

MEDIAMATTERS

ACTION NETWORK

MYTHS AND FALSEHOODS IN MEDIA COVERAGE OF GOV. SARAH PALIN

On August 29, when Sen. John McCain introduced¹ Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin as his vice-presidential running mate, he suggested she was a reformer and claimed that she has an “outstanding reputation for standing up to special interests and entrenched bureaucracies; someone who has fought against corruption and the failed policies of the past; someone who's stopped government from wasting taxpayers' money on things they don't want or need and put it back to work for the people.” However, in reporting on Palin, the media have often repeated or failed to challenge several myths, falsehoods, and claims about her record that are called into question or contradicted by the facts. Indeed, in a relatively short period of time, media coverage of Palin has been plagued by myths and falsehoods that do not accurately or adequately reflect her opinions, positions, and record. Many of these myths and falsehoods have advanced the McCain campaign narrative that Palin is a tough-minded reformer, opposed to earmarks and pork-barrel spending, and bent on rooting out corruption.

Media report Palin's opposition of “bridge to nowhere” but not her previous support for it

In her August 29 speech² in Dayton, Ohio, Palin asserted: "I told Congress, 'Thanks, but no thanks,' on that bridge to nowhere." Subsequently, numerous media outlets reported that Palin opposed

¹ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/08/29/AR2008082901882.html>

² <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=94118910>

the “bridge to nowhere” without noting that she previously supported the project. For example, on the August 29 broadcast³ of the *CBS Evening News*, Bob Schieffer asserted that Palin is “[s]omeone, you know, who is against earmarks, who is against the bridge to nowhere.” However, in a questionnaire published in the October 22, 2006, *Anchorage Daily News*, then-gubernatorial candidate Palin answered the question, “Would you continue state funding for the proposed Knik Arm and Gravina Island bridges?” by writing: “Yes. I would like to see Alaska's infrastructure projects built sooner rather than later. The window is now -- while our congressional delegation is in a strong position to assist.” In an October 5, 2006, article⁴, the *Anchorage Daily News* noted that Palin had addressed the issue at a gubernatorial forum hosted⁵ by Alaska Conservation Voters the previous day, and quoted Palin as saying, “I do support the infrastructure projects that are on tap here in the state of Alaska that our congressional delegations worked hard for.” The News added that Palin “said the projects link communities and create jobs.”

In assessing Palin's claim that “I told Congress, ‘Thanks, but no thanks,’ on that bridge to nowhere,” PolitiFact.com reported⁶: “By the time Palin pulled the plug on the Gravina bridge project in September 2007, much of the federal funding for the bridge had already been diverted to other transportation projects.” It further stated that “[w]hen Palin says ‘I told Congress, ‘Thanks, but no thanks,’ on that bridge to nowhere,’ it implies Congress said, ‘Here's a check for that bridge’ and she responded, ‘No thanks, that's wasteful spending; here's your money back.’ That's not what happened. Fact is, Alaska took the bridge money, and then just spent it on other projects. Palin did make the final call to kill plans for the bridge, but by the time she did it was no longer a politically viable project.”

³ <http://mediamatters.org/items/200808300004>

⁴ <http://dwb.adn.com/news/alaska/story/8269725p-8166465c.html>

⁵ <http://www.acvoters.org/conserwatch/2006/cw2006-16.htm>

⁶ <http://politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/675/>

Media report Palin opposes earmarks, but not her previous requests for them

In an August 29 article⁷, Forbes.com Washington bureau chief Brian Wingfield asserted that Palin "shares McCain's opposition to earmarks." But while the media have reported that Palin is opposed to earmarks, Gov. Palin's administration has acknowledged it requested⁸ federal earmarks in 2008. Indeed, in a March 18 *Juneau Empire* op-ed⁹, John Katz, Alaska's director of state-federal relations and special counsel to Palin, wrote that in 2008, the Palin administration "request[ed] 31 earmarks, down from 54 last year." Additionally, *The Washington Post* reported¹⁰ on September 2 that Palin also oversaw the procurement of federal earmarks while Mayor of Wasilla, Alaska: "Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin employed a lobbying firm to secure almost \$27 million in federal earmarks for a town of 6,700 residents while she was its mayor, according to an analysis by an independent government watchdog group." Moreover, in a September 3 article headlined, "McCain had criticized earmarks from Palin¹¹," the *Los Angeles Times* reported that "[t]hree times in recent years, McCain's catalogs of 'objectionable' spending have included earmarks for this small Alaska town [Wasilla], requested by its mayor at the time -- Sarah Palin."

