

## ***The President Calls the GOP Bluff***

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A My.BarackObama.com Entry, and an E-Mail to Political Activists**

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In his dramatic, historic, seven-plus-hour summit yesterday with both Democratic and Republican leaders of the House and Senate—[televised for all the world to see](#)—President Obama remained true to his reputation and convictions, and thus our cause: better, more affordable health care for more Americans.

With his characteristic intellect — [his mastery of issues impressing even his opposition](#)—and his sincerity and sense of fair play, the president did, yes, share his “bully pulpit” with his political opposition. And sadly, yet predictably, even in this “bipartisan” forum—as in town hall meetings and elsewhere nationwide, with the backing of ever-richer insurers—they spread half truths and outright lies, caught on camera by the president and Democrats, armed with the facts; the GOP continued their pattern of misinforming, misleading, terrifying, and enraging millions of Americans in opposition to the reforms championed by the president, Democrats in Congress, and millions of other Americans clamoring for life-and-death change.

As the Republicans in the summit continued to cite polls showing majorities of Americans now opposed to the Democratic bills (even though majorities of Americans are still in favor of most

elements of the plans)—thus demonstrating the power of the Right-wing “noise machine” if nothing else—the president time and again pointed out how many of the central provisions of the bills—such as “exchanges” for small businesses and individuals without employer-provided health insurance to purchase coverage at group-discount rates—were previously not only favored by the GOP but actually originally proposed by their legislators, before the Democrats and Pres. Obama gained power and the GOP became the “Party of No.”

And indeed, the Republicans in the summit again went on record as opposing the Democrats’ plan, as they whined and pined for the good ol’ days, when bipartisanship supposedly reigned supreme and Republicans joined Democrats in passing such wonderful things as Social Security and Medicare—the same Medicare the GOP is allegedly now trying to protect from the Democrats, looking to cut the very same budget-busting “fraud and abuse” the Republicans also denounced—the very same Medicare and Social Security that the Republicans tried to keep from ever being created in the first place and that they are still trying to dismantle, in favor of the same “free market” policies that now are bankrupting families, businesses, and governments and had

in “the good ol’ days” impoverished and extinguished the lives of so many seniors and others of the “least among us.”

To be sure, the Party of No was not strictly the party of no ideas (as their leadership has tried to confuse that issue): They were for the most part in favor of such things as doing away with the insurance companies’ “recession” of policies, when the insured have the audacity to get ill, or the insurers’ likewise unpopular refusal to insure anyone with “pre-existing conditions,” which all of us have, in one way or another (If we were always in perfect condition, then we wouldn’t need any insurance). However, the GOP remains adamantly opposed to a “wholesale government takeover of health care”—previously alleged in response to our proposal to have private, for-profit insurers compete with a non-profit public option, but now alleged in response to our proposal to have the federal government set minimum standards of coverage for health care policies. As the president pointed out, while the Republicans are decrying “big brother” from trying to take away the health care “choices” of Americans—and are spreading lies about “death panels” and the like — [such standards of care were originally proposed by conservative Republicans](#), trying to reign in wasteful, ineffective medical spending; and the government already sets safety standards for everything from food to prescription drugs. Sure, insurance policies could be sold much cheaper, if they didn’t actually cover anything (which they often already do, at high prices)!

The GOP continued to harp on the theme of decreasing costs, even as their plans would cover

[only a few million more people](#)—not the 30 million Americans who without insurance now would be covered by the Democrats’ plans—but one had to wonder how their plans would lower prices and/or maintain quality, given that not only were they utterly opposed to public option competition but also that the GOP would rely on such things as allowing people to buy insurance across state lines — like the president supports, although unlike the GOP, with federal minimum standards of coverage, to prevent a “race to the bottom”—or encouraging people to have health savings accounts, which as the president pointed out would be more of a comfort to someone like the legislators themselves than their poor or working class constituents, with much less income to save—all the while health insurance premiums have, as the Democrats kept pointing out, doubled in the last tens years and, at current rates, will double again in the next ten.

And that’s not even accounting for the increased demand for insurance, which would increase price, if you insure all those added folks with pre-existing conditions or rescinded policies. If the supposedly “free market” we have now won’t keep prices in line, how do the Democrats propose to pay for all the extra coverage? The fundamental way of providing more coverage in the insurance industry is to expand the pool of who is covered. Just like with Social Security or Medicare, those who are not now in as great a need of the service—namely, the healthy, especially most young adults—also contribute into the pool, helping to cover those more in need of the insurance; and no matter how “invincible” we may seem in our younger years, sooner or later each of us will, to one extent or

another (God only knows), need to draw upon that insurance. “Pooling the risk” is the whole idea behind insurance, how virtually every other industrialized nation prevents anyone from going bankrupt just because they get ill.

