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The Opinionator

A Gathering of Opinion From Around the Web

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Weekend Opinionator: A Sick Debate

By [TOBIN HARSHAW](#)

Am I the only one to suspect that the debate over health care has turned into a nationwide avant-garde performance based on “[Rashomon](#)”? Everyone has his or her individual truth, and feels that everyone else is not just wrong, but is lying with the basest of motives. So, from these individual truths, are we gaining any understanding of the objective big picture? Or are we, like the four tale-tellers in Kurosawa’s film, simply looking out for ourselves?

Somewhere along the way, the health care reform discussion came to be about reserved seating, AstroTurf, clothes and race.

Let’s start with something that comes as close to documentary truth as we have at the moment: a homemade video taken outside a town hall meeting held by Representative Russ Carnahan, Democrat of Missouri, showing a fracas between conservative “tea party” advocates and members of the Service Employees International Union.

So, what happened? The St. Louis Post Dispatch’s report indicated that “Kenneth Gladney, a 38-year-old conservative activist from St. Louis, [said he was attacked](#) by some of those arrested as he handed out yellow flags with ‘Don’t tread on me’ printed on them ... ‘It just seems there’s no freedom of speech without being attacked,’ he said.”

According to John Hinderaker at Power Line, it is “[shocking video](#) of union thugs — self-identified by their t-shirts — attacking peaceful ‘tea party’ protesters last night in St. Louis.”

Eric Kleefeld at Talking Points Memo thinks [both sides are to blame](#): “It’s not at all clear who started it and both sides appear to be blaming the other ... Both the Tea Party and labor union folks are yelling at each other.”

Ezra Klein of the Washington Post thinks it’s “[ugly stuff](#),” but offers no guidance on which side is uglier.

Archpundit of Blog Saint Louis, however, feel the [anti-reform forces were the real aggressors](#):

The video only starts at the end of the incident so it’s unclear what started it. At best what you have is two guys attacking a third guy. That’s bad and if true the two guys will be prosecuted which is the right answer. Hours of taunts and verbal [assaults] by SEIU and ACORN? Not so much ... [Tea party advocates] can try and play the victims here, but let’s be very clear, they aren’t there for discussion or dialogue — they are there to be disruptive. They are angry bitter people and that’s really quite sad.

For what it’s worth, the Opinionator sees a man on the ground (wearing an S.E.I.U. shirt?) as the footage starts, then a bit of shouting, and then a man in an S.E.I.U. shirt grabs a man (one

supposes it is Mr. Gladney) from behind and pull him down. Near the end, that assailant is handcuffed by the police. If you disagree, I'd love to year your take in the comments section. But if you think the video informs us as to what happened, I beg to differ. Same for this video taken elsewhere from the same event:

The right-wing blogger Digger [sums it up thusly](#):

You will see that members of ACORN or the SEIU are let into the doors while hundreds of protesters opposed to Carnahan's support of universal health care were barred from entering. The Democrats have recently resorted to the tactic of trying to claim that all of those opposed to universal health care are being bussed in and are "astroturf" — fake grassroots people — who are being paid by the insurance industry, but as the video below clearly shows these union thugs and community organizing groups are the ones busing people in.

Doug Mataconis of Below the Beltway [plays the centrist](#): "I fail to see what either side thinks they're accomplishing here."

And myiq2xu of the Confluence tries to get [both sides of the story](#): "Apparently the people who were standing outside in line got upset when they discovered that SEIU members were being admitted through a side door. Depending on who you believe the SEIU people were there to set up or they had reserved seats down front."

But TPM's founder, Josh Marshall, [sees nothing wrong](#) with the union-members-only admission. "I have an unconfirmed report that what touched off the outburst at the St. Louis event was that after the doors had been shut, two SEIU employees who were staffing the event (SEIU was a sponsor) came to the door and were allowed in," he writes. "This provoked the teabag contingent, who believed this was prima facie evidence of discrimination against their political views." He adds: "In post-event retellings on the right fire code enforcement became a form of political repression of teabaggers."

Now that we've completed the video portion of today's exam, it's time to acknowledge that the who-pushed-whom and who-gets-in-hall arguments taking place at the actual meetings are simply the boisterous sideshow to an even uglier debate in the blogosphere: that over who is a "real" voice in the debate, and who is [this](#).

