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On Point: Big Oil scapegoat



Vincent Carroll
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April 26, 2006

Are Americans really dumb enough to blame oil companies for the run-up in gasoline prices in recent months? That's the bet a growing number of politicians have made as they rush to join calls for an "excess profits" tax on Big Oil and federal probes of price fixing (see the nearby editorial).

Maybe the demagogues in Congress should have checked the Conference Board's respected index of consumer confidence before launching into their latest populist crusade: That index just reached its highest point since May 2002. Most Americans know the sky isn't falling.

If you enjoy irony, by the way, there's none richer than the spectacle of politicians who have railed about the need for alternative energy and conservation now railing against the single biggest spur to their adoption: higher prices for traditional fuel. All the pious environmental preaching against SUVs over the years did *nothing* to retard their sales. Yet once gas prices hit \$3, dealers could barely give the behemoths away.

Economist Lawrence Kudlow believes "the biggest factor in rising energy prices is still the world economic boom." If that's the case, and if Congress is determined to act silly when addressing high gas prices, it might as well pass a resolution calling for global recession. That would make as much sense as holding hearings, as the Republican chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee promised, to examine "how oil companies determine where to invest profits."

Manual insults bizarre

"When a man concludes that any stick is good enough to beat his foe with, that is when he picks up a boomerang."

- G.K. Chesterton



The cast of Friends

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The upcoming closure of Manual High School in Denver has goaded angry foes into seizing verbal boomerangs that only hurt their cause. School board members and the superintendent have been compared to Hitler, Stalin and the Gestapo. The specter of ethnic cleansing has been invoked. And on Sunday, at the latest rally of opponents, the Rev. James D. Peters Jr. reportedly described those who support closing Manual as "latter-day members of the Ku Klux Klan."

If the school board were composed of right-wing white men, such incendiary insults might at least be understood - although hardly justified - as simply ruthless smears. But in fact this board is dominated by liberal civic activists, and includes minorities. Indeed, the sole middle-aged Anglo male, Bruce Hoyt, is the founder of Friends of Manual High School, which he attended.

In short, references to the Ku Klux Klan and Gestapo are not only offensive and unfair - as they'd be under any circumstances in this city - they're downright bizarre.

Friends of free speech

Thank heaven for Hollywood. If it weren't for the movie industry's economic clout, you have to wonder if the California Supreme Court would have issued a ringing endorsement of freedom of expression in the workplace last week - one that should send a message well beyond that state.

However, since defendants in the case were the producers of the once wildly popular *Friends* TV show, the same California court that had previously rolled back free speech in the workplace at last saw the light. It unanimously rejected the claim of a scriptwriters' assistant that obnoxious sex talk prevalent among the show's writers amounted to harassment.

"Most of the sexually coarse and vulgar language at issue did not involve and was not aimed at plaintiff or other women in the workplace," one justice wrote. Said another: "This case has very little to do with sexual harassment and very much to do with core First Amendment free speech rights."

Admittedly, Warner Bros. Television Productions has an advantage over most employers because it can argue that crude talk is vital to the creative process. Still, any blow against the stifling growth of laws and rules meant to protect people from offensive speech is worth celebrating.

Harvey Silverglate, director of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, believes the decision has particular relevance for college campuses. "If a court widely deemed one of the nation's most hostile to free speech could recognize the need to protect robust and even obnoxious speech in a 'creative workplace,' " he wrote in *The*

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Wall Street Journal, "shouldn't universities, by virtue of their truth-seeking mission, enjoy the highest degree of freedom from censorship, and campus harassment codes that regulate speech be abolished?"

But of course.

Vincent Carroll, editor of the editorial pages, writes On Point several times a week. Reach him at carrollv@RockyMountainNews.com.

About Vincent Carroll

Vincent Carroll, editor of the editorial pages, is a longtime resident of Denver whose work has appeared in numerous publications, including *The Wall Street Journal* and *Barron's*. He has also been a syndicated columnist for the Newspaper Enterprise Association.

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