

## Documents show media plotting to kill stories about Rev. Jeremiah Wright

By Jonathan Strong - The Daily Caller 1:15 AM 07/20/2010  
ADVERTISEMENT

It was the moment of greatest peril for then-Sen. Barack Obama's political career. In the heat of the presidential campaign, videos surfaced of Obama's pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, angrily denouncing whites, the U.S. government and America itself. Obama had once bragged of his closeness to Wright. Now the black nationalist preacher's rhetoric was threatening to torpedo Obama's campaign.

The crisis reached a howling pitch in mid-April, 2008, at an ABC News debate moderated by Charlie Gibson and George Stephanopoulos. Gibson asked Obama why it had taken him so long – nearly a year since Wright's remarks became public – to dissociate himself from them. Stephanopoulos asked, "Do you think Reverend Wright loves America as much as you do?"

Watching this all at home were members of Journalist, a listserv comprised of several hundred liberal journalists, as well as like-minded professors and activists. The tough questioning from the ABC anchors left many of them outraged. "George [Stephanopoulos]," fumed Richard Kim of the Nation, is "being a disgusting little rat snake."

Others went further. According to records obtained by The Daily Caller, at several points during the 2008 presidential campaign a group of liberal journalists took radical steps to protect their favored candidate. Employees of news organizations including Time, Politico, the Huffington Post, the Baltimore Sun, the Guardian, Salon and the New Republic participated in outpourings of anger over how Obama had been treated in the media, and in some cases plotted to fix the damage.

In one instance, Spencer Ackerman of the Washington Independent urged his colleagues to deflect attention from Obama's relationship with Wright by changing the subject. Pick one of Obama's conservative critics, Ackerman wrote, "Fred Barnes, Karl Rove, who cares — and call them racists."

Michael Tomasky, a writer for the Guardian, also tried to rally his fellow members of Journalist: "Listen folks—in my opinion, we all have to do what we can to kill ABC and this idiocy in whatever venues we have. This isn't about defending Obama. This is about how the [mainstream media] kills any chance of discourse that actually serves the people."

"Richard Kim got this right above: 'a horrible glimpse of general election press strategy.' He's dead on," Tomasky continued. "We need to throw chairs now, try as hard as we can to get the call next time. Otherwise the questions in October will be exactly like this. This is just a disease."

(In an interview Monday, Tomasky defended his position, calling the ABC debate an example of shoddy journalism.)

Thomas Schaller, a columnist for the Baltimore Sun as well as a political science professor, upped the ante from there. In a post with the subject header, “why don’t we use the power of this list to do something about the debate?” Schaller proposed coordinating a “smart statement expressing disgust” at the questions Gibson and Stephanopoulos had posed to Obama.

“It would create quite a stir, I bet, and be a warning against future behavior of the sort,” Schaller wrote.

Tomasky approved. “YES. A thousand times yes,” he exclaimed.

The members began collaborating on their open letter. Jonathan Stein of Mother Jones rejected an early draft, saying, “I’d say too short. In my opinion, it doesn’t go far enough in highlighting the inanity of some of [Gibson’s] and [Stephanopoulos’s] questions. And it doesn’t point out their factual inaccuracies ... Our friends at Media Matters probably have tons of experience with this sort of thing, if we want their input.”

Jared Bernstein, who would go on to be Vice President Joe Biden’s top economist when Obama took office, helped, too. The letter should be “Short, punchy and solely focused on vapidness of gotcha,” Bernstein wrote.

In the midst of this collaborative enterprise, Holly Yeager, now of the Columbia Journalism Review, dropped into the conversation to say “be sure to read” a column in that day’s Washington Post that attacked the debate.

Columnist Joe Conason weighed in with suggestions. So did Slate contributor David Greenberg, and David Roberts of the website Grist. Todd Gitlin, a professor of journalism at Columbia University, helped too.

Journalist members signed the statement and released it April 18, calling the debate “a revolting descent into tabloid journalism and a gross disservice to Americans concerned about the great issues facing the nation and the world.”

The letter caused a brief splash and won the attention of the New York Times. But only a week later, Obama – and the journalists who were helping him – were on the defensive once again.

Jeremiah Wright was back in the news after making a series of media appearances. At the National Press Club, Wright claimed Obama had only repudiated his beliefs for “political reasons.” Wright also reiterated his charge that the U.S. federal government had created AIDS as a means of committing genocide against African Americans.

It was another crisis, and members of Journalist again rose to help Obama.

