

# Health Care Hostilities Result From Right's Declaration of War on Obama

## Religious Right joins industry, right-wing media, and GOP officials in anti-Obama propaganda campaigns

Vituperative attacks on Democratic-led efforts to reform the nation's health care system reflect right-wing leaders' strategic decision to do everything in their power to destroy the Obama presidency. The disruptions at congressional town hall meetings by angry, misinformed mobs are the result of an opportunistic coalition of convenience between deep-pocketed corporate opponents of reform, Religious Right leaders who see opposition to Obama as a religious duty, right-wing media outlets eager to use any bludgeon at their disposal to weaken the Obama administration, and Republican officials all too eager to play along in hopes of strengthening their political position.

"If we're able to stop Obama on this, it will be his Waterloo," says Sen. Jim DeMint, "It will break him." That strategic imperative – "breaking" the Obama administration – underlies the false charges, the scare-mongering, and the incitement to disrupt debates during the August congressional recess.

"Moderate" Democrats and Republicans who repeat or fail to repudiate the Right's false charges are colluding with a movement whose goals they do not, or should not, share. They are helping right-wing organizations gain credibility and strength which they will undoubtedly turn against responsible public policies across the board, from environmental protection to equality under the law for gay and lesbian Americans.

### Declaring War on Obama

After the Conservative Political Action Conference in February, we said, "Watching GOP officials and other speakers made it clear that the movement sees its future not in cooperating with the Obama administration but declaring war on it." Some Religious Right leaders had already done so, declaring immediately after the 2008 elections that they would consider themselves part of a "resistance movement."

The "resistance movement" has been building steam since then. It got rolling with dishonest over-the-top attacks on Obama administration judicial nominees. It built with ludicrous accusations of anti-Christian bias and persecution in the economic stimulus bill. It gained momentum with "grassroots" anti-tax and anti-government "tea-bagger" events mobilized by right-wing political strategists like Dick Arme's Freedom Works and FOX pundits like Sean Hannity. It flexed its muscle in Washington by successfully browbeating Republican senators into near-party-line opposition to Supreme Court nominee Sonia Sotomayor. And it has blossomed into full-on madness with this summer's wildly false charges about Democratic health reform proposals.

Columnist Cynthia Tucker of the Atlanta Journal Constitution recently wrote. "Remember the vast right-wing conspiracy? It's ba-a-a-ck, turning its considerable resources to ruining health care reform and wrecking legislation aimed at curbing climate change." Turner's right that "ideologues like DeMint and Newt Gingrich have made it pretty clear that they're not interested in finding the best approach on public policy or in helping Americans cope with skyrocketing health care costs. They just want to win political battles." But in fact the Right never went away. Every time the media declares that the Religious Right is dead as a political movement, its leaders make it clear that they still have the means and the will to rally their supporters. The same leaders who had preached that opposing Obama's election was God's will immediately after the election began rallying their troops into holy struggle against his presidency.

### The Merger of God and Mammon

Republican and conservative political strategists have tried with varying degrees of success over the past 40 years to build a strong working coalition between social and economic conservatives. A litany of leaders and their interchangeably-named organizations has tried to bring about that kind of political merger, among them Paul

Weyrich, Newt Gingrich, Grover Norquist, Dick Arme and Ralph Reed. Back when he was building the Christian Coalition, Reed worked hard to move Religious Right leaders away from a focus on gay rights and abortion, arguing that the movement would have more sway within the GOP if it embraced a right-wing economic agenda. And suddenly anti-government rhetoric and opposition to taxes became part of the “pro-family” agenda.

A current example is Gary Bauer’s Campaign for Working Families, which makes the mingling an essential part of its mission, declaring itself “Unapologetically Pro-Family, Pro-Life, and Pro-Growth.” The group’s current rallying cry? “Stop Obama’s Socialism.” In an August 21 Human Events column, Bauer declared, “Healthcare populism is so strong because it taps into the public’s anxiety about the Left’s handling of both economic issues (spending and taxes) and cultural issues (taxpayer-funded abortion and “death panels”).

