



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on September 2, 2009

Town Hall Tempest

The peasants are revolting — and getting downright ugly about it. That was Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's complaint when she and House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer of Maryland penned a recent op-ed piece for USA Today about opponents of healthcare reform legislation who have been turning out at town hall meetings to voice their objections.

Pelosi had furnished Democratic House members with "talking points" to use in town hall meetings with constituents over the August recess. But opponents of the proposed healthcare legislation had talking — and shouting — points of their own.



Pelosi wrote, "It is now evident that an ugly campaign is underway not merely to misrepresent the health insurance reform legislation, but to disrupt public meetings and prevent members of Congress and constituents from conducting a civil dialogue." The disruptions have occurred, she argued, "because opponents are afraid not just of differing views — but of the facts themselves. Drowning out opposing views is simply un-American. Drowning out the facts is how we failed at this effort for decades."

Yet with three different healthcare reform bills in the House and competing legislation in the Senate, the "facts" about whatever healthcare legislation might finally be enacted appear to be up for grabs. And drowning out opposing views may be rude and not conducive to the "civil dialogue" that Pelosi endorses, but it is hardly un-American. For better or worse, our nation has a long tradition of rowdy and disruptive protests, from the colonial rebels opposing the taxes and overreaching laws imposed by the British crown, to labor union demonstrations, to antiwar protests during the conflicts in Vietnam and Iraq.

Dismissing Dissent

Indeed, when Pelosi was being shouted down by antiwar demonstrators at a San Francisco event in 2006, she seemed to encourage the efforts at "drowning out" her own speech. "That's okay, that's okay," she told the crowd repeatedly. "I understand your anger." Then she seemed to be comparing the shouting demonstrators to Franklin Roosevelt.

"He was a disruptor," she said of FDR. "I'm a fan of disruptors, those who make change."

She's obviously not a fan, however, of disruptive people who want to prevent the kind of change Obama and the majority of Democrats in Congress are pushing in the name of healthcare reform. In fact, Speaker Pelosi was actually contemptuous of the idea that the protesters should be taken seriously. When she was asked in an interview whether "there's legitimate grass-roots opposition going on here," she said of the protesters, "I think they're Astroturf [fake, in other words]. You be the judge. They're carrying swastikas and symbols like that to a town hall meeting on healthcare."



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Pelosi is not alone among Democrats in sharing that viewpoint: “On what planet do you spend most of your time?” an indignant Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.) asked a woman who compared the healthcare reform effort to Nazism at one of the congressman’s town hall meetings.

Pelosi and Frank seem to be missing the point; the people are expressing their level of dislike for the reform plans. However loathsome those symbols may be, people carrying placards with images of a swastika or pictures of Obama with a Hitler-like moustache were not promoting Nazism or Fascism, but were making a comparison to express opposition to government control of a healthcare system that affects the lives and health of 300 million Americans.

Controversy and Confrontations



But there is no doubt many attending town hall meetings and those demonstrating outside them have become increasingly strident and confrontational in their strategies and tactics. Several members of Congress have been shouted down while attempting to answer questions or respond to comments at town hall meetings in their states and districts. At least one House member, Democrat Frank Kratovil of Maryland, discovered he’d been “hanged” in effigy outside his district office. Fistfights and near riots have occurred at some events when supporters and opponents of the proposed healthcare overhaul have clashed. Rep. Kathy Castor (D-Fla.) was escorted by police out of the Hillsborough County Children’s Board building after Castor and state representative Betty Reed were shouted down with cries of “Tyranny!”; “You work for us!”; and “Read the bill!” as they attempted to deliver their opening remarks at a town hall meeting put on by Reed in the Tampa suburb of Ybor City. “They’re hiding from their constituents,” one member of the audience said when Castor left. “She works for us and needs to listen.”