But of course, to reform “one-sixth of the nation’s economy,” as the GOP kept crying about (as if their neglect of all that for all the years that they were in power were thus somehow OK), requires equally massive legislation—the 2700 pages piled on the Republicans’ desk, as a prop televised to try to prop up their arguments. So their theme song throughout the day was “incremental change”: Let’s scrap the whole Democratic plan and all start over again—as if this last year of intense debate, hundreds of Republican amendments (many of which actually made it into the Democrats’ bills), and the summit yesterday had somehow accomplished as little as the GOP had hoped. They wanted just a few, small bills—covering, yes, just a fraction of those covered by the Democrats’ plans (The GOP chided the people at home to be better shoppers for better deals, even though study after study shows that in most states there are only one or two major insurers to choose from; and of course, those choices are incredibly, and increasingly, expensive) but avoiding controversy by just covering what the two sides agreed on.

Can anyone in even their wildest dreams imagine the Republicans when in power scrapping their entire agendas and agreeing to vote on only those things that the Democrats wanted?

Or can anyone ever imagine President Obama’s predecessor arranging a summit like this to give his political opposition a fair and open airing of all their ideas on any of his major policy actions? I don’t recall any such action.

No, as the president continually reminded everyone and as he stressed in his conclusion, “baby steps” won’t get us to where we need to go. [As the Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman has pointed out](#), trying to do health reform in small, disconnected chunks is like making a “one-legged stool”: The various parts support one another, like the increased pool of coverage allows us to spread the risk and cover more people, more reliably—yes, requiring large employers to cover their employees or pay into the pool; and yes, requiring individuals to purchase insurance, although with subsidies matching their need; and yes, requiring those in the upper one percent or so of incomes to help pitch in, to make a healthier, more productive and more humane America.

In the end, although the president played “high stakes poker” with his political opposition—giving them the same national platform he and his party enjoyed—he “played his hand” well: Pres. Obama “called their bluff”—their plans, while well presented and in at least some cases well meaning, could not match the Democrats’, [for availability, affordability, and dependability](#); and the president gave them just a few weeks to try to meet us halfway on the things that keep them from supporting any of our bills, even though, as he pointed out, much of what we are going to legislate are actually ideas supported by the GOP in the past (As the president stressed,

these are not “radical” bills; they are simply reforms of the free market insurance industry, not a “government takeover” or its undoing, as by “single payer,” Medicare for all, which many of us have called for in the past).

It’s now time for the Republicans to “show their hand.” If they’ve got nothing more to offer than what they’ve shown—and no intention of compromising on anything, even though we have compromised on so much (as by evidently dropping the public option, still given a good defense by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi), then the president has given his consent to Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid—both of whom have done herculean heavy lifting so far (even more than any of us can imagine, in this most highly charged political atmosphere)—to pursue the additional legislation necessary, beyond what’s in the already passed (and thus filibuster-proof) Senate bill, through whatever means necessary, meaning “budget reconciliation”—decried by the Republicans as some weird, undemocratic bending or breaking of the time-honored rules of the Senate but actually a simple majority-rules vote, in the Senate rules, used 22 times in the last 30 years—16 of those times by the Republicans, [as to pass two Bush budget-busting tax cuts, mostly for the wealthy](#)—and, also contrary to GOP claims, previously used to impact that “one-sixth of the U.S. economy,” as in passing of the popular and vital COBRA health insurance legislation (the “R” referring to Reconciliation).

As the president and the Democrats kept stressing—to their eternal credit—we cannot heed the GOP calls to “go slow” any more

(Especially since the recent loss of our filibuster-proof majority in the Senate, I sometimes feel like Sen. Olympia Snowe, always holding out hope of her vote if we just talk a while longer, has been more of an impediment than Sen. Jim DeMint, who came right out and said he wants to “break” Obama — and also America — with a health care defeat). It’s been a half century since Pres. Harry Truman called for universal health care for all Americans—a century since Teddy Roosevelt also raised the subject—and every year that goes by, filled with misinformation and intimidation from those profiting ever so handsomely by the status quo, another three quarters of a million Americans go broke from medical bills (and most of those folks had health insurance when they first got sick) and [another 45,000 Americans die](#) because they had no health insurance at all.

President Obama has taken powerful political hits, from both the Left and the Right; and any of us can point to where he might have done better. Should such a summit, with his committing to specifics of a plan and not just general goals, have been held last year, at the beginning of the debate? Or is the crafting of legislative particulars to meet executive branch objectives better left to the Congress, with the Chief Executive closing the deal, as in this summit? History will be the ultimate judge of all that (The president said the elections will have their say, too). But the bottom line is that because of the hard work and passionate appeals from all of us—the president, the Democrats in Congress, the political pundits and grassroots organizers on the Left, and just folks at home who think America can do better—we are now

closer than we have ever been to insuring that human life is more important than some corporate bottom line.

And that, to me, is the difference between a flesh-and-blood person and [a “person” on paper](#).

Let’s finish this job, and get on with the rest of our good work for America!