

CONYERS V. OBAMA: THE “DEMEANING TEAM”

I wasn't going to post on this—I was going to let John Conyers and Barack Obama to have their public spat in peace.

According to [John Conyers], the president picked up the phone several weeks ago to find out why Conyers was “demeaning” him.

Obama's decision to challenge Conyers highlights a sensitivity to criticism the president has taken on the left.

Conyers's critical remarks, many of which have been reported on the liberal-leaning Huffington Post, appear to have irritated the president, known for his calm demeanor.

Conyers, the second-longest-serving member of the House, said, “[Obama] called me and told me that he heard that I was demeaning him and I had to explain to him that it wasn't anything personal, it was an honest difference on the issues. And he said, ‘Well, let's talk about it.’”

[snip]

“I've been saying I don't agree with him on Afghanistan, I think he screwed up on healthcare reform, on Guantánamo and kicking Greg off,” Conyers said, referring to the departure of former White House counsel Greg Craig.

[snip]

The liberal Conyers has been an outspoken proponent of a single-payer healthcare system and a critic of U.S. involvement in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

He has also been at odds with White House policy on extending expiring provisions of the Patriot Act, crafting legislation that is to the left of the Senate's version.

But I thought it worthwhile to elaborate on what the Hill said about Conyers' support for Obama—which reminds that Conyers was the first CBC member to endorse Obama.

Conyers played a pretty important role in the way Michigan's Clusterfuck of a primary worked out. Recall that Jennifer Granholm—a very active Hillary supporter—pushed the primary, knowing it would cause all sorts of headache for Edwards and Obama. Leading up to the Clusterfuck, there were really just two main sources of ads: a bunch of Hillary supporters doing what was primarily direct mail in support of Hillary. And Conyers, with very little assistance, doing radio and robocalls in Detroit. (I think there as also some union support for Edwards/uncommitted, though it was not as public.)

Now, Conyers' ads were a tough ask: unlike the Hillary supporters (who, after all, only had to ask people to vote for one of the only people on the ballot), he was working to convince a population that is not always reliable to not only come out to the Clusterfuck to vote, but to vote for this crazy-ass "Uncommitted" category.

When the votes were counted, "Uncommitted" won in only three parts of the state: a teeny county up north, Washtenaw (Ann Arbor), and Detroit (this never showed on national stories bc the results got reported for Wayne County, not Detroit).

The fact that Hillary lost in the Clusterfuck against "other" in Detroit, an area whose turnout can make or break Democrats in state-wide elections, was pretty significant to the urgency behind trying to find an equitable solution to the Clusterfuck.

So yeah, Conyers was the first to insist that African Americans might elect an African American President. And he was also instrumental (as far as Conyers can be without a machine) in making sure that Hillary's efforts to game the primary here didn't succeed. Conyers is far more than a disgruntled progressive falling out of love with Obama.

That said, he is in many ways the archetypal disgruntled progressive. The issues the Hill cites—Afghanistan, health care, Gitmo, and PATRIOT—are many of those that progressive everywhere split with Obama on.

Obama was always a hawk on Afghanistan. He was always a moderate on health care reform—though he did campaign on a public option. It's the latter two issues the Hill cites—Gitmo and PATRIOT—that violate Obama's campaign stance that "no one is above the law" and that he would revisit FISA immediately (the Administration has rejected such efforts now, including the HJC bill aiming to do just that). Conyers' complaints with Obama are the complaints we all have.

Then again, unlike the rest of us, Conyers is Chair of the House Judiciary Committee, which just so happens to be the committee that oversees these "rule of law" issues.

And it's on that level where the accusations of "demeaning" seem most important. Obama has asked Congress to roll over on issues and, in SJC at least, succeeded in getting top people (like Pat Leahy) to do so. On PATRIOT and Gitmo, Conyers has thus far refused to do so.

So who is demeaning whom? If the President demands that a Democrat who has served in Congress since Obama was four years old, one who paved the way on civil rights issues to make it possible to elect an African American man President, and one who played a key role in Obama winning the primary, just roll over on legislative issues, who is demeaning whom?