Demonstrators clashed with organizers of the event at the doorways after the auditorium had been filled to capacity. Opponents claimed supporters of the healthcare legislation, including those affiliated with the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) and the Service Industry Employees Union (SIEU) were allowed in and had filled the first three rows by the time the auditorium was opened. Outside, people with signs and posters banged on doors and windows, while activists on both sides argued and screamed at one another in the parking lot. A freelance video photographer was reportedly roughed up, with damage done to his camera, equipment, and eyeglasses. One man was treated for minor injuries after a scuffle that left his shirt partially torn.

Six people were arrested, some on assault charges, in Mehlville, Missouri, when opponents of the Obama healthcare plan, organized by the St. Louis Tea Party, clashed with supporters, organized by SIEU, outside Representative Russ Carnahan’s forum on healthcare and aging. A conservative activist,



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being treated at a local emergency room, told the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* he was attacked while passing out “Don’t tread on me” flags. There were also reports of rowdiness at a healthcare reform meeting held by Democratic Representative John Dingell in Romulus, Michigan, and during a visit by Speaker Pelosi to a clinic for the homeless in Denver.

And on the same day that President Obama was speaking to a mostly supportive crowd at a healthcare forum in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Senator Arlen Specter, a Republican-turned-Democrat, was confronted with some hostile foes of the president’s reform plans in Lebanon, Pennsylvania. Specter, who plans to run for a sixth Senate term in 2010, heard warnings about not only Election Day, but Judgment Day as well. “One day God is going to stand before you, and he’s going to judge you and the rest of your damn cronies,” an angry constituent told Specter. Another speaker warned against “the dismantling of this country.... We don’t want this country to turn into Russia.” Specter and Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius had previously been loudly booed and hissed at a joint meeting on healthcare reform in Philadelphia.

Some members of Congress have cancelled or simply refused to schedule town hall meetings. Some have chosen to conduct them by phone to avoid face-to-face confrontations. In New Hampshire, Senator Jeanne Shaheen and Representatives Paul Hodes and Carol Shea-Porter, all Democrats, have opted for conducting forums by telephone with large numbers of constituents to discuss healthcare reform and other issues. Manchester Mayor Frank Guinta, a Republican who has already announced his candidacy for Shea-Porter’s seat next year, has accused the representative of hiding from the people and scheduled an in-person town hall meeting of his own to discuss healthcare and issues with the district’s voters.

Out of Left Field

For some longtime observers of political trends, the current turmoil may bring back memories of anti-communist and anti-UN demonstrations of the early 1960s when *Thunder on the Right* was a bestseller. But the Tea Party demonstrations last April and the recent confrontations at healthcare forums indicate that activists on the right have studied, and in many cases, borrowed many of the strategies and tactics of their left-wing adversaries. Some have even been studying and implementing the game plan set forth in a book called [Rules for Radicals](#) by the late Saul Alinsky. In fact, Alinsky’s works are required reading at FreedomWorks, the Washington-based conservative group headed by Dick Armey, a Republican and a former congressman from Texas.

“When we get our jobs in our organization, the first thing you do is you sit down with some of Saul Alinsky’s books [like] [Rules for Radicals](#),” Adam Brandon, a spokesman for FreedomWorks, told National Public Radio. “And we read that book and study that book and everything we’ve been trying to do here comes straight out of those pages.”

According to Ryan Lizza, who has written extensively about Alinsky in *New Yorker* magazine, the man called “the father of community organizing” took the confrontational approaches he had used as a labor organizer in the 1930s and adapted them for political action in Chicago.

“Alinsky’s basic insight was, what would happen if you used the sort of hardheaded, very realistic negotiating tactics that labor uses when they negotiate with management, what if you took those techniques and adapted them to the relationship between your average citizen and public officials?” Lizza said in a recent interview on NPR. The idea was to use confrontational methods to galvanize public opinion and hold elected officials accountable. “Now (Alinsky) would go into a public meeting



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with an official and would not think twice about humiliating them or staging a very loud and angry protest. He had no empathy for the public official. The idea was to gain some attention for your cause. So he did, you know, all kinds of silly, confrontational events with public officials.”

