

Republicans Embrace the Cootie Effect

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Back in the 1950s, at the height of the McCarthy era, simply being friends with someone suspected of being a Communist could ruin your career. It became known as “guilt by association.” During this year’s presidential campaign, however, it’s been extended to guilt by spatial proximity, which could appropriately be called the “cootie effect.” If you sit on the same board, have appeared at the same event or otherwise have been in close physical proximity of someone deemed undesirable, you therefore must have been infected by their politics or, at minimum, have no problems with things they may have done in their past.

Republican presidential nominee John McCain and his running mate Sarah Palin, building upon a line of attack originally used by Hillary Clinton during the primary campaign, have raised alarms over the possibility that Barack Obama may have picked up radical terrorist cooties from Bill Ayers, a professor of education at the University of Illinois in Chicago who was active in the Weather Underground during his youth nearly forty years ago.

Though it is easy to dismiss such attacks as absurd, as they certainly are, it is surprising how easy it is for otherwise rational people to fall prey to such twisted logic.

Palin insists that Obama sees America as “being so imperfect, imperfect enough that he’s palling around with terrorists who would target their own country.” Similarly, a recently released McCain ad declared, “Obama worked with terrorist William Ayers when it was convenient,” a charge that Bob Shrum, a senior fellow at New York University’s Robert F. Wagner School of Public Service, notes “all but alleges that the candidate was there planting bombs.” Palin has defended such attacks on her Democratic rivals, arguing “We gotta start telling people what the other side represents.”

As has been investigated by The New York Times, Factcheck.org, Politifact, and other media, the links between Obama and Ayers are so minimal that it defies any semblance of rationality as to how — in the midst of two wars and the greatest financial crisis in generations — this has become a major campaign issue just two weeks before the general election. But it has.

Sitting on the Same Boards

Back in 1995, Ayers, along with two other education reformers, successfully applied for a \$50 million grant from the conservative billionaire Walter Annenberg to support school reform efforts in the city. Ayers had been serving as an educational consultant for Chicago mayor Richard M. Daley and later received the city’s “Citizen of the Year” recognition for his education advocacy. According to the investigation by the New York Times, Obama was asked to chair the six-member panel that oversaw distribution of the funds, which became known as the Chicago Annenberg Challenge, over a four-year period.

Fox News, however, reported that “Barack Obama and Bill Ayers had a close working relationship [with]...the two of them were running the foundation together” and that “Barack Obama was funding Bill Ayers’ radical educational projects.” A widely-circulated McCain campaign ad claimed “Ayers and Obama ran a radical educational foundation together.” Similarly, in the Wall Street Journal, Stanley Kurtz — ignoring other members of the team of applicants and the wide range of supporters who made the CAC possible — claimed that “Mr. Ayers founded CAC and was its guiding spirit.” He also insisted that “No one would have been appointed the CAC chairman without his [Ayers’] approval” when, according to the Times investigation, the decision to ask Obama to head the committee was made at the recommendation of Deborah Leff, then president

of the Joyce Foundation, at a luncheon meeting with Patricia Graham of the Spencer Foundation and Adele Simmons of the MacArthur Foundation. Ayers wasn't even present. Kurtz goes on to claim that "Mr. Obama and Mr. Ayers worked as a team to advance the CAC agenda." In reality Ayers attended no more than half a dozen meetings over the five years of CAC's operation, which were open to the public, in which he — among many others — briefed board members on various issues effecting Chicago schools. As Obama pointed out in the final debate, the board also included Republicans.

Another example the Republicans have used of this supposed "close friendship" between Obama and Ayers is that from 2000 to 2002, Obama and Ayers overlapped on the eight-member board of the Woods Fund, a Chicago anti-poverty group. The New York Times quotes Eden Martin, a corporate lawyer and president of the Commercial Club of Chicago who was also on the board at that time, as noting, "You had people who were liberal and some who were pretty conservative, but we usually reached a consensus." He also said that he found nothing remarkable about Obama and Ayers' interactions on the board.

Being at the Same Place at the Same Time

One apparently does not have to be on a board at the same time to get somebody's cooties. Simply appearing on the same panel or being in the same room can apparently lead to infestation as well.

