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# A Vicious Smear

by **Noah Rothman**

MERICANS WERE BOMBARDED OVER THE WEEKEND WITH POLITICAL “ANALYSIS”

alleging that Senate Republicans are either blinded by self-destructive rage or are savage fanatics who don't care whom they hurt. The story we were told is that the minority party's members in the upper chamber of Congress performed a sudden about-face and blocked cloture on a bill to fund health-care services for veterans exposed to toxic burn pits, and they did so largely out of spite. That simplistic morality play, in which Republicans are reduced to one-dimensional villains, only obscures the problems with this legislation. Maybe that's the point.

Indeed, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that the country has been subjected to a campaign of emotional blackmail because its primary proponent, former comedian Jon Stewart, has become the face of this effort. Though he is surely honest and well-intended—Stewart has advocated this expansion of veterans' benefits for years—he took his white-hot frustrations out on the GOP alone, and he did so from every available media platform.

“You don’t support the troops,” Stewart accused Republicans who voted against ending debate on this bill. “You support the war machine.” The entertainer added that “these motherf\*\*\*\*\*s sit in the air conditioning, walled off from” the conflicts they send American soldiers to fight, are engaged in “casual cruelty” and “parliamentary f\*\*\*\*\*ery.” Flanked by a company of aggrieved veterans, Stewart alleged that the GOP deployed “the Byzantine rules” of the Senate to “keep sick veterans suffering.”

A slightly less profane but equally craven explanation for the Republican Party’s conduct was provided by Sen. Chris Murphy. He charged that one of two motivations accounted for the GOP’s behavior. Either Republicans didn’t care about veterans’ issues, or they were lashing out in an inchoate rage over a Democratic deal to address climate change under the guise of fighting inflation. Either way, Republicans’ actions were indefensible.

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This smear—and it is a smear—is predicated on the presumption that it will encounter a friendly media environment where it will be disseminated uncritically and without hesitation. When it comes to Democratic talking points, that’s usually a safe bet. It sure paid off in this case. But the truth of the matter is more complicated. In fact, a fuller understanding of the Republican position should compel Democrats with the capacity for shame to explain themselves.

The effort to invoke cloture on the Honoring Our PACT Act went down to defeat last week after it had already passed the U.S. Senate in June with significant Republican support. Why? The Senate had to take a second vote on the measure after the Senate introduced phased-implementation rules and upped the number of staff to process new claims. But that required new revenue, and since all such bills must originate in the House, the process had to begin anew. In the interim, however, the *Washington Post* reported that Sen. Pat Toomey “worked behind the scenes to inform his colleagues about a major flaw in the bill.”

The Pennsylvania senator's long-held objection to this legislation rests on the fact that about \$400 billion in spending over the next ten years has been deemed "non-discretionary," meaning that it doesn't need to be deliberately appropriated by Congress and will be spent, no matter what. But that spending isn't dedicated to veterans' affairs; it isn't dedicated to anything, in fact. It is a blank check that Toomey believes will be made out to Democratic priorities or favored constituencies without a public debate over the value of that spending.

"It's about Congress hiding behind an important veterans care bill a massive unrelated spending binge," Toomey alleged. His proposed amendment to this legislation would strike that provision, preserving the \$280 billion specifically devoted to veterans' care as mandatory spending. But Toomey's amendment was tabled by Senate leadership and remains unconsidered. These are perfectly valid considerations that could be easily resolved. But Democrats held the vote anyway. And when it failed, they defaulted to a theatrical display of befuddlement over Republicans' motives.

Their confusion, and Stewart's, is rooted in the fact that so many Republican lawmakers voted in favor of cloture in June but against cloture last week. "They're manufacturing reasons to vote against legislation that they literally voted for just last month," said one frustrated veteran who appeared alongside Stewart. "And so, it's really a new level of low." Advocates for this worthy cause don't even address the simplest explanation for Senate Republicans' reversal, which is by no means exculpatory of Republicans, that Toomey and his staff read the legislation more carefully than his GOP colleagues. It must be that those senators, some of whom are veterans themselves, "don't support veterans."

"This is the oldest trick in Washington," Toomey said with due contempt for those who accused him of being a "f\*\*\*ing coward." Lawmakers "take a sympathetic group of Americans," he continued, "craft a bill to address their problems and then sneak in something completely unrelated that they know could never pass on its own and dare Republicans to do anything about it." It's such a tired tactic that only those with virtually no exposure to legislative affairs in Washington could fail to

comprehend Republican objections, even if they don't agree with them. That does not describe Senate Democrats. It doesn't even describe Jon Stewart. They bet that profound displays of anguish over the Republican Party's heartlessness would find a credulous audience in the press, and they were correct.

That does not, however, legitimize this callous politicking. It is not heartless to object to federal spending for spending's sake at a time of rampant inflation, which was partly exacerbated by the federal government's introduction of too much capital into an economy typified by shortages in goods and labor. The handful of responsible political actors who have engaged with Toomey's objections directly and in good faith claim that this additional funding is padding to avoid "rationing of care" to veterans. They have nevertheless failed to explain why the non-discretionary spending in question isn't dedicated to veterans' care. But even this level of discourse has been the exception. The rule, such as it exists, has been to paint a portrait of Republicans as malevolent skinflints who put their political objectives above the suffering endured by soldiers exposed to toxic conditions in overseas battlefields.

The facile dramaturgy we've been forced to endure is the first clue that what we're witnessing is not a reasoned debate over competing policy priorities. We're to be led by the hand to the conclusion that Republicans care more about money than veterans' lives. But as Toomey predicted, there is a simple solution to this problem. And given the broad support for the underlying goals of the PACT Act, resolving what Toomey deemed a budgetary "gimmick" is the likeliest outcome. But not before this moment of Democratic catharsis has passed.

You can say a lot about Senate Republicans' conduct here, not all of it complimentary. But you cannot call their defense of American taxpayer dollars from wanton abuse cowardice, particularly given their understanding of how this news cycle was likely to play out. The party in power or its phalanx of celebrities hope you ignore what Republicans are saying, read their minds, and divine their wholly nefarious intentions from your couch. That brand of trite demagoguery doesn't

advance anyone's interests, much less those of America's veterans, but it does help beleaguered Democrats. Perhaps the press should spend a little time pondering the governing party's motivations, too.

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