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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Republican Death Trip

By [PAUL KRUGMAN](#)

“I am in this race because I don’t want to see us spend the next year re-fighting the Washington battles of the 1990s. I don’t want to pit Blue America against Red America; I want to lead a United States of America.” So declared Barack Obama in November 2007, making the case that Democrats should nominate him, rather than one of his rivals, because he could free the nation from the bitter partisanship of the past.

Some of us were skeptical. A couple of months after Mr. Obama gave that speech, I warned that his vision of a “different kind of politics” was a vain hope, that any Democrat who made it to the White House would face “an unending procession of wild charges and fake scandals, dutifully given credence by major media organizations that somehow can’t bring themselves to declare the accusations unequivocally false.”

So, how’s it going?

Sure enough, President Obama is now facing the same kind of opposition that President Bill Clinton had to deal with: an enraged right that denies the legitimacy of his presidency, that eagerly seizes on every wild rumor manufactured by the right-wing media complex.

This opposition cannot be appeased. Some pundits claim that Mr. Obama has polarized the country by following too liberal an agenda. But the truth is that the attacks on the president have no relationship to anything he is actually doing or proposing.

Right now, the charge that’s gaining the most traction is the claim that health care reform will create “death panels” (in Sarah Palin’s words) that will shuffle the elderly and others off to an early grave. It’s a complete fabrication, of course. The provision requiring that Medicare pay for voluntary end-of-life counseling was introduced by Senator Johnny Isakson, Republican — yes, Republican — of Georgia, who says that it’s “nuts” to claim that it has anything to do with euthanasia.

And not long ago, some of the most enthusiastic peddlers of the euthanasia smear, including Newt Gingrich, the former speaker of the House, and Mrs. Palin herself, were all for “advance directives” for medical care in the event that you are incapacitated or comatose. That’s exactly what was being proposed — and has now, in the face of all the hysteria, been dropped from the bill.

Yet the smear continues to spread. And as the example of Mr. Gingrich shows, it’s not a fringe phenomenon: Senior G.O.P. figures, including so-called moderates, have endorsed the lie.

Senator Chuck Grassley, Republican of Iowa, is one of these supposed moderates. I’m not sure where his centrist reputation comes from — he did, after all, compare critics of the Bush tax cuts to Hitler. But in any

case, his role in the health care debate has been flat-out despicable.

Last week, Mr. Grassley claimed that his colleague Ted Kennedy's brain tumor wouldn't have been treated properly in other countries because they prefer to "spend money on people who can contribute more to the economy." This week, he told an audience that "you have every right to fear," that we "should not have a government-run plan to decide when to pull the plug on grandma."

Again, that's what a supposedly centrist Republican, a member of the Gang of Six trying to devise a bipartisan health plan, sounds like.

So much, then, for Mr. Obama's dream of moving beyond divisive politics. The truth is that the factors that made politics so ugly in the Clinton years — the paranoia of a significant minority of Americans and the cynical willingness of leading Republicans to cater to that paranoia — are as strong as ever. In fact, the situation may be even worse than it was in the 1990s because the collapse of the Bush administration has left the G.O.P. with no real leaders other than Rush Limbaugh.

The question now is how Mr. Obama will deal with the death of his postpartisan dream.

So far, at least, the Obama administration's response to the outpouring of hate on the right has had a deer-in-the-headlights quality. It's as if officials still can't wrap their minds around the fact that things like this can happen to people who aren't named Clinton, as if they keep expecting the nonsense to just go away.

What, then, should Mr. Obama do? It would certainly help if he gave clearer and more concise explanations of his health care plan. To be fair, he's gotten much better at that over the past couple of weeks.

What's still missing, however, is a sense of passion and outrage — passion for the goal of ensuring that every American gets the health care he or she needs, outrage at the lies and fear-mongering that are being used to block that goal.

So can Mr. Obama, who can be so eloquent when delivering a message of uplift, rise to the challenge of unreasoning, unappeasable opposition? Only time will tell.

David Brooks is off today.

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