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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Conservatives Are Such Jokers

By **PAUL KRUGMAN**

In 1960, John F. Kennedy, who had been shocked by the hunger he saw in West Virginia, made the fight against hunger a theme of his presidential campaign. After his election he created the modern food stamp program, which today helps millions of Americans get enough to eat.

But Ronald Reagan thought the issue of hunger in the world's richest nation was nothing but a big joke. Here's what Reagan said in his famous 1964 speech "A Time for Choosing," which made him a national political figure: "We were told four years ago that 17 million people went to bed hungry each night. Well, that was probably true. They were all on a diet."

Today's leading conservatives are Reagan's heirs. If you're poor, if you don't have health insurance, if you're sick — well, they don't think it's a serious issue. In fact, they think it's funny.

On Wednesday, President Bush vetoed legislation that would have expanded S-chip, the State Children's Health Insurance Program, providing health insurance to an estimated 3.8 million children who would otherwise lack coverage.

In anticipation of the veto, William Kristol, the editor of *The Weekly Standard*, had this to say: "First of all, whenever I hear anything described as a heartless assault on our children, I tend to think it's a good idea. I'm happy that the president's willing to do something bad for the kids." Heh-heh-heh.

Most conservatives are more careful than Mr. Kristol. They try to preserve the appearance that they really do care about those less fortunate than themselves. But the truth is that they aren't bothered by the fact that almost nine million children in America lack health insurance. They don't think it's a problem.

"I mean, people have access to health care in America," said Mr. Bush in July. "After all, you just go to an emergency room."

And on the day of the veto, Mr. Bush dismissed the whole issue of uninsured children as a media myth. Referring to Medicaid spending — which fails to reach many children — he declared that "when they say, well, poor children aren't being covered in America, if that's what you're hearing on your TV screens, I'm telling you there's \$35.5 billion worth of reasons not to believe that."

It's not just the poor who find their travails belittled and mocked. The sick receive the same treatment.

Before the last election, the actor Michael J. Fox, who suffers from Parkinson's and has become an advocate for stem cell research that might lead to a cure, made an ad in support of Claire McCaskill, the Democratic candidate for Senator in Missouri. It was an effective ad, in part because Mr. Fox's affliction was obvious.

And Rush Limbaugh — displaying the same style he exhibited in his recent claim that members of the military who oppose the Iraq war are “phony soldiers” and his later comparison of a wounded vet who criticized him for that remark to a suicide bomber — immediately accused Mr. Fox of faking it. “In this commercial, he is exaggerating the effects of the disease. He is moving all around and shaking. And it’s purely an act.” Heh-heh-heh.

Of course, minimizing and mocking the suffering of others is a natural strategy for political figures who advocate lower taxes on the rich and less help for the poor and unlucky. But I believe that the lack of empathy shown by Mr. Limbaugh, Mr. Kristol, and, yes, Mr. Bush is genuine, not feigned.

Mark Crispin Miller, the author of “The Bush Dyslexicon,” once made a striking observation: all of the famous Bush malapropisms — “I know how hard it is for you to put food on your family,” and so on — have involved occasions when Mr. Bush was trying to sound caring and compassionate.

By contrast, Mr. Bush is articulate and even grammatical when he talks about punishing people; that’s when he’s speaking from the heart. The only animation Mr. Bush showed during the flooding of New Orleans was when he declared “zero tolerance of people breaking the law,” even those breaking into abandoned stores in search of the food and water they weren’t getting from his administration.

What’s happening, presumably, is that modern movement conservatism attracts a certain personality type. If you identify with the downtrodden, even a little, you don’t belong. If you think ridicule is an appropriate response to other peoples’ woes, you fit right in.

And Republican disillusionment with Mr. Bush does not appear to signal any change in that regard. On the contrary, the leading candidates for the Republican nomination have gone out of their way to condemn “socialism,” which is G.O.P.-speak for any attempt to help the less fortunate.

So once again, if you’re poor or you’re sick or you don’t have health insurance, remember this: these people think your problems are funny.

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