In Winsted, the important issue is privacy

In the wake of Watergate, government forfeited much of the public trust. Americans realized that those in power would do anything, including break the law, violate the rights of others and ignore basic notions of decency to achieve their own, narrow goals.

Recent events in the Winsted election of 1995 reminds citizens of these realizations.

A private conversation between two individuals was secretly tape recorded. Using this tape recording, one candidate threatened that if two other candidates did not withdraw from the campaign he would make public the contents of the tape. A political party chairman joined in the hysteria and called for the withdrawal of the two candidates based upon an interpretation of the content of the conversation which, he said, "undermined" the party. Another member of the town committee said the speakers on the tape "betrayed" the party.

Subsequent discussion continues to focus on the content of the conversation.

The small group who heard the tape expressed outrage at the content. All this noise distracts our attention from the significant issue: the secret interception and interference with private conversations, the violation of the privacy of citizens and the threatened use of this taped private conversation to gain political advantage.

The legality of the act of secretly tape recording conversations will be determined by a court of law. But regardless of whether it is legal or illegal, the question remains for us to answer as citizens, as Americans, if whether it is right.

Every culture has some boundary to define the public from the private.

American citizens still believe that there are legitimate expectations of privacy to be protected, regardless of whether the law has caught up to the technology.

There are some things that are simply shameful. You have probably had the experience of overhearing a conversation at a restaurant, or hearing an encounter between two people that made you feel embarrassed, as if you were witnessing something you shouldn't be witnessing.

This is an important reaction which demonstrates that our society still has boundaries. When those boundaries are ignored, it clears the way for individuals to consider it appropriate to operate as though the only thing that mattered was their own political objectives.

Those who intercepted and interfered with the communication must feel some degree of shame. They are not proclaiming that they performed an act in the public good, rather they insist on anonymity. Those who used the tape to intimidate and threaten others must also feel a degree of shame. They are not proclaiming that they performed an act in the public good, rather they insist on anonymity. Those who used the tape to intimidate and threaten others must also feel a degree of shame. The refusal to let the public, or even those involved, hear the tape reveals this.

It is the citizenry that has been betrayed, not a political party. This type of activity is a body blow to democracy, it is profoundly anti-democratic. Americans cherish their privacy and expect it to be respected. It is part of our historical roots: the private sphere is one of the greatest creations of Western history and politics.

Democracy is an achievement that requires ongoing effort to keep it vital. There is nothing gentle about democratic argument. But we must reject those who attempt to intimidate, coerce, silence and bully through anti-democratic acts and threats. Citizens do not have to tolerate inappropriate behavior in the public sphere. We can say "shame on you" to those who would break a fundamental tenant of a free society. And we can certainly not vote for those who invade the privacy of others and threaten people in the pursuit of a political goal. The ends do not justify the means.

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