

**THE BLOG**

# Did Jerry Falwell Go to Hell?

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By Marty Kaplan

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Giuliani's triumphant moment in the Fox Republican presidential debate — I know America's Mayor won, because Sean Hannity and Carl Cameron told me so — came when Rudy pretended that Ron Paul said that 9/11 was our fault.

Like Lloyd Bentsen praying for Dan Quayle to compare his own youth to Jack Kennedy's, Rudy had been waiting all night for someone dim enough to dis his 9/11ishness. It turned out to be Congressman Paul who hit that tripwire. Paul said that decades of American meddling in the Middle East had sewn the anti-Americanism that eventually led to terrorism. From the CIA coup that replaced Mossadegh's Iranian democracy with an authoritarian Shah who'd keep the oil flowing to the West, to the American military bases sprinkled through the Gulf region, the US has acted for generations as though aggressive pursuit of American national interests would bring with it no negative consequences to our standing with the people of the region. This is what Paul, though not as articulately as one might have hoped, explained had created a seedbed for al-Qaeda.

No, intervened Rudy, to thunderous (though forbidden) audience applause, whose volume exceeded even the (also forbidden) laughter at Governor Huckabee's joke about John Edwards spending too much money (you know how those gals are) in a beauty shop (not a barber shop, where real men — you know, Republicans — go). No, said Rudy, here's what caused 9/11: They hate us for our freedom.

Rudy's macho solo came just hours after all the Republican candidates' campaigns had issued condolence statements on the death of GOP hero Jerry Falwell. It was Reverend Falwell, of course, who had notoriously said on 9/11 that the terrorists hate us for our freedom to be gay, they hate us for our freedom to be lesbian, they hate us for our women's freedom of choice, they hate us for our freedom to be secular, they hate us for our freedom to have civil liberties, they hate us for keeping God out of government, they hate us for the ACLU and People for the American Way. "I point the finger in their face," said Falwell about liberals, the World Trade Center still smoldering, "and say, 'You helped this happen.'"

Giuliani's outrage at Ron Paul is the kind of Republican indignation usually reserved for straw men, for caricatures of the Democratic view that US national security interests are best served not just by a strong military deterrent, but also through multilateralism, political engagement, public diplomacy, a commitment to human rights and economic development, and the rest of what used to be known, before the sainted Gipper, as the bipartisan consensus on American foreign policy. What Giuliani did, in effect, was to borrow Falwell's attack on liberals and aim it at Ron Paul.

“You’re a fag, Ron”: that was Rudy’s response to what used to be Republican foreign policy doctrine, too. “You homos hate yourselves.”

There were plenty of other opportunities in the Fox debate for Republican candidates to prove their macho, thanks to the hypothetical scenario — straight out of the Fox show “24” — that Brit Hume posed near the thrilling conclusion of the program. It had something to do with terrorists destroying three American shopping malls, and a captured terrorist who knew when the bomb would go off in a fourth mall: in other words, the “ticking time bomb” scenario which all American military and intelligence specialists have declared to be a confection of fevered Hollywood minds, rather than having anything to do with the real world of terrorism and interrogation. But this hypo from Planet Clancy permitted each of the candidates except McCain, who actually served in the military and knows what torture means, to claim that his own balls were truly big and clanky enough to authorize “whatever it takes,” to prove that he among all the other candidates had the least compunctions about tearing up our faggy Constitution when faced with a suicider from Central Casting.

It gave me the feeling that if only Michael Dukakis had proposed waterboarding Kitty Dukakis’ hypothetical rapist, George H.W. Bush would never have been elected president.

You didn’t have to watch the Fox debate all the way to Rudy’s Quayle moment to know something odd was afoot. Right at the beginning, as each candidate was introduced, a graphic appeared with the following data: Age. Religion. Family. Career. I suppose I shouldn’t have found it breathtaking that Religion was the second identifying feature — not from the network where Bill O’Reilly’s synonym for Democrats, “secular progressives,” is just another word for Satanists. Still, the naked injection of religious denomination into a debate for candidates for the country’s highest civic office stuck me as Fox’s way of saying — as a kind of winking tribute to Jerry Falwell — “Fuck you” to People for the American Way. Plus, with Religion being listed just beneath how old they are, it turned Age into a kind of Meet-Your-Maker-Meter, a countdown to their eternal reward. On the other hand, ya gotta laugh at the data included under Family: the wife, the kids, the odd step-kid, but no mention of prior spouses, let alone prior spouses’ prior spouses. The only statistic missing was dick size, but that willingness-to-torture hypo turned out to serve very nicely as a proxy for that.

I don’t know enough about theology to know whether, when people die, they go to the Place that their own One True Religion believes in, or whether they go to a different Place that another, Truer Religion believes in — whether each of us gets to decide only for ourselves what throne will judge us, or whether we each get to determine the ultimate fates of everyone else. Those suiciders: are they enjoying their virgins in Islamic eternity, or are they burning in Baptist hell? Is Revered Falwell now in the lap of the Lord, or is he somewhere else, a less paradisiacal where Methodists, Seventh Day Adventists, Catholics, Presbyterians, once-born Episcopalians, and other non-members of The 700 Club end up?

I suppose the only way to answer question that would be a poll, like the text-message poll that Fox ran at the end of the debate. It made Sean Hannity apoplectic that Ron Paul won that poll for most of the evening, with Giuliani a distant third. That drove Hannity to keep reminding his audience that the very poll he and Alan Colmes were exhorting their viewers to enter, the same coolio Foxy interactivity they were relentlessly promoting, was in fact completely meaningless. Vote in our poll! Pay attention to this! Don’t pay attention to this! This means nothing!

Not a bad metaphor for the whole of the night.

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