

A Picture's Worth of Bias



They say a picture's worth a thousand words. This phrase rings no truer than when it comes to most of the media's feelings toward Republican politicians.

The photo to the left was posted Wednesday on CNN's website as the featured image for an article describing Republican Bob Turner's Congressional seat win in New York. While I haven't spent any time around Bob Turner and know little about the man, I'm fairly confident that he's not an evil mastermind from a James Bond film. Thus, I think it's safe to say that CNN sorted through dozens and dozens of available photos before they found one of Turner looking absolutely diabolical.

While I tend not to get too bent out of shape over this cheap form of bias (especially in the grand scheme of a disreputable media that routinely commits far worse offenses), I'm always taken by the adolescence it stems from. It reminds me of when I was a child and used to crayon-draw unflattering pictures of my older brother (occasionally with devil horns) when I was mad at him.



While I recognize the temptation, the role of the news media in this country is an important one. There should be a certain

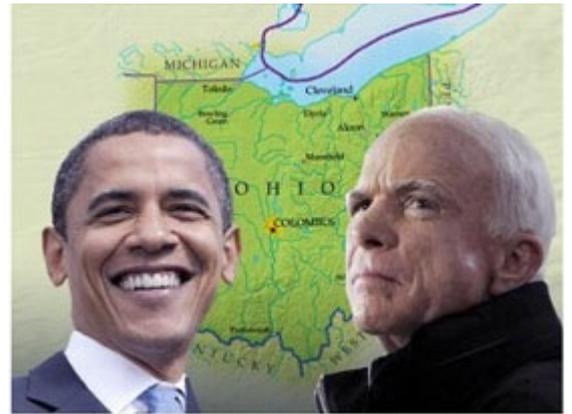
level of maturity that accompanies how the news is presented. It's one thing if this is being done on a partisan blog site. It's quite another if it's being put out by a major news organization that claims to be fair. In the case of the Turner photo, I thought the column it accompanied was pretty fair. Yet, someone in the newsroom apparently felt the need to add their own artistic accent to the story.

This is certainly nothing new, but it seems to have grown more blatant in recent years. Case in point, Newsweek took a lot of criticism last month when they featured a cover photo of presidential candidate Michele Bachmann looking mentally unstable. While a lot of us know full well where Newsweek's political leanings are, they bill themselves as a legitimate news source. Thus, the idea that they would put forth such an obvious, agenda ridden caricature (and then try to defend it) is astonishing.

Sometimes the habit even borderlines on the perverse as it did during the 2008 presidential campaign when the Associated Press featured a photo from a Sarah Palin campaign stop. The image seemed to play off the Mrs. Robinson scene from the film "The Graduate", zoomed in on a student looking up at the Alaskan governor in wonder from a vantage point between her legs. Though I don't think the shot was done with malice toward Palin, there was certainly a sexist element to it that would have been off limits to a Democratic politician.



One of my all-time favorite examples of this pseudo-subliminal, partisan imagery also came from the 2008 presidential campaign, when ABC News posted an article about Barack Obama and John McCain campaigning in Ohio at the same time. The faces of both men were superimposed over the outline of the state. For Obama, they used an energetic, pleasant photo. McCain's made him look like a former KGB agent who won't accept that the Cold War's over.



The larger point here is that there is a consensus in the media that the Republicans and everything they stand for are at worst evil and at best wrong. Thus, this type of imagery doesn't trigger reservations from the editors who are ultimately responsible for what is presented to readers. Again, in the grand scheme of things, this isn't a monumental issue. However, it's symbolic of an agenda-driven media culture that, like it or not, persuades public opinion.

Like any other bias in the media, it deserves some attention.

Hypocrisy!

☒ The other day, a gunman walked into an IHOP in Carson City, Nevada, and opened fire with an AK-47 on helpless patrons who had been eating breakfast. He hit 12 of them, five who

were members of the National Guard. Before he turned the gun on himself, the gunman had killed three patrons and wounded eight more.

This happened just one day after James Hoffa, the head of the Teamsters Union, told a Labor Day Rally in Detroit, "President Obama this is your army! ... Everybody here has got to vote. If we go back and keep the eye on the prize, *let's take these son of a bitches out and give America back to America where we belong.*"

The shooting at the IHOP followed by just a few weeks this statement by Congresswoman Maxine Waters to supporters in California: "*The Tea Party can go straight to hell.*" The remark was greeted with cheers from the audience.

Perhaps you saw the editorial in the New York Times following the murder in Nevada. This is part of it:

"It is facile and mistaken to attribute this particular madman's act directly to Democrats or union members. But it is legitimate to hold Democrats and particularly their most virulent supporters responsible for the shooting at the Nevada IHOP. Many on the left have exploited the arguments of division, reaping political power by demonizing conservatives. They have tried to persuade many Americans that Republicans, especially the more conservative Republicans, are not just misguided, but the enemy of the people."

