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## Michael Giltz

Award-winning freelance writer

Posted January 7, 2009 | 02:58 PM (EST)

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# Obama's Latest Dumb Pick: TV Doc Sanjay Gupta

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Apparently, Marcus Welby is too old and Noah Wylie of ER wants a break because Barack Obama's pick for Surgeon General is CNN's Sanjay Gupta. This is dismaying since Gupta has embraced junk science, has questionable ethics and seems to have been chosen mostly because he is famous. Forget a Team of Rivals: this is the latest example of Obama's Team of Celebrities.

First, Gupta. I don't watch him regularly but I assume (and hope) most of his medical commentary falls well within standard norms.

But I was aghast when I heard him talk about cell phones and say he was too afraid to use one without an ear piece. Surely the Surgeon General should take a strong stand against junk science and unreasonable fears. The argument by Gupta and others when it comes to cell phones is sure, there's absolutely no sound scientific evidence they can be damaging and of course believing they can cause cancer goes against everything we know about non-ionizing radiation, but still...you never know. By this logic, there's no reason to be afraid of your TV set but why not watch your favorite shows from behind the couch, just to be safe? Unless you're also afraid of the AM/FM radio signals that bombard you every day, afraid of grocery store item scanners, afraid of the signals that zap you every time you walk in and out of a store so they can check for security devices, there is no sound scientific medical reason to be afraid of your cell phone. If you want to be on the safe side, you should also wear aluminum foil on your head, "just in case."

Gupta also came out on the losing end in my opinion when trying to attack Michael Moore's documentary *Sicko*. His initial report on the film and subsequent debate with Moore led to CNN having to issue corrections fixing Gupta's errors. They never spotlighted a single factual error by Moore but simply took issue with how Moore cherry-picked the data he cited. Here is CNN's

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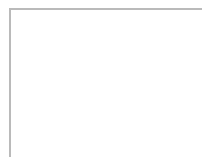
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But I'm far more concerned about Gupta's questionable ethics. According to the *New York Times*, Gupta accepts paid speaking engagements, something no journalist worth their salt would do -- and a practice banned by most media outlets. Why CNN allows this of one of their reporters is a mystery to me, but it means Gupta's conflicts of interest probably stretch from here to Kalamazoo. You can't call yourself a journalist and take money from people you're supposedly reporting on.

Finally, I'm most concerned because the only valid reason I can think of for Obama choosing Gupta is that he's on TV. Certainly, Obama needs someone to challenge him on medical issues: Obama's medical disclosure was shamefully inadequate during the election. (Basically, he offered up a note from his doctor insisting that Obama was fine.) Let's hope that's not a pattern, just like the selection of Gupta seems a pattern. Bush wallowed in cronyism. I hoped Obama would embrace competence. But that's hardly been the case.

Why was Bill Richardson picked for Secretary of Commerce? Given the state of our economy, I would expect Obama to pick someone who lived and breathed commerce and was bursting with smart, progressive ideas about how to stimulate the economy and get us back on track. Instead, by their own admission, Richardson's biggest asset seems to have been his high profile and his Hispanic roots. (Aren't two Hispanics in the Cabinet enough of a show of respect?) Certainly, commerce has not been the laser-like focus of Richardson over the years.

Why was Leon Panetta picked as head of the CIA? (And what possible reason could there be for [keeping Diane Feinstein out of the loop](#) on it?) Panetta has zero intelligence experience and even his own supporters agree he'll need to have a staff of advisers who are well-grounded in the intelligence community. Gee, you think? I'd like to imagine that ALL the top people at the CIA had a strong background in intelligence. Panetta's main qualification seems to have been that he's well-known, a celebrity in political circles. Rather breathtakingly, Obama's people insist that one of Panetta's qualifications is that he received intelligence briefings from the CIA when he was the White House Chief of Staff. In other words, because he received briefings from the CIA, he's now qualified to run the CIA. I often read Supreme Court rulings. I guess that means I'm ready to be the Chief Justice.