In a nationally-broadcast special on Fox News, Sean Hannity claimed that Obama and Ayers "appeared together at various public engagements... it would seem that they are more than just a little bit friendly," the assumption being that if you speak at the same public forum you must be socially and ideological close.

Hannity also claimed in his report that in 1995 Ayers "hosted a political coming out party for a young Barack Obama." Palin, meanwhile, has insisted that "I think it's fair to talk about where Barack Obama kicked off his political career, in the guy's living room." This meet-the-candidate gathering was actually organized for retiring state senator Alice Palmer to kick off her campaign for U.S. Congress. It was she who invited Obama to the event, not Ayers. While there, Palmer introduced those attending her event to Obama — who had already announced his candidacy for her soon-to-be-vacated seat in the Illinois state senate — and endorsed him as her preferred successor.

Still, Jerome Corsi, in his best-seller *Obama Nation*, insists that introducing Obama in that particular house was significant in that "Palmer would never have introduced Obama to the Hyde Park political community at the Ayres-Dohrn home unless she saw an affinity between Ayers and Dohrn's radical leftist history . . . and the politics of Barack Obama."

Such attacks do not just come from right-wing journalists and bloggers, but Senator McCain himself, who claimed that "if you're going to associate and have as a friend and serve on a board and have a guy kick off your campaign" who is "an unrepentant terrorist, . . . I think really indicates Senator Obama's attitude..." Indeed, a recent McCain ad claims that Obama "launched his political career in Ayers' living room."

Apparently, cooties can be spread through money as well: Republicans have also made much of the \$200 contribution Ayers made in the spring of 2001 to Obama's campaign for re-election to the Illinois State Senate, arguing that since Obama is "financially supported by terrorists," Obama himself must be of a similar radical left-wing orientation.

It's Not What You Actually Say or Do

If such indirect associations can really spread political cooties, they must not be very strong. Indeed, there is virtually nothing in these kinds of accusations against Obama that criticize things he has actually said or done.

Senator Obama is a cautious center-left Democrat whose advisors primarily come from the liberal mainstream of the domestic and foreign policy elite. Nothing in his career or in any spoken or written statements gives any indication whatsoever that he has been influenced by or is at all supportive of the kind of radical ideology or violent tactics advocated by or engaged in by Bill Ayers and his associates back in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Obama has repeatedly condemned the acts of sabotage and other violence by the Weather Underground — including Ayers’ involvement specifically — virtually all of which took place when Obama was a young boy living thousands of miles away.

Indeed, Obama’s support for escalating the war in Afghanistan, shipping additional arms to repressive Middle Eastern allies, backing only a limited withdrawal from Iraq, increasing military spending, funding the Wall Street bailout, keeping open the option of promoting nuclear power and offshore drilling, and backing a health care plan which precludes the single-payer route taken by virtually all other industrialized democracies has alienated many potential supporters, not just on the far left, but on the liberal wing of the Democratic Party as well. The idea that Obama is a far leftist should be easily dismissible.

Despite this, there are those on the right who insist that this moderate persona is not the “real” Obama. For example, the National Review Online claims that the Democratic nominee is really “a man of the Left, doing his level-best to assemble a coalition free from the constraints of conventional, middle-ground Democratic politics” and that “Obama offers radicalism with a moderate face.” Republican blogger Nicholas Stix insists that Obama “is in fact a far-left politician who . . . seeks to force ever more socialist and racist laws and programs on the American people.” When Senator Joe Lieberman — for whom Obama campaigned against liberal anti-war challenger Ned Lamont in Connecticut’s 2006 Senate primary — was asked if Obama was a Marxist, the former Democratic vice-presidential nominee equivocated: “I must say, that’s a good question... I will tell you that during this campaign, I’ve learned some things about him, about the kind of environment from which he came ideologically. . . I’d hesitate to say he’s a Marxist, but he’s got some positions that are far to the left of me and I think mainstream America.”

The Republican nominees apparently agree: Palin has claimed that Obama’s plan to modestly raise taxes on those making more than a quarter million dollars a year are “a little bit like socialism” and McCain has said, “At least in Europe, the socialist leaders who so admire my opponent are upfront about their objectives.”

