

**THE BLOG**

# Move Over, Willie Horton

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By Marty Kaplan

10/27/2008 01:23 pm ET | Updated May 25, 2011

I just hope Peter Feldman isn't Jewish.

In my parents' New Jersey home, when the perpetrator of some awful act in the news was not yet known, I could always count on them to say, "I hope he isn't Jewish."

This worked out well in the case of Lee Harvey Oswald, but for Jack Ruby, not so much. Sighs of relief greeted the announcement that the "Mad Bomber" terrorizing New York was George Metesky, but not when the "Son of Sam" killer was identified as David Berkowitz.

Peter Feldman is the McCain-Palin campaign's communications director in Pennsylvania.

I don't know Peter Feldman, and the only mayhem he's suspected of is metaphorical, and the drip, drip, drip of evidence against him is coming out in the court of public opinion, not in a court of law. I realize that politics ain't beanbag, and I'm familiar with the riptides and undertows that can seize anyone working in a presidential campaign, especially an apparently losing one, in its final days. Still, for the sake of the reputation of Jewish ethics, and even for the sake of the reputation of Republicans, I sure hope he didn't do last week what it kinda sorta looks like he did.

By now everyone knows that Ashley Todd, the 20-year-old McCain volunteer from College Park, Texas who told Pittsburgh police that a 6-foot-4 black man robbed her at an ATM machine and carved a backwards B on her face, has (in the words of a Pennsylvania prosecutor) "not insignificant mental health issues." She made it all up.

But what everyone may not know is that before the contents of her allegation were fully known, let alone verified, it appears to be Peter Feldman — not the police — who told local reporters that her (fictional) big black assailant said to her, "You're with the McCain campaign? I'm going to teach you a lesson."

Move over, Willie Horton.

The story begins last Thursday, when a reporter from Pittsburgh television station KDKA called the Pennsylvania McCain campaign after the Drudge Report — an online conduit for right-wing talking points — ran a big red banner saying, "MCCAIN VOLUNTEER 'ATTACKED AND MUTILATED' IN PITTSBURGH... MUGGER CARVED 'B' ON ME..." (If

you think Drudge was tipped off by the Pittsburgh police, rather than by someone in the McCain campaign, I have a bridge to nowhere to sell you.)

According to KDKA news director John Verrilli, it was Pennsylvania McCain spokesman Peter Feldman, in the absence of any confirmed facts, who told the media that the mugger saw a McCain bumper sticker on Ashley Todd's car, and that the B stood for Barack. Mr. Feldman fed the same story to a WPXI-TV reporter, even though the assistant chief of the Pittsburgh police department's investigative division later said, "We suspected [her story] was false from the beginning."

Brian Rogers, a spokesman for the national McCain campaign, claimed that the KDKA and WPXI stories were the product of "sloppy reporting," that the incendiary quotes — despite on-the-record statements about their source by both stations — didn't come from Peter Feldman, but rather from the police. Even if you believe that Peter Feldman was just repeating what he had heard from the police, it is nevertheless arguable, as Washington Post columnist Eugene Robinson said, that Mr. Feldman's actions showed "not just a willingness to believe it, but an eagerness to incite a ...racial backlash against the Obama campaign."

On Saturday night, the same Peter Feldman [told the Associated Press](#) that McCain "rejects politics that degrade our civics." He said this not to deny his role in the Ashley Todd story, but to try to distance the McCain campaign from an email sent to 75,000 Jewish Pennsylvanians by the "Republican Federal Committee of PA — Victory 2008" warning "Fellow Jewish Voters" that an Obama victory would risk a second Holocaust:

*"Jewish Americans cannot afford to make the wrong decision... Many of our ancestors ignored the warning signs in the 1930s and 1940s and made a tragic mistake. Let's not make a similar one this year."*

Michael Barley, a spokesman for the Pennsylvania GOP, said that the party had not authorized the email; he blamed it on Bryan Rudnick, a consultant whom he said had drafted it. Mr. Rudnick denied that, saying that he had been hired by the party to do outreach to Jewish voters, and that "I had authorization from party officials."

TalkingPointsMemo.com, the Web site that's been all over these stories, said that Peter Feldman's statement — McCain "rejects politics that degrades our civics" — was made "without any apparent hint of irony."

I guess I can believe that. But I just can't believe that Peter Feldman believes what he says.

It is conceivable, I suppose, that John McCain actually believes, as he told the Des Moines Register, that he always tells "100 percent absolute truth" — that he is not winking at us ironically, not signaling "it's just politics, my friends," not asking us to pardon him for just-doing-what-a candidate's-gotta-do, when he says that Jerry Falwell "is no longer an agent of intolerance"; or that he told Bush to fire Rumsfeld; or that he's the only presidential candidate not to receive money from "special interests"; or that he'll balance the budget in four years; or that Obama wants kindergarteners taught "comprehensive sex education"; or that Sarah Palin is the country's foremost expert on energy.

It is even conceivable that Sarah Palin really does think it's true that the Troopergate investigation exonerated her of "unlawful or unethical" activity; or that construction of a \$40 billion Alaskan natural gas pipeline really is under way; or that Obama really does pal around with terrorists; or that Obama's economic plan actually amounts to crypto-communism ("If you thought your income, your property, your inventory, your investments were, were yours, they would really collectively belong to everybody" under an Obama administration).

But in the end, I just can't make myself believe that the Republican ticket has drunk its own Kool-Aid, just as I can't bring myself to imagine that Peter Feldman doesn't realize that he's licking the razor.

In a campaign, especially toward the end of a campaign, especially when you're staring at a possible rout, you may not be able to convince yourself that what you're saying is actually true, but it's not so hard to believe that your demagoguery is justified by a higher purpose.

It's hard to lose. I know. But it's even harder when there's nothing left to lose for.

*(This is my column from the Jewish Journal of Los Angeles, where you can email me if you'd like.)*

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