

Though the Republicans no doubt fanned the flames, much of the impetus was coming from an edgy new force in our politics, the Tea Party, which began as an organic protest movement but would quickly be enhanced by deep-pocketed Republican oligarchs intent on wresting the Congress away from Obama and the Democrats. Their vitriol was reminiscent of the angry crowds that had turned up at McCain-Palin rallies less than a year earlier. Now, in Obama's initiatives, they were convinced they had found evidence of the dark, socialist impulses they had imputed to him all along.

The ugliness and personal tone of the protests betrayed a truth we were loath to acknowledge publicly. For some in the crowd, their ire was rooted in more than disagreements over policy. It was rooted in race: a deep-seated resentment of the idea of the black man with the Muslim name in the White House. The facts notwithstanding, to them, health reform was just another giveaway to poor black people at their expense.

Speaking with the authority of a former president and a lifelong southerner, Jimmy Carter decided to weigh in on the nature and tone of the protests. "When a radical fringe element of demonstrators and others begin to attack the President of the United States as an animal or as a reincarnation of Adolf Hitler . . . those kinds of things are beyond the bounds," he said during a speech at Emory University. "I think people who are guilty of that kind of personal attack against Obama have been influenced to a major degree by a belief that he should not be president because he happens to be African-American."

I appreciated Carter's candor, but cringed when I read his remarks. I didn't doubt that race had added an element of fury to some of the protests that summer, and even to the defiance of some in Congress. I also knew that Lincoln had been depicted as an ape. Roosevelt had been denounced as a dictator. Clinton was the fulcrum of relentless personal attacks from the Right, as was George W. Bush from the Left. If we appeared to be dismissing opposition to Obama's policies as racism, it would enrage all those who had honest concerns about his legislative priorities, including millions who had voted for him.

The day after his comments, President Carter sent me an e-mail acknowledging these challenges. "Please express my regrets to the President if I have created an additional problem for him," the Georgian wrote. "I have lived with these people for 85 years, been their governor and their President. I have made it clear in all my statements that it is ok to debate important issues, even to claim falsely that Obama supports death squads to kill old people. But some of the ad hominem and extremely vitriolic attacks go beyond a tough political debate. I'll do anything to help him, but cannot deny what I am convinced is true."

“Mr. President, I never doubted your sincerity or your intentions,” I wrote in reply. “I know very well the vantage point from which you spoke. But race is the catnip of the media. They didn’t believe Obama could win because of it and, given the current story line that he is stumbling, they tremble with excitement at any suggestion of it as a defining factor now. It is not a diversion we need.”

Axelrod, David Believer: My Forty Years in Politics (pp. 378-379).