

Amy Gutmann

*The lure & dangers of  
extremist rhetoric*

In a democracy, controversy is healthy.<sup>1</sup> Complex issues as far-ranging as immigration, health care, military interventions, taxation, and education seldom lend themselves to simple, consensual solutions. The public interest is well served by robust public argument. But when disagreements are so driven and distorted by extremist rhetoric that citizens and public officials fail to engage with one another reasonably or respectfully on substantive issues of public importance, the debate degenerates, blocking constructive compromises that would benefit all sides more than the status quo would. Like many scholars, American citizens today discern a link between the impoverished, divisive dis-

course that pollutes our politics and culture, and the diminished capacity of America's political system to address intelligently, let alone solve, our most challenging problems – from health care to global warming, from public education to Social Security, from terrorism to this country's eroding competitive advantage in the global economy.

To help us understand the nature of this link between extremist rhetoric and political paralysis, let us begin with an example of extremist rhetoric in entertainment, where it is even more common and far less controversial than in politics. Many Americans over the age of forty may remember the weekly "Point/Counterpoint" segment from *60 Minutes*, which pitted the liberal Shana Alexander against the conservative James J. Kilpatrick. Even more will recall the spoof of "Point/Counterpoint" from *Saturday Night Live*, where Dan Ackroyd resorted to a show of verbal pyro-

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1 This essay is adapted from lectures delivered at the University of Pennsylvania, Stanford University, Brown University, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. I thank those audiences along with Sigal Ben-Porath, Sam Freeman, Jim Gardner, Rob Reich, Steve Steinberg, and Dennis Thompson for their excellent advice.

technics as he drove a single point to the ground, while effacing Jane Curtin as an “ignorant slut.”

Jane and Dan were clearly not out either to advance the public interest or to respect one another. Nor should they have been. *SNL* is, as they say, entertainment. And when extremist rhetoric is intentionally outlandish, it makes for great entertainment. But when it is politically for real, extremist rhetoric has far less benign effects on democratic discourse: it demeans opponents, radically narrows understanding of the issue at hand, and closes off compromise.

As we have seen all too vividly, extremist rhetoric has become par for the course of democratic controversy in America. It dominates cable TV news. (Talk radio is even more extreme.) The public issues discussed are complex and important, but little light is shed on them. The entertainment is that of a wrestling match, with far less demonstrable skill.

Serious extremist rhetoric has two defining features. First, it tends toward single-mindedness on any given issue. Second, it passionately expresses certainty about the supremacy of its perspective on the issue without submitting itself either to a reasonable test of truth or to a reasoned public debate.

Extremist rhetoric, of course, admits of degrees. Imposing single-minded certainty on just one complex issue is extremist, but not as much as being single-minded on every issue. Likewise, the certainty with which one argues a point may be more or less impervious to evidence and argument. Extremist rhetoric also comes in many secular and religious varieties.

If we are discerning in our analysis, we can also distinguish extremist rhetoric from merely extreme rhetoric. Extremist rhetoric refers to the expression of sin-

gle-minded certainty by true believers in their extremist ideology. Extreme rhetoric often is hard to distinguish from extremist rhetoric because it takes its language out of the same rhetorical playbook, but those who speak the words do not subscribe to an extremist ideology.<sup>2</sup>

Why, then, do nonextremists go to rhetorical extremes and sound like true believers? Because they can gain at least a short-term tactical advantage by sounding extreme. Outrageous, inflammatory remarks make for good copy, and it is often easier to speak in extreme sound bites than in moderate ones. Politicians can use extreme rhetoric in a calculated way to capture the public's attention, to rally support of single-valued interest groups, and to mobilize voters.

For the sake of our discussion, let us group extreme and extremist rhetoric together under the label of extremist rhetoric, and consider the three most salient questions about extremist rhetoric in democratic controversy. First: what makes it alluring at all? Second: how can it imperil democratic discourse in spite of the constitutional protections of free speech to which it is entitled? Third: is there any potentially effective way of responding to the prevalence of extremist rhetoric in our political culture other than trying to beat one kind of extremism with another?

