



Appeal to Authority

by James Taranto

ARE YOU RUNNING FOR SOMETHING?" Richard Nixon asked Dan Rather at a March 1974 press conference.

"No, sir, Mr. President," the CBS newsman replied. "Are you?"

Five months later, Nixon left the White House in disgrace. Three decades after that, Rather left the network in disgrace. He had become the Richard Nixon of news.

Like the post-presidential Nixon, Rather has been waging a campaign to rehabilitate himself—although unlike Nixon, who expressed regret for the scandal that sank his career, Rather has not acknowledged doing wrong.

This summer Rather, styling himself an elder statesman of journalism, made a proposal aimed at saving the news business. In a July Aspen Institute speech and an August *Washington Post* op-ed, Rather endorsed a long-standing leftist critique of the media: that they are controlled by corporations and therefore in the pocket of the government. As he wrote in the *Post*:

The big conglomerates that own most of America's news media may have, at any given moment, multiple regulatory, procurement and legislative matters before various arms of the federal government; their interests, therefore, can often run contrary to the interests of the citizens whom journalism, at its best, is meant to serve. There is little incentive to report without fear or favoritism on the same government one is trying to lobby. Increasingly, the news we get—and, significantly, the news we don't get—reflects this conflict of interests.

His remedy, believe it or not, is to call on the government for help:

I want the president to convene a nonpartisan, blue-ribbon commission to assess the state of the news as an institution and an industry and to make recommendations for improving and stabilizing both.

Why bring the president into it? Because this is the only way I could think of to generate the sort of attention this subject deserves....

This is a crisis that, with no exaggeration, threatens our democratic republic at its core. But you won't hear about it on your evening news, unless the message can be delivered in a way that corporate media have little choice but to report—such as, say, the findings of a presidential commission.

Imagine the ridicule with which Rather would have greeted a proposal for a presidential commission on news in 1974. Of course, that was the heyday of adversarial journalism, when reporters were instrumental in bringing down a president. Perhaps the ensuing decades made the media more compliant.

Yet surely Rather would not have approved of such a proposal, much less put it forward himself, as recently as one year ago—that is, during the presidency of George W. Bush. Lest we forget, Rather's downfall was occasioned by a hit piece on Bush, then seeking reelection, that turned out to be based on fraudulent documents. The problem was neither fear nor favor, just appallingly shoddy work.

The truth is that the media's attitude toward government tends to vary based on party and ideology. It is far more adversarial when Republicans are in power. If journalists now show favoritism toward the government, it is mostly because Barack Obama, probably the most liberal president in history, now runs it.

Far from speaking truth to power, journalists increasingly regard those in power as authoritative

on questions of truth. Last month in this column, I described how the Associated Press, in its “fact check” articles, has repeatedly presented Obama campaign promises as “facts” refuting putative Republican “falsehoods.”

In an August 12 dispatch on a presidential appearance in New Hampshire, the wire service reported that “Obama assailed ‘wild misrepresentations’ of his health care plan..., taking on the role of fact-checker-in-chief for his top domestic priority.” The AP thus erased the distinction between journalism and politics, or between truth and power.

A day earlier, the Washington bureau of McClatchy Newspapers published an article that began:

Two independent organizations that are widely respected for objective fact-checking on topics of political controversy are FactCheck.org, a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, and Politifact, a Pulitzer-prize winning project of the *St. Petersburg Times*.

Their research into critiques of the health care legislation pending before Congress was cited Tuesday in a memo from staff to two Democrats who are helping to shape the legislation—Reps. George Miller of California, chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, and Chris Van Hollen of Maryland, a member of the House Ways and Means Committee. Both panels approved similar versions of the legislation.

The House Democrats’ memo, with summaries of fact-checking research and links to the fact-checkers’ Web sites, follows.

The rest of the story was simply a reprint of the Miller-Van Hollen press release. McClatchy had been well regarded by Bush administration foes for its muckraking foreign-policy investigations. Now it is reduced to letting congressmen from the party in power literally write the news.

