

How Bachmann's statements on Social Security led me on a merry chase

By Eric Black | Published Fri, Oct 7 2011

It seems (because it was) barely a month ago that the punditocracy saw Michele Bachmann as the likely winner of the Iowa caucuses and therefore a top-tier candidate for the Republican nomination for president. She's fading now, shedding staff, gasping for funds and polling down in Newt Gingrich territory behind both Ron Paul and the current hot ticket – Herman (the Hermanator) Cain.

Others can speculate on whether her fundraising can keep her campaign alive until the Iowa caucuses. Predicting the future is not my specialty, but I'm pretty decent at predicting the past, and still interested in extracting such lasting wisdom as I can from my years of Bachmann-watching.

Today's attempted extraction is words about words. Words have meaning. Except, in politics and marketing, when the meaning of words previously spoken, has become inconvenient. In that case, the politics/marketing operation tries, and often succeeds in changing the word or changing the meaning or both.

Bachmann had a pretty funny instance of changing the meaning of a word in August, when she was pressed as to why, on videotape, she had said in 2006 that the Lord commands wives to be "submissive" to their husbands.

Bachmann often attributes her decision-making to biblical injunctions, which may make some secular voters a tad uncomfortable. But it is fundamental to the Bachmann package and she would barely exist politically without it. Still, a candidate for commander-in-chief asking voters to accept that she feels biblically obligated to do whatever her husband tells her is yet more discomfiting.

'Well, in our house it is'

So, at one of the debates and in a subsequent series of interviews on the Sunday talk

shows, Bachmann just changed the meaning of the word “submissive,” in the biblical context, to a more modern notion of mutual “respect” between a husband and a wife.

“Wives must to be submissive to their husbands” does not mean “husbands and wives should treat each other with mutual respect.” But Bachmann insisted that it did.

“Meet the Press” host David Gregory gave her the most grief about it, asserting that in his own marriage, respect does not mean submission. Replied Bachmann: “Well, in our house it is.” Problem solved, by the doctrine that you can decide for yourself what a word means to you and no one can say it doesn’t.

In her early days as a congressional candidate, I had several similar experiences with Bachmann’s ability to change the meaning of words. I don’t mean to imply that Bachmann is the only one that does this, although some of her offenses (like the one above) struck me as pretty brazen. This troubling pattern is somewhat similar to her pattern of refusing to acknowledge factual errors.

I don’t really see how our politics and our democracy can be what they are supposed to be – a grand argument about what’s best for the nation or the state, rooted in facts and logic – if facts don’t matter and if you can change your position without acknowledging it by retroactively changing the meaning of the words you previously said.

The ‘P’ word

The tale that follows is about a fairly important word change – committed over recent years by many Republicans for marketing purposes – in the meaning of the word “privatize,” as in Social Security privatization. It was committed in a particularly shameless and deceptive manner by Bachmann in 2006.

The term “privatization” had been used for years – by proponents – of the idea of converting Social Security from a defined-benefit style public pension program (in which the government paid a more-or-less guaranteed monthly amount to retirees, based on a formula) into more of a 401(k)-style program (in which working Americans would convert a mandatory portion of every paycheck into a mutual fund account, managed by private investment firms). The account would belong to the worker to be drawn down during retirement or bequeathed to his/her heirs. Privatizing Social Security has been a long-standing righty dream.

The word “privatize” is not perfect to describe the idea (just as “Social Security” is not a perfect description of a mandatory government-run public pension program that also includes elements of insurance). But under the privatization idea, private firms would handle (and profit from) the funds and Social Security funds would be invested mostly in the private sector. And “privatization” -- the term for this idea used throughout the 1990s -- was not deemed as a pejorative.

George W. Bush ran on the idea in 2000. (Al Gore pounded it as a “risky scheme,” which certainly *was* a pejorative). Bush ran on it again in 2004, although by then some kind of righty market research had discovered that the word “privatization” made Americans nervous. Republicans – who had been using the word themselves for years – launched a campaign to substitute other more marketable words for their idea, although the new words were more like slogans than descriptors.

Later, Bush would suggest that Democrats had come up with what he called the “poll-tested” term “privatize” to scare the public. In “Decision Points,” his post-presidency book, Bush insisted that the “P” word was unfair and untrue. “My plan saved Social Security, modernized Social Security, and gave Americans the opportunity to own a piece of their Social Security. It did not privatize Social Security.” Sorry Mr. Former President, you may believe your plan would have done those things. But your claim about the origin of “privatize” is rubbish. In fact, the Cato Institute – the leading righty think tank that promoted the idea in the 1990s and provided Bush with much helpful pro-privatization research and talking points – called its program “The Project on Social Security Privatization.”

So, when Bush actually (in an act of considerable political courage, in my opinion) launched his second term with a campaign for the idea of optional investment accounts to replace a portion of the existing pay-as-you-go Social Security system, he ditched the word “privatization” and emphasized words like “individual” and “personal” and “investment” and “choice.” Cato even changed the name of its long-standing program from “Project on Social Security Privatization” to “Project on Social Security Choice.” (It still exists.)

What about Bachmann?