The intense opposition to health care reform, and particularly to a public component, started with the corporate folks, including Rick Scott, who in a saner world would be so shamed by his company’s participation in a criminal billion-dollar-taxpayer-rip-off that he would stay out of the public spotlight on healthcare issues. But these days “shameless” doesn’t begin to describe the Right. So Scott is running an anti-reform group whose ads are being put together by the good folks at CRC public relations, notorious for their bogus “swift boat” attacks on John Kerry and a favorite of right-wing groups.

Another major player, Americans for Prosperity, is an oil-baron-funded group led by Tim Phillips, who has made a career out of masterminding Astroturf campaigns like the supposedly spontaneous outpouring of citizens screaming at their members of Congress about Nazi-like government death panels that will deny care to infirm and aged Americans (apparently blind to the fact that private sector insurance companies routinely deny care to people in need – hence the need for reform in the first place).

Many Religious Right groups had picked abortion as their angle on health care reform, falsely insisting that Democratic health care plans would require taxpayer funded abortion on demand, and threatening massive resistance. But when it became clear that the town hall meetings would be the prime Obama-bashing opportunity for the summer, they jumped right in, urging their members to join the attack on the supposed government takeover and join the town hall protesters being mobilized by groups like Freedom Works and Americans for Prosperity.

The Traditional Values Coalition’s Andrea Sheldon, for example, warned on July 30 that “Obamunists” were out to destroy the nation’s health care system. “Only six months into office, President Obama and his allies in Congress have seized control of our financial institutions and the automobile industry. Now, they want to nationalize our health care system and bankrupt us in the process. Obamunism must be stopped.”

As the Religious Right and its right-wing allies join forces, it’s particularly appropriate to have both Tim Phillips and Ralph Reed helping to lead the charge against reform, since they have such an admirable track record of manipulating and exploiting religious belief and religious people to advance the interests of their paying clients. Phillips joined Reed after the latter left the Christian Coalition to create Century Strategies and appealed to lobbyist Jack Abramoff for help drumming up business, telling him, “I need to start humping in corporate accounts.”

ThinkProgress’s Wonk Room spells out one particularly appalling example:

Part of Phillip’s role at Century Strategies was to manage the firm’s direct mail subsidiary, Millennium Marketing. In 1998, now disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff hired Phillips’ firm to pressure members of Congress to vote against legislation that would have made the U.S. commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands subject to federal wage and worker safety laws. A federal report “found that Chinese women were subject to forced abortions and that women and children were subject to forced prostitution in the local sex-tourism industry.” Nonetheless, Phillips sent out mailers claiming Chinese workers “are exposed to the teachings of Jesus Christ” while on the islands, and many “are converted to the Christian faith and return to China with Bibles in hand.” The mailers then encouraged the recipients to contact lawmakers and ask them to oppose the Marianas labor reform legislation.

That’s the same kind of duplicity and rank cynicism that was behind Reed’s infamous manipulation of Indian tribes and anti-gambling Christians for the benefit of a competing tribe’s gambling interests. Again, Wonk Room summarizes:

Reed and Phillips conspired to generate conservative Christian outrage towards gambling at Indian casinos in a cynical plot to encourage those same tribes to hire Abramoff to lobby on their behalf. In some cases, Phillips’ anti-gambling crusade would simply be part of

an effort to kill off competition to Abramoff's clients. And while Phillips and Reed postured to be motivated by anti-gambling Christian values, the pair helped launder lobbying money from an Abramoff Internet gambling client called eLottery.

Americans for Prosperity also has a record of making connections between economic and social conservatives. At a "Solutions Day" summit in 2007 to promote Newt Gingrich's profile and his new "American Solutions for Winning the Future" project, AFP's Texas chapter sponsored a workshop featuring David Barton, a Texas GOP official and a pseudo-historian who gets Religious Right and GOP backing to promote his "Christian nation" view of American history and his anti-Democratic Party propaganda film.

With that kind of track record, it's not so surprising to have the Family Research Council mobilizing against "rationing" with all the false and lurid accusations they can muster, but becoming strangely unconcerned about insurance companies who refuse to pay for treatment for people who thought they were covered. As Kyle at RightWingWatch.org says:

So if your insurance provider refuses to cover necessary medical costs, FRC sees that perfectly acceptable, but if "the federal government is doing it" then it is an absolute outrage. In essence, FRC is taking a standard practice among private insurers and using it to try and scare people into opposing "government-run" health care ... all in an effort to ensure that private insurers will remain free to continue to do the very thing they are warning that the government would do.

