

**THE BLOG**

# CNN Flack Sez I'm "Pretty Infuriating" [Updated]

By Marty Kaplan

11/28/2007 01:20 pm ET | Updated May 25, 2011

**(Updated below - Update II - Update III - Update IV - Morning After Pill - The Gift That Keeps on Giving - Update VII - UPDATE VIII)**

CNN spokeswoman Christa Robinson wrote HuffPo's media relations vp saying that my post about how the CNN/YouTube Republican Debate was rigged was "pretty infuriating."

So I had to wonder: had I been inaccurate or unfair?

For example, my post cited what CNN Washington bureau chief David Bohrman, who's executive producing the debate, told the *New York Times* blog [The Caucus](#): that YouTube videos "asking the candidates to defend their opposition to gay marriage and abortion" would not be asked.

*"Those kinds of 'lobbying grenades' would be disqualified by the CNN selection team, Mr. Bohrman said. 'There are quite a few things you might describe as Democratic 'gotchas,' and we are weeding those out,' Mr. Bohrman said. CNN wants to ensure that next Wednesday's Republican event is 'a debate of their party.'"*

Was Mr. Bohrman misquoted by the *New York Times*? Hard to believe, since here's what a [St. Petersburg Times](#) reporter now writes about the question-screening process, based on his exclusive access to the CNN inner sanctum:

*"The group — about 10 people — began whittling down the 5,000-or-so video submissions. Gotcha questions were eliminated. So were most that seemed like they came from Democrats or went on for too long."*

So if that's what CNN is doing now, surely they applied the same rules to the previous CNN/YouTube Democratic Debate? No gotchas, no questions from Republicans, a debate of their own party?

Um, no. Media Matters conveniently recaps some of the grenades lobbed at at the Democratic presidential candidates:

*"I'd like to know, if the Democrats come into office, are my taxes going to rise like usually they do when a Democrat gets into office?"*

*To all the candidates: Tell me your position on gun control, as myself and other Americans really want to know if our babies are safe. This is my baby, purchased under the 1994 gun ban...*

*Don't you think if we pulled out [of Iraq] now that it would open it up for Iran and Syria, God knows who — Russia — how do we pull out now? And isn't it our responsibility to get these people up on their feet? I mean, do you leave a newborn baby to take care of himself? How do we pull out now?*

*My question is for Mike Gravel. In one of the previous debates, you said something along the lines of, "The entire deaths of Vietnam died in vain." How do you expect to win in a country where probably a pretty large chunk of the people voting disagree with that statement and might very well be offended by it? I'd like to know if you plan to defend that statement, or if you're just going to flip-flop. Thanks. I'm a proud serving member of the United States military. I'm serving overseas.*

*This question is to Senator Hillary Clinton. The Arab states, Muslim nations, believe its women as being second-class citizens. If you're president of the United States, how do you feel that you would be even be taken seriously by these states in any kind of talks, negotiations, or any other diplomatic relations? I feel that's a legitimate question."*

Hmm. If those questions to Democrats aren't gotchas or Republican talking points, then why is CNN ruling out from the git-go questions about homophobia to Republicans who are actually using it as a wedge issue on the campaign trail?

If the folks at CNN want to know what "pretty infuriating" feels like, well, they might try putting themselves in the position of citizens appalled by a double standard and played for suckers in an overhyped Orwellian charade that goes by the brand name of "the most trusted name in news."

**UPDATE:** Email to me from CNN's Christa Robinson: "There is no double standard in how CNN treats Democrats and Republicans. You must be thinking of another network." Umm... CNNHeadlineNews?

**UPDATE II:** Well, there was no Sarah Brady question on guns (I guess that would've been a gotcha), but they did do don't-ask-don't-tell and Log Cabin Republicans. A print reporter I spoke to earlier today, who'd just been on the phone with a CNN executive, told me that this kerfuffle here at HuffPo and elsewhere online seems to have drawn some blood at CNN, and that if they ended up going anywhere near the discomfort level of a homophobia question in the debate, it was because they'd been dragged there, kicking and screaming, by the net roots. You know what? It doesn't matter what it took; in this case, in the end, they did the right thing.

**UPDATE III:** This is priceless. In the CNN post-game show, that paragon of virtue, Bill Bennett, said that he's been getting a lot of email saying that the retired gay military man whose YouTube question challenged don't-ask-don't-tell is actually a member of Hillary Clinton's "gay steering committee." Says Bill, I don't know if it's true, but that's what I'm hearing. Replies Anderson Cooper, That's not something we've heard, but if there was a candidate connection, we should have known about it and said something about it. Hmm. I'm getting emails saying that Bill Bennett does the nasty with dead goats. I don't know if it's true, but that's what I'm hearing. And hey, Anderson, instead of letting Bill

bully you into backing off the legitimacy of the don't-ask-don't-tell exchange, couldn't you maybe have mentioned that there were dozens of such questions in the YouTube pool, and that surely not all of them came from Clintonistas?

