



Ted Kennedy: Protector of American Healthcare?

Ah, the ironies of politics. The late Sen. Edward Kennedy, an early and steadfast proponent of national health insurance, turns out to have spared Americans from such a fate for nearly 40 years.

In 1974, President Richard Nixon introduced the Comprehensive Health Insurance Act. Looking like nothing so much as the recently passed ObamaCare law, Nixon's [plan](#) would have mandated that employers provide health insurance for their employees and would have created or expanded other government health-insurance programs to cover those who did not have employer-based insurance.



Kennedy, then chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Health Care, refused to work with Nixon to pass his plan because it didn't go far enough to suit the senator, who had proposed a single-payer health-insurance scheme — and thus the first crack at nationalized healthcare went down to defeat. Kennedy would later [refer](#) to this incident as his biggest political mistake.

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A few years later President Jimmy Carter also proposed a national health-insurance program. CNN [explains](#) the differences between the contemporaneous Carter and Kennedy approaches:

Kennedy at the time was pressing for a health care program run by the federal government, comparable to the so-called “public option” that many progressives fought for last year. Carter preferred to enact smaller changes over time to improve the existing health care system, similar to the legislation signed by President Obama in March. In the end, both of their plans failed to gain traction and the issue was put on the back burner when Ronald Reagan was elected president.

Carter, in an interview with CBS's *60 Minutes* to be aired on September 20, attributes the failure to pass national health insurance during his term to Kennedy's political ambitions — the Massachusetts senator would challenge him for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1980 — and spitefulness toward him.

The Associated Press reports that Carter told *60 Minutes*: “The fact is that we would have had comprehensive health care now, had it not been for Ted Kennedy's deliberately blocking the legislation that I proposed. It was his fault. Ted Kennedy killed the bill.”

“He did not want to see me have a major success in that realm of life,” Carter added.

Clearly Carter has believed that Kennedy was at fault since the legislative battle first occurred, writing in his diary at the time, “Kennedy continuing his irresponsible and abusive attitude, immediately condemning our health plan. He couldn't get five votes for his plan.” The diary entry is excerpted from Carter's forthcoming book, *White House Diary*.



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on September 17, 2010

Kennedy, for his part, blamed the failure to pass healthcare legislation during Carter's term on Carter's own intransigence. CNN [reports](#) that Kennedy wrote in his 2009 memoir, *True Compass*, "Looking back, I think he simply had convinced himself that he was going to do it his way. This was true of his dealings with the Senate, and one of the principal reasons that he never won that body's cooperation." CNN further notes that "Carter's failure to allow compromise" provided part of the impetus for Kennedy's running against him in 1980.

In fact, it appears that both men had problems with compromising — not surprising given the egos and power involved. Still, absent Kennedy's competing plan and lack of enthusiasm for Carter's plan, Americans might have been saddled with something resembling ObamaCare in the late 1970s, which certainly would have made the economic recovery of the 1980s less likely, or at least less robust.

By 1979 *Time* was [reporting](#) that Kennedy had moderated his approach to healthcare to something resembling Nixon's and Carter's — and ultimately Obama's, to which Kennedy contributed before he was sidelined by the brain tumor that would kill him at age 77.

Thus, while we have Kennedy, in part, to thank for the unconstitutional disaster of ObamaCare that has now befallen us, we also have Kennedy, in large measure, to thank for protecting us — for all the wrong reasons — from nationalized healthcare for the preceding three-and-a-half decades. Can I get half a cheer for Teddy?

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