The following article was published in the Houston Chronicle on Saturday, April 30, 2011:

Letters: Birthers and certificates

Impure motives

The continuous mentioning of the ludicrous "birther" issue, already thoroughly debunked, the statement by Donald Trump that the president was "not a good student," not "fit" for the Ivy League, brought into sharp relief his true intentions, Trump's true message. It is nothing more than modern-day race baiting, an appeal to voters based upon racism and prejudice.

Of course Donald Trump is a joke. You might say, why bother listening to such idiocy? The joke, however, is at our expense — as a nation, as a people. There are those in our country who are looking for a movement, looking for ways to justify their prejudices. They are an incipient movement of racists and bigots. Trump is their leader. The sooner we identify him as such, the better. Whether he seeks the presidency for the greater good of the country, as he claims, or for greater profits for his brand, or for more insidious reasons, the reality is that Trump's message is disingenuous at best, and dangerous at worst.

The road to hate speech is a gradual one. We don't normally penalize such speech in this country in any event. A person can get away with saying almost anything, except in the rare case where he is advocating "imminent lawless action," or in the words of Justice Holmes, where there is a "clear and present danger" of violence. Even flag burning, and apparently Quran burning, are protected, even when such an act leads to violence overseas or interferes with our nation's foreign policy. The First Amendment protects a vast array of even the most bigoted speech and also certainly protects Trump's scurrilous ramblings against the president. But the First Amendment only provides Trump the right to speak. It does not and should not immunize the speech from review and criticism. The First Amendment is not a blanket that smothers the debate about the true message behind the speech. Trump's subtext here is that the president is unfit for office because of either a failure to qualify as a "natural-born" American or because of lack of educational success, both of which are completely spurious charges.

So what does Trump have to gain by repeating untrue and unfounded assertions in the media, again and again? By his speech, he is consciously paving the road for greater and greater bigotry and further more serious attacks. He is opening up a space in the political discussion, little by little, in an attempt to normalize race-based attacks. This normalization has already been successful, as we saw recently when Marilyn Davenport, an elected member of the Orange County Republican Central Committee, sent around an email with the president depicted as an ape. ("Despicable' email puts GOP official in hot spot," Page A8, April 17).
Davenport, like Trump, is testing the waters. We concerned Americans must respond forcefully and repudiate such messages. The failure to do so would be a retreat from the progress which the election meant for this country.

Geoffrey A. Hoffman, director, University of Houston Immigration Clinic