



Calling in the Big Guns: Oval Office Meeting to Heal Healthcare Rift

In what has been described as a last-ditch effort to save the healthcare overhaul that is first on his Christmas wish list, President Barack Obama has summoned all 60 members of the Senate's Democratic caucus to the White House on Tuesday for an 11th-hour pep talk in anticipation of an impending vote on the Senate's version of a bill that would alter the healthcare industry by changing Medicare, offering long-term care to retirees and the disabled, and creating a government-subsidized and administered panoply of health insurance policies.



The President's urgent call to meet with Senators whose votes are crucial to overcome an expected Republican filibuster and other procedural maneuvers designed to prevent healthcare legislation from reaching the floor of the Senate for a roll call vote, came just hours after Senator Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.) announced his resolve to oppose the bill's expansion of Medicare coverage to Americans as young as 55 years old. This announcement caught Reid and the White House by surprise, as they thought Lieberman's support was in the bag. An aide to a Democratic Senator summed it up this way, "It was a total flip flop, and leaves us in a predicament as to what to do." Lunch at the White House is the latest attempt to sway wayward lawmakers to the side of Reid and President Obama. Prior to this audience, the job of finding a middle ground was left to a dream team of influential Senators.

The compromise language hammered out by the Team of Ten led by Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) on the Left and Mark Pryor (D-Ark.) in the middle was believed palatable to all members of the 60 member Democratic Caucus. Lieberman, while not a Democrat, is a member of that caucus and as such his support for the bill is vital to fulfilling Senator Reid's promise to deliver the package to President Obama by Christmas Day.

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All the impediments to presenting President Obama with an historic overhaul of the medical care industry in America that has been the hallmark of his legislative agenda were thought to have been overcome in the Team of Ten's re-write of the bill. The well-chosen cadre of representatives from across the spectrum of Democratic Senators worked for several days (and nights) to deliver a sleeker scheme that would attract the support of liberal Democrats eager to offer government subsidized health insurance to all Americans, as well as more moderate members of the party determined to excise all new entitlements from the measure.

Considered a "moderate" and a bit a maverick, Senator Joseph Lieberman's support of any of the various healthcare bills has been tepid at best. On Sunday, however, Lieberman removed all speculation as he phoned the Senate Majority Leader and let him know that he would flatly reject any measure that



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contained a provision permitting those Americans 55 and over to buy-in to Medicare coverage, as the current bill does. Lieberman told Reid that the already bloated bill was growing too large and that he could not recommend such a behemoth be placed on the back of an American middle-class already suffering from over-taxation and an economic atmosphere poisoned by government meddling in private industry. "We've got to stop adding to the bill. We've got to start subtracting some controversial things," Lieberman told a television commentator on Sunday.

One of the controversial things still threatening to scupper the wholesale healthcare revisions promoted by Senator Reid and President Obama is abortion. As currently composed, the bill before the Senate contains provisions that would permit women receiving federally subsidized health insurance to receive an abortion on demand. Despite, waffling between support and opposition, Senator Ben Nelson, author of the anti-abortion amendment that was rejected by the Senate last week, seems to be yet leaning toward voting against the bill that would be put before the body sometime before Christmas.

Naturally, any ground ceded to Senator Nelson on the abortion front might inspire the defection of pro-abortion proponents from the critical coalition necessary to carry the legislation through the Senate and onto President Obama's desk. Details of any concessions being considered are inscrutable, but there are a few possibilities being bandied about by anonymous legislative spokesmen.

One proposal maintains the coverage for abortion within the greater "public option" but prohibits the use of federal funds to pay for the controversial procedure. Critics recognize this bizarre barrier as nothing more than a Chinese wall that will be susceptible to being pierced by zealous lawyers and activists judges dedicated to finding a path to federally funded abortion on demand, in spite of legislative intent.

There are several other ideas on the table and Senator Reid and his cohorts are frantically trying to cobble together some sort of small, but convincing concessions that will strengthen Nelson's tenuous ties to his Party's proposal, as well as foster the fidelity of the 58 other Democrats whose votes are equally paramount to surmounting Republican resistance to the march toward healthcare "reform."



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