What is the lure of extremist rhetoric in democratic controversy? After all, most citizens are not extremists. Part of the lure lies in the fact that it is easier to believe passionately in a value or cause without regard to subtlety, reasoned argument, probabilistic evidence, and vigorously tested scientific theory or fact. Expressions of single-minded visions for

<sup>2</sup> I thank Ambassador Robert M. Beecroft for helping me clarify this point.

solving problems and changing society can make complexity and uncertainty, frustration and regret, all appear to evaporate. Another part of the lure is that having comrades-in-argument is comforting.

If extremist rhetoric has popular appeal, at least on its face, what could be wrong with the overwhelming prevalence of extremist rhetoric in democratic discourse? After all, extremists have a constitutional right to speak in extremist language as long as they are not directly threatening other people. Our answer to the question of what is wrong with extremist rhetoric is essential to understanding both why its prevalence endangers the public interest that democracy should serve, and why so many democratic citizens, even many initially drawn to some forms of extremist rhetoric, find it increasingly troubling over time.

Going as far back in political philosophy as Aristotle, political rhetoric has been employed in the service of reasonable persuasion concerning questions of justice or the public good. Aristotle maintained that the “proper task” of rhetoric is to drive home the logic, the truth, and the evidence of an argument. Reason should frame a good politician’s goal to persuade. The opposite of a sound democratic argument is demagoguery: manipulation and deception in order to divide and conquer the democratic populace. Extremist rhetoric is a common tactic of demagoguery: it divides in order to conquer.

Mobilizing one’s base and arousing people’s passions are natural parts of democratic politics. Aristotle recognized that rhetoric at its best appeals concomitantly to our passions as well as to our character and our reason. The problem with extremist rhetoric is that it mobilizes the base by spurning reason and playing exclusively to the antagonistic

passions of disrespect and degradation of argumentative adversaries. Extremist rhetoric insidiously undermines the democratic promise of mobilizing citizens on the basis of some reasonable understanding of their interest and the public interest.

Extreme rhetoric has the same effect as extremist rhetoric because it expresses itself in the same way. It is extreme simply for the sake of gaining attention and mobilizing the base. While we may not worry that extreme rhetoric reflects a dangerous underlying ideology, we should be concerned that it is unnecessarily disrespectful of argumentative adversaries.

Unlike extremist rhetoric, extreme rhetoric is almost always either deceptive or worse: It blatantly disregards and devalues truth-seeking understandings upon which citizens in a democracy may make informed judgments. It also undermines a basic value of representative politics. When politicians use extreme rhetoric to mobilize their base in cavalier disregard of the vast majority, they strip the moderate middle of a voice in governance.

The problem for representative democracy, therefore, is that many people who are not ideological zealots manipulatively use extreme rhetoric for their own mutually disrespectful political ends – at the same time as zealots of all ideological stripes insidiously subvert the compromising spirit of democracy through their use of extremist rhetoric. Since so much of representative democracy depends on politicians’ wooing the votes and support of citizens to govern in our names, what politicians say matters mightily.

Examples of polarizing political rhetoric abound in American history, which is not to say that America ever enjoyed

a 'golden age' devoid of extremist rhetoric.<sup>3</sup>

At the 1992 Republican National Convention, for example, Pat Buchanan launched a tirade against advocates of abortion rights, women's rights, gay rights, and the separation of church and state: "My friends... there is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the cold war itself."<sup>4</sup> The very description of the disagreement on public policy as 'war' pushes not only extremists but also moderates into more extremist positions, and undermines the opportunity for reasoned argument and respectful compromise.

This troubling tendency to polarize is by no means reserved for the Right or the Republican Party. Many prominent Southern Democrats unleashed virulent strains of extremist rhetoric to whip up the resistance against civil rights for American blacks. During his inaugural address in January 1963, Alabama Governor George Wallace portrayed his state as "this Cradle of the Confederacy, this very Heart of the Great Anglo-Saxon Southland," and declared, "In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyran-

3 For colorful and well-documented accounts of the (figuratively and often literally) bruising political battles during the early years of the American republic, see Richard N. Rosenfeld, *American Aurora: A Democratic-Republican Returns: The Suppressed History of Our Nation's Beginnings and the Heroic Newspaper That Tried to Report It* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); and Jeffrey L. Pasley, "The Tyranny of Printers": *Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001).