Media promote Palin as "reformer," ignoring state ethics investigation

In numerous press reports and interviews, McCain campaign surrogates have pointed to Palin's purported record as a "reformer," while the media have often not mentioned or asked about the state legislature's ethics investigation of Palin. On the August 31 broadcast of *Fox News Sunday*, host Chris Wallace did not ask McCain about the current ethics investigation of Palin, despite McCain's statement that

⁷ http://www.forbes.com/2008/08/29/palin-mccain-campaign-biz-beltway-cx_bw_0829veep.html

⁸ <http://mediamatters.org/items/200808290024>

⁹ http://www.juneauempire.com/stories/031808/opi_258953362.shtml

¹⁰ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/09/01/AR2008090103148.html>

¹¹ <http://www.latimes.com/news/politics/la-na-earmarks3-2008sep03,0,2482434.story>

Palin is "a reformer" and that his selection of her as his vice-presidential running mate "brings a spirit of reform and change that is vital now in our nation's capital." In his September 2 column¹², David Brooks wrote that Palin "seems to get up in the morning to root out corruption" but did not mention that Palin is under investigation for her firing of former Alaska Public Safety commissioner Walter Monegan.

The Washington Post reported¹³ on August 31 that a "bipartisan state legislative panel has appointed a special prosecutor to investigate whether Palin ... and her aides pressured and ultimately fired the public safety commissioner, Walter Monegan, for not removing Palin's ex-brother-in-law from the state police force. Interviews with principals involved in the dispute and a review of court documents and police internal affairs reports reveal that Palin has been deeply involved in alerting state officials to her family's personal turmoil." According to the *Post*: "In July, Palin's chief of staff told Monegan he was being fired because the governor wanted to 'go in a different direction,' Monegan said. Monegan went public, alleging that his firing was connected to his failure to remove Wooten. The state legislature launched its investigation, and the governor asked the attorney general's office to conduct an internal investigation."

The New York Times reported¹⁴ on August 29 that Palin "initially denied there had ever been pressure applied to Mr. Monegan," but later "disclosed [that] there had been more than two dozen inquiries from members of her staff to the public safety department about" Wooten.

Ignoring numerous ties, media promote idea that Palin "took on" Sen. Stevens

On the August 29 edition¹⁵ of CNN's *The Situation Room*, McCain campaign surrogate Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) asserted¹⁶ without challenge from host Wolf Blitzer that Palin "took on" Sen. Ted

¹² <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/02/opinion/02brooks.html>

¹³ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/08/30/AR2008083002366.html>

¹⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/30/us/politics/30trooper.html>

¹⁵ <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0808/29/sitroom.01.html>

¹⁶ <http://www.thenation.com/blogs/campaignmatters/351223>

Stevens (R-AK). In his September 2 *New York Times* column¹⁷, David Brooks wrote that Palin "made mortal enemies of the two people McCain has always held up as the carriers of the pork-barrel disease: [Rep. Don] Young [R-AK] and Stevens." Graham's assertion that Palin "took on" Stevens and Brooks' characterization of Palin and Stevens as "mortal enemies" is undermined by the fact that Stevens has endorsed Palin's 2008 vice-presidential bid and as recently as July, Palin praised Stevens. In a July 2 joint press conference¹⁸, Stevens acknowledged "comments¹⁹ made [by Palin] about my earmarks" and "the [federal²⁰ corruption²¹] investigation," but Stevens said he has "never known of any animosity between" them. At the same press conference, Palin said, "I have great respect for the senator and he needs to be heard across America, his voice, his experience, his passion needs to be heard across America so that Alaska can contribute more. I again have great respect for him and I agree there's a big difference between reality and perception regarding our relationship."

Additionally, Palin previously served²² as co-director of a 527 organization bearing Stevens' name; Palin also ran an advertisement²³ during her 2006 gubernatorial campaign that featured Stevens endorsing her; as mayor of Wasilla, Alaska, Palin reportedly²⁴ hired a lobbying firm to secure earmarks for the town, and the account was handled by Stevens' former chief of staff.

¹⁷ <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/02/opinion/02brooks.html>

¹⁸

http://community.adn.com/mini_apps/vmix/player.php?ID=1975979&GID=118

¹⁹ <http://www.adn.com/front/story/343660.html>

²⁰ <http://www.adn.com/politics/story/243337.html>

²¹ <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/313/story/45824.html>

²² http://voices.washingtonpost.com/trail/2008/09/01/palin_was_a_director_of_embatt.html

²³

<http://www.nationaljournal.com/members/adspotlight/2006/11/1102akg0v6.htm>

²⁴ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2008/09/01/ST2008090103340.html>

Media fail to challenge McCain camp talking point that Palin is “commander in chief” of the Alaska National Guard

On August 31, an online *USA Today* item reported²⁵ that “[i]t was hard to keep track of how many Republicans on Sunday morning referred to Gov. Sarah Palin as ‘commander in chief’ of the Alaska National Guard.” Yet, while this assertion often went unchallenged, Maj. Gen. Craig Campbell, the adjutant general of the Alaska National Guard claimed that Palin plays no role in directing the guard’s national defense activities. According to an August 31 AP article²⁶, Campbell “considers Palin ‘extremely responsive and smart’ and says she is in charge when it comes to in-state services, such as emergencies and natural disasters where the National Guard is the first responder. But, in an interview with The Associated Press on Sunday, he said he and Palin play no role in national defense activities, even when they involve the Alaska National Guard. The entire operation is under federal control, and the governor is not briefed on situations.”

