

Looking for the line

by Susan_Estrich

Nothing gets people's attention faster than picketing them at home — which is not necessarily a reason to do it.

Last week, at the height of the furor over the AIG bonuses, activists managed to locate the homes of a number of those who momentarily received bonuses, and brought their protests home. The executives, at least the ones who were interviewed, were not happy. Some of them had nothing to do with the toxic transactions that brought AIG to the edge of collapse; they were hired to clean up the mess made by others. Whether they should make more than government employees (which, in some sense, is what they are now) for doing so is a fair question and a fair subject for protest, as well.

No, what made the executives most unhappy and what gives me pause is not the question of whether they are fair subjects for public protest — of course they are — but whether their spouses and kids are. When dad signs up to work for AIG, does the whole family lose their right to privacy and personal security? If Mom wants to run for office, does that mean the kids go under the microscope with her? What kind of parent would do that to their kids?

A friend of mine, who has held various offices during turbulent times, said the only protest that ever made him angry was one that women activists staged at his home. I can't even remember what they were protesting, but I do remember my friend white with rage as he recounted how the protestors, and with them the reporters and television crews, surrounded his home. It wasn't the invasion of his privacy that bothered him; he was the first to admit that as a public official, he had no privacy. It was the exposure of his wife and preteen children. Any nut could figure out where they lived, just from the pictures and the street signs.

These days, the nut could pull up the satellite image of your yard, the programs from your kids' school events and all kinds of personal stuff, just by clicking. These days, the nut could hook up to forums where duly elected officials, as well as other nuts, can and do wish people they disagree with dead. These days, the nut could find a hundred outlets spewing all kinds of anger, threats and damnation at politicians and executives alike.

We still need good people at AIG. In fact, we — the taxpayers — need those people more than ever because it's our money on the line. If activists want to surround AIG offices and protest there, fine. If they want to surround congressional offices, fine. But I don't know too many reporters who would welcome protestors at their own front doors.

You can't stop people from holding demonstrations on the public streets where executives and politicians live with their families. But the press doesn't have to cover them. They don't have to identify the town and the individual who is the target. They don't have to reward people who are crossing the line. The purpose of a

demonstration is to get attention. A demonstration that gets no attention is like a tree falling in an empty forest.

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