

From **Media Matters for America** <action@mediamatters.org>
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Media Matters: Captain Lou and the Birther Brigade

Leave it to Lou Dobbs: If there's a right-wing conspiracy theory out there floating around on the Internets, he'll latch onto it like a pit bull. He may be past his prime, but he just won't let go. It must be tough for CNN to look on while Dobbs [discredits](#) "the most trusted name in news," one wild claim at a time. If there's a hook to the conspiracy even tacitly involving the immigration issue, well, you've just made Dobbs' day.

How can we forget his [preoccupation](#) with conspiracy theories about purported government plans for a "North American Union" between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada? Or his [promotion](#) of the nutty conspiracy that Mexicans plan to reconquer the American Southwest?

Over the past two weeks, however, Dobbs took things even further, pushing one of the most ludicrous conspiracy theories of the right-wing fringe: the notion that the authenticity of President Obama's birth certificate is in doubt.

Kicking things off on the July 15 broadcast of his nationally syndicated radio show, Dobbs aligned himself with the far-right birther movement, [devoting](#) substantial airtime to the issue of Obama's birth certificate, asserting repeatedly that Obama needs to "produce" it. Dobbs said that the birth certificate [posted online](#) by FactCheck.org "purporting to validate the president" has "some issues. ... I mean, it's peculiar." He also stated that he wants to see a "long form" birth certificate, which he called "the real deal." That same day on his CNN program, Dobbs brought up the issue again. [Referring](#) to the document that FactCheck.org posted, he said, "It is, in fact, the so-called short form, not the original document. It is really a document saying that the state of Hawaii has the real document in its possession."

By contrast, Dobbs' CNN colleagues have repeatedly debunked claims that Obama has yet to produce a valid birth certificate, calling them "total bull" and "a whack-job project," and have characterized those who make these claims as "conspiracy theorists" who wear "tin foil hat[s]."

Two days after his initial rant on the subject, Kitty Pilgrim was filling in for the immigration-obsessed crusader as guest host of his CNN show. During the broadcast, Pilgrim, a regular correspondent for *Lou Dobbs Tonight*, [debunked](#) claims that Obama does not have a valid birth certificate and is therefore ineligible to be president, noting that CNN "found no basis" for such claims and cited "overwhelming evidence that proves that his birth certificate is real, and that he was born in Honolulu."

You'd think that would put an end to the nonsense. Yet, days after Pilgrim answered it on his very own show, Dobbs was back on the air [claiming](#) that the birth certificate "questions won't go away." A day later, still on the birther bandwagon, Dobbs [said](#) on his CNN program that "no one" knows "the reality" of Obama's birth certificate.

Dobbs' obsession with this fringe conspiracy did not go unnoticed by his colleagues at CNN or competing networks for that matter. With Dobbs digging in his heels, other outlets began picking up -- and debunking -- various strands of the story.

On the July 21 edition of MSNBC's *Hardball*, host Chris Matthews hosted Rep. John Campbell (R-CA), [one of nine](#) Republican co-sponsors of what has become known as the "birther bill" -- legislation that would require future presidential candidates to provide their birth certificates. During the nearly 10-minute segment, Matthews [grilled](#) the conservative congressman on the "crazy proposal," repeatedly asking, "Do you believe that Barack Obama is a legitimate, native-born American or not?"

The following day, *Los Angeles Times* media writer James Rainey [quoted](#) FactCheck.org director and former CNN employee Brooks Jackson as stating, "CNN should be ashamed of itself for putting some that stuff on the air." In the same report, Rainey noted the assertion of "one CNN employee" who, in an apparent attempt to distance Dobbs from the network, "reminded [him] several times that Dobbs' most pointed assertions were made on his radio program, which is unconnected to CNN."

Perhaps sensing a tidal wave of opposition to his fringe commentary mounting, Dobbs took to his radio show on July 21 to [rant](#) about the "national liberal media" debunking birther theories, telling his audience "they are not applying critical judgment."

At least we now know what Dobbs thinks of his CNN colleagues and other members of the media, who have taken to the airwaves since Dobbs' initial rant to [debunk](#) the Obama birth certificate theories, often while [ridiculing](#) their adherents as "nut jobs" who advance "ludicrous" claims that are "more conspiratorial than factual."

Dobbs doesn't want you to think he isn't fair. You see, according to him, Obama [could](#) "make the whole...controversy disappear ... by simply releasing his original birth certificate." Yep, if the president placates a bunch of right-wing lunatics, they'll be sure to leave him alone.

It's not Dobbs who is on the attack; he is the [victim](#) of the "liberal media," which is afraid to "upset the Obama White House." It's [those](#) "limp-minded, lily-livered lefties ... attacking" Dobbs because he "actually had the temerity to inquire as to where the birth certificate was." Dobbs' words, not mine. You can't make this stuff up.

In the days that followed, Dobbs faced a torrent of criticism spanning the media gambit: NBC *Nightly News* [debunked](#) the Dobbs-driven birther theory; MSNBC's Chris Matthews [wondered](#) if the hubbub is about "not documentation, but pigmentation"; Jon Stewart, host of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, noting that Pilgrim had debunked Dobbs on his own show, [asked](#), "Do you even watch CNN?"; MSNBC's Ed Schultz [said](#), "For Lou Dobbs to wonder if President Obama is quote, 'undocumented' ... that's fringe psycho talk"; playing a clip of Dobbs on MSNBC's *Morning Joe*, co-host Willie Geist [said](#) birthers are flogging an "imaginary controversy."

