

Caught in a Crossfire

By Rory O'Connor
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Talk about 'cheap and tawdry' political tricks! How would you feel if you were sitting at home watching television with your family when your privacy was invaded, your love life scrutinized ... and you suddenly found yourself being compared to a Nazi? That's what happened to my longtime friend Winona LaDuke during a recently televised drive-by shooting on CNN's Crossfire.

Bow-tied Junior-Leaguer and George-Will-wannabe Tucker Carlson gratuitously slandered LaDuke last week following the endorsement of Kerry by Ralph Nader's one-time running mate. And co-host Paul Begala chimed in ignorantly (from the left???) to compare Native American leader LaDuke – a prominent human and earth rights activist – with Nazi-lover David Duke!

Welcome to the silly, sickening season in politics – those final two weeks before the election when no holds are barred and no punches pulled, and where no trick is too dirty nor attack too low, as best evidenced by the veracity-challenged Carlson's nasty, underhanded and typically untrue LaDuke broadside. Here's a sampling, from the Crossfire transcript:

CARLSON: Well, Winona LaDuke, remember that name? Even to students of presidential politics, it might not immediately ring a bell, so here is a refresher. LaDuke is the two-time Green Party candidate for vice president. Four years ago, she ran with Ralph Nader on the party's stridently pro-hemp ticket. A longtime Indian rights activist, LaDuke rarely joined Nader on the campaign trail, owing in part to legal difficulties she had with her common law husband. He was head of the police at the time.

On one of the few occasions LaDuke did speak to the national press, she offered at least one policy proposal. If elected, LaDuke promised to remove pictures of white people from the White House and replace them with portraits of famous minorities. Down with George Washington. Up with Grover Washington.

This year, LaDuke is working on a wind power project and will not be running for office again. But in statement released this week, she declared that she's no longer supporting Ralph Nader. She's supporting John Kerry. Keep that in mind Election Day. John Kerry, if he's good enough for Winona LaDuke, he's good enough for you. (LAUGHTER, CHEERING

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AND APPLAUSE)

There's so much stupidity evident in Crossfire Carlson's remarks that, in challenging them, it's difficult to know where to begin. (Few students of presidential politics, for example, are so dim that they cannot remember the previous two elections – both 1996 and 2000 saw LaDuke running as the Green candidate for Vice-President!) But I suppose that – unlike Tucker Carlson – we should start with a few facts . . . like THE FACT that when she ran with Ralph Nader, LaDuke had no “legal difficulties.” Or THE FACT that she had no “common-law husband,” who therefore could not FACTUALLY be the “head of the police at the time.” (Head of police where, by the way? And at what time?) Or even THE FACT that LaDuke often spoke to the national press – certainly not the ‘few times’ that Carlson claims.

A mere phone call to LaDuke (a fundamental journalistic practice Carlson seems unfamiliar with) yielded the following information: “Although I was pregnant until February 2000, and thereafter obviously had a newborn to contend with, I traveled to a total of twenty-eight states as a Green candidate in the last election, and many more before that.” LaDuke says the only thing that's remotely true about Carlson's ad hominem assault on her is that, “Yes, I did suggest that a few pictures of white people – not all of them, but a few – might be replaced by portraits of a few Indian chiefs!”

Asked how she felt about Carlson's attack, LaDuke said she was “puzzled and hurt” that someone she's never met or spoken to would lash out at her on national television “in such a negative, vindictive and personal manner, and drag my personal life and family into his political attack.”

Carlson seems to have two standards when it comes to mentioning family members, however. Not long ago, after I wrote about his insipid new public television series (See <http://www.mediachannel.org/views/dissector/affalert216.shtml> ‘PBS Unfiltered’) he called me up and screamed at me because I had mentioned his father. I thought the reference fair, since young Tuck has repeatedly told reporters he was ‘confused’ about how public broadcasting works, and his father Richard used to run the whole Corporation for Public Broadcasting shebang, after finishing his earlier propaganda stint at the United States Information Agency.

But Carlson the Younger was offended! “I deeply resent what you wrote,” he told me, having found it “dumb, gratuitous, nasty and stupid.” (In other words, about the same way I feel about his television career..) He concluded that it was “shitty to mention my father,” and then, taking the last refuge of the inarticulate, sputtered “fuck you!” before abruptly terminating our otherwise fascinating conversation.

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And finally, there is the matter of Paul Begala, who really ought to know better. Let's pick up with that Crossfire program transcript, shall we?

BEGALA: Come on. I mean, that's...

CARLSON: Someone has got to keep track of the celebrity endorsements here, OK?

BEGALA: That would be like me saying David Duke endorses George W. Bush.

CARLSON: You're missing it. You're missing it. You're missing it, Paul.

BEGALA: The Duke family is all over the...

CARLSON: Day after day, you make the argument, look, Barbra Streisand is voting for John Kerry. You should, too. And I'm just saying, there are other people who are voting for John Kerry. It's not just Barbra Streisand. It's also Winona LaDuke.

BEGALA: You know, David Lesar, the CEO of Halliburton, I believe is for George W. Bush.

CARLSON: I hope so.

BEGALA: So, you can go to Halliburton or you can go with David and Winona LaDuke, whoever they are.

CARLSON: Winona LaDuke.

BEGALA: I suspect they're not related, actually.

Did Paul Begala really mean to equate Winona LaDuke with American Nazi David Duke? Is he so uninformed that he doesn't know who Winona LaDuke is or what she stands for? Was he simply making a bad joke? Once again I turned to the reporter's friend - the telephone - in search of those elusive little critters, THE FACTS.

When I spoke with Begala, it turned out his defense was ignorance and poor judgment. "I was being silly," he confessed when reminded of the exchange. "I was trying to tweak Tucker, to mock the absurdity of his remarks. My point was that endorsements - particularly celebrity endorsements, which is what he was talking - don't matter at all."

Why mention Winona LaDuke in the same breath as David Duke? "I really didn't remember who she was, and I only brought up David Duke because their names sounded similar," he protested. "No fair-minded person would say that I compared her to the Nazis!"

As for Carlson's inaccuracies, he maintained that "if LaDuke is in the public eye, then she should expect to have her personal life examined." Maybe so, but perhaps the Kerry/Edwards campaign team, which reached out to LaDuke in the first place, for her endorsement of Senator Kerry can take Begala quietly aside and fill him in.

Mentioning Winona LaDuke in the same breath as the Nazi David Duke? Next thing you know, they'll be calling her... a lesbian!