



**THE BLOG** 08/10/2009 05:12 am ET | Updated May 25, 2011

# Smile! You're on Deather Camera!



By Marty Kaplan

I keep hoping that the health care “debate” we’re having this summer will turn out to be just a plot point in the 2009 version of *The Truman Show*, the movie where Jim Carrey’s character, Truman Burbank, discovers that what he thought was reality is actually a reality television show.

I want my character in *The Marty Show* to discover that Rush Limbaugh calling Obama a Nazi, and Glenn Beck calling the president a racist, turn out to be harmless taunts in a fictional storyline, not actual invitations to nutballs with weapons to do something truly terrible.

I keep waiting for that *Candid Camera* reveal when members of Congress realize that the constituents accusing them of wanting to euthanize their grannies turn out to be actors playing their parts, not voters too dumb or too scared to resist being manipulated by political demagogues and industry propagandists.

I keep praying that the execrable job the news media is doing turns out to be an intervention by extraterrestrials in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. The elevation of combat over content; the false equivalence of lies and facts in service of a bizarre notion of “balance”; the imperative to captivate instead of the obligation to inform: I want the camera to pull back and disclose the alien mind-control experiment that has forced human journalists to become entertainers.

When Sarah Palin declares that Obama’s evil death panel intends to condemn her Down’s syndrome baby to die, I keep waiting for the twist. This isn’t really the news; it’s a headline in the *Onion*. This isn’t really the opening salvo of the GOP frontrunner in the 2012 presidential campaign; it’s a *South Park* parody of *Harry Potter*.

When I see how a handful of Senate Republicans and a kennel of Blue Dogs can demonize the public health insurance option as a tyrannical government takeover; when I see seniors demand that government keep its mitts off Medicare; when I see Obama trade billions of savings achievable by price-bargaining with drug companies for millions of administration-friendly Big Pharma ads — that’s when I pine for a shocker like the one in *The Matrix* when Neo learns that reality is just an illusion.

The election of Barack Obama offered reason to believe that the fear-mongering on the campaign trail, the lying in the ads and the inadequacies of the media were no match for the enduring common sense of the American people. Wow — the system works.

Not so fast.

If the health care fracas has demonstrated anything so far, it's how porous the membrane is between self-government and self-deception. Other than the Hollywood tradition that the darkest hour is just before dawn, what evidence is there to believe that the country — as Obama said at his inaugural — has put away childish things? Other than the president's faith in bipartisanship and compromise, what reason is there to feel that Republicans won't do everything they can to destroy him?

This summer is shaping up to be as ugly as anything served up by Newt Gingrich and Tom Delay. Karl Rove and Dick Cheney may no longer call the shots, but their disciples in lobbyist front groups like Americans for Prosperity and FreedomWorks share the same DNA as the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth and the folks who impeached Bill Clinton.

When I hear Republican congressmen and cable gasbags cast doubt on Obama's natural-born citizenship, I know that they don't really believe the "birther" argument, just as they don't really believe the euthanasia argument. They're just playing to the base.

The problem is that the base doesn't know it's just being played.

To the demagogues in Congress, it's all a game, an act. They've already got health insurance. It doesn't matter whether 46 million uninsured Americans get it; what matters is whether they get re-elected.

To the media bloviators, it's a play, a piece of political theater. Their job isn't to cry foul, or to explain really complicated things; their job is to review the politicians' performances, and to hold the audience's attention so they stick around through the commercials.

Of course it's not at all a sport or a spectacle to the drug industry, the insurance industry, the hospital industry or any of the other stakeholders with hundreds of billions of dollars at risk. For them, it's a fight to the death.

Unfortunately, it's also a fight to the death for many of the Americans who can't afford premiums, can't afford drugs, and can't get insured. For them, it's not *The Truman Show*; it's a horror show.

*This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.*

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