

# Unpopularity Contest

By Howard Kurtz  
Washington Post  
Tuesday, August 25, 2009

I seemed to have waded into a minefield with yesterday's [column](#) about death panels.

My point was basic: When something is clearly and factually inaccurate, journalists should say so. And the issue of the supposed euthanasia panels under the Obama plan was a rare instance in which news organizations did just that. And yet it didn't matter, with 45 percent of Americans saying in an NBC poll that they believe the plan includes government panels that would make end-of-life decisions.

I'm told this was the most commented-upon piece on washingtonpost.com, and many of those holding forth fell into two camps: those who believe we in the MSM don't do enough of calling a spade a spade (and therefore let the conservatives get away with murder), and those who believe we are liberal shills (and therefore have no credibility no matter what we say).

Over at the Web site, [Doug Feaver](#) highlighted some of the comments:

"24681 wrote, 'Traditional media is no longer able to influence Public opinion because the Public recognizes traditional media for what it is - an arm of the Democratic Party. Actually, we've known it for decades, but it's only in recent times that the Public has alternative news sources and opinion sites such as the Internet, cable TV and talk radio . . .'

"johnhodson wrote, 'I am sick of the media refusing the use the dreaded 'L word' . . . I'm ta[l]king about 'Lying'! There are too many times when they say 'fact check' . . . and many many other synonyms for not telling the truth . . . '

"richcpl said, 'Yes, the mainstream media worked to debunk the phony claim about death panels. But that's just surface work. What they should have done -- what their true job as journalists is -- was to take it a step further and actively slam the liars peddling the crap to the public. Muckrake. It used to be a high calling.'

"Oomingmak wrote, 'When the media is more interested in covering 'the ruckus' rather than a healthy and fair debate, bad information drives out good. In a nutshell, the media empowers crazies.'

"sandynh said, 'Since main stream journalists . . . have proven that they are illiterate and so truly liberal as to embrace a politician so brazenly tainted, without qualifications and seemingly swarming with unsavory supporters whose claim to fame is to destroy the United States of America, no wonder they are 'left out'. The only reason we keep you around is to attack you on a daily basis. It's fun.' "

Glad somebody's having fun.

There's plenty to criticize in the media's performance -- hey, I make a living at it. But some -- I emphasize some -- of the commenters seem heavily influenced by their own ideology and view the press through that prism.

By the way, we is not illiterate.

In the New Republic, [Jonathan Chait](#) tries to tie the untruths to the GOP:

"What we are witnessing is the convergence of the mainstream Republican culture with the right-wing political subculture. Last year, the two remained clearly distinct. During the presidential election last fall, angry people began showing up at John McCain's rallies, screaming out various lunatic conspiracy theories. McCain reacted to these supporters with discomfort or puzzlement. Here he was accusing Obama of massive tax hikes or palling around with Bill Ayers, and attendees at his rallies were shouting about Obama being an Arab or plotting to destroy the country. McCain would squint his face as if to wonder, 'What are these people talking about?'

"Now, mainstream Republican leaders are reading from the same hymnal. You don't need to rely on poorly written, all-capital-letter e-mails for your lunatic conspiracy theories. You can get them straight from the GOP and its message organs.

"What distinguishes the right-wing subculture is not that it relies on lies. The mainstream political culture does, too. But mainstream lies -- John McCain wants to give special tax breaks to oil companies; Obama voted for kindergarten sex education -- operate within the context of plausible assumptions about how government works. The lies of the right-wing subculture, on the other hand, incorporate fantastical beliefs.

"Take, for instance, the now-famous hypothesis, dating back to the primaries, that Obama was actually born in Kenya and is thus ineligible for the presidency. To believe this, you need not only imagine that Obama covered up a disqualifying secret about his past (which is plausible) but that the state of Hawaii covered it up, and that Hillary Clinton, John McCain, and the entire Republican establishment chose to overlook publicly available information that would have guaranteed victory. Today's Republicans typically react to this theory by saying something like, 'I believe Barack Obama is a citizen,' as though they were extending him the benefit of the doubt in the absence of proof either way."

