



Anger Is All The Rage

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George F. Will

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During the divisive War of 1812, a livid woman famous for her long hair rode to the White House, stood in her carriage, let down her tresses and proclaimed that she would gladly be shorn of them if they would be used to hang President James Madison. That anecdote, from Catherine Allgor's biography of Dolley Madison, shows that today's theatrical anger is not without precedent. But now there is a new style in anger -- fury as a fashion accessory, indignation as evidence of good character.

Under the headline "San Franciscans Hurl Their Rage at Parking Patrol," the *New York Times* recently described the verbal abuse and physical violence -- there were 28 attacks in 2006 -- inflicted on parking enforcement officers in a city that has a

surplus of liberalism and a shortage of parking places. Parking is so difficult that George Anderson, a mental health expert, has stopped holding lectures there because his audiences arrive seething about their parking frustrations. Anderson represents the American Association of Anger Management Providers.

Of course. San Francisco, a showcase for expressive individualism, is full of people bristling with rights and eager to rebel against oppressive authority, but having a hard time finding any. The only rules concern parking.

No wonder Americans are infatuated with anger: It is democratic. Anyone can express it, and it is one of the seven deadly sins, which means it is a universal susceptibility.

So in this age that is proud of having achieved "the repeal of reticence," anger exhibitionism is pandemic.

There are the tantrums -- sometimes both theatrical and perfunctory -- of talking heads on television or commentators writing in vitriol (Paul Krugman's incessant contempt, Ann Coulter's equally constant loathing). There is road rage (and parking lot rage when the Whole Foods Market parking lot is congested with expressive individualists driving Volvos and Priuses). The blogosphere often is, as one blogger joyfully says, "an electronic primal scream." And everywhere there is the histrionic fury of ordinary people venting in everyday conversations.

Many people who loathe George W. Bush have adopted what Peter Wood describes as "ecstatic anger as a mode of political action." Anger often is, Wood says, "a spectacle to be witnessed by an appreciative audience, not an attempt to win over the uncommitted."

Wood, an anthropologist and author of "A Bee in the Mouth: Anger in America Now," says the new anger "often has the look-at-me character of performance art." His book is a convincing, hence depressing, explanation of "anger chic" -- of why anger has become an all-purpose emotional stance. It has achieved prestige and become "a credential for group membership." As a result, "Americans have been flattening their emotional range into an angry monotone."

Wood notes that there is a "vagueness and elasticity of the grievances" that supposedly justify today's almost exuberant anger. And anger is more pervasive than merely political grievances would explain. Today's anger is a coping device for everyday life. It also is the defining attribute of an increasingly common personality type: the person who "unless he is angry, feels he is nothing at all."

That type, infatuated with anger, uses it to express identity. Anger as an expression of selfhood is its own vindication. Wood argues, however, that as anger becomes a gas polluting the social atmosphere, it becomes not a sign of personal uniqueness but of a herd impulse.

Once upon a time, Americans admired models of self-control, people such as George Washington and Jackie Robinson, who mastered their anger rather than relishing being mastered by it. America's fictional heroes could be angry, but theirs was a reluctant anger -- Alan Ladd as the gunfighter in "Shane," Gary Cooper as the marshal in "High Noon." Today, however, proclaimed anger -- the more vituperative the better -- is regarded as a sign of good character and emotional vitality.

Perhaps this should not be surprising, now that Americans are inclined to elect presidents who advertise their emotions -- "I feel your pain." As the late Mary McGrory wrote, Bill Clinton "is a child of his age; he believes more in the thrust-

out lower lip than the stiff upper one."

The politics of disdain -- e.g., Howard Dean's judgment that Republicans are "brain dead" and "a lot of them never made an honest living in their lives" -- derails politics by defining opponents as beyond the

reach of reason. The anger directed at Bush today, like that directed at Clinton during his presidency, luxuriates in its own vehemence.

Today, many people preen about their anger as a badge of authenticity: I snarl, therefore I am. Such people make one's blood boil.

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