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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## **Sliming Graeme Frost**

By **PAUL KRUGMAN**

Two weeks ago, the Democratic response to President Bush's weekly radio address was delivered by a 12-year-old, Graeme Frost. Graeme, who along with his sister received severe brain injuries in a 2004 car crash and continues to need physical therapy, is a beneficiary of the State Children's Health Insurance Program. Mr. Bush has vetoed a bipartisan bill that would have expanded that program to cover millions of children who would otherwise have been uninsured.

What followed should serve as a teaching moment.

First, some background. The Frosts and their four children are exactly the kind of people S-chip was intended to help: working Americans who can't afford private health insurance.

The parents have a combined income of about \$45,000, and don't receive health insurance from employers. When they looked into buying insurance on their own before the accident, they found that it would cost \$1,200 a month — a prohibitive sum given their income. After the accident, when their children needed expensive care, they couldn't get insurance at any price.

Fortunately, they received help from Maryland's S-chip program. The state has relatively restrictive rules for eligibility: children must come from a family with an income under 200 percent of the poverty line. For families with four children that's \$55,220, so the Frosts clearly qualified.

Graeme Frost, then, is exactly the kind of child the program is intended to help. But that didn't stop the right from mounting an all-out smear campaign against him and his family.

Soon after the radio address, right-wing bloggers began insisting that the Frosts must be affluent because Graeme and his sister attend private schools (they're on scholarship), because they have a house in a neighborhood where some houses are now expensive (the Frosts bought their house for \$55,000 in 1990 when the neighborhood was rundown and considered dangerous) and because Mr. Frost owns a business (it was dissolved in 1999).

You might be tempted to say that bloggers make unfounded accusations all the time. But we're not talking about some obscure fringe. The charge was led by Michelle Malkin, who according to Technorati has the most-trafficked right-wing blog on the Internet, and in addition to blogging has a nationally syndicated column, writes for National Review and is a frequent guest on Fox News.

The attack on Graeme's family was also quickly picked up by Rush Limbaugh, who is so important a player in the right-wing universe that he has had multiple exclusive interviews with Vice President Dick Cheney.

And G.O.P. politicians were eager to join in the smear. The New York Times reported that Republicans in Congress “were gearing up to use Graeme as evidence that Democrats have overexpanded the health program to include families wealthy enough to afford private insurance” but had “backed off” as the case fell apart.

In fact, however, Republicans had already made their first move: an e-mail message from the office of Mitch McConnell, the Senate minority leader, sent to reporters and obtained by the Web site Think Progress, repeated the smears against the Frosts and asked: “Could the Dems really have done that bad of a job vetting this family?”

And the attempt to spin the media worked, to some extent: despite reporting that has thoroughly debunked the smears, a CNN report yesterday suggested that the Democrats had made “a tactical error in holding up Graeme as their poster child,” and closely echoed the language of the e-mail from Mr. McConnell’s office.

All in all, the Graeme Frost case is a perfect illustration of the modern right-wing political machine at work, and in particular its routine reliance on character assassination in place of honest debate. If service members oppose a Republican war, they’re “phony soldiers”; if Michael J. Fox opposes Bush policy on stem cells, he’s faking his Parkinson’s symptoms; if an injured 12-year-old child makes the case for a government health insurance program, he’s a fraud.

Meanwhile, leading conservative politicians, far from trying to distance themselves from these smears, rush to embrace them. And some people in the news media are still willing to be used as patsies.

Politics aside, the Graeme Frost case demonstrates the true depth of the health care crisis: every other advanced country has universal health insurance, but in America, insurance is now out of reach for many hard-working families, even if they have incomes some might call middle-class.

And there’s one more point that should not be forgotten: ultimately, this isn’t about the Frost parents. It’s about Graeme Frost and his sister.

I don’t know about you, but I think American children who need medical care should get it, period. Even if you think adults have made bad choices — a baseless smear in the case of the Frosts, but put that on one side — only a truly vicious political movement would respond by punishing their injured children.

