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What If John Ashcroft Had Tried to Quiet the New York Times the Way Daschle Targeted Limbaugh?

Where's Their First Amendment Solidarity?

According to Tom Daschle, his conservative critics resemble the Taliban, and their "shrill rhetoric" has defied violent death threats against him and his family. At least that's what the outgoing Senate Majority Leader suggested yesterday in a meeting with reporters.

But while the liberal media have been quick to condemn officials ranging from John Ashcroft to Ari Fleischer for statements that reporters suspect might have a "chilling effect" on the First Amendment right to complain and criticize freely, there has been no hue and cry about a top Senate leader's seeming attempt to muzzle a critic by falsely linking him with threats of physical harm. Former Clinton aides and CNN *Crossfire* hosts Paul Begala and James Carville can be pretty "shrill" — does Daschle also see them as threats to public safety?

This morning, NBC's *Today*, ABC's *Good Morning America*, and CBS's *Early Show* ignored Daschle's remarks, as ABC's *World News Tonight*, the CBS *Evening News*, CNN's *NewsNight* and CNBC's *The News with Brian Williams* all did Wednesday evening. Of evening newscasts, only FNC's *Special Report with Brit Hume* fully conveyed Daschle's vitriol. Reporter Carl Cameron noted how Daschle "singled out Rush Limbaugh, suggesting that conservative media are inciting violence."

Cameron then revealed Daschle's rant: "What happens when Rush Limbaugh attacks those of us in public life is that people aren't satisfied just to listen. They want to act because they get emotionally invested. And so, you know, the threats to those of us in public life go up dramatically.... We see it in foreign countries and we think, well my God, how can this religious fundamentalism become so violent? Well, it's that same shrill rhetoric. It's that same shrill power that motivates.... Pretty soon it's a foment that becomes physical in addition to just verbal, and that's happening in this country."

Just imagine if Orrin Hatch had lectured reporters back in 1998 that they shouldn't criticize Ken Starr because the

independent counsel had received threats. Or if John Ashcroft had warned that the unrelenting anti-Bush coverage of the *New York Times* had increased threats against the President. Wouldn't the entire media establishment have decried such comments as anti-free speech and an abuse of authority? Yet, while the Bush administration has issued no such threats or warnings, ultra-sensitive reporters have quickly condemned perceived attempts to silence critics (see box).

But Daschle's diatribe wasn't regarded as improper, just quirky. On *Inside Politics* yesterday, CNN's Judy Woodruff merely asked reporter Jonathan Karl about "some memorable comments" Daschle had made. "Yes," Karl replied, "Fascinating." On *Nightly News*, NBC anchor Tom Brokaw portrayed it as a reasonable charge: "Tom Daschle had some comments on the tone of political discourse in this country, saying that threats have increased against him and his family. He blames talk show host Rush Limbaugh and quote, 'all the Rush Limbaugh wannabes' for an increasingly negative tone in politics.'"

As Karl had, Brokaw also included the fact that Rush "Limbaugh countered by saying that Daschle's comments are a Democratic Party strategy to undermine the power of his talk show." Is that what government officials are supposed to be doing in a free country?

Daschle, of course, isn't the first Democratic officeholder to try and blunt Limbaugh's effectiveness; then-President Bill Clinton blamed conservative radio hosts in the wake of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. Back then, most of the liberal press showed no alarm that such comments could be seen as a threat to free expression and the First Amendment. Will they give Tom Daschle's dark invective a similar free pass? — Brent Baker and Rich Noyes

Is Daschle Trying to "Necklace" Rush?

"It's an obscene comparison, and I'm not sure I like it, but there was a time, in South Africa, where people would put flaming tires around peoples' necks if they dissented. And in some ways, the fear is that you'll be necklaced here, you'll have the flaming tire of lack of patriotism put around your neck. Now it's that fear that keeps journalists from asking the toughest of the tough questions and to continue to bore in on the tough questions so often." — CBS anchor Dan Rather, on BBC's *Newsnight*, May 16.

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