Just kidding.

The Times – or any news organization – would have had to be grossly irresponsible and hopelessly ideological – to tie the shootings in Nevada to anything James Hoffa or Maxine Waters said, especially since it turns out the gunman who killed himself was mentally unstable, according to people who knew him. Besides that, there is not a shred of evidence that he heard Hoffa's angry rhetoric or the "go to hell" vitriol of Maxine Waters – or for that matter, even knew who they were.

That's why the New York Times didn't run the fake editorial you just read. But here's the real editorial the New York Times ran just days after the mass shootings outside a Tucson, Arizona supermarket last January.

"It is facile and mistaken to attribute this particular madman's act directly to Republicans or Tea Party members. But it is legitimate to hold Republicans and particularly their most virulent supporters in the media responsible for the gale of anger that has produced the vast majority of these threats, setting the nation on edge. Many on the right have exploited the arguments of division, reaping political power by demonizing immigrants, or welfare recipients, or bureaucrats. They seem to have persuaded many Americans that the government is not just misguided, but the enemy of the people."

Looks a lot like the phony editorial, doesn't it? But the Arizona gunman – like the one in Nevada – was also mentally unstable. And there's no evidence that the Arizona shooter ever listened to those supposed right-wing hate mongers that are always in the cross-hairs of liberal commentators – just as there is no evidence that the gunman in Nevada ever listened to Hoffa or Waters. There's no evidence, for that matter, that the Arizona gunman ever even heard of Rush Limbaugh or Sarah Palin or Glen Beck – just as there's no evidence the Nevada gunman ever heard of James Hoffa or Maxine Waters. But that didn't stop the New York Times from telling its readers that it's "legitimate" to link Republicans to the massacre.

If a conservative publication or TV network linked Hoffa and Waters to what happened at the Nevada IHOP, they would be seen as ideological buffoons, hacks not to be taken seriously. But, without a shred of evidence, the Times linked conservatives to the Arizona rampage.

Editorial writers, of course, are expected to have a point of view. But even those who write opinions must be fair in the

way they come to their conclusions. Otherwise, they aren't journalists so much as they are ideological warriors. That's what Rush Limbaugh is on the right, but he doesn't pretend to be a journalist. The editorial writers at the New York Times do.

Back to the Future

✘ On MSNBC the other night we got a glimpse of the future, a sneak peek into what we can expect from some liberal journalists as the campaign for president heats up. Let's just say the future, unfortunately, looks a lot like the past.

Our tour guide was liberal journalist and author Richard Wolffe, who was the White House correspondent for Newsweek and is now an MSNBC contributor. He's always been a big fan of Barack Obama, a loyal member of the president's base, but this time he outdid himself. Asked about the dust-up over what night President Obama would be allowed to speak to a joint session of Congress – the president wanted to speak Wednesday, the same day as a Republican presidential debate; House Speaker John Boehner said, no, try Thursday – Wolffe said this:

“The interesting question is: What is it about this president that has stripped away the veneer of respect that normally accompanies the office of the president? Why do Republicans think this president is un-presidential and should dare to request this kind of thing? It strikes me that it could be the economic times, it could be that he won so big in 2008 or it could be, let's face it, the color of his skin.”

Before we get to the ugly, unsubstantiated, reckless accusation of racism, let's first consider Wolffe's supposed concern about "respect" for the office of the president. As Peter Wehner put it in a piece for Commentary magazine, "Funny, but I don't recall the 'veneer of respect that normally accompanies the office of the president' when the chief executive was a man named George W. Bush. During the Bush presidency, for example, George W. Bush was referred to by leading members of the Democratic Party as a 'moral coward' (Vice President Al Gore), as a 'loser' and a 'liar' who had 'betrayed his country' (Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid), and who 'week after week after week after week ... told lie after lie after lie after lie' (Senator Edward Kennedy). But in a remarkable feat of self-control, Wolffe was able to keep his moral outrage in check."

Yes, Wolffe is now an opinion journalist and opinion journalists are entitled to their opinions. But this kind of "analysis" reminds me of Chris Matthews' embarrassing line about how he got a thrill running up his leg when he heard Barack Obama speak. This is not political analysis. This is a man crush. And both Matthews and Wolffe have it – though this is not unusual for people who work at Obama Media Headquarters, also known as MSNBC.

But it's the last part of Wolffe's commentary that goes beyond embarrassing to truly pathetic – the part about race. There is no reason to believe that Boehner refused permission to Mr. Obama because of "the color of his skin," as Wolffe suggests. And Wolffe doesn't even bother to offer any proof to back up his accusation. He simply says, "Let's face it, the color of his skin" as if he's doing nothing more than stating the obvious.

