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The Opinion Pages | OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Long History of Political Idiocy

By JOANNE B. FREEMAN AUG. 4, 2015

NEW HAVEN — WE are currently enjoying a master class in the art of political stupidity. Donald J. Trump has been schooling us for some time, but the Iran nuclear deal has touched off a new race to the bottom. Mike Huckabee said the agreement with Iran would “take the Israelis and march them to the door of the oven.” Ted Cruz called the Obama administration “the world’s leading financier of radical Islamic terrorism.” Let’s not even get started on the Affordable Care Act, which Ben Carson once called “the worst thing that has happened in this nation since slavery.”

It’s tempting to rail against the media’s ability to elicit and amplify such stupidity. But none of this is new. Politicians have always resorted to dumb claims, blatant insults, bold exaggerations and baldfaced lies to gain press coverage and win votes. Indeed, Americans of the 19th century invented a name for it. The word “bunkum” — the origin of the word “bunk” — dates from the 1820s, a product of the over-the-top speechifying of Representative Felix Walker, who forewarned his congressional colleagues to ignore a blustery grandstand speech because it was intended only for the folks back home in Buncombe County, N.C. Then as now, raising hackles before the eyes of the press was a play for power; politicians who displayed their fighting-man spunk were strutting their suitability as leaders.

Such grandstanding was particularly blatant in the mid-19th century, an

era with a political climate much like our own. The nation was becoming increasingly polarized because of the debate over the spread of slavery in new states born of Western expansion. At a time of enormous change, a sense of do-or-die extremism was in the air. New technologies, like the steam-powered printing press and the telegraph, were dramatically reshaping the power of the press.

Congress was particularly newsworthy in the 1840s, '50s and '60s. A typical newspaper had an extended account of debates in both houses, commentary on those debates and a "letter" from a Washington reporter (thus the term "correspondent") filled with gossip about congressional doings. Legislators who went to extremes were virtually guaranteed press coverage. As Senator Franklin Pierce of New Hampshire griped in 1838, the visitors' galleries were empty during debates on "great measures of policy," but became "crowded almost to suffocation" when personal insults were expected.

Some men were known for such performances. Take Representative Henry A. Wise, a congressman from Virginia from 1833 to 1844. Like many purveyors of bunk, Wise was by no means a stupid man, however problematic his politics. (After his congressional career, he went on to become governor of Virginia, and signed the abolitionist John Brown's death warrant.)

Wise loved grandstanding of all kinds: the swaggering threat, the mocking taunt, the over-the-top insult. He even took an occasional swing at an opponent. In 1842, he demonstrated his pro-slavery credentials by threatening to assault John Quincy Adams, an opponent of slavery, who had returned to the House after serving as president. "If the Member from Massachusetts had not been an old man, protected by the imbecility of age," Wise warned, "he would not have enjoyed, as long as he has, the mercy of my mere words." A horrified Adams wrote in his diary that night that Wise made "a threat of murdering me in my seat."

In 1838, Wise's baldfaced claim that a Democratic congressman was

corrupt led to a deadly duel. Speakers of the House had to be alert when Wise was on a roll. In 1834, a particularly alert speaker managed to stop Wise mid-insult (halfway through the word “malignant”). “Sir, I leave the blank to be filled by the House,” Wise said.

Over the top, yes. But Wise benefited from such behavior many times over. He was a star attraction. Crowds filled the galleries when he seemed likely to erupt; he sometimes advertised his flare-ups in advance. In an age when most congressmen served only one or two terms, Wise was elected to the House a remarkable six times.

Matters grew worse in the ever-more polarized 1850s, when grabbing attention and scoring points often rewarded new heights of hyperbole. During the fraught debate over new slave states in 1850, Southerners threatened bloody murder, earning national attention in the process. A threat by Representative Thomas Clingman of North Carolina to shed Northern blood in the House — he promised a “collision” as electric as the Battle of Lexington — received widespread press coverage.

Perhaps polarized times require such grandstanding. They certainly invite it. But, as now, some politicians in the 1850s recognized the risks and voiced their concerns. They understood that extreme claims and violent words have escalating consequences. The tossing of verbal “missiles” in Congress could cause bloodshed, one congressman presciently warned in July 1856.

In recent weeks, by contrast, we haven’t heard much talk of the consequences of political flame-throwing, save some hand-wringing by President Obama.

And so our crop of presidential contenders continues to spout stupidities with a swagger. Given the pack of candidates vying for attention (and basic name recognition), stupidity seems smart. It gets attention — but not without a price. In reaching for new heights of bunkum, these candidates are stoking the flames of extremism at a time when dialogue is desperately needed.

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