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The Senators Who Dissed Baby Jesus



By Marty Kaplan

What's the right word for what Sen. John Kyl (R-Ariz.) was doing when he attacked Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev.) for "disrespecting one of the two holiest holidays for Christians" by keeping Congress in session in the week before Christmas? What do you call it when Sen. Jim DeMint (R-S.C.) blasted Democrats as "sacrilegious" for wanting the Senate to take up an arms control treaty and a spending bill "right before... the most sacred holiday for Christians"?

Not "chutzpah." Chutzpah is Newt Gingrich and incoming House speaker John Boehner (R-Ill.) hammering Democrats in 2010 for the effrontery of convening a lame-duck session of Congress, even though then lame-duck House speaker Gingrich called a lame-duck session the week before Christmas 1998 so that he and Boehner could vote to impeach President Bill Clinton.

Not "hypocrisy." Hypocrisy is Sens. John Thune (R-S.D.) and John Cornyn (R-Tex.) holding a press conference last week to denounce Democrats for bringing an earmark-riddled 2011 spending bill to the floor, even though they themselves had larded the appropriation with hundreds of millions of dollars of pork for their states.

"Extortion" isn't quite it either. Extortion is Sen. Bob Corker (R-Tenn.) threatening that if Don't Ask Don't Tell were to be repealed, it would doom ratification of the New Start arms control treaty because "it poisons the well" for other votes.

"Demagoguery"? That better describes Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-Ala.) falsely warning that the DREAM Act will provide "safe harbor for any alien, including criminals"; will be "funded on the backs of hard working, law-abiding Americans"; and will "give college preference to illegals over citizens." (I can't decide whether Sen. John McCain's (R-Ariz.) running away from the DREAM Act is demagoguery or opportunism. Maybe both.)

"Obstructionism" comes close to the motive of Kyl and DeMint for camouflaging their partisanship as a battle in the war on Christmas. But I'd reserve that word to describe the ruthless opposition of Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) to passage of the 9/11 First Responders bill, and to anything else that President Obama could conceivably call a win.

There's something "Orwellian" about labeling as sacrilegious the requirement that Congress work a regular week like other Americans fortunate enough to be employed, but I think the Ministry of Truth vibe emanates more purely from the four Republican members of the Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission who

voted last week to ban the phrases “Wall Street,” “shadow banking,” “interconnectedness” and “deregulation” from the commission’s final report.

“McCarthyism”? Sure, there’s a lick of that here; yesterday’s Godless communists have seamlessly morphed into today’s anti-Christian socialists. But I’m inclined to reserve McCarthyism for the birthers’ warning that Obama is the Muslim equivalent of the Manchurian Candidate, a sleeper terrorist charged with delivering America to the Islamic caliphate.

No, perhaps the best way to characterize the Kyl-DeMint talking point is “tipping point.” It may be wishful thinking on my part, but I suspect that their crocodile Christian umbrage could turn out to be the symbol of a historic overreaching, the sequel to Newt Gingrich’s cry-baby confession that he forced the notorious 1995 shutdown of the federal government because Bill Clinton made him sit at the back of Air Force One.

It feels to me like a critical mass is being reached. In the same seven days that the sanctimony of Kyl and DeMint was ridiculed even by Republicans Mike Huckabee and Joe Scarborough, the reliably somnolent Capitol Hill press corps instead treated the Thune-Cornyn denunciation of earmarks as the cynical Tea Party-pandering stunt that it was. In that same week, Media Matters published one leaked Fox News memo catching Fox’s Washington editor, Bill Sammon, ordering his correspondents to call the public option “a government takeover of health care,” and another one instructing them to undermine evidence of global warming as junk science - a story actually reported by media that had grown used to yawning at Fox’s avid partisanship. And also in that week, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Web site PolitiFact named “a government takeover of health care” as 2010’s “Lie of the Year,” and University of Maryland researchers found that Fox News viewers were the most misinformed segment of the 2010 electorate — and both reports were covered, except on Fox, as facts.

Now maybe all these dots are outliers; perhaps they don’t really add up to a tipping point. After all, this was the same week that CNN announced that it would produce the first 2012 Republican presidential primary debate in New Hampshire, and that it was “teaming up with the Tea Party Express for a first-of-its-kind presidential primary debate” in June 2011. In the wake of those press releases, I didn’t notice anyone observing that the presidential primary debates of both political parties in 2007 and 2008 turned out to be pretty much colossal wastes of time for their audiences, who - though entertained by putative insights into candidates’ “character” — learned approximately nothing useful about the impending financial crisis, the war in Afghanistan and the rest of the problems that the next president would have to face. It was also the same week that America learned that when he takes his dog on a South Lawn walk, President Obama himself scoops up Bo’s poop — a reminder (as if we needed one: Look! A tweet from Sarah Palin!) that the trivialization of public discourse in the age of show biz shows no signs of abating.

Even so, I’m sensing a tectonic shift. Could it really be that politicians once invulnerable to being shamed are increasingly being held accountable for their bad behavior, and that some of the reliable ol’ boogeymen just ain’t what they used to be? Maybe. But don’t ask Boehner, and don’t tell McConnell.