



Healthcare Shepherds Promise “Reform” by Hook or by Crook

Everyday the headlines in the nation’s newspapers report the same salient and unsurprising fact: Healthcare “reform” is unpopular to historic levels and yet President Obama and his legislative factotums still insist on passing it at all costs. Day after day, the sharp edges are sanded down so the bill can roll through the Senate and into the Oval Office by Christmas.



The problem with this bit of congressional carpentry is that it’s not only eviscerating the bill, but this daily concourse of clumsy cobbling by compromise is also leaving President Obama’s liberal allies feeling betrayed by the one man who promised them the “hope” of a collectivist utopia. Instead of having a rock-ribbed true believer in the Oval Office, they are discovering that he is a realpolitik pragmatist loyal only to his legacy.

To impress upon members of the Democratic caucus just how committed he is to forcing this “once in a lifetime” gift onto the American public, he called them one and all to a meeting at the White House earlier this week. There was discussion of the Medicare buy-in proposal (gone), the public-option scheme (gone), and all the other nobby protrusions (abortion), but the Big Picture message was simple: Get this done and get it done now. Nothing should be seen as the *sui generis* of a healthcare bill. Everything, it appears, is expendable as long as the President has a bill on his desk by the end of the year. A row of “reforms” is an acceptable trade for a row of ceremonial pens for the bill-signing photo op.

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President Obama is healthcare’s her, and if he’s willing to jettison the key (albeit controversial) elements that attracted supporters when his devotion to the historic re-engineering of healthcare in America (taking care of the under- and uninsured) was first announced on the campaign trail, then why should anyone feel constrained to fight for any aspect of the bill that comes up against even token resistance? The bill is a political cyanide tablet, and setting your jaw against a daily right and left hook to the chops is no ambitious politician’s notion of how to spend the days and weeks leading up to re-election.

These bouts are particularly unappealing to Democratic senators from states where healthcare legislation is most unpopular (there isn’t any state where it’s popular, but some are worse than others).



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In Arkansas, for example, Democratic Senator Blanche Lincoln is up for election next year and 68 percent of her constituents regard healthcare overhaul as strongly distasteful. Lincoln, once a healthcare hold-out, has declared her support for the bill — even though, given the minute-by-minute mangling, there's not telling what the bill will look like by the time her name is called by the clerk. As recompense for her devotion to her party and her President, Senator Lincoln is trailing opponents in every statewide poll.

The head cheerleader on Team Obama is Senator Harry Reid (D-Nev.). Being the "public face of healthcare" hasn't helped the Majority Leader's popularity. In fact, in the days since the healthcare debate began in earnest, his approval rating in the Silver State has never exceeded 38 percent. There's little hope for him in a state whose rural population is conservative, politically active, and actively seeking to remove their senior senator from office.

Finally, the *Wall Street Journal* reports that in North Dakota, a Zogby Poll showed 28 percent of voters are in favor of any version of healthcare "reform." Moreover, 40 percent of respondents said they will be "less likely" to vote for Senator Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.) if he casts his ballot in favor of the measure. Any measure. The message they are sending is give up and get out. This is the refrain being sung loudly by Americans from sea to shining sea.

Regardless of the cost, political and fiscal, Senator Reid and the other leaders of the Democratic Party soldier on in their march toward medical-care meddling. Not content to let pro-life proponent Senator Ben Nelson off the hook (Reid and Obama need all 60 members of the Democratic Caucus to sign on to the measure or the bill will crumble under the weight of a Republican filibuster), they have presented him with yet another re-write of abortion language that they are willing to insert into the bill. This attempt to make Nelson happy, like the last one, was written by fellow Democrat and abortion foe Bob Casey (D-Pa.). Undaunted by Nelson's rejections (and the dismissal of the offerings as "accounting gimmicks" by Catholic bishops), Casey went back to the drawing board Thursday night to find some equation whose sum would equal 60. "We're trying to get this right," Casey told reporters. "I've had ideas on the table for a while now, I'm still working through them."

For their part, Republicans are content to sit as spectators and watch the internecine bloodletting. They are hopeful that the casualty rate will reduce the electorate's collective will to return a Democratic majority to the Congress in 2010. They have but to bide their time. One way to pass the time is the time-honored time-killer - the filibuster. Republican leaders promise to invoke the rule requiring the reading of any bill upon which they are asked to vote. In its current iteration, the bill is over 2,000 pages long and Republicans plan to make clerks and their deputies read every mind-numbing syllable in order to forestall an up or down vote. "I don't think it would be outrageous to ask for a bill that we haven't seen to be read," declared self-described "maverick" John McCain (R-Ariz.).

It's difficult to forecast whether Senator Reid's and President Obama's backs are flexible enough to bend over backward far enough and frequent enough to convince the 60 senators to stand up in front of voters and electronically manifest their assent to one of history's most onerous and undesirable legislative acts. One wonders how, in the face of such formidable and career-killing opposition, President Obama (even with his "unprecedented" charm and powers of persuasion) is able to convince even 59 senators to join him on a cruise on the legislative equivalent of a cruise on the *Titanic*. Perhaps he sees further than congressmen who of necessity have a focus of fixed-length and care less for legacy than for livelihood.

President Obama knows that no matter what shape the final act takes on, it will come with a roster of



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new taxes (including plans for a value-added tax), federal regulations, and Tenth Amendment-taming surrenders of state sovereignty that will inexorably alter the dynamics of the relationship between state and national government and reduce the states to European-style irrelevance.

Meteorologists are calling for over a foot of snow in D.C. between now and Christmas, effectively paralyzing the city. Senators, accustomed to generous holiday schedules, have been advised that they must consider themselves on alert and be ready to assemble at any hour of night or day to vote on amendments and procedural proposals, even if it culminates in a Christmas Day pageant performed under a blanket of snow and a cloud of suspicion.

Photo of Barack Obama and Harry Reid: AP Images



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