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Tea party protesters scream 'nigger' at black congressman

William Douglas | McClatchy Newspapers

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WASHINGTON — Demonstrators outside the U.S. Capitol, angry over the proposed health care bill, shouted "nigger" Saturday at U.S. Rep. John Lewis, a Georgia congressman and civil rights icon who was nearly beaten to death during an Alabama march in the 1960s.

Protesters also shouted obscenities at other members of the Congressional Black Caucus, spat on at least one black lawmaker and confronted an openly gay congressman with taunts.

Capitol Police escorted the members of Congress into the Capitol after the confrontation. At least one demonstrator was reported arrested.

"They were shouting, sort of harassing," Lewis said. "But, it's okay, I've faced this before. It reminded me of the 60s. It was a lot of downright hate and anger and people being downright mean."

Lewis said he was leaving the Cannon office building to walk to the Capitol to vote when protesters shouted "Kill the bill, kill the bill," Lewis said.

"I said 'I'm for the bill, I support the bill, I'm voting for the bill'," Lewis said.

A colleague who was accompanying Lewis said people in the crowd responded by saying "Kill the bill, then the n-word."

"It surprised me that people are so mean and we can't engage in a civil dialogue and debate," Lewis said.

Rep. Emanuel Cleaver, D-Mo., said he was a few yards behind Lewis and distinctly heard "nigger."

"It was a chorus," Cleaver said. "In a way, I feel sorry for those people who are doing this nasty stuff - they're being whipped up. I decided I wouldn't be angry with any of them."

Cleaver's office said later in a statement that he'd also been spat upon and that Capitol Police had arrested his assailant. The statement praised the police, who Cleaver said escorted the members of Congress into the Capitol past the demonstrators.

"The man who spat on the congressman was arrested, but the congressman has chosen not to press charges," the statement said.

"This is not the first time the Congressman has been called the 'n' word and certainly not the worst assault he has endured in his years fighting for equal rights for all Americans," the statement said. "That being said, he is disappointed that in the 21st century our national discourse has devolved to the point of name calling and spitting."

Protesters also used a slur as they confronted Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., an openly gay member of Congress.

Frank told the Boston Globe that the incident happened as he was walking from the Longworth office building to the Rayburn office building, both a short distance from the Capitol. Frank said the crowd consisted of a couple of hundred of people and that they referred to him as 'homo.' A writer for The Huffington Post said the protesters called Frank a "faggot."

"I'm disappointed with the unwillingness to be civil," Frank told the Globe. "I was, I guess, surprised by the rancor. What it means is obviously the health care bill is proxy for a lot of other sentiments, some of which are perfectly reasonable, but some of which are not."

"People out there today, on the whole, were really hateful," Frank said. "The leaders of this movement have a responsibility to speak out more."

Thousands of demonstrators gathered outside the Capitol on Saturday as the House Democratic leadership worked to gather enough votes to enact a health care overhaul proposal that has become the centerpiece of President Barack Obama's domestic agenda. Most were affiliated with so-called tea party organizations that originally sprang up during last summer's protests of the health care proposals.

Heated debate has surrounded what role race plays in the motivations of the tea party demonstrators. During protests last summer, demonstrators displayed a poster depicting Obama as an African witch doctor complete with headdress, above the words "OBAMACARE coming to a clinic near you." Former President Jimmy Carter asserted in September that racism was a major factor behind the hostility that Obama's proposals had faced.

The claim brought angry rebuttals from Republicans. Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Steele, who is black, accused Carter of playing the "race card."

On Saturday, Frank, however, said he was sorry Republican leaders didn't do more to disown the protesters.

Some Republicans "think they are benefiting from this rancor," he said.



Clyburn said. "This is incredible, shocking to me."

He added, "A lot of us have said for a long time that none of this is about health care at all. It's about extending a basic fundamental right to people who are less powerful."

(James Rosen contributed to this story.)

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