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Real Health Care, Real Reform

Mr. President:

You called for universal healthcare in America, and spoke for our aspirations, but now you have not stood firm in our interest: You have waffled on our best insights, and let this debate buckle to ideological blackmail at every turn.

l) At the outset, the White House accepted a paltry promise from the HMO's to restrain the growth of high medical costs, and the best option was taken off the table: Everywhere else in the world a well-run single-payer public health plan works fine, but Here the right-wingnuts screech about 'socialism', and the smear sticks.

They had the audacity to argue that the private sector cannot compete with this, so it must not be allowed, because it's a 'Government takeover' – such that a more efficient and equitable health system is turned to political taboo, and put out of reach.

And they got away with it... nobody laughed them out of the building.

Once all the centrist pols & pundits bought into this illogic, the Bill had to get complicated... its devices and postures got more contorted and conditional, so as to offend no one, confusing everyone. It ducks the problems of accountability to patients in medical practices & billings, buttressing top-heavy management and the skewed incentives we now endure. We saw the "public option" devolve in conception, more vague and negotiable at each turn, and now it is gone.

As citizens we are left with compulsory buy-ins and cranked-up revenues for the 'Medical-Insurance Complex' (as Ike would call it), on the perverse principle of government-mandated risk management – on behalf of those corporations.

We will be compelled to subsidize an echelon of 'suits-on-salary', positioned to control and censor medical decisions – rewarding those most vested in pilferage, inflating costs and creating false scarcities in healthcare for decades to come.

The Bill emerging from Congress is cumbersome and onerous, not a solution:
It is a sellout of American aspirations and not worth fighting for.
I concur fully with Governor Dean:

Stop this nonsense now and start over. Best that it come from the President, duly exasperated with the process gone awry: Announce that the current Bill is damaged by compromise, evades needed reforms, cannot meet our goals, and if passed he will veto it.

Progressives in Congress can also turn things around, standing the high ground on a straight-up principle: This Bill is just not good enough. They can boycott the vote and send back a mandate for a robust public option and rigorous controls on health costs, with porkbarrel deals, featherbedding, and ideological riders stripped out.

11) The public sees this worthy initiative beset with foolish politics, warped around committee haggles & filibuster rules: Why gut the Bill for 60 votes, when 55 Senators will support meaningful healthcare reforms? These should not be held hostage by a few charlatans like Boehner, Nelson, and Lieberman... wear them down, let them face the rage of voters for opposing the fair health system they overwhelmingly Want.

Repugnicans need to be reminded of the healthcare policies they abided or embraced in the last Administration: When asked how uninsured people should get treatment, George Bush said: "They can go to the emergency room..." – an inconceivably stupid answer. Upon that record and their unwavering loyalty, GOP hacks have nothing to offer now... bipartisan compromise with bad ideas only spawns non-solutions.

Rely on the intrinsic strength of good ideas... revived controversy won't kill the Bill, it will only be made more imperative. With the necessary arm-twisting, fitting shame, and a chorus of public outrage, the naysayers will fold. Better to have real health reform on the table in a few weeks, than this albatross around our necks now.

Déjà vu all over again, c. 1994... Bill Clinton was supposed to be a pretty smart guy too, but he couldn't figure out that "Managed Care" was an oxymoron. Also operating on the fallacy that good ideas are negotiable at all, he folded up and saddled us with the burgeoning 'HMO Oligopoly' – leading to the present debacle:

They rode the demographic wave in medical services, as 'baby boomers' came of middle age. Payments, premiums, and public funds have been funneled through these corporations, inflating costs, limiting care, leaving millions uncovered and untreated – and giving them political power. This infrastructure is now the vested norm, and the source of resistance to any reform that might curtail its bloat and waste.

Most at-risk is the moment to act. Many fear that it has passed; indeed the current debate is tainted and dragged-out, its momentum lost on ambivalent schemes – unless its course is radically altered now. Understanding this stalemate on mediocrity as a tough learning phase in its evolution, we can see this moment as one of opportunity:

The current quagmire is the best reason to change the game. Make a new plan with good science, true innovation, embodying the real needs of patients and demands of public interest – and it will move. But it must be done immediately... missing this moment now, it will be lost, at great cost for generations.

If the eviscerated Bill now brewing in Congress becomes Law, in fact we are faced with a final Corporate takeover of healthcare: Cornering the market with vast new subsidies, controlling 'public health policy' as-applied, its very meaning at stake. It will be no reprieve from Government bureaucracy if medical decisions are made by HMO & insurance business bureaucrats – far more obtuse, capricious and impenetrable in their vested interests, as the last sixteen years have shown.

III) The mute deadlock of recent weeks is most telling: Media speculations persist on the prospects in Congress, but healthcare debate has dropped from sight, into partisan conclaves parsing and scheming behind closed doors. The twisted calculus of What Might Fly just got more complex, with the Democrats' lost Senate seat in Massachusetts.

It could turn out to be a good thing, if they come to realize that this mutant mockery of healthcare reform is unworkable and unwanted – already subverted by lobby money, and contrived on some conjectured middle ground where nobody lives.

The progressive bloc needs to wake up to its political strength: They are the real swing vote in both chambers, without whom the Bill goes nowhere... they can re-set the course on real reform, with support of most Americans in doing so.

Decisive here is the principle of transparency – the true promise of the erstwhile "Public Option", where medical and management decisions are accountable to higher public interests & standards. This offers a chance for a fair and competent system of care, which can protect patients, reduce costs, and raise performance, by consensus. Corporate medicine cannot achieve this, by nature and proof of history.

Speaking for many... we renew the call for real healthcare and real reform.

In my view, an effective public health plan is an essential part of the package:

Make the private sector compete with better-run programs, demonstrating more efficient delivery models, cutting overhead system-wide. Such a hybrid care system may offer the best of both worlds, in a uniquely American solution.

I have ideas, but there are studied perspectives on how to do this, what it entails, and smart, informed people to work out the pragmatics. Here the focus is the big picture, the emergent issues in real time, and the stakes for the future.

I hope this commentary is illuminating and useful.

Thanks for your open mind and creative leadership.

Respects,

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