

Lessons in Civility

by Paul Krugman

It's the season of the angry liberal. Books like Al Franken's "Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them," Joe Conason's "Big Lies" and Molly Ivins's "Bushwhacked" have become best sellers. (Yes, I've got one out there, too.) But conservatives are distressed because those liberals are so angry and rude. *o.k.*, they admit, they themselves were a bit rude during the Clinton years—that seven-year, \$70 million investigation of a tiny money-losing land deal, all that fuss about the president's private life—but they're sorry, and now it's time for everyone to be civil.

Indeed, angry liberals can take some lessons in civility from today's right.

Consider, for example, Fox News's genteel response to Christiane Amanpour, the CNN correspondent. Ms. Amanpour recently expressed some regret over CNN's prewar reporting: "Perhaps, to a certain extent, my station was intimidated by the administration and its foot soldiers at Fox News." A Fox spokeswoman replied, "It's better to be viewed as a foot soldier for Bush than as a spokeswoman for Al Qaeda."

And liberal pundits who may be tempted to cast personal aspersions can take lessons in courtesy from conservatives like Charles Krauthammer, who last December reminded TV viewers of his previous career as a psychiatrist, then said of Al Gore, "He could use a little help."

What's really important, of course, is that political figures stick to the issues, like the Bush adviser who told The New York Times that the problem with Senator John Kerry is that "he looks French."

Some say that the right, having engaged in name-calling and smear tactics when Bill Clinton was president, now wants to change the rules so such behavior is no longer allowed. In fact, the right is still calling names and smearing; it wants to prohibit rude behavior only by liberals.

But there's more going on than a simple attempt to impose a double standard. All this fuss about the rudeness of the Bush administration's critics is an attempt to preclude serious discussion of that administration's policies. For there is no way to be both honest and polite about what has happened in these past three years.

On the fiscal front, this administration has used deceptive accounting to ram through repeated long-run tax cuts in the face of mounting deficits. And it continues to push for more tax cuts, when even the most sober observers now talk starkly about the risk to our solvency. It's impolite to say that George W. Bush is the most fiscally irresponsible president in American history, but it would be dishonest to pretend otherwise.

On the foreign policy front, this administration hyped the threat from Iraq, ignoring warnings from military professionals that a prolonged postwar occupation would tie down much of our Army and undermine our military readiness. (Joseph Galloway, co-author of "We Were Soldiers Once . . . and Young," says that "we have perhaps the finest Army in history," but that "Donald H. Rumsfeld and his civilian aides have done just about everything they could to destroy that Army.") It's impolite to say that Mr. Bush has damaged our national security with his military adventurism, but it would be dishonest to pretend otherwise.

Still, some would say that criticism should focus only on Mr. Bush's policies, not on his person. But no administration in memory has made paeans to the president's character—his "honor and integrity"—so central to its political strategy. Nor has any previous administration been so determined to portray the president as a hero, going so far as to pose him in line with the heads on Mount Rushmore, or arrange that landing on the aircraft carrier. Surely, then, Mr. Bush's critics have the right to point out that the life story of the man inside the flight suit isn't particularly heroic—that he has never

taken a risk or made a sacrifice for the sake of his country, and that his business career is a story of murky deals and insider privilege.

In the months after 9/11, a shocked nation wanted to believe the best of its leader, and Mr. Bush was treated with reverence. But he abused the trust placed in him, pushing a partisan agenda that has left the nation weakened and divided. Yes, I know that's a rude thing to say. But it's also the truth.