

Label Libel

By David Chandler

[This was the first of several articles I wrote for the Tule River Times "Left in America" column while Gil Franco, the regular columnist, was on vacation.]

From the time we moved to Springville I have been impressed that a small-town paper like the *Tule River Times* would make space for an ongoing Left-Right political dialogue. I commend Valeri for her openness to the expression of competing ideas.

When Gil invited me to cover his column for a month he suggested I might not want to use the heading "Left in America." He said if I were to identify myself openly with "The Left" in a conservative area like this some people would label me as a Socialist or even a Communist. I have been similarly warned by more than a few people, since moving to town two years ago, that I should be careful what opinions I express.

I hope they are wrong. I would like to assume that you, my neighbors, whatever your political beliefs, have a generous spirit and tolerance for the viewpoints of others. If that were not the case, this would be a pretty dismal place to live! People who would demean others for their sincerely held beliefs are flying in the face of the very ideals they profess to be defending. It is the essence of freedom to be allowed to be who you are, to think your own thoughts, to freely express what you truly believe, and to engage in open dialogue with others who perhaps hold very different beliefs.

The terms "Left" and "Right" applied to politics comes from the era of the French Revolution. In the French Assembly the conservatives, who supported the status quo (the privileges of the nobility, etc.), literally sat on the right, and those pushing for fundamental changes to bring about more equality for the common man sat on the left. In American politics the Right has generally supported the interests of big business ("what's good for General Motors is good for America") and the Left has supported the interests of working people (labor unions, progressive taxation, etc.). Other issues get lumped in with these, but historically these economic issues have been the main distinctions between left and right. Neither side is more "American" or more "patriotic" than the other. There is no single way all Americans are supposed to think! That's why the Bill of Rights tells our government to keep hands off in the matter of self-expression.

Those whose needs are being met by the current system will want to leave well enough alone. Those who are more in touch with the shortcomings of the system will push for change. This is only natural. When Rush Limbaugh attempts to demonize the left by calling "liberal" the "L" word, a dirty word to be ashamed of, he is attempting to bully

half, maybe more than half, of the population into silence. People who think they are alone and isolated are less likely to act on their beliefs. To the extent that liberals take the bait, feel isolated, outnumbered, and impotent, he has won. But this is not a victory for democracy or the American ideals that thoughtful conservatives, like thoughtful liberals, take care to defend: it produces an atmosphere of fear that eats away at the core of our freedom.

Rush Limbaugh isn't the only one trying to make the left invisible. When Elia Kazan was given his lifetime achievement award at the Academy Awards ceremony there was a major organizing effort to ask those in the audience to stay seated and refrain from applause to protest Kazan's role in the McCarthy era Hollywood blacklistings. Eyewitnesses reported that the protest effort was largely successful, with estimates that 60% to 80% of the audience remained seated. The network cameras, however, gave the distorted impression that the vast majority stood and applauded, with only a few token shots of isolated dissenters and no comment on the issue. By controlling perceptions the media can be an agent of thought control.

When it comes to choosing "talking heads" discussing current events, the major corporate media routinely ignore the true spokespeople of the left. Instead they characterize their center-to-right discussions as balanced journalism. This is not for lack of qualified representatives. The left has some remarkably articulate and persuasive voices. If your source of news and information is limited to network TV you may have never heard the opinions of Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Michael Parenti, Alexander Cockburn, Ian Williams, and many others. You may have heard of Ramsay Clark in his former role as U.S. Attorney General, but have you heard from him as a major critic of the wars in Iraq and Kosovo?

I was heartened to see Margery Hodge's statements in her opening column of Right Side Up explaining something of where she is coming from and where she finds her sources of information. It is important to acknowledge that none of us lives in a vacuum. We all have our own viewpoints because we have taken different roads through life and we each have struggled in our own way to make sense of our experiences. Equally intelligent people come to very different understandings of the world through this process, and as a result they march to different drummers. Bullying may temporarily silence one group or another, but the only way we can truly come together and benefit from our diversity is through open dialogue.

I differ with Margery in that I don't believe any one news source is balanced. If you want balance, you have to read across the spectrum and let actual proponents of a belief speak for themselves. If I really wanted to understand Hinduism or Islam I wouldn't go to a Christian "expert" on world religions. I would want to talk to someone who not only understands the religion, but who also has an inward experience of the religion that

would help me understand the source of his commitment. Similarly, if you wonder why any American "would be so foolish" as to embrace liberalism or socialism or even communism, find one and have a long heart-to-heart talk.

I would like to close with a resource list. If you want to know what the Left in America is talking about, start by listening to radio station KFCF 88.1 FM [KFCF.org or KPFA.org]. Read Howard Zinn's [A People's History of the United States](#). Read The Nation Magazine. On the Internet you can download a free copy of the "Real Audio" player and listen to Pacifica Evening News and [Democracy Now](#) at pacifica.org. While you are on the internet, browse through zmag.org, thenation.com, progressive.org, and iacenter.org, to name a few stimulating sites.

In summary, if you are on the left and feel isolated, come out of hiding. You are not alone! If you are on the right, I trust that you won't see me as someone to be censored or feared or converted. I am a thinking person. I have reasons for what I believe, I listen to and consider the opinions of others, and I am open to mutually respectful dialogue with people who see the world through other eyes. I trust this describes you as well.