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Code Red: Threats Abroad, Threats at Home

By Leonard Fein

Finally, a diagnosis: My malady is Attention Overload Disorder. I try, honestly I do, to keep up with the news. But before I can absorb the Icelandic volcano eruption, I have to absorb the Goldman Sachs corruption. And all the while, Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh and the Tea Party and the Birthers, and always Israel, and the persistent dysfunction of Congress, and now the impending nomination of a justice of the Supreme Court and so forth. Inundation. I can handle two, three, maybe even four Big Ones simultaneously, although I think it would be much fairer if events were to pause now and then; now, however, a permanent surge, less a flood than a swamp, quicksand.

But wait: Sometimes, there is something to feel good about. That happened just days ago with President Obama's Nuclear Security Summit. It was, in a real sense, an entirely unexpected gift to all of us, and I do mean "all." If the president had not bothered to convene the largest assembly of world leaders gathered by an American president since 1946, very, very few of us would have noticed its absence: We have not been walking around with the threat of non-state nuclear capability furred on our brows. But now governments have taken notice, and henceforward may actually take care, as well, to prevent Satanic rogues from acquiring nuclear weapons. The threat has not been eliminated, not by a long shot, but a bold new course has been set.

Plus: The United States has begun to reclaim its historic role. Prodded by Obama, the coalition of the willing has become the coalition of the eager. America at its best.

Of Prime Minister Netanyahu's decision to skip the meeting, to send Dan Meridor in his stead, no comment just now, save to say that it seems the prudent choice to have made.

But here, my principal concern lies elsewhere. For there is, I fear, yet another hazard before us, in its perverse way as serious as the nuclear threat. It is the threat of violence here at home.

I have mentioned my concern to several friends in recent days, and, to a person, they have assumed I was referring to Islamic extremists. I was not, am not. I am concerned about such as Timothy McVeigh, or Scott Roeder (the murderer of Dr. George Tiller in Wichita last year), or Branch Davidians, or the Hutaree militia of Michigan, arrested last month for plotting to kill police officers and thereby initiate a revolution against the U.S. government. More specifically, and more urgently, I am concerned about the garbage rhetoric that now comes so easily to far too many people, including any number who certainly know better.

Whether Sarah Palin knows better, I cannot say, but her recent Twitter message “Don’t retreat, Instead — RELOAD!” is worrisome. It is worrisome because, as Bill Clinton said on the 15th anniversary of the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah federal building, “What we learned from Oklahoma City is not that we should gag each other... but that our words really do matter. There is this vast echo chamber, and the words fall on the serious and delirious alike.”

It is the apparently growing numbers of the delirious that troubles me, and the failure of those who clearly do know better to make crystal clear what they know: The peril grows. The inhibitions recede, the delirious become more mad still, and somewhere, and somewhere else as well, in America, today, people plot horrific things.

What Clinton did not say, what he in fact quite specifically dismissed, was that the Tea Party is implicated in the escalating madness, is not merely enabling but actually encouraging it. Obama as Hitler? Obama as Islamist? Obama as treasonous socialist? Obama as foreign-born? The allegations are not merely preposterous; they are a challenge to the legitimacy of the government. And such challenges can become fierce, unrestrained. It is quite possible that Clinton would agree, but feels politically constrained from expressing his displeasure. I feel no such inhibition. So: According to a Times/CBS poll, one of every four Tea Partiers replies in the affirmative to “Do you believe it is ever justified for citizens to take violent action against the government or is it never justified?” Not a lot — but more than enough.

I assume that our intelligence and law enforcement agencies are deeply engaged in efforts to prevent such of violence. But so long as Republicans fail to distance themselves from the crazy talk, the problem will fester, the threat grow.

Criticism of policy, no problem; challenge to legitimacy, Code Red. When the Supreme Court gave the 2000 election to George W. Bush, there was no such challenge; Al Gore chose dignity, we who'd favored him chose patriotism. Now it is McConnell, Boehner, Gingrich et al whose time for dignity and patriotism has come.