4 Pat Buchanan, address to the Republican National Convention, August 17, 1992.

ny... and I say... segregation today... segregation tomorrow... segregation forever."<sup>5</sup>

In the hypercharged climate of post-9/11 American politics, extremist political rhetoric has grown vituperative. President George W. Bush and his administration have frequently been compared to Hitler and the Nazis. One of the most infamous examples is a television ad produced by MoveOn.org that aired during the 2004 campaign. The ad begins with images of Hitler and German military might during World War II and recordings of Hitler speaking. At the end of the ad, a photo of Bush raising his hand to take the oath of office appears, accompanied by the following statement: "A nation warped by lies. Lies fuel fear. Fear fuels aggression. Invasion. Occupation. What were war crimes in 1945 is foreign policy in 2003."

On the right, some elected officials have all but explicitly equated both opposition to the Iraq War and criticism of President Bush's foreign policy with treason. Following the Supreme Court ruling that rejected the Bush administration's argument that it could establish military tribunals without Congressional authority, then-House Republican Majority Leader John Boehner said, "I wonder if [the Democrats] are more interested in protecting the terrorists than protecting the American people." During a House debate on the war in Iraq, Republican Congresswoman Jean Schmidt relayed this message from an Ohio State Representative to Democratic Representative Jack Murtha, a Marine Corps veteran and a leading advocate for troop redeployment: "Cowards cut and run, Marines never do."

5 George C. Wallace, inaugural address, January 14, 1963.

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Extremist rhetoric is hardly the exclusive domain of party politics. Here is a recent example of extremist political rhetoric from outside the domain of professional politics: “This is Jihad, pal. There are no innocent bystanders, because in these desperate hours, bystanders are not innocent. We’ll broaden our theater of conflict.”<sup>6</sup> These remarks could have come straight out of the mouths of the Islamic terrorists who murdered Daniel Pearl. In fact, this speaker, Mike Roselle, is an environmental extremist. His rhetoric calls for war on the ‘guilty’ – the unconverted – in the name of the supreme value of environmental preservation.

Extreme and extremist rhetoric tends to divide, demean, and deceive democratic citizens. To put it metaphorically but not inaccurately: Such rhetoric is junk food for the body politic. It clogs two major arteries that nourish constitutional democracy and the inevitably imperfect but all the more important drive to serve the public on salient issues: mutual respect and morally defensible compromise across differences.

The increasing prevalence of extremist rhetoric poses not only a moral dilemma but also a great practical puzzle for moderates because most extremist rhetoric does not pose a ‘clear and present danger’ to our democracy. In addition to being entertaining to many, extremist rhetoric does not directly threaten anyone’s life, property, or well-being. Its entertainment value therefore can easily lull us into neglecting and even ignoring its dangers.

And, as I indicated at the outset, not all extreme or extremist rhetoric is nec-

essarily bad for democracy. Indeed, some perilous times may need a healthy dose of extremist rhetoric. For example, we rightly applaud those who, when confronting slavery in antebellum America, called for its abolition with certainty and single-mindedness and defended liberty as the supreme value.

Yet we also must remember that passionate certainty in the service of a supremely just cause is not enough in politics. In *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, Doris Kearns Goodwin recounts how Secretary of State William Seward, because of his early hard-line rhetoric, surrendered the ability that Abraham Lincoln maintained, by virtue of his own more tempered rhetoric, to unite a coalition to stop the spread of slavery and ultimately to defeat it.<sup>7</sup>

Even in a supremely good cause – which the abolition of slavery certainly was – extremist rhetoric tends to appeal to an already convinced base. It excludes all those who might join a more moderate and more winning political coalition. When many people’s lives and liberties are at stake, being right is not enough. Being politically effective is morally essential as well.

When Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater prepared to accept the Republican nomination for president in 1964, he became the target of widespread attacks from moderate Republicans, who charged that his views were dangerously extreme. Goldwater directly confronted these attacks in his famous acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention. “I would remind you,” he said, “that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. And let me remind you also

6 Mike Roselle in *Earth First! Journal* (December 1994/January 1995).

7 Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 14–15.

that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue.”<sup>8</sup>

Goldwater’s is one of the most powerful defenses of extremist rhetoric – and action – in the annals of American politics. He was right that extremist rhetoric in a good but single-valued cause – such as liberty – can be a great virtue, depending on the context and its capacity to mobilize a majority toward advancing the public interest. But Goldwater failed to acknowledge that extremist rhetoric even in a good cause can be dangerous.

