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Planned Parenthood Attacks Obama

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Cecile Richards, the President of Planned Parenthood, sent out an e-mail letter last weekend attacking the Obama administration because it re-stated explicitly that no federal funding could be used to cover abortions as the new health care bill is implemented, except in those cases permitted by the Hyde Amendment, namely, rape, incest, or when the life of the mother is threatened. She addresses the issue of high-risk pools being set up in all 50 states and about which I wrote on Friday.

The e-mail was sent to supporters of Planned Parenthood and it invited them to write to the White House to express their outrage. There is a link to the Planned Parenthood website where readers are given a sample letter and instructed: "We need to make sure the Obama administration knows this is unacceptable. Fill out the form below to do your part" and tell the Obama administration to reverse this decision. The problem, of course, is that there was no decision last week from the Department of Health & Human Services regarding the coverage of abortion in the high risk pools, there was merely a re-statement of the new law. The decision was made last spring, when the President issued an executive order to clarify the fact that no federal funds could be used to for abortion. The executive order allowed longtime pro-life Democrats like Congressman Bart Stupak to vote for the final bill.

At the time, there were cries from the right wing bleachers that the executive order had no effect, that it did not matter, that it was a fig leaf handed to Stupak to allow him to turn traitor to the pro-life cause. Congressman Stupak's year-in and year-out defense of life mattered not a whit: He ended up supporting the vilified Obamacare, so he must be a traitor. People of good faith disagreed about whether the new law did or did not permit some form of federal funding of abortion, and some also doubted the value of the executive order. But, many people were not acting in good faith. Many people — and sadly, some bishops too — failed to acknowledge the most obvious fact about the executive order, namely, that it publicly

committed the President of the United States in the most explicit and formal manner possible to ensuring that no bureaucrat would sneak any abortion funding through a regulatory back door. The executive order ensured that the worst case scenarios envisioned by some pro-life groups could not come to pass. It may not have been statutory, but in a democracy, a President goes back on his word at great peril.

Most damningly, some people – and, again, some bishops, refused to believe that the President himself was acting in good faith. He was, after all, “the most pro-abortion president in history,” so whatever he did had to be understood in the most vicious light possible. If he signed the executive order, there must be something sneaky afoot, there must be some line or clause that vitiated the clearly stated commitment of both Congress and the President that the health care bill would not permit federal funding of abortion. Some of these critics of the President simply wanted to defeat health care reform at all costs. Others blinded by hatred of the man himself, could not bring themselves to acknowledge the political fact of his commitment. After all, if you are not taken aback at posters that portray Obama with a Hitler moustache, it is not so difficult to believe that he was duping someone.

The President was not duping anyone. He recognized that there was no way to pass health care reform if it included federal funding of abortion, even if that funding was covered by some kind of accounting shell game such as the Capps Amendment proposed. He also recognized that there was no way to pass health care reform if the Stupak Amendment was attached: No one likes to admit it, but Stupak went beyond Hyde, and those pro-choice progressives who were deeply committed to health care reform could not abide what amounted to a prohibition on the purchase of health insurance with abortion coverage on the new exchanges, even if the policy was purchased entirely with private funds. The executive order bridged the compromise.

For that very reason, the executive order did not satisfy those who make their living raising money from the pro-life or pro-choice extremes. Both the National Right to Life Committee and Planned Parenthood objected to the executive order because any hint of compromise is deadly to their ability to continue to whip their base and, most importantly, raise money. People give money when they are angry or scared, not when they are busy applauding a legislative compromise.

Ms. Richards writes: “This is not what we worked for. This is not what we fought for. You and I, and millions of Planned Parenthood supporters, fought for a year to make sure that health care reform would provide comprehensive coverage to every woman, man, and child in America. We achieved some tremendous victories, including defeating the Stupak amendment that would have banned private insurance coverage of abortion for millions of women. Now, a Stupak-like rule is back – and it came from the Obama administration.” Her hyper-ventilating sounds almost exactly like the hyper-ventilating found among conservative Catholic blogs last week when questions were raised about abortion funding in the high-risk pools.

As difficult as it may be for people like Ms. Richards or the National Right-to-Life crowd to believe, many people do not think about abortion every waking moment. I suspect that the person who drafted the initial language for the Pennsylvania high-risk pool lacked expertise in the subject of abortion coverage. Planned Parenthood and NRLC have a strangely symbiotic relationship. We saw this in the history of the Freedom of Choice Act which began as a pro-choice fundraising tool in the early 80’s and has morphed into a pro-life fundraising tool in this decade, even though it did not then and does not now stand the least chance of passage. This symbiotic relationship is one in which both groups exploit fears of worst-case scenarios to raise money and fire up their base, and neither side is capable of seizing a political compromise when it is offered. That is why both groups attack someone like Cong. Stupak and, now, President Obama. The President and the Congressman focused on getting health care passed provided it was abortion neutral. They did so. That is what really galls both Planned Parenthood and NRLC.

Finally, those rightwing critics who have been denouncing the President and his executive order as a sham, will they now praise the President for sticking to his promise and staring down one of the best organized and most powerful groups within his own party? Decency demands that they do so, but my guess is that the silence will be deafening.

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