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## Meanies And Hypocrites

Advertisement

By E. J. Dionne Jr.  
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Conservatives claim to be in favor of stable families, small businesses, hard work, private schools, investment and homeownership. So why in the world are so many on the right attacking the family of [Graeme Frost](#)?

Frost is the 12-year-old from [Baltimore](#) who delivered the [Democrats' reply](#) to a radio address by [President Bush](#) in September. The seventh-grader pleaded -- [in vain](#), it turned out -- that the president not veto Congress's \$35 billion expansion of the children's health care program known as SCHIP. A car crash in December 2004 left two of Halsey and Bonnie Frost's children comatose, Graeme with a brain stem injury and Gemma, his sister, with a cranial fracture.

The kids were treated, thanks to SCHIP. The Frosts spoke out so the public would know that real people lie behind the acronym.

Their reward was to be trashed on right-wing [blogs](#) and talk radio as if they were multimillionaires ripping off the system. The assault on the Frosts apparently began on the [Free Republic](#) Web site and quickly spread to [National Review Online](#), [Power Line](#) and [Michelle Malkin's](#) blog, as well as [Rush Limbaugh's](#) radio show.

And of what were the Frosts guilty? Well, they own their own home, which they bought for \$55,000 in 1990 and which is now worth about \$260,000; they invested in a commercial property, valued at \$160,000; Halsey Frost, a self-employed woodworker, once owned a small business that was dissolved in 1999; and Graeme attends a private school on scholarship. I rely here on facts reported this week in the [Baltimore Sun](#) and the [New York Times](#), both of which set straight the more outlandish claims made by the Frosts' attackers.

The right is unapologetic. "The Democrats chose to outsource their airtime to a Seventh Grader," [wrote](#) National Review's Mark Steyn. "If a political party is desperate enough to send a boy to do a man's job, then the boy is fair game."

Okay, the Democrats are "fair game," but a 12-year-old? No wonder nobody talks about compassionate conservatism anymore.

As a general rule, I am a fan of the blogosphere. It has broadened the public debate and brought new people into politics. And nasty stuff is by no means limited to the right-wing blogs. Left-of-center blogs whose political views I largely share have published offensive stuff, too. Shaun Mullen, who blogs at [The Moderate Voice](#)-- yes, there are moderate blogs -- is right to generalize when he [says that](#) the targeting of the Frost family reveals "the vicious underbelly of the blogosphere."

So rather than just condemn the right-wingers as meanies, let's take their claims seriously. Doing so makes clear that they are engaged in a perverse and incoherent form of class warfare.

The left is accused of all manner of sins related to covetousness and envy whenever it raises questions about who benefits from Bush's tax cuts and mentions the yachts such folks might buy or the mansions

they might own. But here is a family with modest possessions doing everything conservatives tell people they should do, and the right trashes them for getting help to buy health insurance for their children.

Most conservatives favor government-supported vouchers that would help Graeme attend his private school, but here they turn around and criticize him for . . . attending a private school. Federal money for private schools but not for health insurance? What's the logic here?

Conservatives endlessly praise risk-taking by entrepreneurs and would give big tax cuts to those who are most successful. But if a small-business person is struggling, he shouldn't even think about applying for SCHIP.

Conservatives who want to repeal the estate tax on large fortunes have cited stories -- most of them don't check out -- about farmers having to sell their farms to pay inheritance taxes. But the implication of these attacks on the Frosts is that they are expected to sell their investment property to pay for health care. Why?

Oh, yes, and conservatives tell us how much they love homeownership, and then assail the Frosts for having the nerve to own a home. I suppose they should have to sell that, too.

The real issue here is whether uninsured families with earnings similar to the Frosts' need government help to buy health coverage. With the average family policy in employer-provided plans now costing more than \$12,000 annually -- the price is usually higher for families trying to buy it on their own -- the answer is plainly yes. All the conservative attacks on a boy from Baltimore who dared to speak out will not make this issue go away.

[postchat@aol.com](mailto:postchat@aol.com)

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