It may be obvious to Richard Wolffe and his fellow liberals who need to see racism at every turn in order to feel morally superior to those *hateful conservatives*. But we've seen this movie before. Anyone who disagrees with Mr. Obama about

almost anything runs the risk of having some liberal journalist call him a racist. It's getting way beyond tiresome.

To make such a charge, absent anything vaguely resembling proof, is, as Peter Wehner says, "slanderous." Expect a lot more slander from journalists and other liberals as we move toward Election Day 2012 – especially if President Obama's prospects for re-election look dim.

Warning: Conservatives May Be Harmful to Your Mental Health

✘ "If you hooked network news reporters and producers to polygraph machines and asked them, 'Do you think you are guilty of liberal bias?' most would almost certainly answer, 'No.' And they would pass the polygraph test because they're not lying. They honestly believe what they're saying. And that's the biggest problem of all."

I wrote those words 10 years ago in my first book *Bias*, a behind-the-scenes expose on how and why mainstream journalists often slant the news to fit their own liberal biases. It's still the biggest problem of all today.

But despite what some conservatives might think, there's no grand conspiracy to slant the news in a liberal direction. During my nearly three decades as a correspondent at CBS News I never once saw Dan Rather (or anyone else) summon his top lieutenants and tell them to cover a story in a way that would make liberals happy. It doesn't work that way.

The problem is that newsrooms are packed with liberal

journalists who see the world through a liberal prism. There's a lot of racial and ethnic and gender diversity in newsrooms these days, but very little ideological diversity – very little diversity of opinion. So, inside the bubble, everything to the right of center is (correctly) seen as conservative, but everything to the left of center is (incorrectly) seen as middle of the road. Liberal views, in this world, aren't really liberal. They're moderate. They're reasonable. They're mainstream.

That's why there's so much liberal bias in the news. That's why it's so entrenched, so much part of the fabric of American journalism.

And now we have a brand new piece of evidence showing once again that liberal bias is alive and well in America's newsrooms, even if mainstream journalists are oblivious to it.

This time the evidence is about labels – the ideological labels journalists slap on presidential candidates the way tobacco companies slap warning labels on packs of cigarettes.

One says "Cigarettes cause cancer." The other practically shouts: Look out, be careful, you're about to hear from a CONSERVATIVE!

A study out this week by the conservative Media Research Center concluded that if you're a Republican running for president there's a good chance you'll be labeled a conservative. But if you were a Democrat running for president four years ago, there was virtually no chance journalists would call you a liberal. Here's what the MRC found:

"This year's crop of GOP presidential candidates includes strong conservatives, just like the top Democratic candidates four years ago – Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and John Edwards – were all staunch liberals. But a major, glaring difference between today's campaign coverage and the early

coverage of the 2007 Democratic nomination race is the impulse of journalists to repeatedly brand the 2012 GOP candidates as 'conservative' despite offering extremely few 'liberal' labels four years ago.

"Media Research Center analysts reviewed the ABC, CBS and NBC morning and evening news programs from January 1 through July 31 and found 62 'conservative' labels for Republican candidates or those talked about as potential candidates. A check of the same broadcasts for the same time period in 2007 found a paltry three 'liberal' labels for the Democrats running that year, a greater than 20-to-1 disparity."

Journalists identify conservatives because inside the bubble conservatives are out of the mainstream. They're different. Their views are often seen as alien, even dangerous. None of that applies to liberals, of course. Their views are the very essence of mainstream.

What makes this especially dopey, is that while about 40 percent of Americans identify themselves as conservative, only 20 percent identify themselves as liberal. So which side is really mainstream and which is *different*?

This kind of thing has happened before in American journalism, a long time ago. Then, it was about crime and race.

In the old days, pretty much the only time a criminal's race was mentioned in a story is if the criminal was black. So a story might begin, "Johnny Jones, a 25-year-old Negro from Smithtown, was arrested last night ...". But if Johnny Jones were white, the story would simply read, "Johnny Jones, a 25-year-old from Smithtown, was arrested last night ...". No mention of race.

Journalists, in those days, identified black people because, *at some level*, they saw them as out of the mainstream, as different, as alien, and yes, as dangerous. White people were the mainstream. They weren't different. They weren't alien.

Let's stipulate that nothing in America is exactly like race, so analogies go only so far. But, as I say, something like what went on in the bad old days is happening again, now.

Journalists slap labels on conservatives today for the much the same reason they slapped labels on blacks decades ago. Both are, or were, seen as outsiders – alien, dangerous outsiders.