At least some political activists on the right have taken a similar approach. One example that has been getting a lot of attention, mainly on liberal blogs, is a political-action memo sent out to conservative activists by Bob MacGuffie, who runs a website called Right Principles. The memo recommends that town hall participants put their congressman on the defensive by asking tough questions and refusing to accept an evasive or pat answer. “The questions should personalize the Rep e.g. why did YOU vote for a budget that immediately carried with it a \$1.7 trillion deficit?” the memo says. “Use the Alinsky playbook of which the Left is so fond: freeze it, attack it, personalize it, and polarize it,” MacGuffie wrote.

“You need to rock-the-boat early in the Rep’s presentation. Watch for an opportunity to yell out and challenge the Rep’s statements early. If he blames Bush for something or offers other excuses — call him on it, yell back and have someone else follow-up with a shout-out. Don’t carry on and make a scene — just short intermittent shout outs. The purpose is to make him uneasy early on and set the tone for the hall as clearly informal, and free-wheeling. It will also embolden others who agree with us to call out and challenge with tough questions. The goal is to rattle him, get him off his prepared script and agenda. If he says something outrageous, stand up and shout out and sit right down. Look for these opportunities before he even takes questions.... These tactics will clearly rattle the Rep and illustrate some degree of his ineptness to the balance of the audience.”

MacGuffie, a Connecticut resident, claims the tactics were successful in rattling Democratic Representative Jim Himes of the state’s Fourth District at a town hall meeting in May. “Himes clearly left the hall staggered, as the meeting, billed as a progress report for his economic solutions, clearly did not go as he planned,” MacGuffie wrote.

Pelosi and other Democrats have claimed the objections heard and disruptions created at the congressional town hall meetings come not from a genuine “grass root” campaign, but from an “Astroturf” movement choreographed by organizations like FreedomWorks and the anti-tax Tea Party groups. On the other side, opponents of the healthcare plan point out that ACORN, SIEU, and like-minded organizations have been recruiting people to turn out in support of Obama and his reform plans. A coalition of liberal and left-wing organizations, including the Sierra Club, Environment America, and the Human Rights Campaign advertised summer jobs on Craig’s List offering \$500 a week at 50 different offices around the country to people who would work to defend the Obama healthcare plan.

And if the dialogue is not always civil and polite at some of the town hall meetings, one may recall that a confrontational approach has often been convenient and useful to the activists on the Left — even to Barack Obama, who studied the “Alinsky playbook” in his younger days as a community organizer in Chicago. Last year, while campaigning for the presidency, Obama encouraged a cheering crowd to carry the battle to those among their neighbors who opposed his candidacy. “I want you to argue with them, get in their face,” he said.

Representative Tim Bishop (D-N.Y.) may have enjoyed as much “in-your-face” argumentation as he could stand recently at a town hall meeting on Long Island. Though he asked for a “civil” and “respectful” discussion, a YouTube video of the event shows the congressman struggling to get in an occasional word or phrase.



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“Can I finish a sentence?” he asked during one of many interruptions. “Stop talking and I’ll be happy to answer,” he said at another.

“You didn’t answer the question!” someone hollered out.

“I’m trying to!” Bishop protested.

But it was not his day and not his audience. One woman drew sustained applause by simply quoting Lincoln to her congressman: “You can fool some of the people all of the time and all of the people some of the time, but you can’t fool all of the people all of the time.”

Referring to the Himes town meeting in Connecticut, MacGuffie has promised: “We will be traveling the state to provide a similar reality-check for all five of the Reps, and of course (Senator) Chris Dodd,” who is expected to seek a sixth Senate term next year. “Just imagine what we can achieve if we see to it that every Representative in the nation who has supported the socialist agenda has a similar experience!”

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