Article of the Week

Due August 28

1. *Mark your confusion. 2. Show evidence of a close reading. 3. Write a 1/2 page reflection. 4. Turn in your annotated article with your reflection.*

What Ben Carson revealed about the Republican assault on Planned Parenthood

By Paul Waldman

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In one of those fascinating moments that is only possible because of the internet, Republican presidential candidate Ben Carson got caught in a controversy Thursday when a physician [noted](https://drjengunter.wordpress.com/2015/08/12/ben-carson-did-research-on-17-week-fetal-tissue/) on her theretofore non-famous blog that Carson performed research on tissue from aborted fetuses in the 1990s. She even posted photos of the medical journal in which it was published. This is newsworthy because Carson, like all good Republicans, has expressed outrage at Planned Parenthood over videos taken by anti-abortion activists showing members of the organization discussing the transfer of just that kind of tissue.

So is Carson a hypocrite? Maybe, but what's important about this case is that this is a rare instance where what people in politics are doing and saying can't be understood without examining their motives.

I say that as someone who has amply criticized the news media for focusing far too much on motives in politics. Indeed, the supposed revelation of the "real" motives behind a political action is one of the primary themes of political coverage. How many times have you read, "In an attempt to shore up his standing with a key voting bloc, Candidate X today gave a speech…"? You've probably gotten so used to that construction you barely notice it anymore. The assumption is that the reason the politician gives for what he's doing — let's say that he believes the minimum wage should be raised — is insincere, while the real reason — he's just trolling for votes — is hidden. Once the intrepid reporter reveals it, now you the reader understand what's really going on.

That's almost always far less important than the substance of what the person is doing or saying. Is increasing the minimum wage a good idea? Answering that question is more complicated, and possibly outside what the reporter considers her expertise, while she feels perfectly comfortable opining on what she assumes the candidate's motives are.

And yet, there are times when the hidden motive really is the key to understanding what's happening. The controversy over Planned Parenthood is one of those times.

In [the Planned Parenthood tapes](http://www.vox.com/2015/8/13/9140849/planned-parenthood-videos-unedited), what one actually sees isn't the commission of a crime or even the violation of ethical norms, but a failed attempt at a sting. Posing as medical researchers, the anti-abortion activists attempt to get representatives of the organization to say things suggesting that they profit off the sale of fetal tissue, which would be illegal. But they fail; the group's representatives repeatedly say they can only charge a small fee to cover their expenses. At one point one of the activists even tries to offer the Planned Parenthood representative *more*money than she's asking for to collect the tissue.

Nevertheless, Republicans in Congress are using this as an excuse to renew an old effort to "defund" Planned Parenthood. Most of the money the organization gets from the government comes through Medicaid reimbursements, which don't cover abortion — no federal funds can go to abortion services, by law — but pay for things like gynecological exams, cancer screening, and contraception. So defunding Planned Parenthood would just make it harder for poor women to get medical services, by forcing them to look elsewhere for their care.

Nobody is even bothering to pretend that these activists, or the Republican politicians who have used the tapes as an opportunity to go after Planned Parenthood, are primarily or even secondarily concerned with stopping fetal tissue research. They may think such research ought to be illegal, but if they do, they haven't been proposing any bills to outlaw it. The actual policy proposal they're advocating for has precisely nothing to do with fetal tissue research.

In a situation like that, you have to look at their motives to understand what they're up to, and it isn't a mystery. Republicans have always hated Planned Parenthood, not only because it provides abortions but because it's a forthright advocate on behalf of women's rights to control their own reproductive lives. This is an excuse to attack the organization, nothing more and nothing less.

Ben Carson has an argument for why his own fetal tissue research was morally fine, but Planned Parenthood giving fetal tissue to other medical researchers is morally abhorrent. "You have to look at intent," he [told](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/08/13/ben-carson-no-apologies-for-1992-fetal-tissue-research/) *The Washington Post*. "To willfully ignore evidence that you have for some ideological reason is wrong. If you're killing babies and taking the tissue, that’s a very different thing than taking a dead specimen and keeping a record of it." So he's saying that the problematic thing is the abortion itself, but once the abortion has taken place, there's nothing wrong with conducting research on the tissue.

That's a defensible position to take, though I'm sure many who share his stance on abortion would disagree — they'd say that any involvement with the fruit of the poisoned act should not be allowed. But having taken that position, it's impossible for Carson to argue that *these videos* show that Planned Parenthood should be defunded, because it's clear that his real objection to them is the fact that they perform abortions.

And that's true of all the other Republicans as well. They would have supported defunding Planned Parenthood before the videos emerged, and even if they actually watched them and realized that the group isn't profiting from the sale of fetal tissue, they'll still support defunding Planned Parenthood. This controversy simply has nothing to do with fetal tissue.

I could go a step further, and make the case that abortion opponents barely care at all about the "babies" they supposedly want to save, because their real interest is in controlling women's lives and limiting their autonomy. Nothing is more horrifying to a certain kind of conservative than a woman who has sex because she wants to, and does so without being punished for her sin; witness the recent turn in conservative circles not just against abortion but even against contraception.

But you don't have to agree with me on that to acknowledge that all this talk about fetal tissue research has nothing to do with fetal tissue research at all. I'm guessing not too many of Ben Carson's fans will turn away from him now. He's as committed as ever to taking away women's reproductive rights, and that's what really matters.