Why are Americans rightly wary of extremist rhetoric even in a good cause? First, by its very nature, extremist rhetoric excludes from consideration other important public values. Liberty is not the only important value for American democracy. Education, health care, and opportunity, for example, also matter, and indeed are essential for the well-being of a majority of Americans.

A second concern about extremist rhetoric, even in a good cause, is that it condemns without further consideration those who dare to disagree. No single value, not even liberty, can safely claim to be a ‘total solution’ to the problems afflicting humankind; therefore, those who disagree should not be dismissed out of hand – and denied the respect that their views deserve – simply by the rhetoric employed in a worthy cause.

The defense of justice, however, is far more resistant to extremist rhetoric, because justice is a consummately inclusive moral value in democratic politics. It internally admits other public values under its rubric, including liberty, security, equal opportunity, and mutual respect among persons. The passionate defense of justice therefore can be a ral-

lying point for nonextremists who want to make a public difference.

To sum up the significant dangers that extremist rhetoric today poses to a constitutional democracy:

- It shuts out consideration of competing values that are basic to constitutional democracy. Neither liberty without security and opportunity, nor security and opportunity without liberty is a tenable option.
- It shuts down constructive conversations that offer relevant evidence and argument that can improve public decisions.
- It denigrates and degrades rather than respects those who beg to differ. Abortion-rights proponents become ‘baby killers.’ Anti-abortion advocates are ‘religious wing nuts.’
- It even discounts the intelligence of the followers of rhetorical excesses. Callers to Rush Limbaugh’s talk radio show are known as ‘Dittoheads’ because they form an amen chorus to Limbaugh’s extremist rhetoric.

Another problem with extremist rhetoric from the democratic perspective of pursuing the public interest arises from the psychological frailty called hubris. Even granting that some extremists are right, we still must recognize that the vast majority of people who seek public power and influence are all too prone to believe without warrant – yet with subjective certainty – that they have the absolute right on their side. They therefore indefensibly denigrate and dismiss the many reasonable and respectable people who disagree with them. They also block constructive examination of their own values and beliefs. The aftermath of the U. S. intervention in Iraq painfully illustrates the problems attending a politics

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8 Barry Goldwater, acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention, July 16, 1964.

in which public officials and their supporters fail to take the facts into account, and also refuse to consider more than one side of the argument.

Appreciating the dangers of extremist rhetoric leads us to the third and final question: what is our most reasonable remedy for upholding the pluralistic values of constitutional democracy? The most enduring remedy is closely related to the fact that a majority of democratic citizens are not themselves extremists. The most reliable surveys and scholarly studies consistently find a far more pluralistic and open-minded electorate than the public catered to by extremist rhetoric on cable TV and talk radio and among many political elites.<sup>9</sup>

The remedy must help us counter what can best be called rhetorical rage: the phenomenon of one form of extremist rhetoric breeding another, counter-extremist rhetoric. Here is an example that illustrates how far rhetorical rage has spread – in this case, to scientists – in a country whose citizens are overwhelmingly moderate and reasonable. Creationism is often communicated in extremist terms, as part of a comprehensive divine plan, and as such is impervious to the mountain of evidence that refutes its claims to being a scientific theory that disproves the theory of evolution.

Recently, in response to creationism, an opposite form of extremism – which calls itself science but really is scientism – has emerged and gained a following.

9 Morris Fiorina, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005); Alan Wolf, *One Nation After All: What Middle-Class Americans Really Think About God, Country, and Family, Racism, Welfare, Immigration, Homosexuality, Work, The Right, The Left, and Each Other* (New York: Viking, 1998).

Scientism expresses an equal and opposite certainty, which also defies reason, that all human understanding derives from the comprehensive rational value of scientific inquiry. It treats religion – and religious believers – with open contempt. Richard Dawkins, for example, proclaims that “faith is one of the world’s great evils.”<sup>10</sup> Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens indict all organized religions for inciting hatred and abetting humanity’s propensity for cruelty and murder. With single-minded fury, all three drive democratic discourse deeper into the cycle of mutual disrespect and denigration. Trading one kind of extremism in for another – creationism for scientism – does not bode well for an informed public policy.