I wouldn't tar the GOP with the fringe birther movement, but I do think the media, as with death panels, is right to dismiss that claim as ludicrous.

### **Pundit Postmortems**

I hope the president is enjoying his time on Martha's Vineyard, because the commentators -- at least those who are not also on the Vineyard, or in the Hamptons, or summering elsewhere -- are shredding him over the health-care battle. In Salon, [Thomas Schaller](#) offers several reasons why the plan is stalled:

"Obama misplayed his hand by failing to properly explain what the public option is, how it works, who will have to pay for it -- and, most of all, to show that he's prepared to fight for it.

"A president has to be educator in chief as well as commander in chief. But the White House lost control of the public option narrative very early on because, as Salon's own Joan Walsh wrote on July 21, Obama hesitated from the start to lay down clear markers and defend them publicly. 'I'm clear about why this is a tough fight for Obama. But I think he may be making it harder than it needs to be. I realize it's difficult to define when still playing politics -- necessarily -- but I really want to know his bottom line,' Walsh pleaded, noting that on a range of disputed elements, including the public option, Obama was curiously vague and uncommitted about his intentions. That he has been only slightly more clear and committed in the ensuing month hasn't helped.

"It wasn't until after weeks of being eclipsed by noisy, half-crazy protesters that the White House finally went on the offensive. Obama flew into New Hampshire to conduct his own, nationally televised town hall."

At the Daily Beast, [Matthew Yglesias](#) essentially says we should grade Obama on a curve:

"What Clinton tried didn't work . . . so Obama's trying it another way. Now the United States Senate looks reluctant to pass a comprehensive plan, so people think Obama is making mistakes. But looking back at American history, it's not only Clinton who failed to accomplish comprehensive health-care reform -- his effort joined reform charges by FDR, Harry Truman, Richard Nixon, and Jimmy Carter on the ash heap of history. Johnson, arguably the most accomplished legislator in American history, was too scared to try and brought us Medicare and Medicaid instead. It defies plausibility to suggest that president after president after president is blundering or inept. Rather, we should just admit the obvious -- people keep trying and failing to reform the health-care system because *reform is hard to do*."

But Obama, presumably, knew that during the campaign.

At Pajamas Media, [Jennifer Rubin](#) portrays the president as turning partisan -- even as liberals complain that he's trying too hard to be bipartisan:

"Obama's candidacy was defined (to the exasperation of conservatives) by idealism, appeals to bipartisanship, and competency. He is now short on all three -- which explains why his support among voters and especially independents (who were susceptible to pledges to end old-style politics) has plummeted.

"As for the idealism, no president has sunk so far so fast. Candidate Obama chastised Washington as a place where good ideas died. He summoned young voters with high-minded slogans and Kennedy-esque rhetoric. Hillary Clinton and George W. Bush were mere politicians; he was the leader of a whole new era in politics.

"Now? Opponents of health care are stooges, evil-mongers, and villains. Citizen activists are to be reported to the authorities for spreading misinformation or ridiculed. The candidate with the

superior temperament has devolved into a peevish president exasperated that mere citizens would question his wisdom or stand in his way."

I haven't heard Obama call anyone evil; in fact, he boasts about working with the health industry. But he does seem a bit exasperated.

The NYT's newest conservative columnist, [Ross Douthat](#), doesn't blame Obama:

"The health care wrestling match is less a test of Mr. Obama's political genius than it is a test of the Democratic Party's ability to govern. This is not the Reagan era, when power in Washington was divided, and every important vote required the president to leverage his popularity to build trans-party coalitions. Fox News and Sarah Palin have soapboxes, but they don't have veto power. Mr. Obama could be a cipher, a nonentity, a Millard Fillmore or a Franklin Pierce, and his party would still have the power to pass sweeping legislation without a single Republican vote . . .

"If the congressional Democrats can't get a health care package through, it won't prove that President Obama is a sellout or an incompetent. It will prove that Congress's liberal leaders are lousy tacticians, and that its centrist deal-makers are deal-makers first, poll watchers second and loyal Democrats a distant third. And it will prove that the Democratic Party is institutionally incapable of delivering on its most significant promises."