And how about the hate-mongerer Rick Warren? Did Obama choose to honor a person of faith at his inauguration that reflected his own personal values, someone that celebrated the diversity of this country and showed a respect for people of other faiths and even people of no faith? No, he chose Warren, a man who actively attacks the beliefs of most Americans, spreads hate about gays by comparing them to pedophiles and incest, lies about it, also lied about Prop 8 by insisting he would be thrown in jail if it didn't pass and on and on. So why did Obama choose him? Because Warren is a celebrity. He's famous. Lots of people know him. And even if Warren's beliefs are antithetical to those of most Americans and certainly most of Obama's actual supporters, fame outstrips everything else.

Maybe Sanjay Gupta will prove an effective Surgeon General, if he accepts. He's certainly an effective communicator, a smart man, and an Emmy-winning, best-selling author and celebrity. But first he'll need to clean up his questionable ethics, junk the junk science and embrace the scientific and medical community.

What do you think of Gupta as Surgeon General? Any other Obama picks you're disappointed in?

UPDATE: [The New York Times blogs about the debate over Gupta](#), with links to articles and comments that mention Gupta has also waffled on issues like vaccines and autism, opposes medical marijuana, is considered by many on the left to be in the pocket of big pharma, opposes universal health care, played up the risks of Avian flu in the US to scare up ratings, and other cases where he might be cowtowing to irrational fears or entrenched interests rather than siding with the scientific community.

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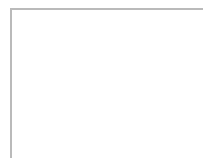


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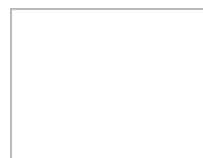
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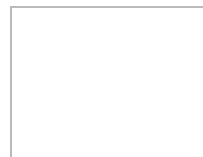
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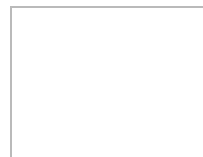
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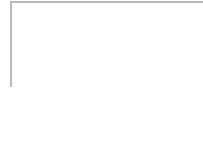
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WilliamL See Profile I'm a Fan of WilliamL permalink

Sanjay Gupta is a pompous and condensending fella along with be too impressed with him self.

I am sure there are many more qualified Dr. in the country that this pretty boy with big pretty teeth.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 03:51 PM on 01/20/2009

sagan See Profile I'm a Fan of sagan permalink

Michael, Entertainment, politics, sports and religion is your beat. But not biology. Proclaiming something "junk science" without actually investigating it, understanding who's doing it, funding it, been knocked out of the game, or has the appropriate credentials to evaluate it--is risky. Sure, physical scientists are likely to say wireless radiation is harmless, because the energy is too low to heat tissue or knock electrons off their orbit, and because there are studies are inconsistent. But biologists know biological systems are inconsistent, and that they respond to chemical and subtle electromagnetic signals. A pathogen or toxin doesn't have to have the force of a club to bring a biological system down. A small, constant irritant over time--interrupting repair mechanisms, inducing stress proteins, or opening the blood-brain barrier--can add up. Your outlook sounds more influenced by industry PR than by actual knowledge of the science--and the politics surrounding it.

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I'm sure Gupta has had to watch his words carefully re wireless health because it's a dicey political/legal topic, and because the hair-trigger response of some is to make light of it. But it's a serious concern, especially re children, as acknowledged by the E.U., Germany, Finland, the former UK Health chief, and France, which is about to place bans on advertising and selling cellphones to children.

For a review of the science by prominent international researchers: [www.biointiative.org](http://www.biointiative.org). To glimpse the issue's political history over 20 years , see [www.microwavenews.com](http://www.microwavenews.com).

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 06:09 PM on 01/12/2009

kitanonami See Profile I'm a Fan of kitanonami permalink

Hi Michael,

I agree with all you said, though you forgot to mention Tim Kaine at DNC.

When I first read about Gupta as Surgeon General, I was sure it was a joke, but my ha ha ha quickly became WTF?!