Worse than rhetorical rage are extreme political responses to extremist rhetoric. The French parliament, for example, adopted a bill in 2006 making it a crime to deny that Armenians suffered genocide at the hands of the Turks. This is an extreme reaction to extremism.

Democracy’s most reasonable hope for countering demagoguery is the democratic lure of morally engaged pluralism. The vast majority of American citizens realize that they have multiple interests, ideals, and preferences. And they are more satisfied when democratic politics attends to those interests, ideals, and preferences.

How can American democracy take better advantage of the lure of morally engaged pluralism? Well-educated citizens can practice what Dennis Thompson and I describe as “an economy of moral disagreement.” When we argue about controversial issues, we should defend our views vigorously while ex-

10 Richard Dawkins, “Is Science a Religion?” *Humanist* 57 (January/February 1997).

pressing mutual respect for our adversaries. We can do this by not preemptively rejecting everything for which our political adversaries stand.<sup>11</sup> Take the controversy over creationism. I can staunchly defend evolution against creationism as a scientific theory while also recognizing that science does not have answers to most of the great cosmological questions that religion addresses. Nothing will thereby be lost, and much will be gained. Practicing “an economy of moral disagreement” engenders mutual respect across competing viewpoints and, as important, makes room for moral compromise. No democracy can function – let alone flourish – without moral compromise over reasonable differences.

Can morally engaged pluralism be an effective rhetorical strategy? The reasonable hope lies in the fact that most democratic citizens are not extremists. And respecting multiple points of view carries more lasting and long-term benefits in democratic politics than playing exclusively to a narrow political base.

However, morally engaged pluralists must not check all emotions at the door. “Rationality is a bond between persons,” the philosopher Stuart Hampshire observed, “but it is not a very powerful bond, and it is apt to fail as a bond when there are strong passions on two sides of a conflict.”<sup>12</sup> Rationality *alone* is apt to fail as a bond, but morally engaged pluralists have every reason to be passionate as well as rational in their rhetoric. The

11 See Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1996); and Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

12 Stuart Hampshire, *Justice is Conflict* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 94.

moral stakes in pursuing the public interest could not be higher; life, liberty, opportunity, and mutual respect are the lifeblood of a flourishing democracy. For morally engaged pluralists to be effective, we must be passionate as well as reasonable in our rhetoric. Passion supported by reason elevates democratic debate while also making it more alluring and effective.

In searching for antidotes to extremism, there is therefore no substitute for a better democratic education in robust, reasoned, and respectful political controversy and debate. We need to teach students how to engage with one another over controversial issues. Students must first learn how to recognize demagogic rhetoric and then how to counter it, both individually and institutionally.

Well-designed democratic institutions can dramatically reduce the toxic effects of extremist rhetoric. We need to support institutional structures whose incentives encourage respectful controversy. Less partisan gerrymandering would foster more representative democratic rhetoric. Well-structured debates and factcheck.org blogs can expose extremist and extreme rhetoric that is deceptive and subversive of the democratic pursuit of the public interest.

Democratic citizens should not wait for the media and our political leaders to reform themselves. All pluralists – the vast majority of democratic citizens – can play an important part today in criticizing extreme and extremist rhetoric and in defending a more democratic, less demagogic rhetoric of morally engaged pluralism. We can do so both reasonably and passionately in keeping with our character as morally engaged pluralists.

This never-ending pursuit of the public interest in a democracy is not a value-neutral enterprise. Pluralist citizens are committed to upholding the spirit of

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constitutional democracy beyond what the letter of the law requires us to do.

We must recognize that demonizing and demeaning our opponents to mobilize like-minded people in democratic politics is a legal but nonetheless demagogic way of driving constitutional democracy into the ground.

Democracy's saving grace is that most citizens are put off by demagogues and their techniques. By recognizing that the person with whom we disagree, far from being an "ignorant slut," typically has a valid point worth considering, we can work together as fellow citizens who respectfully disagree with one another to give our great constitutional democracy a longer lease on life.