

Columnist does conservatives a disservice

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While the events of September 11th have inspired some impressive bi-partisan cooperation on Capitol Hill, they have also given a new voice to fringe leaders and pundits on both the Left and the Right who are taking advantage of America's fear.

Understandably, many Americans have reacted to the events of 9-11 with anger, frustration, and pride, but these feelings play right into the hands of extremists within the Conservative Movement who view the world in a starkly simplistic way and who define American "patriotism" in purely partisan terms.

The latest major manifestation of extreme right-wing conservatism in American politics is the Ann Coulter phenomenon. A quick-witted, sharp-tongued pundit with a penchant for publicity, Coulter is not new to politics, but she has recently accelerated her talk show appearances in order to promote her book entitled "Slander." Unfortunately, the content of the book fits its title all too well: "Slander" is a host of insults and invective hurled at liberals.

"It's all liberals' fault," she claims, and then proceeds to deride "the liberal media" (who, nevertheless, give her an awful lot of air time).

Besides stereotyping the media, Coulter lambastes liberals with epithets such as "America-haters," "elitists," "liars," "communists," "terrorists," "traitors" and all sorts of other nasty things. What Coulter and her defenders don't realize is that it's not liberals that she harms with her invidious remarks - it's conservatives.

Pursuing her self-described fatwa against liberals, Coulter recently lamented that Timothy McVeigh did not bomb the New York Times building. (And conservatives roundly defend her!)

Coulter is considered right-wing, but there's nothing right about the message she sends for conservatives or for America. Coulter's extremism alienates not only those who lean left, but also the young, the undecided, and moderates - all potential members of the Conservative Movement. Her black-and-white perspective actually inhibits political dialogue between conservatives and liberals, and her destructive criticism loses much of its moral force as biting personal attacks.

While there's no doubt that "party politics" play a role in our government, there's also no reason to exaggerate party differences into a silly soap opera. Indeed, Coulter's columns often cross the line between politics and personality, ending in unacceptable expressions of racism and hatred. She asserted, for example, that Japanese-American Transportation Secretary Mineta, "was burning with hatred for America" and "subjecting all of America to the Bataan Death March."

Coulter frequently voices her support of extremist politics and she argues vehemently for both the expulsion of Arab and Muslim immigrants and the implementation of racial profiling. About those foreigners who dislike America, Coulter wrote: "we should invade their countries, kill their leaders, and convert them to Christianity."

Coulter's greatest fault, however, is not her provocative policy ideas or discriminatory remarks. Ours is a country of free thought and free speech, and Coulter is entitled to her opinions. Coulter's offense is rather

that she portrays herself as a Christian conservative, a representative of the views and principles of the Religious Right, and then uses that adopted identity to spread hate and fear, thus stigmatizing all those who embrace Christian conservatism.

Richard Cohen's "Washington Post" piece recently questioned the Conservative Movement's credibility in embracing Coulter. Does she represent what it means to be a Christian conservative? Not at all. Coulter is nothing more than an extremist in conservative clothing. Coulter's "conservative" message is not about conservative ideals or empowering the American people. Rather, it is a message of hating liberals and slandering all those who disagree with her. As such, Coulter cannot legitimately call herself conservative and conservative leaders ought to renounce her as a voice of our movement.

With major congressional and gubernatorial elections coming up in November, conservative spokesmen need to be clear about their values and ideals. While we believe that America is founded on certain principles and freedoms laid out by our founders, we dispute Coulter's notion that extremism and hatred are the building blocks of a thriving nation.

Loathing and vilifying those who disagree, as Coulter does, challenges the very democratic system that allows Americans to exist peacefully as political opponents rather than as political enemies. America is about discourse and dialogue, not accusation and name-calling. We hope that conservatives can resist the urge to buy (and buy into) sensationalist libel like Ann Coulter's "Slander."

What do we, as conservatives, believe? Is the heart of Conservatism hollow? Or are we resolved to elevate, and not assassinate? To inspire, and not denigrate? To love, and not hate?

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