The Family Research Council, whose annual Values Voter Summit has become the preeminent gathering of Religious Right leaders and their friends in the Republican Party and the right-wing media machine, is urging activists to attend the September gathering and "Help us Bring the Town Hall to Washington." Here's some of what attendees can look forward to:

Obamacare: Rationing Your Life Away

Thugoracy – Fighting the Vast Left Wing Conspiracy

Speechless – Silencing the Christians

Global Warming Hysteria: The New Face of the "Pro-Death" Agenda

Activism and Conservatism: Fit to a Tea

Marriage: Why it's Worth Defending and How

Redefining It Threatens Religious Liberty

## Nothing New Under the Sun? Oh, yeah. Fox News and the Internet

People For the American Way Foundation's nearly three decades of monitoring the Religious Right movement and its political allies documents a history of lies told by the supposed guardians of Truth in order to motivate contributions, activism, or both. Apparently, if you're convinced that you are advancing God's agenda, that divine end can be used to justify the most ungodly of means. Pick a topic of conversation in the public policy arena, and you can find an array of false charges from Religious Right leaders used to agitate and activate their supporters:

- Gays lobbying for marriage equality are actually out to destroy the institution
- Liberal politicians are on the verge of criminalizing Christianity and throwing pastors in jail for reading from the Bible
- A standard provision in the economic stimulus bill to preserve church-state separation was an anti-Christian effort to wipe religion off of college campuses

In that context, it's perhaps not so surprising that a sensible effort to encourage conversations about end-of-life decision making was turned by Sarah Palin and others into "death panels" that would deny care to people with disabilities and start executing 70-year-olds. Or that current efforts to prepare for possible flu pandemics really amount to preparations by the Obama administration to declare martial law and put conservatives in internment camps.

Two journalists have recently written pieces that put the Right's current anti-health care shenanigans in some historical context. USA Today's Cathy Grossman recently wrote that Religious Right leader Phyllis Schlafly has in fact built her entire activist career on a strategy of scaring people into action by making up threats that are barely grounded in reality. Grossman cites a profile of Schlafly that she wrote back in 1987, noting that the activist is still using the same playbook. And now, her strategy has been adopted by the entire conservative movement, including Sarah Palin, who has practically accused President Obama of plotting the murder of her special-needs child.

"What interests me here," wrote Grossman, is the tactical gimmick of arguing by extremes. Palin reflects the teachings of the master- Phyllis Schlafly, founder of the Eagle Forum and a conservative-right tactician extraordinaire."

How fitting then, that Schlafly is being honored at this year's Values Voter Summit with the James C. Dobson Vision and Leadership Award. Dobson himself is no slouch at pulling a Schlafly. Remember his 16-page letter from the future that he released before the election? He was writing from October 2012, with this sad news:

We are not "the land of the free and the home of the brave." Many of our freedoms have been taken away by a liberal Supreme Court and a majority of Democrats in both the House and the Senate, and hardly any brave citizen dares to resist the new government policies any more.

In another recent article, author Rick Perlstein made it clear that Dobson and Schlafly, and Armev and Limbaugh and the rest of the crowd, are part of a long and unsavory tradition in American politics. Perlstein noted the long history of conservative Americans being frightened and manipulated by political strategists, saying that in America "the crazy tree blooms in every moment of liberal ascendancy" and "elites exploit the crazy for their own narrow interests." Said Perlstein, "Liberal power of all sorts induces an organic and crazy-making panic in a considerable number of Americans," said Perlstein, "while people with no particular susceptibility to existential terror – power elites – find reason to stoke and exploit that fear."

In Perlstein's column about the history of right-wing paranoia, he notes that one major difference is that yesterday's conspiracy theorists and those who manipulated them did not have the same kind of access to media. Today's, however, get priceless help from right-wing media outlets like Fox News Channel and online "news" services such as birther-redoubt WorldNetDaily and the American Family Association's One News Now, as well as conservative Christian outlets like the Christian Broadcast Network, which has helped spread false charges about health care reform. And they're all joined by many Republican elected officials, all of whom are happy to repeat Frank Luntz's talking points about a "Washington takeover of health care" and help promote even the most extreme claims about health reform, Democratic officials, and President Obama.