**UPDATE IV:** Coop closes out the hour by saying that yes, the retired gay military man is a Hillary supporter - "something we should have disclosed about the question, HAD WE USED THE QUESTION AT ALL." In other words, it was fine to pepper the Democratic presidential candidates in the prior CNN YouTube debate with hostile Republican video questioners, but these Republican candidates in Florida are just way too sensitive to be bruised by non-Party-line reality. So in the end, CNN basically apologizes to the country for providing the Republican candidates (but not the Democrats) with an insufficiently hermetic bubble. Ah, I just love that special primetime smell o' the-best-political-team-on-TeeVee.

**MORNING AFTER PILL UPDATE V:** When CNN rebroadcast the debate, according to commenter AdamDek, the don't-ask-don't-tell question from Brig. Gen. (ret.) Keith Kerr was edited out of the program. Gone! Just like that. But according to this morning's [Los Angeles Times](#),

*"Kerr denied in a telephone interview that the question was a setup and said the Clinton camp was 'in no way attached' to his query. The executive producer of the debate, CNN Vice President David Bohrman, said the cable network had taken some precautions, verifying Kerr's military background and that he had not contributed to any presidential candidate. 'We regret this, and apologized to the Republican candidates,' Bohrman said. 'We never would have used the general's question had we known that he was connected to any presidential candidate.'"*

Yeah, and I'm sure another apology is forthcoming after CNN goes back and discovers that the "happiness is a warm gun" questioner and the "Democrats always raise taxes" questioner in their Democratic debate had Bush bumper stickers on their butts. If CNN's clumsiness in handling this weren't so hilarious, it would be (to pick a random phrase) pretty infuriating. Pressured by citizens to prove the network wasn't holding Republicans to a different standard than the Democrats, forced to demonstrate they hadn't censored questions about homophobia under the bogus cover of "gotcha," CNN selects the video of a 43-year military veteran who's gay, but when it turns out that last summer he decided to support a presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton, who's actually against don't-ask-don't-tell, CNN reels back on its hind legs, shrieks like an elephant who's seen a mouse, edits out the offending question (Paging Generalissimo Stalin!), and apologizes to the delicate Republican candidates for exposing them to garlic. Well, I'm sure CNN is simply applying the secret rulebook of journalistic integrity. I mean, without a *Republican* gay general's video to ask the question, there just wouldn't have been any rationale at all for Anderson Cooper to tee up the don't-ask-don't-tell topic on his own, would there? Oh, wait.

**THE GIFT THAT KEEPS ON GIVING UPDATE VI:** Drudge, Malkin and the freepers (no links - why feed the beast?) are now giddily outing other YouTubers as supporters of Obama, Edwards, etc., as though not being a loyal Bushie, let alone asking a question about lead paint in toys or abortion, were sufficient grounds for an auto-da-fe. It only further demonstrates the self-defeating stupidity of CNN's attempt to suck up to the Republicans by promising an intra-party debate in the first place. You'd think they'd learn the Chamberlain lesson from this — there's no gain in appeasing wingnuts — but I have a feeling they're passing out kneepads over at the Washington bureau instead.

**UPDATE VII:** Commenter JulieSA writes in this: "General Kerr campaigned for Kerry, too. He didn't just last summer turn Democrat. You should update your post with this correction." Hi JulieSA. C'mon over here and sit down. Comfortable? Good. Okay, now let me put this as calmly as I can. I DON'T CARE IF GENERAL KERR'S GRANDMA WAS ELEANOR FREAKIN' ROOSEVELT! What's wrong here is not that a Democrat got to ask a question of candidates

running for the Republican nomination for president. What's wrong is that CNN — not a political party, but “the most trusted name in news” — in its lust to score this marketing coup, promised the Republican candidates to protect them in a bubble as impenetrable as the reality-free zone that's surrounded George W. Bush and Dick Cheney ever since the American public started paying their bills. Got it? Thanks. Now let's have some of that nice troll herb tea they're serving.

**UPDATE VIII:** If you've read this far, you might as well read this, too.

**Follow Marty Kaplan on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/martykaplan](http://www.twitter.com/martykaplan)**



**Marty Kaplan** 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director