

# Republican Ignorance and Contraception

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

Posted: 03/13/2012 10:36 am

There are many bizarre angles of the latest Rush Limbaugh outrage. One is Limbaugh's apparent unawareness about how prescription birth control works. His frequent suggestion that Ms. Fluke needed so much birth control because she was having too much sex is, in addition to being offensive, just plain ignorant. Another perplexing aspect of this attack on contraception and the women who use it is that if one listens to the Limbaughs, Rick Santorums and other social reactionaries too much, one could be mistaken for thinking using contraception is a nasty habit that some women have developed on their own, like using excessive profanity or picking their nose in public, and that men are not part of the process or equation. Perhaps Limbaugh's ignorance of how contraception works also extends to not understanding the role which men play in heterosexual sex and in pregnancy.

Additionally, the implication that the government is expressing religious intolerance through its position is also a claim that is a few degrees removed from the facts. The administration's position is entirely consistent with the behavior of the overwhelming majority of American women, including American Catholic women. Asserting that the Obama administration's position is one of religious intolerance only makes sense if religious tolerance is defined by giving in to the most conservative elements within a given religious community. It is the conservative religious leaders who are the intolerant ones, here seeking to foist their views on employees and students regardless of their religious views.

There is also a puzzling financial side to the right wing attack on contraception. We are constantly being told that it is "our" and occasionally "my" money being spent on contraception for women. This is not true, because health insurance in America, red-baiting and deliberate misunderstandings notwithstanding, is still largely provided by employers, not the government. If an employer is compelled to provide health insurance that includes contraception, it is the employer's money, not the taxpayer's money, that is being spent. While it is true that some employers may not be comfortable spending their money on contraception for their employees, many of these employers may also not be comfortable doing a lot of things for their employees, but at least for now, we live in a democracy where working people are allowed to vote and have rights of their own.

The U.S. is not a feudal system where employers can tell their employees how to spend their money or what they can and cannot purchase. Similarly, the company store model of stripping workers of their rights, money and dignity is not the best model for employer-worker relations, but it seems to be the one towards which supporters of the Blunt Amendment would like to return the country.

If health insurance were provided through a single payer program, as it is in so many other western democracies, this would not be an issue at all. The state would not be compelling employers to do anything they do not want to do. Whether or not contraception would be

covered by the single payer program would be decided by congress, but given the proportion of people who use contraception, it is clear how this decision would go.

The irony is that, currently, the people who are being forced to pay more money out of their pockets to support ideas which they don't believe are pro-contraception tax payers, as well as, of course, tax payers who support marriage equality and other similar ideas. We are the ones who have to pay higher taxes, because religious institutions do not pay taxes. In this regard, we are paying more taxes so that religious conservatives with whom we disagree on abortion rights, marriage equality, contraception and myriad other issues do not have to.

The contraception discussion has become like a forest of small-mindedness, intolerance and anger out from which the far right and, increasingly, the Republican Party in general, cannot find a way. Limbaugh's statements are not a stand alone case of ignorance and viciousness because right-wing opinion makers including elected officials, presidential candidates and media figures have all, while occasionally taking umbrage with Limbaugh's choice of words, more or less repeated his trope that women are asking for the state, the church, their employers or their schools to pay for them to have sex. Wiser Republicans are undoubtedly asking themselves why with the unemployment rate still more than 8 percent, the country still embroiled in two wars, and potentially a third, and the price of gas moving towards five dollars a gallon, their party has decided that contraception is the issue facing the country. The answer to this question is that too many in their party, like Rush Limbaugh spitting vitriol into a microphone, simply cannot stop themselves.