As Patricia Murphy of Politics Daily pointed out, the Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, [has been leading the prosecution from the left](#):

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's office sent out a fact sheet to reporters Tuesday afternoon, calling recent demonstrations at congressional town hall events "Astroturf," the Washington euphemism for a corporate public relations campaign disguised to look like a grass roots citizen movement.

Pelosi said that while Democrats are putting forth proposals to reform health care, "those not interested in health insurance reform are disrupting public meetings and not allowing concerned constituents to ask questions and express their views. Many of these opponents who are shutting down civil discussion are organized by out-of-district, extremist political groups, and industry-supported lobbying firms."

Josh Dorner at Huffington Post has [done more digging](#):

While much of the effort is clearly designed to kill health care reform, there's also considerable evidence that these same astroturf corporate lobbying operations are also trying to derail clean energy jobs legislation — and the entire progressive agenda with it. And who is funding much of this — our friends in the oil and coal industries. Media Matters Action Fund has pulled together some of the lowlights on dirty energy's ties to the astroturf army.

One prime example is Americans for Prosperity, which is trying to kill health reform, clean energy, and the Employee Free Choice Act. And who, pray tell, is this Americans for Prosperity you ask?

AFP is just one giant, multi-headed hydra of a front group for Koch Industries — a huge oil and gas conglomerate and one of the largest privately held corporations in the world. And since being funded by one giant oil company is not enough, AFP has also taken cash from ExxonMobil.

So has Lee Fang at Think Progress "[The lobbyist-run groups](#) Americans for Prosperity and FreedomWorks, which orchestrated the anti-Obama tea parties earlier this year, are now pursuing an aggressive strategy to create an image of mass public opposition to health care and clean energy reform. A leaked memo from Bob MacGuffie, a volunteer with the FreedomWorks website Tea Party Patriots, details how members should be infiltrating town halls and harassing Democratic members of Congress."

Mary Katherine Ham at the Weekly Standard, however, [refutes those claims](#) (quite well, in the opinion of Slate's Mickey Kaus):

When the "manufactured" outrage the Left is trying to demonize lines up so inconveniently with public polling, it's sometimes necessary to create evidence for the "manufactured" storyline.

Enter Think Progress, which unearthed this shocking, secret memo from the leader of a small grassroots conservative organization in Connecticut, which allegedly instructs members on "infiltrating town halls and harassing Democratic members of Congress."

Right Principles PAC was formed by Bob MacGuffie and four friends in 2008, and has taken in a whopping \$5,017 and disbursed \$1,777, according to its FEC filing.

"We're just trying to shake this state up and make a difference up here," MacGuffie told me during a telephone interview. He's surprised at his elevation to national rabble-rouser by the Left.

Right Principles has a Facebook group with 23 members and a Twitter account with five followers. MacGuffie describes himself as an "opponent of leftist thinking in America," and told me he's "never pulled a lever" for a Republican or Democrat on a federal level. Yet this Connecticut libertarian's influence over a national, orchestrated Republican health-care push-back is strong, indeed, if you listen to liberal pundits and the Democratic National Committee, who have crafted a nefarious web out of refutable evidence.

The editors at National Review think the Democrats [have some dirty Astroturf of their own](#):

This smear job is being shepherded by the DNC's Brad Woodhouse, who back in his Americans United days acted as a front for the union bosses working to defeat President Bush's Social Security reforms, doing precisely what he now accuses Republicans of doing — packing town-hall meetings with political activists and party operatives posing as regular people, shunting lobbyists' money into phony grassroots action, etc. We'll take Mr. Woodhouse's tender concerns for decorum with a grain or two of salt.

The most interesting line of attack, however, had to be the one taken by Senator Barbara Boxer, Democrat of California (I know I promised no more movies, but, hey, it's summer):

O.K., it's a bit convoluted, but I can't say I disagree with Ed Morrissey's [summary](#):

Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA) appeared on Hardball last night in support of the Left's attempt to discredit the people showing up to townhalls in protest of ObamaCare. Boxer says she can tell that they're fakes, because they're too well dressed. How does she know that this is a problem? Because well-dressed people apparently told her to get the hell out of Florida in the Bush-Gore recount, too

Morrissey also gives us this response from Brian Walsh of the National Republican Senatorial Committee: "When you consider that Barbara Boxer considers Code Pink and MoveOn.org protestors to be 'her base,' it's understandable that a senator representing the left wing fringe would be confused when ordinary Americans engage in free speech. But the fact of the matter is that across the country, Americans of all backgrounds are standing up and saying 'no' to the Democrats spending and health-care takeover proposals."

