

RACE AND THE PUBLIC OPTION

MoDo has discovered that racists are upset they have a black President.

I've been loath to admit that the shrieking lunacy of the summer – the frantic efforts to paint our first black president as the Other, a foreigner, socialist, fascist, Marxist, racist, Commie, Nazi; a cad who would snuff old people; a snake who would indoctrinate kids – had much to do with race.

I tended to agree with some Obama advisers that Democratic presidents typically have provoked a frothing response from paranoids – from Father Coughlin against F.D.R. to Joe McCarthy against Truman to the John Birchers against J.F.K. and the vast right-wing conspiracy against Bill Clinton.

But Wilson's shocking disrespect for the office of the president – no Democrat ever shouted "liar" at W. when he was hawking a fake case for war in Iraq – convinced me: Some people just can't believe a black man is president and will never accept it.

Now, frankly, I think MoDo was partly right in agreeing with Obama advisors that Democratic President will always attract nuts. As Glenn Greenwald argued yesterday:

I have very mixed feelings about the protests of conservatives such as David Frum or Andrew Sullivan that the conservative movement has been supposedly "hijacked" by extremists and crazies. On the one hand, this is true. But when was it different? Rush Limbaugh didn't just magically appear in the last twelve months. He – along with

people like James Dobson, Pat Robertson, Bill Kristol and Jesse Helms – have been leaders of that party for decades. Republicans spent the 1990s wallowing in Ken Starr's sex report, "Angry White Male" militias, black U.N. helicopters, Vince Foster's murder, Clinton's Mena drug runway, Monica's semen-stained dress, Hillary's lesbianism, "wag the dog" theories, and all sorts of efforts to personally humiliate Clinton and destroy the legitimacy of his presidency using the most paranoid, reality-detached, and scurrilous attacks. And the crazed conspiracy-mongers in that movement became even more prominent during the Bush years. Frum himself – now parading around as the Serious Adult conservative – wrote, along with uber-extremist Richard Perle, one of the most deranged and reality-detached books of the last two decades, and before that, celebrated George W. Bush, his former boss, as "The Right Man."

It's also why I am extremely unpersuaded by the prevailing media narrative that the Right is suddenly enthralled to its rambunctious and extremist elements and is treating Obama in some sort of unique or unprecedented way. Other than the fact that Obama's race intensifies the hatred in some precincts, nothing that the Right is doing now is new.

Now Glenn is describing what the institutional right does to undermine the legitimacy of Democrats and government in general, and to the extent that we're comparing the strategic choice to discredit Obama by mobilizing paranoia and hate, I absolutely agree with him.

But race is important because of the way it has enabled the institutional right, in its efforts to protect corporations, to mobilize paranoia and resentment as a "grassroots" effort directed

at Obama. And because the Village (MoDo now excepted) is not yet ready to talk about race, they instead claim the opposition really reflects opposition to Obama's policies. They claim it's ideological.

And the refusal to call racism what it is one of the key means by which the Village continues to portray the public option as unpopular even while 70% of the country supports it.

Just as an example, check out this JMart article on Blue Dog Allen Boyd's response to the outrage at his town halls. JMart includes a number of details that show that the vehement opposition to health care in Boyd's district derives at least partly from racism.

While Boyd's district includes the student and state worker-filled city of Tallahassee – a Democratic enclave – much of it is rural and deeply conservative, indistinguishable from nearby south Georgia and Alabama.

[snip]

At events in Bristol and Marianna, the crowds were overwhelmingly composed of those opposed to health care reform and wary of government in general. And in a district that is more than 20 percent African-American, the audiences were also overwhelmingly white.

Veteran politician that he is, Boyd had answers at the ready for all the familiar questions.

No, he said when it was brought up four separate times in Bristol, illegal immigrants won't get government health care in the new legislation.

[snip]

"They want to take over our life," insisted Elaine Thompson just minutes before she shoved a stack of signed pink slips and a copy of the Constitution in

Boyd's hands.

Wearing a shirt that read "Concerned American Patriots" on the front and "Wake Up America" on the back, Thompson, of Marianna, said the White House was being run using "Chicago terrorism." [my emphasis]

JMart even describes Boyd appealing to Southern mores even as he rejects the Democratic House bill and the public option.

But even though JMart notes and reports all these details—he sees the evidence of racism—not once does JMart entertain that at least some of the outrage here derives from that racism directed at Obama. Instead, he allows Boyd to present—and presents himself—the opposition to health care as being primarily about conservative ideology, about partisanship.

That's not to say a lot of it isn't—that a lot of the furor comes from a sincere (if often ignorant, for a crowd significantly comprised of Medicare recipients) opposition to big government. But even JMart's description of the town halls reveals the degree to which this is about populism as well. And as Nate Silver has shown, the public option is probably popular in a lot of poorer Blue Dog districts.

However, there also appears to be a secondary relationship between support for the public option and the poverty rate. Kentucky and Nebraska, for instance, each gave Barack Obama 41 percent of their vote. But in Kentucky, the public option is supported (barely) at 46-45, whereas in Nebraska it's opposed 39-47. What's the difference? Kentucky is much poorer than Nebraska — 17.0 percent of its residents are impoverished, versus 11.5 percent in the Cornhusker state. Likewise, Nevada gave Barack Obama 55 percent of its vote, whereas Cooper's TN-5 gave him 56. But

in Nevada, the public option is supported 52-40, whereas in TN-5, the margin is much larger: 61-28 in favor. TN-5's poverty rate is about 50 percent higher than Nevada's.

While Arkansas-4 does not have a lot of Obama voters, it does have a lot of people in poverty: 20.5 percent of its population, which ranks it 50th out of the 435 Congressional Districts. It is basically like an exaggerated version of Kentucky where, according to the Research 2000 poll, 46 percent support the public option and 45 percent oppose it. That the public option is "overwhelmingly" unpopular in such a district is unlikely.

In fact, Nate does some estimates that account for Obama support and poverty to project that in Boyd's district, in which only 45% voted for Obama but in which 17% of its residents live in poverty, probably 52% of voters would support the public option.

So a DC journalist (from an outlet with a fetish for reinforcing Blue Dog narratives) comes in to watch Allen Boyd's town halls. He sees a lot of opposition to Obama's policies. Some of it is couched in the language of libertarianism. Some of it expresses an anti-corporate populism. A lot of it is also either coded or explicit racism. Yet the conclusion JMart draws is that this is about conservatism. And so, JMart explains, it is understandable that Allen Boyd would oppose his party and the interests of his constituents by vociferously opposing the public option. Opposing the public option, the Village narrative goes, is about voting his district. And with that backing of that Village narrative, Boyd gets political cover—at least in the short term—for siding with corporations over his constituents.

Glenn's right in arguing that the institutional right opposes Democrats by mobilizing paranoia

and hate of whatever type they can generate.

But racism, in this particular instance, gives the institutional right two more tools to work with. First, it makes it a lot easier to generate pseudo-grassroots outrage directed against Obama—because the racist anxiety about a black President is very real.

Just as importantly, because there is still a taboo in the Village about calling this racism for what it is, it allows a fundamentally false narrative about the public option to persist.

The public option is popular in this country, even in poorer, more racist areas. But because opposition in those racist areas is so spectacular, it allows the Village and conservative Democrats to pretend their constituents hate the public option, and not just the idea of a black President.