In the Wall Street Journal, [Fred Barnes](#) argues not just that Obama is sinking, but that the GOP is rising:

"Barack Obama's agenda is in jeopardy, and the president is disconcerted, less popular and on the defensive.

"Republican opposition isn't the only reason for this. Mr. Obama did himself no favors by pushing policies far more liberal than voters wanted. But the decision by Republicans to be combative rather than accommodating has played an indispensable role.

"What the GOP has done best has been to make and win arguments. This is the key to successful opposition. Seeking compromise, being conciliatory, pretending bipartisanship exists when it doesn't all play into the hands of the majority. These tactics are a ticket to permanent minority status. By making the case against Mr. Obama's policies, Republicans have given themselves a chance to again win favor with voters."

But Time's [Joe Klein](#) unloads on the Barnes piece, and this goes back to the lead of today's column:

"The lack of editorial rigor at the Wall Street Journal is lamentable. What is reprehensible is Barnes' reassertion of Sarah Palin's death panel fantasia: 'Columnists disputed her claim, then realized she had a point. The death panels are dead, for now.' Of course, it has been widely established that the death panels never existed. Doesn't the Wall Street Journal have some

responsibility to point out--as the pathetic Charles Grassley did on Face the Nation--that 'pulling the plug on granny' was never part of the program?"

### **Interrogating the Interrogators**

Obama calls it "looking backward," but that is inevitable now that a special prosecutor has been named to look into CIA abuses. And, in classic Beltway fashion, both sides were unhappy.

[NYT](#): "The attorney general's decision, which he made despite President Obama's oft-stated desire not to get mired in Bush-era torture disputes, was based in part of his reading of a 2004 report by the C.I.A. inspector general on the agency's interrogations. A heavily redacted version of the report was released Monday by the Justice Department.

"The report found that the C.I.A. program obtained critical information to identify terrorists and stop potential plots and said some imprisoned terrorists provided more information after being exposed to brutal treatment. But it raised broad questions about the legality, political acceptability and effectiveness of the harshest of the C.I.A.'s methods, including the near-drowning technique of waterboarding."

[LAT](#): "Congressional Republicans continued their sharp criticism of the attorney general for launching such an investigation, no matter how narrowly focused, saying it endangered national security. And human rights organizations condemned the nation's top law enforcement official for not going far enough in trying to hold Bush administration officials legally accountable for using at least one coercive interrogation technique -- water-boarding -- which Holder himself has described as torture."

[ABC News](#) gets some pretty hard knock-downs for its report:

"A 'profanity-laced screaming match' at the White House involving CIA Director Leon Panetta, and the expected release . . . of another damning internal investigation, has administration officials worrying about the direction of its newly-appointed intelligence team, current and former senior intelligence officials tell ABC News.com."

But then there's this: "A White House spokesperson, Denis McDonough, said reports that Panetta had threatened to quit and that the White House was seeking a replacement were 'inaccurate.' "

And: "CIA spokesman George Little said the report was 'wrong, inaccurate, bogus and false.' " But a spokesman says Panetta does use "salty language."

### **In Other Headlines**

This is pretty big news: "Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke, widely credited with taking aggressive action to avert an economic catastrophe after the financial meltdown last fall, will be nominated by President Obama for a second term, the [Associated Press](#) learned Monday night." I guess averting another Depression counts for something.

And so is [this](#): "Michael Jackson's personal Doctor Feelgood spent hours desperately dosing him with every drug in the book to get him to sleep -- finally administering the hospital-grade anesthetic Propofol just before the singer's heart gave out, court papers revealed yesterday.

"The findings -- laid bare in an extraordinary account of the star's last hours written as part of a search-warrant affidavit -- have helped lead the Los Angeles County coroner to officially rule Jacko's death a homicide, sources added."

The New York Post story labels Conrad Murray "Doctor Death."

I wonder which of these two will be the bigger television story. On the network news last night, it was torture by a 2-1 margin, with only ABC leading with Jackson.

*Howard Kurtz also works for CNN as a contributor and host of its weekly media program, "Reliable Sources."*