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COMMENTARY

Palaima: Capitalizing on socialism's bad name

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Among techniques to prevent informed discussions from taking place on critical issues that are facing our country is the timeworn strategy of demonizing the opposition through personal attacks or by linking them and their views to some notion, practice or philosophy that a good many people view as bad or evil.

As terms of opprobrium in American society, very few words have had over time the staying power to damn thoughts, ideas and thinkers that the words "socialism" and "socialist" continue to have. Foxbusiness.com on July 13 reports: "Obama's a socialist. That's the view of 55 percent of American voters." Nationalreview.com four days earlier followed "socialist" with a cascade of related and more violent adjectives: "Marxist, fascist, Nazi, communist."

It is clear that being described as a "card-carrying socialist" (cnn.com) is not a compliment. The iconography of images for "Obama socialist" on Google drives the point home.

One image has a smiling Obama in front of an American flag. Instead of 50 stars on a blue field, it has a Soviet hammer and sickle on a sickly purple (reddened blue) background. Another image shows Obama orating in front of larger scale busts of the unholy triad Marx, Lenin and Mao. Yet another shows that the label of socialism is not innocuous. The word SOCIALISM appears in red at the bottom. Above, a red cartoon drawing of a man points a gun, execution-style, at the head of a like figure in blue. The blue man holds a round black bag with a dollar sign on it.

The nebulous term "socialism" is effective because it provides entry into a pool of stronger terms like "Nazi" and "communist." It can also be juxtaposed with violent images like the gun to the head. And it has a long history.

Back in 1942 three young economics instructors at the University of Texas had the courage to present themselves at the kind of orchestrated mass meeting we now call a "Tea Party". The meeting in Dallas was organized to denounce the 40-hour workweek, the New Deal and organized labor. The instructors wanted to offer explanations.

They were denied the right to speak. But a Dallas federal judge wrote the UT regents requesting "changes in the economics faculty" because "our university (is) swinging away from true economics and routing our children into the camp of state socialism." UT President Homer Rainey, who resisted regental requests to fire tenured and untenured economics faculty who taught New Deal economics, was eventually himself fired for "recommending 'homosexuals' for teaching positions, countenancing the teaching of communism, and supporting socialist economic philosophies."

Read these accusations out loud and you may want to wash your mouth out with soap. A better way to clear your mind and spirit is to read the following words of a true, committed socialist, the artist, craftsperson, poet, translator and thinker William Morris, recommended to me by long-time Austinite and craftsperson James E. Gardner. They capture the true high aspirations of some socialist thinkers.

In a lecture with the title "The Beauty of Life" (1880) Morris declared: "I had thought that civilization meant the attainment of peace and order and freedom, of goodwill between man and man, of the love of truth and the hatred of injustice ... not more stuffed chairs and more cushions ... and more dainty meat and drink - and therewithal more and sharper differences between class and class ... If (civilization) does not aim at ... giving some share in the happiness and dignity of life to all the people that it has created ... it is simply an organized injustice, a mere instrument for oppression."

Idealistic? Yes. Simple-minded? Perhaps. But noble, gentle and consistent with the message of Jesus Christ - and impossible to confuse with the actions of a mob hit man.

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