



# Caprice Prize

by James Taranto

**T**HE FIRST WEEK IN OCTOBER saw a stunning turn-about in coverage of Barack Obama. Pro-Obama coverage might have hit its peak on Monday, October 5, when CNN's *Situation Room* aired an astonishing segment "fact checking" a comedy sketch. No joke.

The skit had appeared two days earlier on *Saturday Night Live*. Fred Armisen, playing President Obama, delivered a speech in which he said, "When you look at my record, it's very clear what I have done so far. And that is nothing." He continued: "Almost one year and nothing to show for it. You don't believe me? You think I'm making it up? Take a look at this checklist." He then rehearsed a series of campaign promises—closing Guantanamo, improving Afghanistan, taking over the health care system, and so on—and declared all of them undone.

CNN interviewed Bill Adair of the *St. Petersburg Times*'s PolitiFact.com, one of those supposedly nonpartisan fact-checking outfits, which had actually published a "study" of the *SNL* skit earlier that day. Adair said:

I think *SNL* tended to kind of gloss over what is a—a fair amount of progress by this administration, about sending two additional brigades to Afghanistan. We rated that [as] a promise kept. On Iraq, *Saturday Night Live* said not done and, of course, that's true, they're not done. But they hadn't promised to be done by now.

CNN reporter Kareen Wynter added, "As for health care, Adair says *SNL* also got it wrong, since that legislation is still stalled in Congress." Which means it had been done? "But Adair says the sketch did get some things right, like Guantanamo Bay. PolitiFact says the president has fallen short on that promise."

If only CNN had been around back in the days of the original Not Ready for Prime Time Players, Ameri-

cans might have learned that President Ford was not actually as clumsy as Chevy Chase's portrayal made him out to be, and that the Al Franken Decade in fact began long after 1980. Then again, the program got some things right. Generalissimo Francisco Franco was still dead.

But seriously, folks, CNN's decision to speak power to mirth is emblematic of the news media's attitude in the age of Obama. Reporters frequently are not only supportive of, or even enthusiastic about, the president, but also protective of him, as if he were too delicate or unformed for the rough-and-tumble of politics and world leadership, not to mention satire. On October 8, veteran diplomatic correspondent Barry Schweid began an Associated Press dispatch this way:

The woes keep piling up for President Barack Obama. While it is unfair to blame him for all the world's problems (although some folks try) there is no question he is having trouble finding the right answers.

Which is true, but only to the extent that it is true of every president, including George W. Bush.

The next day, everything changed. The Norwegian Nobel Committee announced that Obama was the winner of the Peace Prize, and even many of the president's media admirers could not help but notice his lack of accomplishments. *Time*'s Joe Klein: "This prize is premature to the point of ridiculousness." Peter Beinart, former editor of *The New Republic*: "I like Barack Obama as much as the next liberal, but this is a farce. He's done nothing to deserve the prize." Michael Tomasky, Washington correspondent for London's left-wing *Guardian*: "This is so out of nowhere that it could be almost embarrassing for the White House."

A few Obama backers tried gamely to justify the award, including the *New York Times* editorial page:

Certainly, the prize is a (barely) implicit condemnation of Mr. Bush's presidency. But countering the ill will Mr. Bush created around the world is one of Mr. Obama's great achievements in less than nine months in office.

The argument refutes itself. If Obama has changed the so-called world's attitudes, why is the Norwegian Nobel Committee still rebuking George W. Bush, now a private citizen in Dallas? This Peace Prize differs from those in 2002 (Jimmy Carter), 2005 (Mohamed ElBaradei), and 2007 (Al Gore) only in that the earlier recipients at least had done *something*.

But maybe the Norwegians, by taking Obamania to such an absurd extreme, have done a service to the American media. Perhaps journalists will be embarrassed into remembering that their job is not to cheerlead but to hold the powerful to account. One can at least have the audacity to hope.

**T**HIS COLUMN NOTED LAST MONTH that many mainstream media outlets, especially the *New York Times*, had been slow to pick up on a trio of Obama-related scandals: the extremist background of Van Jones, the former "green jobs" czar, who among other things had signed a 9/11 conspiracy petition; the child sex-slavery sting against ACORN, the left-wing advocacy and community-organizing group that has been closely allied with Barack Obama; and the August conference call on which officials from the National Endowment for the Arts and the White House urged federally subsidized artists to produce propaganda supporting the president's legislative initiatives.

When I filed that column, the *Times* had yet to mention the NEA scandal. That embargo ended on September 23, when the paper reported that the White House had "instructed government agencies to keep politics away from the awarding of federal grants, a step taken as the administration sought to minimize the fallout after an official at the National Endowment for the Arts urged artists to advance President Obama's agenda."

This followed the pattern to a tee. Just as the *Times* had reported on Van Jones only after his resignation and on the ACORN sting only after the Census Bureau had severed ties with the group, the paper did not report on the NEA scandal until after the administration had taken remedial action. (Yosi Sergeant, who had led the call as the NEA's communications director, resigned September 24.)

The *Times's* "public editor" (ombudsman), Clark Hoyt, addressed the paper's slow response to the Van Jones and ACORN scandals on September 27, though he didn't mention the NEA:

Jill Abramson, the managing editor for news, agreed with me that the paper was "slow off the mark," and blamed "insufficient tuned-in-ness to the issues that are dominating Fox News and talk radio."...

Despite what the critics think, Abramson said the problem was not liberal bias.

In the past, whenever Hoyt has raised the topic of liberal bias, he declared that he saw no evidence of it (see *Presswatch*, *TAS*, October 2008). This time, he pointedly expressed no opinion and left the denial to Abramson. This is progress of a sort.

The most amusing detail in Hoyt's column was this:

[Abramson] and Bill Keller, the executive editor, said last week that they would now assign an editor to monitor opinion media and brief them frequently on bubbling controversies. Keller declined to identify the editor, saying he wanted to spare that person "a bombardment of e-mails and excoriation in the blogosphere."

The Obama administration was supposed to usher in a new era of transparency in government. Instead we find ourselves in a new era of opacity, not only in government but in the media. The *New York Times* now employs secret agent editors. ❧

**James Taranto**, a member of the Wall Street Journal's editorial board, writes the *Best of the Web Today* column for *OpinionJournal.com*.

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# Ronald Reagan's Berlin

by John H. Fund

## BERLIN

**W**HO BROUGHT ABOUT THE FALL of the Berlin Wall and then the end of the Cold War? Lots of candidates for the credit were being proposed as this city commemorated the 20th anniversary of the Wall's end.

A dinner held at the posh Adlon Hotel by the Atlantic Council featured a set of awards for the contributions made by the brave people of Eastern Europe, the Western allies, and NATO. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton appeared to show her tough side as she hailed the end of Soviet Communism's "tyranny and oppression," words I suspect didn't drip off her tongue in the 1980s. Several people at my table credited Mikhail Gorbachev with ending the Cold War by not sending in troops to keep the Soviet empire intact.

Curiously, with the exception of one brief reference in a video presentation by NBC's Tom Brokaw, the name of Ronald Reagan was never mentioned during the three-hour dinner. It was almost as if the man who stood at the Brandenburg Gate in 1987 and declared "tear down this wall" didn't exist.

Erasing Ronald Reagan's contribution to the collapse of Communism has almost become a sport in elite foreign policy circles. But a few blocks away the day before, the impact Reagan had was etched in the minds of those who gathered at the Checkpoint Charlie Museum to inaugurate a new exhibit on the Gipper.

Alexandra Hildebrandt is the passionate director of the museum, which attracts some 3,500 people