My guess is that Gupta, along with Warren, are Obama's way of trying to reach out to middle America, the masses, or whatever he calls us. Message to Obama: we are way smarter than you think we are.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 09:29 AM on 01/09/2009

wiseraven See Profile I'm a Fan of wiseraven permalink

Perhaps Sen. Feinstein was kept out of the loop re: Panetta because of the bungled job that she and her committee have done during the past administration. Since she heads the committee that didn't verify the WMDs or any number of other bits of intelligence, why should she be consulted about the new CIA chief?

Maybe Pres.-elect Obama has sent a signal to her, Sen. Rockefeller, and the others who let this nation down by their shoddy oversight.

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Subversive See Profile I'm a Fan of Subversive permalink

Was Dr. Phil not available?

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 01:05 AM on 01/09/2009

jathemelis See Profile I'm a Fan of jathemelis permalink

But is Surgeon General really THAT serious of a position? It's not even a part of the cabinet. If I were going to pick a famous Doc I'd pick Dr. Andrew Weil, who I find to be fair, grounded in science and yet willing to look into safe alternative treatments that work. With Big Pharma the way it is, I'd like to see someone who is steeped in preventative medicine. Or that Dr. Oz from those "You...!" books.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 10:32 PM on 01/08/2009

M1 See Profile I'm a Fan of M1 permalink

Obama won the election in large part because the economy crashed and moderate Republicans could not bring themselves to vote for a Palin ticket. When the economy rights itself or does not right itself, either way, he will no longer have such a large win margin. The next Republican who is more moderate will have a good chance at taking the white house in 2012. This is why Obama is running hard and fast to right of center and is selecting celebrity figures. He intends to use the media to brainwash Americans into believing whatever he sells is the change we wanted. Hence his attraction to Dr. Gupa and Warren and Tim Kaine.

By 2012, Obama will have a record to view and not just beautiful speech smattered with a light record. In 2012, Obama will likely hit the Republican and evangelical wall he is so trying to break down. The loss of progressive support could very well end his Presidency. My guess is that Obama's picks are more about Obama winning in 2012 then anyone would like to think.

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♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 10:43 PM on 01/08/2009

Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

Obama picked Gupta so he could win reelection in 2012? Uh, that seems a stretch. I don't think Gupta has any strong evangelical or right wing base.

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godhelpusall See Profile I'm a Fan of godhelpusall permalink

kudos to you, michael, for your thoughtful and in-depth participation in the conversation +++

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 01:07 PM on 01/08/2009

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Thx. Half the fun of blogging is talking with the people who comment on your posts. Hopefully people will appreciate that.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 09:49 PM on 01/08/2009

Natalie4Obama See Profile I'm a Fan of Natalie4Obama permalink

Sicko is the greatest movie made - I grew up in the UK and the health care was incredible. It's not socialism, anyone with money or a good job buys into BUPA private health care which is forced to be amazing as they are competing with a free service.

The fact that Obama picked a critic of the movie disappoints me as the change this country needs really isn't someone else who will be in the pocket of the pharma industry.

Dr Joel Fuhrman's Eat To Live book literally changed my life and rid me of headaches, anxiety, extra weight and hypoglycemia - with obesity in this country reaching a 60% level it would have been nice for him to pick out someone who would focus on preventative medicine such as healthy lifestyle changes rather than spending billions on avoidable problems such as heart disease or obesity.

Obama has been disappointing me lately with this choice, and Warren so let's see how he does in office. I understand he is trying to bring in people who represent the country as a whole but this is our time, the Democratic administration and there should be no tolerance for ignorance.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 12:39 PM on 01/08/2009

leopoldmozart See Profile I'm a Fan of leopoldmozart permalink

I totally agree. It would have been wonderful if he had chosen someone like Dr. Dean Ornish or Dr. Joel Fuhrman; a physician who also greatly appreciates the role of diet and lifestyle in our health.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 01:30 PM on 01/08/2009

Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

I'll check out that book, though I think I'll still have to give Citizen Kane and Casablanca and the Apu Trilogy the edge over Sicko :)

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 09:50 PM on 01/08/2009

mypov123 See Profile I'm a Fan of mypov123 permalink

Is this another example of Obama's "team of rivals", being that Gupta doesn't support universal health care??

