

[September 30, 2008]

I knew that Paul Newman was dead before I actually knew it.

I was at the supermarket, and found myself staring at a shelf stuffed with Newman's Own salad dressings. I have tried a couple of his food products; they were no better or worse than any of the other celebrity-endorsed stuff out there. While I was staring at the salad dressings, I had an instinct that Newman had died. Sure enough, when I turned on the TV after I got home, the news of his passing scrawled at the bottom of the screen. This had me thinking about Charlton Heston, who had died on April 5th. My sixth sense told me that the reaction to Newman's death would be in stark contrast to the reaction which greeted Heston's death. So far, my sixth sense is batting 1.000!

Heston and Newman had several things in common: both were from the Midwest; both were college graduates; both served in the military; both began in the theater; both battled the bottle; both enjoyed decades-long marriages; both were outspoken opponents of the Vietnam War; both were bleeding-heart liberals. Then, Heston had an epiphany during the 1987 hearings for Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork, which led to his involvement with the National Rifle Association. From then on, he was viewed by Hollywood and the media as a right-wing wacko (his turn in *"Town & Country"* as a gun-toting wack-job with an unhealthy devotion to fellow gun-toting wack-job Ernest Hemingway didn't help).

The New York Times heralded Heston's death: "Epic Film Actor and Voice of the NRA is dead at 84". The Grey Lady just couldn't help herself. Compare that to the majestic sendoff it gave Newman: "A Magnetic Titan of Hollywood is dead at 83". The entertainment industry reacted similarly. When Heston disclosed he was suffering from Alzheimer's, George Clooney mocked him, and no one took Clooney to task. But when news leaked in March Newman had terminal cancer, there was outrage the "rumors" were being circulated.

When Heston died, George Bush and John McCain gave him props, yet the only celebrities the Associated Press could find to comment were Nancy Reagan and Shirley Jones. Conversely, celebrities have been killing each other to sing Newman's praises: Robert Redford, Sally Field, Leonardo DiCaprio, Russell Crowe, Elizabeth Taylor, Julia Roberts, Susan Sarandon, Martin Scorsese, Sidney Poitier, Kevin Spacey, Mario Andretti, Eva Marie Saint, David Letterman, Larry King, and this gush from Boy George: "He set the bar too high for all of us" (whatever the Hell does THAT means!) Funny, none of these big shots could be bothered when another giant of their business died five months earlier!

The thing I came across in these tributes time and again was how "classy" Newman was, which reminded me how he accepted his lifetime Oscar several years back: on videotape in a sweater and no tie! And when he won the Oscar for Best Actor the next year, he couldn't even bother to show up! Yep, he "set the bar too high", all right!

Oddly, Rob Reiner and Oliver Stone - both of whom make Susan Sarandon look like Phyllis Schlafly - attended Heston's funeral. Hey Rob and Ollie: where were you when Boy George was shooting off his big mouth?

I came across Newman's will online. Not surprisingly, he left his millions to his tax write-off -- oops, sorry, foundation (a common tactic among the wealthy), and his personal property to his wife, Joanne Woodward. But what caught my eye was the clause that their children had to repay the Estate the money he lent them! Everything you need to know about Paul Newman - the husband, the father, the man - is contained in that single clause. Boy George Clooney was unavailable for comment.