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**Op-Ed Columnist**

## **An Absence of Class**

By **BOB HERBERT**

Some of the images from the run-up to Sunday's landmark health care vote in the House of Representatives should be seared into the nation's consciousness. We are so far, in so many ways, from being a class act.

A group of lowlifes at a Tea Party rally in Columbus, Ohio, last week taunted and humiliated a man who was sitting on the ground with a sign that said he had Parkinson's disease. The disgusting behavior was captured on a widely circulated videotape. One of the Tea Party protesters leaned over the man and sneered: "If you're looking for a handout, you're in the wrong end of town."

Another threw money at the man, first one bill and then another, and said contemptuously, "I'll pay for this guy. Here you go. Start a pot."

In Washington on Saturday, opponents of the health care legislation spit on a black congressman and shouted racial slurs at two others, including John Lewis, one of the great heroes of the civil rights movement. Barney Frank, a Massachusetts Democrat who is chairman of the House Financial Services Committee, was taunted because he is gay.

At some point, we have to decide as a country that we just can't have this: We can't allow

ourselves to remain silent as foaming-at-the-mouth protesters scream the vilest of epithets at members of Congress — epithets that The Times will not allow me to repeat here.

It is 2010, which means it is way past time for decent Americans to rise up against this kind of garbage, to fight it aggressively wherever it appears. And it is time for every American of good will to hold the Republican Party accountable for its role in tolerating, shielding and encouraging foul, mean-spirited and bigoted behavior in its ranks and among its strongest supporters.

For decades the G.O.P. has been the party of fear, ignorance and divisiveness. All you have to do is look around to see what it has done to the country. The greatest economic inequality since the Gilded Age was followed by a near-total collapse of the overall economy. As a country, we have a monumental mess on our hands and still the Republicans have nothing to offer in the way of a remedy except more tax cuts for the rich.

This is the party of trickle down and weapons of mass destruction, the party of birthers and death-panel lunatics. This is the party that genuflects at the altar of right-wing talk radio, with its insane, nauseating, nonstop commitment to hatred and bigotry.

Glenn Beck of Fox News has called President Obama a “racist” and asserted that he “has exposed himself as a guy, over and over and over again, who has a deep-seated hatred for white people or the white culture.”

Mike Huckabee, a former Republican presidential candidate, has said of Mr. Obama’s economic policies: “Lenin and Stalin would love this stuff.”

The G.O.P. poisons the political atmosphere and then has the gall to complain about an

## absence of bipartisanship.

The toxic clouds that are the inevitable result of the fear and the bitter conflicts so relentlessly stoked by the Republican Party — think blacks against whites, gays versus straights, and a whole range of folks against immigrants — tend to obscure the tremendous damage that the party's policies have inflicted on the country. If people are arguing over immigrants or abortion or whether gays should be allowed to marry, they're not calling the G.O.P. to account for (to take just one example) the horribly destructive policy of cutting taxes while the nation was fighting two wars.

If you're all fired up about Republican-inspired tales of Democrats planning to send grandma to some death chamber, you'll never get to the G.O.P.'s war against the right of ordinary workers to organize and negotiate in their own best interests — a war that has diminished living standards for working people for decades.

With a freer hand, the Republicans would have done more damage. George W. Bush tried to undermine Social Security. John McCain was willing to put Sarah Palin a heartbeat away from the Oval Office and thought Phil Gramm would have made a crackerjack Treasury secretary. (For those who may not remember, Mr. Gramm was a deregulation zealot who told us during the presidential campaign that we were suffering from a “mental recession.”)

A party that promotes ignorance (“Just say no to global warming”) and provides a safe house for bigotry cannot serve the best interests of our country. Back in the 1960s, John Lewis risked his life and endured savage beatings to secure fundamental rights for black Americans while right-wing Republicans like Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan were lining up with segregationist Democrats to oppose landmark civil rights legislation.

**Since then, the right-wingers have taken over the G.O.P. and Mr. Lewis, now a congressman, must still endure the garbage they have wrought.**

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