Media falsely assert Palin supports benefits for same-sex partners of state employees

Several media figures have falsely asserted that Palin supports granting benefits to same-sex partners of state employees. In her August 31 syndicated column²⁷, Debra Saunders wrote that Palin "is not a hard-core social conservative. For example, Palin supported awarding benefits for same-sex couples." Similarly, on the August 29 edition of *CNN Newsroom*, CNN Headline News host Glenn Beck claimed of Palin: "She is the first administration in Alaska's history to provide benefits to the partners of gay and lesbian employees. So she's not -- she's, she's common sense. ... Real conservatives have common-sense values, and they'll look at things and say, 'OK, I believe in traditional marriage. But why would I stop somebody from getting, you know, benefits, they've lived together for 20 years?' " In

²⁵ http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/2008-08-31-sunday-shows_N.htm

²⁶

http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/politics/2008150142_apcvnpaling_raspingatstraws.html?syndication=rss

²⁷ <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2008/08/31/INA312IIVL.DTL>

fact, while Palin vetoed a bill in 2006 that would have prevented state officials from granting spousal benefits, her actions followed a 2005 Alaska Supreme Court ruling²⁸ that the state's policy of denying spousal benefits to same-sex partners of public employees violated the Alaska Constitution and a 2006 state Supreme Court order²⁹ requiring the state to issue regulations granting such benefits by January 1, 2007.

Indeed, in a message accompanying the veto, Palin's office stated that she disagreed with the Alaska Supreme Court's actions: "The Governor's veto does not signal any change or modification to her disagreement with the action and order by the Alaska Supreme Court." Further, as a candidate for governor, Palin reportedly³⁰ supported efforts to prohibit state benefits for same-sex couples. *The Anchorage Daily News* reported³¹ on August 6, 2006, that Palin believes "[e]lected officials can't defy the court when it comes to how rights are applied, she said, but she would support a ballot question that would deny benefits to homosexual couples. 'I believe that honoring the family structure is that important,' Palin said. She said she doesn't know if people choose to be gay." Moreover, Palin indicated in a written questionnaire³² that she disagreed with the Alaska Supreme Court's ruling that same-sex couples are entitled to the same spousal benefits given to other state employees, and in another questionnaire³³ Palin replied, "Yes," when asked if she would

²⁸ http://www.state.ak.us/drb/sspb/supreme-court-order_10-08-05.pdf

²⁹ http://www.state.ak.us/drb/sspb/Supreme_Court_Remedies_Order_6-1-06.pdf

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<http://dwb.adn.com/news/politics/elections/governor06/story/8049298p-7942233c.html>

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<http://dwb.adn.com/news/politics/elections/governor06/story/8049298p-7942233c.html>

³²

<http://web.archive.org/web/20070501192322/http://eagleforumalaska.blogspot.com/2006/07/2006-gubernatorial-candidate.html>

³³

http://www.alaskafamilycouncil.org/action_center/2006_voters_guide_general.pdf#pg=3

support “a Constitutional amendment to overturn [the] Alaska Supreme Court decision mandating public employers to provide benefits equivalent to marriage to same-sex couples.”

Media ignore McCain’s previously stated "threshold" for his VP: "ready to step in on a moment's notice"

During the campaign, McCain said that his "key criteria" in selecting a running mate would be that that person was "most prepared to take my place" and that his selection would be someone "who is ready to take my place at a moment's -- you know, immediately." However, in an interview³⁴ with Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-TX), NBC News chief foreign affairs correspondent Andrea Mitchell said: "[I]f your threshold -- and this wasn't his [McCain's] threshold -- but if your threshold ought to be, ready to step in on a moment's notice, is Sarah Palin ready to be commander in chief and president of the United States in some horrible, unforeseen circumstance?" Contrary to Mitchell's assertion that "this wasn't his threshold," McCain had repeatedly highlighted the need to pick a running mate who would be able to "take my place."

Media do not challenge McCain camp assertion that liberal blogs dictated timing of Palin pregnancy disclosure

After the disclosure that Palin’s 17-year-old daughter, Bristol, is pregnant, McCain campaign surrogates asserted that the disclosure was in response to rumors being spread in the liberal blogs. However, some in the media have failed to challenge those assertions by noting that, according to *The New York Times*, the McCain campaign released the information about the pregnancy, along with other unflattering information about the Palin family, on Labor Day because the media were focused on Hurricane Gustav and "the nation was busy with family and social activities." Indeed, the *Times* quoted Tucker Eskew, a senior adviser to Palin, saying of the release of information about Palin’s daughter’s pregnancy on Labor Day: "We are going to flush the toilet." Yet, on the September 2 edition³⁵ of ABC's *Good Morning America*, co-host Diane Sawyer failed to challenge an assertion by

³⁴ http://mediamatters.org/items/200808290006?f=s_search

³⁵ http://mediamatters.org/items/200809020012?f=s_search

Nicolle Wallace, a senior adviser to McCain, that "the fervor with which the Democratic-leaning blogs and a few in the mainstream media pursued this, I think forced the Palin family, in an effort to knock down what were really lewd and outrageously false rumors, forced them maybe -- maybe ahead of a schedule that worked best for the family, to make this news yesterday about their daughter."