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## Mobs R Us?



By Marty Kaplan

There's a direct line connecting the khaki-wearing "citizen" mob sent from Washington by the GOP to stop the 2000 recount in Florida, to the teabaggers dispatched by the corporate front group FreedomWorks to disrupt congressional town halls.

Whether at the beginning of the decade or its end, the loudmouths have the same goal: hiding behind a grotesque version of free speech and free assembly in order to undermine civil discourse and shut down the institutions of democracy.

Here's the hard question: Are they doing anything different from what the left did in the '60s and '70s to stop the Vietnam War?

Back then, more than a few public events were thrown into confusion by agile and vocal protesters, and more than a handful of universities had sand thrown in their gears by occupiers, demonstrators and masters of agitprop.

What's the difference between what happened then, and what's happening now?

The easy answer, which also happens to be true, is that the effort to end American involvement in Vietnam was largely a moral and just deployment of civil disobedience aimed at fighting an immoral and unjust war, while today's right wingers attempting to hijack town halls are largely nutjobs who also believe that Obama is the Kenyan equivalent of the Manchurian Candidate.

But the harder question requires moving one notch upward, thinking at a higher level of abstraction. The same rule ought to apply, whether you agree or disagree with the cause being advanced. From 2001 to 2008, if grassroots Democrats had been as strategically smart, as well organized and well-funded, and as ruthless as Karl Rove's army, what would we have said about efforts to pierce the Bush bubble? "Way to go!" is one phrase that comes to mind.

I'm not talking about what the mainstream media response would have been. As usual, the right would have played the press like a piccolo, and the reporting about muscular liberal activism during the W years would likely have been as naïve and credulous as the way it treated the Swift Boaters. I'm talking instead about the principle involved here — not how events get deformed and misframed by the media, but how to distinguish protest then from protest now.

Do you have any ideas? Here's my first stab at it: When public debate was shut down by people on my side in the '60s and '70s, I didn't like it then, either.

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**Marty Kaplan** 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director