



Polluters of the public discourse

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Wrapping up her address to the [Conservative Political Action Conference](#) in Washington Friday, best-selling author and right-wing poison-mouth Ann Coulter took a witless swipe at former US senator John Edwards:

"I was going to have a few comments on the other Democratic presidential candidate, John Edwards," Coulter said, "but it turns out you have to go into rehab if you use the word 'faggot.' So . . . I can't really talk about Edwards."

Judging from [video of the event](#) posted on the Internet, Coulter's asinine crack was greeted with laughter and some applause. But condemnation was swift.

The [Edwards campaign](#) posted the video on its website, along with a

statement accusing Coulter of having "brought hate-speech politics to a new low" -- and asking supporters to "help us raise \$100,000 in 'Coulter Cash' this week to keep this campaign charging ahead." Democratic Party chairman Howard Dean called Coulter's comments "[hate-filled and bigoted](#)," and urged Republicans to "denounce her hateful remarks."

[They needed no urging.](#) John McCain's campaign slammed Coulter's statement as "wildly inappropriate." Mitt Romney's spokesman called it "offensive." Rudy Giuliani said "there should be no place for such name-calling in political debate."

But the candidates' rebukes were tepid compared with the scalding outrage from movement conservatives. "There are enough spewers of

mindless filth, vulgarity, and hatred" in American life, fumed the influential [Michelle Malkin](#). "We don't expect . . . that garbage at the nation's preeminent conservative gathering." The editors of [RedState.com](#) announced curtly that "Ann Coulter doesn't speak for us," and said it should be "the last time a candidate for public office willingly accepts her endorsement or appears on the same stage with her." Boston's Dean Barnett, a notable voice at [HughHewitt.com](#), was concise in his appraisal: "[Idiotic. Disgusting. Stupid. Moronic.](#)"

At [GOPUSA.com](#), [Cliff Kincaid](#) blasted Coulter's "bizarre behavior and utterances" and urged the conservative weekly Human Events to drop her from its masthead. Rick Moran of [Rightwing Nuthouse](#) pronounced Coulter a "despicable woman" who "deliberately uses hate language to get a rise out of the left and get the rest of us talking about her." A slew of conservative bloggers simultaneously posted an [open letter](#) lambasting Coulter's invective as "intolerable" and "vicious," and urging that she henceforth be dropped as a speaker. "How can we teach young conservatives to fight for their principles with civility and respect," they demanded, "when Ann Coulter is allowed to address the conference?"

Meanwhile, Coulter wasn't the only performing pundit to say something appalling last Friday.

On his HBO talk show "Real Time," Bill Maher defended liberals who lamented that last week's terrorist

attack in Afghanistan didn't kill Vice President Dick Cheney. "If this isn't China," Maher asked, "shouldn't you be able to say that? . . . I have zero doubt that if Dick Cheney was not in power, people wouldn't be dying needlessly tomorrow." The audience applauded and laughed. A moment later Maher said it again, even more emphatically: "[I'm just saying, if he did die, other people -- more people -- would live. That's a fact.](#)"

Considering the reaction to Coulter's crude taunt, it isn't surprising that Maher's all-but-explicit assassination fantasy triggered an avalanche of criticism. Except that it didn't. There was no statement from Howard Dean, no denunciation from the presidential campaigns, no storm of protest from liberal bloggers repelled by Maher's remarks.

Like Coulter, Maher has a history of repugnant statements. After a riding accident left Christopher Reeve crippled for life, for example, Maher [praised the horse](#): "If you try to make a horse jump over something that it doesn't want to jump over, I think it really should throw you off its back." In November, he [said on CNN](#) that "the people who really run the underpinnings of the Republican Party are gay," specifically naming GOP chairman Ken Mehlman. But while Coulter's latest puerile insult drew lavish media attention, Maher's far more offensive remarks barely caused a ripple.

A Nexis search Monday turned up 91 stories mentioning "Ann Coulter and John Edwards" in the previous

2 1/2 days. There were four that referred to "Bill Maher and Dick Cheney." Google News listed more than 900 web pages dealing with Coulter/Edwards, but only 15 concerning Maher/Cheney.

If there is one thing America's polarized public discourse desperately needs, it is fewer smears and slurs. If there is another, it is an end to the

double standard that loudly condemns hate speech when it comes from the right, while barely noticing when it spews from the left. Coulter and Maher may win cheap laughs, but some kinds of "humor" are distinctly unfunny. Political passion has its place in the marketplace of ideas. Poison doesn't -- and neither does anyone who can't tell them apart.