Chris Hayes of the Nation posted on April 29, 2008, urging his colleagues to ignore Wright. Hayes directed his message to “particularly those in the ostensible mainstream media” who were members of

the list.

The Wright controversy, Hayes argued, was not about Wright at all. Instead, “It has everything to do with the attempts of the right to maintain control of the country.”

Hayes castigated his fellow liberals for criticizing Wright. “All this hand wringing about just how awful and odious Rev. Wright remarks are just keeps the hustle going.”

“Our country disappears people. It tortures people. It has the blood of as many as one million Iraqi civilians — men, women, children, the infirmed — on its hands. You’ll forgive me if I just can’t quite dredge up the requisite amount of outrage over Barack Obama’s pastor,” Hayes wrote.

Hayes urged his colleagues — especially the straight news reporters who were charged with covering the campaign in a neutral way — to bury the Wright scandal. “I’m not saying we should all rush en masse to defend Wright. If you don’t think he’s worthy of defense, don’t defend him! What I’m saying is that there is no earthly reason to use our various platforms to discuss what about Wright we find objectionable,” Hayes said.

(Reached by phone Monday, Hayes argued his words then fell on deaf ears. “I can say ‘hey I don’t think you guys should cover this,’ but no one listened to me.”)

Katha Pollitt — Hayes’s colleague at the Nation — didn’t disagree on principle, though she did sound weary of the propaganda. “I hear you. but I am really tired of defending the indefensible. The people who attacked Clinton on Monica were prissy and ridiculous, but let me tell you it was no fun, as a feminist and a woman, waving aside as politically irrelevant and part of the vast rightwing conspiracy Paula, Monica, Kathleen, Juanita,” Pollitt said.

“Part of me doesn’t like this shit either,” agreed Spencer Ackerman, then of the Washington Independent. “But what I like less is being governed by racists and warmongers and criminals.”

Ackerman went on:

I do not endorse a Popular Front, nor do I think you need to. It’s not necessary to jump to Wright-qua-Wright’s defense. What is necessary is to raise the cost on the right of going after the left. In other words, find a rightwinger’s [sic] and smash it through a plate-glass window. Take a snapshot of the bleeding mess and send it out in a Christmas card to let the right know that it needs to live in a state of constant fear. Obviously I mean this rhetorically.

And I think this threads the needle. If the right forces us all to either defend Wright or tear him down, no matter what we choose, we lose the game they’ve put upon us. Instead, take one of them — Fred Barnes, Karl Rove, who cares — and call them racists. Ask: why do they have such a deep-seated problem with a black politician who unites the country? What lurks behind those problems? This makes \*them\* sputter with rage, which in turn leads to overreaction and self-destruction.

Ackerman did allow there were some Republicans who weren’t racists. “We’ll know who doesn’t

deserve this treatment — Ross Douthat, for instance — but the others need to get it.” He also said he had begun to implement his plan. “I previewed it a bit on my blog last week after Commentary wildly distorted a comment Joe Cirincione made to make him appear like (what else) an antisemite. So I said: why is it that so many on the right have such a problem with the first viable prospective African-American president?”

Several members of the list disagreed with Ackerman — but only on strategic grounds.

“Spencer, you’re wrong,” wrote Mark Schmitt, now an editor at the American Prospect. “Calling Fred Barnes a racist doesn’t further the argument, and not just because Juan Williams is his new black friend, but because that makes it all about character. The goal is to get to the point where you can contrast some thing — Obama’s substantive agenda — with this crap.”

(In an interview Monday, Schmitt declined to say whether he thought Ackerman’s plan was wrong. “That is not a question I’m going to answer,” he said.)

Kevin Drum, then of Washington Monthly, also disagreed with Ackerman’s strategy. “I think it’s worth keeping in mind that Obama is trying (or says he’s trying) to run a campaign that avoids precisely the kind of thing Spencer is talking about, and turning this into a gutter brawl would probably hurt the Obama brand pretty strongly. After all, why vote for him if it turns out he’s not going change the way politics works?”

But it was Ackerman who had the last word. “Kevin, I’m not saying OBAMA should do this. I’m saying WE should do this.”

  3,969 people recommend this. Be the first of your friends.

Article printed from The Daily Caller – Breaking News, Opinion, Research, and Entertainment:  
<http://dailycaller.com>

URL to article: <http://dailycaller.com/2010/07/20/documents-show-media-plotting-to-kill-stories-about-rev-jeremiah-wright/>