



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on October 6, 2009

Frist Fears Tax Hikes Backlash From Health Reform

Some people in and around the "Swampland" of Washington politics seem to be trying awfully hard to get former Senate Majority Leader and heart surgeon Bill Frist on record as endorsing a Democratic plan for healthcare reform.

In a political blog called "Swampland," *Time* magazine's Karen Timulty reported last Friday on an interview with the Tennessee Republican on healthcare legislation before Congress; under the headline, "Bill Frist on Health Bill: I'd Vote For It," Timulty quoted Frist as saying, "I would end up voting for it," adding "As leader, I would take heat for it... That's what leadership is all about."



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But before the advocates of nationalized medicine nominate Frist for a "Profiles in Courage" award, it is worth noting that nowhere in her 600-word blog did Timulty say what "it" is. Nor in her repeated references to "the bill" did she specify which bill, if any, she and Frist were discussing. Frist told ABC News Radio on Monday there are five bills on the Senate floor, and he appeared to be saying he had not endorsed any of them, including the bill sponsored by Montana Democrat Max Baucus, considered to be the most conservative of the health bills before Congress.

"People try to put words in my mouth, saying 'You support the Baucus bill.' I don't support the Baucus bill as written today," said Frist, who retired from the Senate in 2007 and last year became a partner in Chicago-based Cressey & Co, an investment firm in the healthcare market. "I'm pushing the process; it's not where I want it to be," he said in the ABC interview. He also said the Democrats' bills are all too costly and fall short of the goal of making healthcare available to all. "It's going to cost way too much and we're not going to get all of the uninsured into the marketplace," he said. "There's some egregious things in there that will cost the taxpayers too much money and not give them anything." The "Washington Whispers" column in the *U.S. News and World Report* also includes a Frist forecast of tax increases and angry voters if the costs of a government healthcare program get out of control.

"In late December, a bill will pass, certainly," Frist told reporter Paul Bedard. "It will probably bring 30 million people into the system. It will have very significant and very constructive insurance reform. It will cause everyone's taxes to go up and premiums to go up, which is concerning me in terms of the impact on the cost. It will not be a bipartisan bill." A bipartisan plan could pass with help from the President and some Republican amendments, Frist said, but a "big backlash" is likely if "a partisan bill with 51, 52 votes passes that raises premiums and that an average person cannot answer, 'What did I get out of it?'"

The Baucus bill, endorsed by the Senate Finance Committee, "doesn't bend the cost curve sufficiently for me," said Frist, who is promoting his latest book, *A Heart to Serve: The Passion to Bring Health, Hope and Healing*. "A plan that I would support would be a plan that would bring in 20 million



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uninsured, scaled back the benefits toward catastrophic care, and thirdly had incentives for a value-based rather than a volume-based healthcare system," he said.

Yet Democrats have taken portions of Frist's remarks as evidence of support for the kind of plan Obama is promoting and are claiming Frist, along with Howard Baker and Robert Dole, as former Senate Republican leaders who support the Democrats' plans. Some columnists have done the same. "Now if only some currently serving members of the party could take a cue from the retired elder statesmen," wrote Jon Cohn in *The New Republic*. At Salon.com, news of Frist's remarks in the ABC News interview was reported under the heading "Frist backs off support for healthcare reform."

"Last week former Senate Republican Leader Bill Frist was saying that if he were still in his old seat, 'I would end up voting for' at least one version of the Democrats' healthcare reform proposals," wrote Alex Koppelman, quoting from the Timulty blog. "This week he's singing a different tune."

Frist's "apparent retraction," said Koppelman, "is a minor blow for Democrats who surely would have used the former leader's words against his old Senate colleagues as few-if any-of them will end up voting for the reform legislation. It would be interesting to know whether he was genuinely misinterpreted when he gave an interview to *Time's* Karen Timulty or whether he's gotten pressure from his fellow Republicans who realized how damaging his comments could be."

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