The sparks really flew after CNN's Roland Martin took on Dobbs' obsession with the birther conspiracy. Interviewed by Rick Sanchez, Martin made his opinion abundantly clear, [describing](#) those who promote the conspiracy as "a small group of nutty people." Referring to the words of a birther [yelling](#) at Rep. Mike Castle (R-DE) at a recent town hall meeting, "I want my country back," Martin [said](#) the birther really meant, "How is this black guy all of the sudden running the country?" Dobbs was none too pleased. On his radio show, he [called](#) Martin's rebuttal "a hoot," [saying](#), "I can't believe Roland would say something that stupid -- that it's racist." The next day on CNN's *Lou Dobbs Tonight*, Martin [told](#) Dobbs, "[Obama's] not here to satisfy Lou Dobbs."

So, who are the birthers whose claims Dobbs is advancing? The figures [include](#) Andy Martin, who has made anti-Semitic and racially charged comments; 9-11 "Truther" Philip Berg; perennial candidate for public office Alan Keyes, who has reportedly accused Obama of taking the "slaveholder's position" on abortion; a pastor who has prayed for Obama's death; and the discredited right-wing website WorldNetDaily. Remember, in Dobbs' world, it is the "liberal media" who have [failed](#) to apply "critical judgment" to this issue.

Late this week, word leaked that CNN President Jon Klein had [reportedly emailed](#) information on Thursday to the staff of CNN's *Lou Dobbs Tonight* that Klein said shows the "story" about President Obama's birth certificate "is dead." Dobbs noted that evidence -- which was a statement by the Hawaii Health Department that in 2001, paper records were replaced by electronic records -- on air as Klein instructed, but then asked CNN contributor Roland Martin: "When this could be dispelled so quickly, and -- and simply by producing [the birth certificate], why not do it?" We already know that Dobbs apparently doesn't follow the reporting of his own network. I suppose, then, that it isn't surprising to see Dobbs having issues following his own logic.

Less than 24 hours after declaring Dobbs' pet "birther" story "dead" -- and saying anyone who "is not convinced doesn't really have a legitimate beef" -- Klein [caved in](#) to Dobbs, reversing himself completely. In a statement to Washington Post Co. blogger Greg Sargent, Klein defended Dobbs and stated, "I think no good journalist would ever say that a particular story will never be covered again. Every day brings new facts, new pegs." Additionally, according to Sargent, "Klein ... took a shot at Dobbs' critics, saying they're politically motivated: 'I understand that people with a partisan point of view from one extreme or another might get annoyed that certain subjects are aired.' "

This raises the troubling question of who is really calling the shots at CNN. It's hard to see how anyone can believe CNN is the "most trusted name in news" when its own president can't stand by his less-than-day-old word. CNN's "Lou Dobbs problem" just got a whole lot worse.

Other major stories this week:

A banner week for Murdoch's media empire

It was a banner week for Rupert Murdoch, whose media outlets reminded the nation again of their redeeming social and journalistic value. Sigh.

On Monday's edition of *The O'Reilly Factor*, retired Lt. Col. Ralph Peters, a Fox News military analyst, taught America what it means to support the troops. Three weeks ago, 23-year-old Pfc. Bowe Bergdahl of Hailey, Idaho, was taken hostage by Taliban forces in Afghanistan. The circumstances of his abduction remain unclear, with some reports indicating that he was taken by force, while others indicate that he voluntarily abandoned his post. Either way, the people of Hailey are [hoping for his safe return](#).

But not Peters, who stunningly [remarked](#) that if Bergdahl had in fact deserted his unit, then "the Taliban can save us a lot of legal hassles and legal bills." No admonishment came from Bill O'Reilly. His words ignited a firestorm of criticism. NBC's Jim Miklaszewski [reported](#) that Pentagon officials felt Peters' commentary "could endanger" the life of Bergdahl, while on CNN, columnist John Avalon said that the "wingnut" comment had "crossed the line." Before long, a bipartisan group of 23 veterans serving in Congress had [demanded an official apology](#) from Roger Ailes, and Rep. Eric Massa, himself a 24-year veteran of the Navy, had [called](#) for both O'Reilly and Peters to be fired from Fox. But neither O'Reilly nor Peters apologized. Instead, two days later, they [said](#) that they did wish for the soldier's safe return, but also speculated that he might be "crazy." The following day, Peters attacked Bergdahl again, this time on Steve Malzberg's radio show, where he [referred](#) to him as a "deserter" and said a reported story about Bergdahl's girlfriend was a "tissue of lies."

At the same time that the Murdoch-led right-wing media machine was savaging the reputation of a U.S. soldier being held captive overseas, it was disseminating surreptitiously taken near-pornographic images of popular ESPN reporter Erin Andrews. The nude pictures had been culled from a video taken of Andrews through a peephole while she was staying at a hotel. O'Reilly [chose to air](#) the images in a segment titled "Did You See That?" His goal, he said during a moment of particularly robust logic, was to prove the "criminal intent" of those involved. The Murdoch-owned (or more aptly, Murdoch-destroyed) *New York Post* also ran with the pictures, a decision that ESPN [called](#) "beyond the pale" before it banished *Post* reporters from its TV and radio networks.

This week's media columns

This week's media columns from the *Media Matters* senior fellows: Eric Boehlert discusses how [Lou Dobbs is fueling a "birther" bonfire](#) and [why the TV nets should have carried Obama's press conference earlier this week](#), while Jamison Foser looks at the media [privileging opposition to abortion](#).

Don't forget to order your autographed copy of Eric Boehlert's compelling new book, [Bloggers on the Bus: How the Internet Changed Politics and the Press](#) (Free Press, May 2009).