Well, when the level of debate has dipped down to the sartorial level, about the only place to seek relief is in the calming realization that at least nobody has played the race card. Just kidding!

TomP of Daily Kos made the first major ripple, with a diary entry informing us that he "[underestimated the hate in America.](#)"

It's not about health care, public options, details of plans. That is not what motivates the opposition we see. It's the end of a way of life in which mediocre whites have better jobs, better lives, better health care, because of their skin privilege. It's the end of an idea, an idea that told some whites that they were better just because their skin was pinkish or "flesh-colored" as Crayola so racistly used to describe.

It is the death rattle of racism. The racists feel it. Their way of life is ending. White privilege is going away. It may take time and there still are many examples of institutionalized racism (differing medical outcomes, diseases, health, lead poisoning, environmental injustice, African Americans overrepresented in poverty, job discrimination, educational discrimination, ... etc.), but the direction is clear ...

Insurance companies cynically are capitalizing on the white racist anguish, profiting from hate in an effort to save their profits from disease and death. But this is about more than health care to the Tea Baggers, more than taxes. It's the end of their way of life.

The Times's economic columnist Paul Krugman agrees that this anger [has nothing to do with economics](#):

The driving force behind the town hall mobs is probably the same cultural and racial anxiety that's behind the "birther" movement, which denies Mr. Obama's citizenship. Senator Dick Durbin has suggested that the birthers and the health care protesters are one and the same; we don't know how many of the protesters are birthers, but it wouldn't be surprising if it's a substantial fraction.

And cynical political operators are exploiting that anxiety to further the economic interests of their backers.

Does this sound familiar? It should: it's a strategy that has played a central role in American politics ever since Richard Nixon realized that he could advance Republican fortunes by appealing to the racial fears of working-class whites.

Hekebolos at D-Day thinks Krugman [has it nailed](#):

While other media figures are comparing the violence provoked by the Astroturfed radical right to previous contentious policy debates — such as that over Hillarycare in 1993, or over Social Security in 2005 — Krugman just lays out the simple facts:

That dog won't hunt, and it's time to hunt for the real cause: the color of our President's skin ...

How can the fact that our President is only half-white inspire so much blood-boiling hatred? So much that powerful moneyed interests can use that outrage to once again get regular people to seriously obey talking points about forced euthanasia? I mean, come on! How is that possible? Are these dead-enders really so racist that they believe a black Democrat will try to get euthanasia of the elderly written into law, but a white Democrat wouldn't?

"Paul Krugman can't understand [why people would oppose government control of health care](#) — or skyrocketing deficits, or a federal takeover of education, energy, and finance along with health care — unless they're driven by racism," responds David Boaz at Cato @ Liberty.

The classical liberal ideas of individualism, individual rights, property rights, "negative liberties," and limited government date back hundreds, even thousands, of years. They find their roots in the Greek and Hebrew conceptions of the higher law, the Scholastic thinkers, the Levellers' ideas of self-ownership and natural rights, the political theory of John Locke, the economic analysis of Adam Smith, and the political institutions of the American Founding. To suggest that the case for freedom and limited government — or the application of that theory to contemporary proposals for the expansion of government — must be attributable to racism is uncharitable, ahistorical, thoughtless, and indeed contemptible.

It cannot be the case that every parody of a president who happens to be black is racist. And it is not good for democracy to try to counter every opposing argument with such a blood libel. The good news for advocates of limited government is that our opponents are displaying a striking lack of confidence in the actual arguments for their proposals. If they thought they could win a debate on nationalizing health care, or running trillion-dollar deficits, they wouldn't need to

reach for such smears.

So there you have it: the Great Health Care Reform Debate of 2009 isn't about health care at all. It all boils down to reserved seating, artificial grass, clean chinos and, of course, race. Gives one fond memories of the [Medicare Catastrophic Coverage Act of 1988](#). Perhaps today there are just too many truths to stay on one topic. Anyone up for a fight about cost-curve bending?

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