

Revisiting The Abortion Debate

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 11, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

In the post-mortems for the narrowly averted government shutdown, and the negotiations that enacted a compromise on the rest of the fiscal year's budget, another piece of evidence has emerged that Republican politicians are willing to be disingenuous when it comes to abortion legislation.

In [Sunday's Washington Post](#) [1], Rep. Chris Smith, a Republican Congressman from New Jersey who is a leader in the pro-life movement. Cong. Smith was one of those who led the effort to cut off funding for Planned Parenthood, a proposal that did not survive the negotiations after Democrats insisted that the funding not be removed. "You would think this is about women's health care," Smith told the Post. "It's about abortion." As evidence, he noted that Planned Parenthood provides nearly one-quarter of all abortions performed in America and, according to the article, Planned Parenthood's "services for women were minimal compared with community health centers that focus on helping the poor."

It is interesting to hear Smith tout the community health centers. Last year, you may recall, during the health care debate, Cong. Smith, The National Right to Life Committee and even [the USCCB warned](#) [2] that without the Stupak Amendment language on restricting funding for abortion, these same community health centers would become abortion mills. At the time, the people who run such centers affirmed that they did not, never had, and entertained no intention, of performing abortions. But, that did not keep those who were determined from stopping the health care reform effort from spreading the myth that these community health care centers would start performing abortions as soon as the bill was signed into law.

There is no doubt in my mind that Cong. Smith is sincerely concerned about the dignity of the unborn. But, if last year the community health centers were so bad, why are they now held up as the preferred alternative to Planned Parenthood? Is he willing to concede that he and his allies were wrong last year when they raised the prospect of community health centers performing abortions? Are Smith and his allies "and especially, the NRLC and the USCCB" willing to admit that in their zeal, they came to focus so narrowly on worst-case scenarios that too readily gave credence to the most improbable of scenarios and that this skewed their judgment?

This comment of Smith's comes on the heels of Cong. Bart Stupak's interview with Atlantic magazine, about which [I wrote previously](#) [3], in which he charged that Senate Republicans walked away from the Stupak Amendment in their zeal to defeat the health care law. There has been no response from Senate Republicans to the charge. I have seen nothing to rebut the charge from Kathryn Jean Lopez at National Review nor from the American Papist nor from any of those who followed the health care debate closely and who certainly have access to Republican leaders to confirm or deny Stupak's charge.

In that same interview, Stupak also pointed out that the much-derided executive order President Obama signed regarding the health care bill has worked. He noted that there have been three instances in which the Obama Administration has done exactly what it promised in forbidding the use of federal funds for abortions: the high-risk pools, the community health centers and the HHS grant application process. As I pointed out at the time, while an executive order does not have the same weight as statutory law, when it represents the solemn pledge

of a president, who would pay a huge cost for going back on his word, the difference in weight is negligible. Cong. Smith's holding up community health centers is evidence that the worst-case scenario did not play out and that the executive order Obama signed, so far from being a smokescreen, has effectively banned federal funding of abortions as promised. It would be nice to hear those who said executive orders didn't matter (or, that executive orders from this President did not matter; executive orders from President Bush were just fine) admit that this one did matter. Again, I hear only silence from the right-wing bleachers.

Again, I do not intend to question anyone's sincerity. But, one of the problems the Church faces when it focuses so narrowly on abortion legislation is that it avails itself of arguments made by its allies on that issue those allies have more complicated agendas. You cannot expect an issue to be "non-negotiable" with congressmen whose job it is to negotiate.

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