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 11:39 AM on 01/08/2009

Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

Perhaps, though surely Gupta would have been vetted to make certain he could support Obama's health care plan with Congress before signing on.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 09:51 PM on 01/08/2009

glockman See Profile I'm a Fan of glockman permalink

Why do we even need a surgeon general?

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 11:38 AM on 01/08/2009

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Some others have made the same point. He does oversee a 6000 bureaucracy and of course a point person to speak to the public on health issues or when there's a scare like anthrax makes sense to me.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 09:51 PM on 01/08/2009

— **AlienNationRefugee** See Profile I'm a Fan of AlienNationRefugee permalink

There is no doubt that PE Obama selected Gupta because he is a celebrity, communicator, whatever. Frankly I still think Sanjay will turn him down in the end because there's just no money in the appointment. It is also true that it is the Administration that will set health care policy. I am in a wait and see mode regarding the new Administration. Having voted for Obama and been disillusioned by the selection of Rick Warren for the inauguration invocation I am still willing to give Obama the benefit of the doubt. Rick Warren, Sanjay Gupta and the appointment of the Surgeon General are just not at the top of my list of priorities. The Leon Panetta appointment might prove somewhat more troubling. But even then, compared to what? The trampling of the constitution, democracy and human decency by the Bush Administration knows no equal.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 10:38 AM on 01/08/2009

— **Michael Giltz** See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

I agree wholeheartedly. Obama just has to do a so-so job in order to look brilliant compared to Bush. And if he actually obeys the law? Bonus! Neither Gupta nor Warren are very important in the scheme of things, with Warren being an especially transitory (if annoying) choice.

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— **jmpurser** See Profile I'm a Fan of jmpurser permalink

Agreed.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 10:34 AM on 01/08/2009

— **LetMeUnderstandThis** See Profile I'm a Fan of LetMeUnderstandThis permalink

So all those who have a problem with Gupta, who would you have selected?

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— **EtTuBrute** See Profile I'm a Fan of EtTuBrute permalink

Dr. Andrew Weil.

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— **leopoldmozart** See Profile I'm a Fan of leopoldmozart permalink

Dr. Dean Ornish.

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— **Natalie4Obama** See Profile I'm a Fan of Natalie4Obama permalink

Dr Joel Fuhrman

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 12:41 PM on 01/08/2009

— **Michael Giltz** See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

Personally, I don't expect the general public to have a "pick" for Surgeon General. I assume the top ten or 20 or 100 best people for the job who would be huge stars would be pretty much unknown to people outside the medical establishment like myself. Hence my surprise when he picked Gupta.

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— **leopoldmozart** See Profile I'm a Fan of leopoldmozart permalink

Gupta's exchange with Michael Moore, where he used lies, rhetoric and bluster to try to win the debate showed an absence of integrity on his part. Also, he was hopelessly unprepared when he appeared on Larry King with Jenny McCarthy to discuss autism, and his "gee, golly, who really knows?" waffling on the connection between autism and vaccines was shameful and embarrassing. (In case you're interested, there is absolutely positively certainly no evidence that autism is caused by vaccines. Something is causing the rise of autism, parkinson's, and alzheimer's, and it is crucial for the health of our children and elderly that we find what it is, but it is ABSOLUTELY NOT VACCINES.) Maybe he's a

busy guy, but he just didn't do his homework in both situations. During the Koop and Elders years, Surgeon General developed a tradition of integrity and honesty, sometimes embarrassingly so. Gupta deviates from that tradition.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 04:47 AM on 01/08/2009

Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

I didn't know about the vaccine-autism waffling of Gupta and that's even more disturbing since the science is again overwhelming and the dangers to your children and others by NOT getting vaccinated is far, far greater than the non-danger of choosing to use an earpiece on your cellphone.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 09:58 PM on 01/08/2009

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