In 2006, when Bachmann first ran for Congress and I first interviewed her about Social

Security, she was very enthusiastic about the Bush plan. Her favorite word was “ownership,” as in she wanted people to “own” their own retirement (also their health care). Like most conservative Republicans of that time (and since), she overstated the projected future shortfall of Social Security.

In 2006 – in her speech declaring her first candidacy for Congress – she made this unsupportable statement (which, so far as I know, she has never retracted):

“Those born after 1970 will not be able to receive Social Security benefits. That can’t continue. I plan to go to Washington to help the president work on Social Security reform.”

Her assertion was then ludicrous and remains so. If she was a little more careful, she could have said that if the Social Security system is not changed and if the current projections prove true, the Social Security system will be unable to pay *full* scheduled benefits after about 2040. After that date, the system could pay 70-some percent of full promised benefits. There is no date at which the system is projected to be unable to pay any benefits unless she is assuming that the FICA payroll tax will be repealed entirely.

I hadn’t covered Bachmann as a state senator. But when I was assigned to cover her 2006 race for Congress, I had looked forward to the prospect. I enjoy a real debate and assumed that the presence in the race of such a bold outspoken conservative would lead to a substantive argument across the ideological divide. Turns out I was wrong.

For example, **on Social Security, Bachmann wasn’t really for anything that she was willing to describe.** Denouncing the current system as broken and bordering on fraudulent - yes. Listing the things she was unwilling to do to fix it -- double yes. Specifying what she wanted to put in its place -- no, no, no.

This is not unusual. None of the known methods for shoring up the long-term solvency of Social Security are popular. Very few candidates on either side of the ideological divide are willing to embrace the tough choices that everyone knows would be necessary keep Social Security sustainable.

But in 2006, Bachmann went further than usual across the line of ruling out every possible solution. The AARP sent a survey to candidates asking this question:

“Will you support or oppose using Social Security taxes to fund private accounts?”

And here (perhaps this should have been the first paragraph of this long post) is how Bachmann replied, in writing:

“Whatever reforms we adopt, we must find a way to strengthen and protect Social Security without raising payroll taxes, without reducing benefits, without raising the retirement age *and without privatizing the system.*”

I was pretty surprised, although by that point in the campaign I had begun to understand that Bachmann’s bold conservative clarity tends to go away when she has to get specific. But this was pretty brazen. Bachmann had ruled out pretty much all of the known methods of addressing Social Security’s problems.

AARP hadn’t even put the word “privatization” into the question, but **her answer went out of its way to say that she opposes what she actually favors**, apparently on the secret knowledge that she prefers a different term for it.

In those days, I could still get Bachmann to reply to my questions and I actually got her on the phone, on tape, to ask her about this. She led me on this merry chase.

First, she complained that her opponent in that race, Patty Wetterling, should not be allowed to criticize her because Wetterling had been ducking debates. (True, but irrelevant to the question.) She complained about Wetterling ads that had unfairly described her position on taxes (also true, also irrelevant). I conceded those points, but kept trying to ask about her Social Security position and what she had meant when she told the AARP that she opposed privatization.

From my old Strib blog, “The Big Question,” here is how that went:

First she said benefits for current retirees shouldn’t be cut.

Then said that for younger workers “we should look at the idea of **who will own our retirement.**”

Bachmann said that “the idea of allowing young people to invest their own funds is something worth debating.” And “we need to look at those options.” [Calling something

worthy of debate, I have learned, is one of Bachmann's favorite ways of avoiding taking a position.]

But "that's not privatization" [Bachmann said] and if the AARP or Cato calls that privatization "that's their problem."

She came out in favor of "solvency" for Social Security.

After I complained that she was giving me the run-around, I asked her:

"Without use of the word 'privatization,' do you support allowing younger workers the option of using a portion of their FICA contributions to invest in stocks and bonds?"

She replied: "To invest. Put the period after invest."

I asked her what investment she might have in mind other than stocks and bonds. But she had to go.

Bachmann clarifies

Well, that was 2006. In 2010, Bachmann said that the only solution to the long-term unfunded liabilities represented by Social Security and Medicare was to keep faith with those already on the retirement programs but to "wean everybody else off." (You don't want to think about that one too hard. Once the old folks whom you grandfathered in have passed away, and everyone else has been "weaned off," there would seem to be nothing left of the programs.)

Also last year, she joined the ranks of those Republicans who have called Social Security a "colossal fraud," and said that any private company that engaged in similar fraud would be "thrown in jail."

In 2011, as a presidential candidate, Bachmann's non-position on Social Security really hasn't budged at all. There is no mention of the issue on her website.

This is really not terribly different from most of the presidential candidates, other than Herman Cain, who is an unapologetic advocate of privatization, citing the Chilean system as a successful model, although Cain also rejects the word "privatization." (He prefers "personalization.")

MinnPost has requested an updated description of Bachmann's Social Security ideas from her presidential campaign but none has been forthcoming.

O. Kay Henderson of Radio Iowa did get Bachmann into a lengthy discussion of Social Security, the full write up and audio of which is [available here](#). If you click through, I defy you to describe what Bachmann wants to do to fix Social Security. She ruled out quite a few things, but when Henderson asked her specifically how she would change/reform/save the program, she replied:

"That's an issue that will take quite a bit of time and it won't be just one person."