

## **“It’s Witch-Hunt Season”**

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The last time a Democrat sat in the White House, he faced a nonstop witch hunt by his political opponents. Prominent figures on the right accused Bill and Hillary Clinton of everything from drug smuggling to murder. And once Republicans took control of Congress, they subjected the Clinton administration to unrelenting harassment — at one point taking 140 hours of sworn testimony over accusations that the White House had misused its Christmas card list.

Now it’s happening again — except that this time it’s even worse. Let’s turn the floor over to Rush Limbaugh: “Imam Hussein Obama,” he recently declared, is “probably the best anti-American president we’ve ever had.”

To get a sense of how much it matters when people like Mr. Limbaugh talk like this, bear in mind that he’s an utterly mainstream figure within the Republican Party; bear in mind, too, that unless something changes the political dynamics, Republicans will soon control at least one house of Congress. This is going to be very, very ugly.

So where is this rage coming from? Why is it flourishing? What will it do to America?

Anyone who remembered the 1990s could have predicted something like the current political craziness. What we learned from the Clinton years is that a significant number of Americans just don’t consider government by liberals — even very moderate liberals — legitimate. Mr. Obama’s election would have enraged those people even if he were white. Of course, the fact that he isn’t, and has an alien-sounding name, adds to the rage.

By the way, I’m not talking about the rage of the excluded and the dispossessed: Tea Partiers are relatively affluent, and nobody is angrier these days than the very, very rich. Wall Street has turned on Mr. Obama with a vengeance: last month Steve Schwarzman, the billionaire chairman of the Blackstone Group, the private equity giant, compared proposals to end tax loopholes for hedge fund managers with the Nazi invasion of Poland.

And powerful forces are promoting and exploiting this rage. Jane Mayer’s new article in *The New Yorker* about the superrich Koch brothers and their war against Mr. Obama has generated much-justified attention, but as Ms. Mayer herself points out, only the scale of their effort is new: billionaires like Richard Mellon Scaife waged a similar war against Bill Clinton.

Meanwhile, the right-wing media are replaying their greatest hits. In the 1990s, Mr. Limbaugh used innuendo to feed anti-Clinton mythology, notably the insinuation that Hillary Clinton was complicit in the death of Vince Foster. Now, as we've just seen, he's doing his best to insinuate that Mr. Obama is a Muslim. Again, though, there's an extra level of craziness this time around: Mr. Limbaugh is the same as he always was, but now seems tame compared with Glenn Beck. And where, in all of this, are the responsible Republicans, leaders who will stand up and say that some partisans are going too far? Nowhere to be found.

To take a prime example: the hysteria over the proposed Islamic center in lower Manhattan almost makes one long for the days when former President George W. Bush tried to soothe religious hatred, declaring Islam a religion of peace. There were good reasons for his position: there are a billion Muslims in the world, and America can't afford to make all of them its enemies.

But here's the thing: Mr. Bush is still around, as are many of his former officials. Where are the statements, from the former president or those in his inner circle, preaching tolerance and denouncing anti-Islam hysteria? On this issue, as on many others, the G.O.P. establishment is offering a nearly uniform profile in cowardice.

So what will happen if, as expected, Republicans win control of the House? We already know part of the answer: Politico reports that they're gearing up for a repeat performance of the 1990s, with a "wave of committee investigations" — several of them over supposed scandals that we already know are completely phony. We can expect the G.O.P. to play chicken over the federal budget, too; I'd put even odds on a 1995-type government shutdown sometime over the next couple of years.

It will be an ugly scene, and it will be dangerous, too. The 1990s were a time of peace and prosperity; this is a time of neither. In particular, we're still suffering the after-effects of the worst economic crisis since the 1930s, and we can't afford to have a federal government paralyzed by an opposition with no interest in helping the president govern. But that's what we're likely to get.

If I were President Obama, I'd be doing all I could to head off this prospect, offering some major new initiatives on the economic front in particular, if only to shake up the political dynamic. But my guess is that the president will continue to play it safe, all the way into catastrophe.