Remember when right-wing spokespeople went ballistic when an individual activist posted a video to MoveOn.org's site comparing George Bush to Adolph Hitler? It mattered little that the group pulled it down quickly. This month, swastikas and Obama-as-Hitler rhetoric and images have popped up all over. And they're seconded by pundits like Rush Limbaugh, who energetically defended the characterization, saying that Nancy Pelosi was much

closer to Hitler than the town hall protesters. And Rep. Paul Broun of Georgia, who compared Obama to Hitler shortly after the election, spoke this month about a "socialistic elite" including Obama, Pelosi, and Reid, who he said might use disease or a disaster to declare martial law. "They're trying to develop an environment where they can take over."

The Right also has *The Washington Times*, which publishes columns from the likes of Frank Gaffney, a former defense official who claimed last month that "Barack Obama would have to be considered America's first Muslim president." This is the same guy who claimed on Hardball earlier this year that there was evidence connecting Saddam Hussein not only to the 9-11 attackers but even to the Oklahoma City bombers, and who claims that Obama has been sending coded signals to radical Muslims that he's willing to have the U.S. submit to sharia, or Islamic law. There's apparently an extraordinarily low credibility bar to make it to the Washington Times' op ed pages.

Janet Porter (formerly Janet Folger) has a radio show and runs Faith2Action.org, which claims to be "The nation's largest network of pro-family groups." Porter, the author of "The Criminalization of Christianity," may be the grand champion of outrageous conspiracy theories, including the notion that Obama and congressional leaders are preparing to use a flu epidemic to declare martial law, and the idea that the "Cash for Clunkers" program was really designed to give the government control of your computer "to intercept, monitor, record, copy, audit, inspect and disclose everything you have to law enforcement" and to foreign officials. – even to "foreign officials'.

But nothing Porter can come up with is apparently outlandish enough to disturb former presidential candidate and possible contender Mike Huckabee, whose candidacy was aggressively backed by Porter after she declared his showing at a "Values Voter debate" a sign that God had anointed him to be president. Huckabee is among the headliners at a "How to Take Back America" conference Porter and others are convening in September. Also joining them will be census-fearing GOP Rep. Michelle Bachman, who has become her own punch line.

### **The disappearing line between extremist and "mainstream" conservatives**

The collusion of right-wing activists, pundits, and Republican officials has been repeated over and over this year.

When the Department of Homeland Security released

a report on the threat of potential right-wing extremism and violence, including far-right groups' efforts to recruit veterans, right-wing groups falsely claimed that the Obama administration was equating anti-abortion activists and other conservatives to terrorists. It was a ludicrous claim, but one that gained credibility when GOP members of Congress sponsored a resolution attacking DHS, and when Secretary Janet Napolitano withdrew the report.

That was similar to an earlier campaign of falsehoods started by Religious Right legal groups who attacked a standard legislative provision to prevent federal funds from being used to build houses of worship as some new infernal Obama administration threat to religion on campus and in the public square. Members of Congress should have known better and should not have given the attacks credibility. But they were useful in portraying the Obama administration as an enemy of liberty, so when Sen. Jim DeMint of South Carolina moved to strip the provision from the bill, he got embarrassingly high support from his GOP colleagues.

More recently, when the White House made an effort to proactively challenge false information being spread about its health care reform plans, and asked Americans to forward alarmist emails so they could take on the bogus arguments, right-wing leaders like Tony Perkins and elected officials like Sen. John Cornyn of Texas, cheered on by the likes of Matt Drudge, Rush Limbaugh, and Michelle Malkin, acted as if the White House had embarked on a sinister plan to build an enemies list that would be used to silence and intimidate its critics.

The warm relationship between GOP officials, Religious Right leaders, and right-wing pundits will be on display in September at the Values Voter Summit, which will feature a parade of Republican leaders, including Reps. Blunt, Boehner, Cantor, and Pence and Governors Pawlenty and Perry, who, let's not forget, responded to Obama's election by musing about the possibility of Texas seceding from the U.S.