David Stout of the *New York Times* went so far as to “fact-check” a *question* at a town meeting:

“Why does the government want to rush into this bill when many don’t want it?” Senator Ben Cardin, Democrat of Maryland, was asked at a “town meeting” in Hagerstown. “Why are you rushing this?”

Calmly, the senator replied in a snippet shown on CNN, “We’ve got to take as much time as we

need to get it right.” And he added, “The status quo is unacceptable.”

The senator was too polite (or intent on survival) to correct his questioner by pointing out that there is not one bill yet, but rather several proposals working their way through five committees in both houses of Congress, and that to talk of “the government” as a single entity makes no sense, at least in this context, because of the divisions between Republicans and Democrats, House and Senate, Capitol Hill and the White House.

Stout did offer this concession: “As for any implication that there is a ‘rush’ to enact health care legislation, President Obama may have been responsible for that, at least in part, by calling for final action before the House and Senate adjourned for August.” You don’t say.

One of the bitterest arguments in the summer health care debate arose when Sarah Palin, in an essay on her Facebook page, raised the specter of “death panels” denying treatment to sick or disabled patients. Her language was hyperbolic, but it underscored legitimate concerns about rationing of care and financial incentives for doctors to provide end-of-life counseling aimed at encouraging patients to decline treatment.

An item on the *Los Angeles Times* website provided perhaps the best encapsulation of the media’s pro-Obama approach:

The Palin claim about “death panels” was so widely discredited that the White House has begun openly quoting it in an effort to show that opponents of the healthcare overhaul are misinformed.

The fearless, independent journalists of the *Los Angeles Times* justify their assertion that the Palin claim was “widely discredited” with an appeal to authority—the authority of the White House, which is to say, the other side in the debate.

This is the flip side of liberal media bias. Along with unfair coverage of Republican administrations, it leads to cheerleading coverage of Democratic ones. If Dan Rather gets his presidential commission, it may be the death panel for independent journalism. ❄

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Race to the Finish

by John H. Fund

I RECENTLY ATTENDED NETROOTS NATION, the annual gathering of America's liberal bloggers, to see how they were reacting to the first 200 days of the Obama administration and Democratic dominance of Congress.

As I wandered the hallways of the cavernous Pittsburgh Convention Center, I expected to find liberals happy that their political dream of complete control of the federal government had been realized.

But I was wrong. Over and over again, I heard complaints that President Obama was retreating on their key issues, and where he was pursuing a liberal agenda it was being blocked by "reactionary throwbacks to a darker time in America." "Howling mobs" were showing up at town-hall meetings and attacking the president's health care plan. "They may cloak their rhetoric using anti-government and anti-tax rhetoric but racial concerns are at the heart of their objection to Obama," said James Rucker, the executive director of Color of Change.

No matter how opposition to ObamaCare is framed, liberals will find a racial subtext. Princeton professor Melissa Harris-Lacewell decried those who complained that government-run health care would result in fewer Americans "taking responsibility" for their own well-being. "What we know over the past 25 years," she said, "is that language of personal responsibility is often a code language used against poor and minority communities."

Oh, so much has changed since "hope" triumphed last November! As the columnist Jonah Goldberg notes, "It was Obama's supporters who hinted, teased, promised, and prophesied that Obama would help America 'transcend race?... [But since then] Obama's supporters have tirelessly cultivated the idea that anything inconvenient for the first black president just might be terribly, terribly racist."

It's certainly true that rude and obnoxious people showed up at the town-hall meetings. But the worst examples of bad behavior had little to do with conservatives. The only person I know about who was beaten at a town-hall meeting was a black conservative who was put in the hospital by union thugs. The pictures of Obama sporting a Hitlerian mustache were the work of Lyndon LaRouche, a conspiracy theorist whose roots are in the 1970s Paranoid

