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We need higher quality outrage

With all the shouting over politics, we have less genuine opposition - the kind that is the bedrock of democracy.

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WASHINGTON

We need to ratchet up the level of opposition in our public and private discourse.

This statement may seem surprising, coming from someone who wrote a book, "The Argument Culture," claiming that the rise of opposition is endangering our civic life. Why do I now say we need more? The key is what I call "agonism:" ritualized opposition, a knee-jerk, automatic use of warlike formats.

Agonism obliterates and obfuscates real opposition. When there's a ruckus in the street outside your home, you fling open the window to see what's happening. But if there's a row outside every night, you shut the window and try to block it out. That's what's happening in our public discourse. With all the shouting, we have less, rather than more, genuine opposition - the kind that is the bedrock on which democracy rests.

Agonism grows out of our conviction that opposition is the best, if not the only, path to truth. In this view, the best way to explore an idea is a debate that requires opponents to marshal facts and arguments for one side, and ignore, ridicule, or otherwise undermine facts and arguments that support the other side.

Many journalists prize two types of agonism: One is the valuing of attack over other modes of inquiry, such as analyzing, integrating, or simply informing. The other is a seemingly laudable search for "balance," which results in reporting accusations without examining their validity.

Legitimate opposition is quashed when dissension from public policy is branded "hate speech" or unpatriotic. True hate speech stirs passions against members of a group precisely because of their membership in that group. Expressing passionate opposition to - even hatred for - the policies of elected officials is a legitimate, necessary form of engagement in public life. Candidates and individuals may differ - indeed, *must* differ - on public policy, such as whether invading Iraq enhanced or hampered American security. But questioning the patriotism of those who believe the invasion was a mistake quashes legitimate debate.

We can know others' policies, but we cannot know their motives. Accusing opponents of venal motives makes it easy to dismiss valid criticism. One can decry the fact that many of the contracts for rebuilding Iraq were awarded to Halliburton without claiming that the war was undertaken in order to enrich the company the vice president once led. One can argue that having received medals for heroic deeds in the Vietnam war does not equip John Kerry to execute the war in Iraq without seeking to discredit not only his, but all, Purple Hearts. One can argue that the president is using the Sept. 11 attacks to bolster his public profile without going so far as to claim (as does a message circulating on the

Internet) that he played a role in authorizing those attacks. And one can validly defend the way the war was conducted without accusing one's critics of undermining the war effort.

Agonism leads to the conviction that fights are riveting to watch. Together with ever-diminishing budgets and corporate demands for ever-greater profits, this conviction tempts TV producers to quickly assemble shows by finding a spokesperson for each side - the more extreme, the better - and letting them slug it out. This format leaves no forum for the middle ground, where most viewers are. The result is that the extremes define the issues, problems seem insoluble, and citizens become alienated from the political process.

A single-minded devotion to "balance" also creates the illusion of equivalence where there is none. For example, as shown repeatedly by journalist Ross Gelbspan as well as in a recent article by Maxwell and Jules Boykoff in the academic journal *Global Environmental Change*, news coverage of global warming actually ends up being biased because news reports of scientists' mounting concern typically also feature prominently one of the few "greenhouse skeptics" who declare the concern bogus. This "balanced" two-sides approach gives the impression that scientists are evenly divided, whereas in fact the vast majority agree that the dangers of global climate change are potentially grave.

Take, too, the current bemoaning of negativity in the presidential campaign. Given the devotion to "balance," reports tend to juxtapose negative statements from both sides. But negativity comes in many forms. Attacks on an opponent's character distract attention from the issues that will be decided in the election. Attacks on an opponent's proposed and past policies are appropriate; we need more of such attention to policy.

The preoccupation with balance plays a role here, too. If the goal is only ensuring balance, then journalists can feel their work is done when they have reported accusations flung from each side, abnegating the responsibility to examine the

validity of the attacks.

Ironically, while the press is busy gauging who's ahead and who's behind in the contest, significant opposition is left out. Martin Walker, of United Press International, notes that when President Bush addressed the United Nations last month, newspapers in every country other than our own - including our British allies and papers such as the French *Le Figaro*, which supported the invasion of Iraq - reported the event as a duel, with President Bush on one side and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan or the international community on the other. The American press, whether they were supportive or critical of the president's speech, ignored the oppositional context and reported on his speech alone.

This downplaying of genuine opposition is mirrored in our private conversations. In many European countries, heated political discussions are commonplace and enjoyed; most Americans regard such conversations as unseemly arguments, so they avoid talking politics - especially with anyone whose views differ, or are unknown, lest they inadvertently spark a conflict or offend someone who disagrees.

As a result, we aren't forced to articulate - and therefore examine - the logic of our views, nor are we exposed to the views of those with whom we disagree. And if young people don't hear adults having intense, animated political discussions, the impression that politics has no relevance to their lives is reinforced. Surely this contributes to the woefully low voter turnout among young Americans.

The Yugoslavian-born poet Charles Simic has said, "There are moments in life when true invective is called for, when it becomes an absolute necessity, out of a deep sense of justice, to denounce, mock, vituperate, lash out, in the strongest possible language."

We have come to such a moment. Leaving aside invective, vituperation, and mockery, I believe that we need space for peaceful yet passionate outrage. The challenges we face are monumental. Among them are the spread of nuclear weapons, the burgeoning number of individuals and groups who see the United States as a threat, and the question of how far to compromise our liberties and protections in the interest of security.

On the domestic side, the challenges include the impending insolvency of Medicare and social security, the rising number of working Americans with no health insurance, and the question of whether the checks and balances provided by the three branches of government should be strengthened or weakened.

In the face of challenges of these proportions, we can no longer afford to have voices of true opposition muted by the agonistic din.

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