This kind of thing should embarrass journalists. But, of course it doesn't. Several years ago I said that I've met guys who work the overnight shift at 7-11 selling cigarettes and Twinkies to insomniacs who have more introspection than a lot of journalists I know. That's something else that's still true today.

Another Media Double Standard

✘ Unless you were studiously not paying attention, you probably know that the man behind the massacre in Norway is a Christian.

According to the Media Research Center, a conservative watchdog organization that monitors such things, "The three major networks trumpeted the news this weekend that the man behind a mass shooting spree in Norway is also a Christian, highlighting the fact in eight different programs from Saturday through Monday."

A few examples:

From Good Morning America on ABC: "Police have identified the shooter as a 32-year-old Norwegian and Christian fundamentalist,"

From ABC's World News: "His ideology? Religious conservative. [onscreen shot of his Facebook profile reading 'Christian.']"

From The Early Show on CBS: "This morning, the man who admits to killing 93 people [later revised downward] in those attacks, saying he wanted to start a revolution to defend traditional Christian values, is in court behind closed doors."

Several days later the New York Times reported that the gunman's lawyer believed his client, 32 year-old Anders Behring Breivik, "was a warrior destined to die for the eventual salvation of European Christian values."

There is no evidence that Breivik belonged to a church, or was religious in any formal way. No evidence either that he believed God or Jesus told him to go out and slaughter his fellow Norwegians. Still, if in some way his religion informed what passes for his thinking – his lawyer says he believes Breivik is insane – then noting his Christianity is legitimate journalism.

On this I disagree with my friend Bill O'Reilly who says that Christians, by definition, don't murder innocent people, therefore the gunman couldn't possibly be Christian, no matter how he described himself. This is a circular argument. Christians don't kill. Breivik killed. Therefore Breivik is not a Christian. Sorry, it doesn't fly. If it did, there wouldn't be even one killer since Jesus who could rightly be called a Christian.

Beyond this, there is an important media issue at play here; one that involves the hesitancy to introduce another of the world's major religions – Islam – into a story, even when it is clearly relevant. Given the violent history of Islamic

radicalism, when a Muslim gunman goes on a shooting spree, there's a good chance his religion had something to do with it – and therefore becomes an important part of the story.

So let's go back to November 2009. A U.S. Army major goes on a killing spree at Fort Hood, Texas. His name is Nidal Malik Hasan. Neither the CBS Evening News nor the NBC Nightly News mentioned Hasan's religion. But ABC World News did. Then anchor Charles Gibson, teased his network's coverage, with this: "Fort Hood tragedy: An Army officer, a Muslim convert, is the suspect in a shooting spree..." And then, leading into his first story, Gibson noted that Major Nidal Malik Hasan, "an army officer, a Muslim, opened fire with handguns..."

And later, after Gibson said that there's "confusion" over whether Hasan was a convert or born a Muslim, ABC News correspondent Brian Ross said that Hasan "attended Damascus University in Syria and may be Jordanian – likely not a convert if that's the case."

Katie Couric, on the other hand, at CBS made no mention of Major Hasan's religion saying only that, "Today, according to the Army, a soldier opened fire. ... He's identified tonight as Army Major Nadal Malik Hasan, a licensed psychiatrist and drug and rehab specialist from Bethesda, Maryland."

And NBC anchor Brian Williams said: "The soldier, identified as the initial gunman here, is an Army psychiatrist, Nadal Malik Hasan. He's an officer, a Major, and he was apparently armed with two handguns."

And as the Media Research Center reported at the time, "Newsweek's Evan Thomas regretted the Fort Hood mass murderer, Major Nidal Hasan, is a Muslim because of how that reality will be abused by conservatives." On a syndicated weekend television talk show, Inside Washington, Thomas, the resident thinker at Newsweek, said, "I cringe that he's a Muslim. I mean, because it inflames all the fears. I think he's probably

just a nut case. But with that label attached to him, it will get the right wing going and it just – I mean these things are tragic, but that makes it much worse.”

A few minutes later, Nina Totenberg, one of the many liberal correspondents at NPR, chimed in with this: “It really is tragic that he was a Muslim.”

So much concern that a cold-blooded killer was a Muslim, who by the way, carried a business card proclaiming that he was a “soldier of Allah” and who shouted the Islamic battle cry “Allah-O-Akbar!” meaning “God is Great” just before opening fire.

But because he was a Muslim, liberals in the media tiptoed around his religion even when it became obvious that he killed in the name of his religion. Journalists are “sensitive” that way.

No such sensitivity exists in the case of Anders Behring Breivik, whose religion probably played little or no role in the mayhem he caused, and who, to use Evan Thomas’ description of Major Hasan, is “probably just a nut case.” This was the headline after the Norway massacre in the New York Times:

“As Horrors Emerge, Norway Charges Christian Extremist.”