The Southern Poverty Law Center recently noted with alarm the growth in militia-like "Patriot" movement organizations since the election of Barack Obama, and called attention to the "mainstreaming" of its radical anti-government rhetoric:

A remarkable aspect of the current antigovernment movement is the extent to which it has gained support from elected officials and mainstream media outlets. Lawmakers complaining about the intrusiveness of the federal government have introduced 10th Amendment

resolutions (reasserting that those powers not granted to the federal government remain with the states) in about three dozen states. In Texas, Gov. Rick Perry raised the prospect of secession several months after Obama's inauguration — a notion first brought up there in the '90s by the militia-like Republic of Texas. U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann (R-Minn.) said she feared that the president was planning "reeducation camps for young people," while U.S. Rep. Spencer Bachus (R-Ala.), evoking memories of the discredited communist-hunter Sen. Joseph McCarthy, warned of 17 "socialists" in Congress. Fox News host Glenn Beck, who has called Obama a fascist, a Nazi and a Marxist, even re-floated militia conspiracy theories of the 1990s alleging a secret network of government-run concentration camps.

The original movement also had its mainstream backers, but they were largely confined to talk radio; today, Beck is just one of the well-known cable TV news personalities to air fictitious conspiracies and other unlikely Patriot ideas. CNN's Lou Dobbs has treated the so-called Aztlan conspiracy as a bona fide concern and questioned the validity of Obama's birth certificate despite his own network's definitive debunking of that claim. On MSNBC, commentator Pat Buchanan suggested recently that white Americans are now suffering "exactly what was done to black folks." On FOX News, regular contributor Dick Morris said, "Those crazies in Montana who say, 'We're going to kill ATF agents because the U.N.'s going to take over' — well, they're beginning to have a case."

## The Freedom Federation

There never seem to be enough groups or groups of groups on the Right. In spite of a plethora of recently formed organizations and alliances, a list of mostly Religious Right organizations solemnly announced this summer the founding of yet another coalition, this one called Freedom Federation. The Federation released its own Declaration of American Values, which presumptuously began, "We the people of the United States of America...." Sticking with the founding fathers theme, the Declaration's signers pledged "our names, our lives, and our sacred honor to this Declaration of American Values" (unlike the founders, they left out their fortunes).

Religious Right leaders described the Federation as a collection of Christian organizations that would dedicate themselves to advancing biblical values with a focus on reaching out to younger people and people of color organizations. It is interesting to note that in addition to

a large number of traditional Religious Right groups, the Federation includes a number of Pentecostal groups who have been taking a more visible role in the Religious Right. Among them is Strang Communications, a media company that publishes the Pentecostal magazine Charisma.

One group that stands out on the list is Americans for Prosperity. What are they doing there? AFP is not a Christian organization, and its website says nothing about biblical values. Given their track record, it seems more likely that the trafficker in front groups would have kept its involvement behind the scenes.

Of course AFP brings money to the table. And its presence may explain why the Declaration of American Values released by the Freedom Federation had nothing to say about millions of American who lack access to affordable health care, but did claim a biblical foundation for opposing any form of progressive taxation.

One of the Federation's founders, Ron Luce of Teen Mania ministries, said, "The whole point of the federation is groups coming together saying, let us put a new face on and a new amiable stance in what we believe. Not changing what we believe, but a more amiable approach as well as a more thorough approach."

Amiable? Luce clearly didn't get the memo about the Right's anti-Obama strategies. Or maybe he just didn't know what AFP and others had in store for the summer's health care debate. As Right Wing Watch recently noted, Freedom Federation convener Mat Staver of Liberty University lent his voice and the Federation's name to false charges the Right has leveled at Dr. Ezekial Emanuel, President Obama's healthcare advisor.

Right Wing Watch has dismantled the false claims about Emanuel's supposed desire to keep medical care away from infants and elderly people and concludes:

In short, the very first position taken by the Freedom Federation is based, not surprisingly, entirely on a lie.

They are off to a great start.

Things aren't getting any better. Freedom Federation leaders held a press conference August 26 at which they invoked the name of Sen. Ted Kennedy, who had declared health care reform the cause of his life, to attack reform, and at which Bishop Harry Jackson denounced progressive religious advocates of health care reform as "devious" proponents of "the lowest kind of partisan based politics." That's really putting that new friendly face on the Religious Right, huh?