The Attacks Keep Coming

Even though there is no evidence that the cootie effect from Obama’s periodic presence-in-the-same-room with a former anti-war radical has actually manifested itself in the Democratic presidential nominee’s career trajectory, there are those who will claim it has anyway. For example, Hannity insisted on Fox News that Obama’s “community organizing is a grand scheme perpetuated by none other than William Ayers,” even though Obama had been a community organizer years before meeting Ayers and Ayers was not involved with Obama or any of the organizations who employed Obama during his years as a community organizer.

Politifact analyzed the McCain ads linking Ayers with Obama closely, particularly the claim that Obama and Ayers ran a radical education foundation together, and rated it as a “pants-on-fire” lie, its most extreme category for a misrepresentation in a political ad.

Even after the initial rounds of attacks against Obama had been debunked, the chair of Virginia’s Republican Party compared Obama to Osama bin Laden since both of them “have friends that have bombed the Pentagon,” a comment McCain refused to renounce and, according to a recent Time magazine article, is being pitched by McCain campaign staffers in that state as a talking point for their canvassers. These Virginia Republicans apparently found it irrelevant that: 1) Ayers is not “friends” with Obama; 2) Ayers has never been linked to the

1972 Weather Underground bombing in a Pentagon rest room; 3) that bombing was deliberately designed to avoid casualties, so comparing it to the 2001 Al-Qaeda attack — which was designed to kill and cost 184 lives — is utterly ludicrous; 4) Osama bin Laden directly ordered the al-Qaeda attack on the Pentagon whereas Obama had nothing to do with the Weather Underground bombing, which took place when he was just ten years old.

Just this past week, voters in a number of swing states received pre-recorded phone calls claiming “Barack Obama has worked closely with domestic terrorist Bill Ayres, whose organization bombed the U.S. capitol, the Pentagon, a judge’s home and killed Americans.” In reality, not only did Obama not “work closely” with Ayers, none of the Weather Underground bombings ever killed anybody and Ayers was never convicted of any acts of terrorism.

Shooting the Messenger

Some McCain/Palin supporters are so worried about Obama being infected by Ayers’ radical terrorist cooties that, even after the various independent investigations gave the Democratic nominee a clean bill of health, large numbers of them have refused to accept it, accusing the major corporate-owned daily newspapers and broadcast networks — which they ironically insist carry a “left-wing” bias — of actively engaging in a cover-up. Despite all the media investigations of the Republican charges regarding Obama and Ayers, Palin blames the media for not pursuing the “real story” about Obama, claiming “we’re in dangerous territory when mainstream media isn’t asking all the questions... [W]hen will the questions be asked, and when will we get the answers?”

Despite Obama’s version of his relationship with Ayers having largely been vindicated by these investigative reports, McCain insists, “We know that’s not true. We need to know the full extent of the relationship because of whether Sen. Obama is telling the truth to the American people or not.” In recent weeks, journalists covering McCain rallies have been heckled and given the finger from the Republican crowds, alleging dishonest reporting about Obama’s “terrorist connections.”

It is profoundly disturbing that mainstream American electoral politics has sunk to the level where a major party’s presidential and vice-presidential nominees, along with many of their supporters, are now engaging in this level of smear tactics and guilt-by-spatial-proximity. Also troubling is that such attacks are being communicated as fact on the country’s largest cable news channel and in a #1 best selling book, and are thereby being taken seriously by millions of people.

Polls indicate that these attacks are not having much impact in terms of how people will actually vote. However, if a sizable minority of Americans can be convinced that Obama has been infected by radical terrorist cooties, there will be even more pressure against his administration initiating policies geared toward the left. It is presumably no coincidence that the attacks surrounding Ayers and his past affiliation with a Marxist-Leninist organization have been immediately followed by McCain and Palin labeling Obama’s centrist economic proposals as “socialist.”

As a result, though it is easy to dismiss the Republican reliance on the cootie effect as a sign of desperation for a campaign whose policy proposals have proven to warrant such limited support, it would be a mistake to underestimate its potential impact or to downplay the importance of forcefully challenging such attacks.

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