



**THE BLOG** 08/24/2009 05:12 am ET | Updated May 25, 2011

# Kumbaya, Not Kevorkian, Will Kill Grandma



By Marty Kaplan

I don't know which is more dispiriting: the *New York Times*' failure to call Betsy McCaughey a liar, or Barack Obama's failure to call Chuck Grassley a liar. It's tempting to think of both failures as cowardice, a mortal fear of being branded "liberal." But ironically it's liberalism itself that makes them both mistake their cowardice for fair-mindedness.

Exhibit A is how the *Times* covered Jon Stewart's evisceration of McCaughey on *The Daily Show*.

McCaughey, a former Republican lieutenant governor of New York, is the ventriloquist who put "death panels" in Sarah Palin's mouth. A provision that permits Medicare to reimburse patients voluntarily seeking advance counseling from their doctors about wrenching end-of-life decisions — something that plenty of Republicans like Palin and Senator Grassley (R-IA) have supported — was maliciously twisted by McCaughey to mean that Obama will force people to pull the plug on Grandma.

When McCaughey walked onto the set of *The Daily Show* last week, she brandished a huge binder containing the House health care reform bill. When Stewart asked her to show him where the death panel provision was, she couldn't. In a 15-minute interview he gave her all the rope she needed to make the case that Obamacare means mandatory euthanasia, and with that rope she hanged herself.

"Making Sense of the Healthcare Debate" was the *Times*' heading for its coverage of the encounter. But instead of telling its readers that Stewart caught McCaughey lying about the bill, the *Times* reported that "they could not agree on what it actually said." He said her reading of the bill was "hyperbolic and in some cases dangerous"; she said "Democrats intended to intrude on the medical decisions of dying people." He said, she said: that's what the *Times* means by "making sense" of a debate.

What requires the *Times* to castrate itself? How did excellence in journalism come to mean impotence in the face of untruth? Fox News, which excels in promulgating untruths, purveys its propaganda under an Orwellian banner: "We report, you decide." It does, of course, the opposite; Fox decides, ideologically, and it cleverly packages its partisanship as reporting. What makes the *Times* worship a Fox News definition of

journalism — “fair and balanced” — that not only gets violated at Fox, but that cravenly substitutes stenography for adjudication?

The answer, I suspect, is liberalism — not the muscular democratic liberalism of civil rights and social justice, but the flabby postmodern liberalism of on the one hand and on the other hand. The Right is righteous; it claims to know what God wants. But the secular response to fundamentalism isn't science, it's kumbaya, a campfire that requires reason and ignorance to pay mutual respect, a moral cowardice that values pluralism more than it values values.

That's why it's so dispiriting to watch Obama let Grassley play him. Grassley tells his Iowa constituents that Obama wants government to get rid of Grandma, yet Obama says Grassley is working “constructively” on health care reform. Grassley calls Obama “intellectually dishonest,” Grassley has the gall to accuse Obama of using the end-of-life flap “to divert attention,” yet Obama hostages his presidency to “bipartisanship.” Republicans crow that destroying health care reform will destroy Obama, polls show Obama's Democratic base deserting him because of his deference to Republican nihilists and to health and insurance industry special interests, yet he defers to Max Baucus (D-MT), the Senator who, as the *Montana Standard* reported, raised more campaign money from “drug companies, insurers, hospitals, medical-supply firms, health-service companies and other health professionals” than any other member of Congress.

The people carrying loaded assault weapons to Obama's events are not our swell fellow citizens simply exercising their rights, nor are the people carrying Obama-as-Hitler signs to town hall meetings merely a heartwarming demonstration of America's commitment to free speech, nor are the moms and Rush Limbaughs and Glenn Becks saying “Nazi” just proof of the robust vitality of our democracy, nor are the Sarah Palins and Betsy McCaugheys and Chuck Grassleys only colorful players in the theater of politics.

If journalism had the courage to tell the truth, and if liberalism had the stomach to confront evil, maybe good leaders would be as willing to wield power as bad ones.

Sure — and if Grandma had wheels, she'd be a bus.

*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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