

OP-ED COLUMNIST

Fear Strikes Out



The day before Sunday’s health care vote, President Obama gave an unscripted talk to House Democrats. Near the end, he spoke about why his party should pass reform: “Every once in a while a moment comes where you have a chance to vindicate all those best hopes that you had about yourself, about this country, where you have a chance to make good on those promises that you made ... And this is the time to make true on that promise. We are not bound to win, but we are bound to be true. We are not bound to succeed, but we are bound to let whatever light we have shine.”

And on the other side, here’s what Newt Gingrich, the Republican former speaker of the House — a man celebrated by many in his party as an intellectual leader — had to say: If Democrats pass health reform, “They will have destroyed their party much as Lyndon Johnson shattered the Democratic Party for 40 years” by passing civil rights legislation.

I’d argue that Mr. Gingrich is wrong about that: proposals to guarantee health insurance are often controversial before they go into effect — Ronald Reagan famously argued that Medicare would mean the end of American freedom — but always popular once enacted.

But that’s not the point I want to make today. Instead, I want you to consider the contrast: on one side, the closing argument was an appeal to our better angels, urging politicians to do what is right, even if it hurts their careers; on the other side, callous cynicism. Think about what it means to condemn health reform by comparing it to the Civil Rights Act. Who in modern America would say that L.B.J. did the wrong thing by pushing for racial equality? (Actually, we know who: the people at the Tea Party protest who hurled racial epithets at Democratic members of Congress on the eve of the vote.)

And that cynicism has been the hallmark of the whole campaign against reform.

Yes, a few conservative policy intellectuals, after making a show of thinking hard about the issues, claimed to be disturbed by reform’s fiscal implications (but were strangely unmoved by the clean bill of fiscal health from the Congressional Budget Office) or to want stronger action on costs (even though this reform does more to tackle health care costs than any previous legislation). For the most part, however, opponents of reform didn’t even pretend to engage with the reality either of the existing health care system or of the moderate, centrist plan — very close in outline to the reform Mitt Romney introduced in Massachusetts — that Democrats were proposing.

Instead, the emotional core of opposition to reform was blatant fear-mongering, unconstrained either by the facts or by any sense of decency.

It wasn't just the death panel smear. It was racial hate-mongering, like a piece in Investor's Business Daily declaring that health reform is "affirmative action on steroids, deciding everything from who becomes a doctor to who gets treatment on the basis of skin color." It was wild claims about abortion funding. It was the insistence that there is something tyrannical about giving young working Americans the assurance that health care will be available when they need it, an assurance that older Americans have enjoyed ever since Lyndon Johnson — whom Mr. Gingrich considers a failed president — pushed Medicare through over the howls of conservatives.

And let's be clear: the campaign of fear hasn't been carried out by a radical fringe, unconnected to the Republican establishment. On the contrary, that establishment has been involved and approving all the way. Politicians like Sarah Palin — who was, let us remember, the G.O.P.'s vice-presidential candidate — eagerly spread the death panel lie, and supposedly reasonable, moderate politicians like Senator Chuck Grassley refused to say that it was untrue. On the eve of the big vote, Republican members of Congress warned that "freedom dies a little bit today" and accused Democrats of "totalitarian tactics," which I believe means the process known as "voting."

Without question, the campaign of fear was effective: health reform went from being highly popular to wide disapproval, although the numbers have been improving lately. But the question was, would it actually be enough to block reform?

And the answer is no. The Democrats have done it. The House has passed the Senate version of health reform, and an improved version will be achieved through reconciliation.

This is, of course, a political victory for President Obama, and a triumph for Nancy Pelosi, the House speaker. But it is also a victory for America's soul. In the end, a vicious, unprincipled fear offensive failed to block reform. This time, fear struck out.

Editors' Note:

This column quotes Newt Gingrich as saying that "Lyndon Johnson shattered the Democratic Party for 40 years" by passing civil rights legislation, a quotation that originally appeared in The Washington Post. After this column was published, The Post reported that Mr. Gingrich said his comment referred to Johnson's Great Society policies, not to the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

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