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GOP Scolded For Politics Prior to “Memorial” but Democratic Maneuvers Don’t Register with Media

Cheering Mondale, Decrying Republicans

Early Sunday morning — at 8:39 Eastern, to be exact — CNN interrupted its programming with the “Breaking News” that former Vice President Walter Mondale would replace the late Paul Wellstone on Minnesota’s ballot next week. That came less than 48 hours after Wellstone’s death, evidence that state and national Democratic operatives were fully engaged in partisan calculations.

But even after they had settled on Mondale, Democrats argued that it was reprehensible to campaign against him, and the media agreed. Promoting an upcoming live interview on Monday’s *Inside Politics*, CNN’s Judy Woodruff promised viewers she would ask Senator Harry Reid (D-NV) “if some Republicans in Minnesota are going on the attack even before Paul Wellstone is buried.” Reid took the opening Woodruff gave: “Couldn’t they wait until Paul is in the ground?” he growled.

Just asking if Mondale would debate the issues was an outrage to NBC’s Kelly O’Donnell: “The Wellstone family [was] angered by a letter from the Minnesota Republican party to the Democrats requesting a series of five debates between the presumed Wellstone replacement, Walter Mondale, and Republican candidate Norm Coleman. The letter arrived yesterday, just as Senator Wellstone was laid to rest,” she complained on Tuesday’s *Nightly News*. To drive home the point, NBC viewers saw a close-up of Wellstone’s casket as O’Donnell spoke.

“The timing of the move even makes the Republican candidate uneasy,” O’Donnell reprimanded. Of course, Democrats such as Reid saw no problem with a one-sided campaign attacking Coleman during the same period. But neither Woodruff nor O’Donnell thought it worthwhile to ask Democrats to defend their back-room maneuvering.

While publicly criticizing Mondale was out-of-bounds, network reporters worked to assemble glowingly positive tributes. On Wednesday’s *Good Morning America*, correspondent Claire Shipman sounded like an 18-year-old campaign brochure as she painted the rosier portrait of

Mondale, whom she refused to label as liberal. “Civil rights champion, Senator, Vice President, and finally, presidential candidate in 1984,” Shipman enthused. “The successful ambassadorship in Japan seemed the capstone — or so we all thought. But friends aren’t surprised he’d give it another go.”

Shipman never hinted that anyone of either party had ever criticized a single Mondale policy idea. Recall Mondale’s utterly disastrous 1984 threat of higher taxes that would have suffocated economic growth? To Shipman, it was virtuous remark attributable to Mondale’s “penchant for being honest, sometimes at his own political peril.”

What about Mondale’s idea that the best way to deal with the Soviet Union’s dictators was to make them less afraid of the U.S., starting with a “nuclear freeze?” To Shipman, Mondale’s world view would be perfect now: “The most valuable thing he might bring back to the Senate for Democrats, if he gets the chance, is a steadied, practiced hand in foreign policy when the country needs it most.”

Naming the inexperienced, ethically-challenged Geraldine Ferraro as his running mate? “He certainly proved he’s unafraid to make a bold choice,” Shipman argued before showing an adulatory soundbite from Ferraro: “He recognized that the sign that was on the door of the White House, ‘White Men Only,’ should be taken down.”

In fact, Walter Mondale could wind up being an even better candidate than Paul Wellstone, Shipman suggested. While Minnesota “is a less liberal state than when Mondale last ran,” she admitted, “he’s not viewed as as polarizing a figure as Wellstone, and that could be to his advantage.”

Mondale’s real advantage may be that reporters like Shipman don’t give his critics the time of day, praising his personal qualities while ignoring his policy errors. — Rich Noyes

Not Pro-Big Government, Just “Honest”

ABC’s Claire Shipman: “Remember his determination: Like Al Gore and now Dick Cheney, Mondale helped transform the Vice President’s role from funeral attendee to policymaker. And then there’s his penchant for being honest, sometimes at his own political peril:

Walter Mondale (1984): “Mr. Reagan will raise taxes, and so will I. He won’t tell you. I just did.” — *Good Morning America*, October 30.

L. Brent Bozell III, Publisher; Brent Baker, Rich Noyes, Editors; Jessica Anderson, Brian Boyd, Geoffrey Dickens, Patrick Gregory, Ken Shepherd, and Brad Wilmoth, Media Analysts; Kristina Sewell, Research Associate; Liz Swasey, Director of Communications. Learn how you can help fight liberal media bias at www.mediaresearch.org.