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The “Big Lie” Approach to Health Insurance Reform

Congress and the Obama Administration have continued to modify their health care reform proposals in order to reduce the opposition of various entrenched health care special interests, including insurance and drug companies, while also reaching out to Republicans. That ongoing process of compromise, however, has only invigorated the rightwing opposition to any health care reform. The right has mobilized its troops and stormed the town hall meetings that were intended to encourage a civil public discussion of the various health care reform proposals. The rightwing clearly smells blood, a chance to cripple Barak Obama in his first major effort to implement one of the major planks of his campaign platform that helped him win the presidential election.

Debate is central to democracy. But the rightwing does not want to discuss the issues. Instead it has promoted a series of lies that have nothing to do with what the various Congressional committees and the Obama Administration have actually been considering.

We are being told, for instance, that the health care reform proposals would empower the federal government to engage in euthanasia, setting up “death committees” that would effectively execute seriously ill people. We are told that the government would prevent us from choosing our own doctors or deciding what type of medical treatment we wanted. Instead, government bureaucrats would impose those decisions on us. We are told that the federal government would begin financing and operating abortion mills, pushing abortion as a type of birth control. We are told that

what is being discussed and proposed is straightforward socialism, a government takeover of a big chunk of the economy.

This is the “big lie” approach to politics that seeks to scare the public out of rational and critical analysis of the actual problems that plague our health care system. The intended result is political paralysis and the maintenance of the status quo, which, although dysfunctional and increasingly unaffordable, is the source of substantial profits for many participants including insurance and drug companies.

This “big lie” approach is not new for the rightwing. Remember the weapons of mass destruction that we “knew” that Saddam Hussein had and the close links we were told he had to Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaeda terrorists who attacked the Twin Towers? On the basis of those big lies we launched a war that has lasted over six years with a cost approaching a trillion dollars, not to mention the loss of American and Iraqi lives.

The same folks now making hysterical assertions about the disaster that would flow from any substantial health care reform were also the folks who assured us that government regulation crippled the economy and that deregulation would bring us an economic renaissance. Instead it brought us the financial meltdown and the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression.

Of course, these are also the people who insist that President Obama is not really an American and is not legally our President. He also, we are told, is not a life-long Christian but actually a Muslim who is plotting against real Americans.

These folks have been so spectacularly wrong so often that it is astounding that they still have the nerve to stand up with a new set of wild assertions. What is even more appalling is the attention and influence they appear to have.

What we all need now is a sober dose of reality when it comes to the performance of our health care system and the existence of actual working alternatives that do better.

Despite the assertions that health care reform is a subversive socialist plot, every major capitalist economy in the world has a health insurance system that assures access to health care to all of its citizens. Conservative governments as well as liberal governments in market economies around the world support universal access to health care. Many different approaches have been taken, some making use of private insurance companies, others using a single payer approach. Some emphasizing the private practice of medicine and independent hospitals, others emphasizing government-run medical clinics and hospitals. There is a lot to pick and choose from. What almost all of them have in common, however, besides universal access to affordable health care, are lower costs and better medical outcomes. In addition, when citizens evaluate their health care systems in these other countries, they indicate much more satisfaction than we do with ours.

These are the stark fact about our existing health care system that opponents of reform want to obscure: It costs all of us lots and lots of money and those medical costs are projected to keep rising steeply until they bankrupt our families, our hospitals, and our governments. Tragically, at the same time, those huge expenditures are not making

us healthier. In terms of health outcomes, we are slipping relative to the rest of the world.

So why would we want to stick with the status quo? It is quite literally killing us.

We know we can do better. We have to do better. To do so requires change and change often produces anxiety and fear. It also produces strong push-back from those with a substantial financial interest in the status quo, no matter how irrational the status quo is. That anxiety, given expression by wealthy special interests, explains the current hysterical and irrational opposition to any health care reform.

We cannot let these emotional outbursts and the big lies deflect us from taking the first significant steps to reforming and rationalizing our health care system. The health of our families, our communities, and our economies depend upon it.