

Stormy Weather: Obama's health care plan hits town hall turbulence

**By Maria L. Fornella*

In spite of all the good news about the economy and the swift confirmation of Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court, the headlines this stormy week have been dominated by town hall brawls. As congressional representatives went home to their districts for their August recess, they were greeted by a volatile mixture of high temperatures, monsoon-like storms and furious mobs who stormed town hall meetings to protest against health reform. Several politicians, terrorized by the voters, suspended the meetings and ran past the mobs and into their getaway cars. They later announced they would take phone calls or meet voters individually in scheduled appointments. Journalists and TV talk show personalities were left wondering as to the origin of this new movement of storm troopers: were they real people, from the grassroots, fed up with the way Washington is dealing with health care reform, or was this manufactured, "Astroturf" mobilization, organized by the health insurance and drug companies, scared of losing a large share of their profits if a government-run plan is included on the final bill? Most likely it is a mixture of both. But whether fabricated or not, the tone of the debate and the images of scuffles and fist fights shocked the nation and left many asking what happened to American civility. More importantly, where was the President's leadership?

Granted, it is difficult to defend a bill that is not even ready, and Obama has avoided giving bottom lines that may come back to haunt him: his larger political purpose is to pass some kind of health care reform, even if serious compromises have to be made. Having taken the 1994 Clinton-care defeat lesson to heart, President Obama decided from the beginning that he could not dictate to Congress and therefore stated the general principles of health care reform (universal coverage and cost control) and then gave Congress leeway in writing the detailed legislation. But from the beginning, there was a deep chasm between progressives, who insist that a public-plan option is the best way to meet both goals, and conservatives, who adamantly oppose the government-run plan claiming it would bankrupt private insurance companies, and see this and the mandate of universal coverage as "socialized medicine". The Blue Dog Democrats, fiscally conservative, have joined ranks with the opposition and effectively killed the public option in some versions of the bill, replacing it with a vague alternative of co-ops (mutual care).

The result so far has been a confusion of bills and versions that no regular voter can understand. Indeed, not even those that are following the debate closely can tell with clarity what each version entails. But because health care is close and personal, it is easy to whip up a frenzy over it just by letting out a few misleading judgments, half truths and exaggerations, and hammering at them until they

have the ring of truth. Corporate interest groups from the health insurance and pharmaceutical industries are fiercely organizing fringe elements on the right, mainly instructing them to be disruptive of town hall meetings and to interrupt any serious discourse. And most of the average, less-educated voters use “easy” sources of information such as radio talk commentators (read: Rush Limbaugh) or TV news shows which are anything but “fair and balanced”, instead of hard sources (newspaper editorials, op-ed and factual news articles). In the end, when topics are complex and conflicting information saturates the media, people believe what they want to believe, what confirms their feelings and their ideological bent, what reassures them they are correct in their assumptions and emotions.

It is this state of confusion that has allowed the crazy mobs, aided and abetted by the likes of Rush Limbaugh and Sarah Palin, to make the most outlandish claims, from accusing the government of Socialism and Nazism in one voice, to vociferously asserting the Democrats’ plan includes euthanasia (of course it does not; it includes a voluntary option for terminal patients to get “counseling on end-of-life options”). But these are the same kind of people that kill abortion-clinic doctors and nurses in their crusade to “save innocent lives”. And exactly of the same kind as the “birthers”, those who do not believe President Obama was born in the United States, a fact very easily verifiable, since the White House has made his birth certificate available!

The point is, extremists are taking over that national scene and are attacking a bill that is not yet ready, based on false claims and preposterous characterizations. The left is now mobilizing union representatives to counteract the right wing crazies. Perhaps it would be better to cancel all town hall meetings, since it is expected that a bill will be passed by the end of the month. It will be most likely be a watered down version of what Obama initially wanted, but it will allow him to claim yet another victory, another check mark on his campaign promises.

The debate over health care has accomplished something that seemed unfathomable only a month ago: it has united Republicans. Economic conservatives, libertarians and extreme right social conservatives are all against the public plan option. However, even if they were successful in defeating this bill, as long as they continue on this course of adamant opposition, they will not be well-positioned for the 2010 elections. They will have no other policy initiatives or legislative accomplishments to boast of and they will still be easily characterized as the “party of no.” Their political calculations made them oppose a highly qualified Supreme Court nominee in a futile exercise that has put them on the wrong side of history and set them back at least for a decade in getting electoral support from the Latino community, the largest and fastest-growing minority group in the country. The void of Republican political leadership has been filled by extremist groups and irresponsible radio talk commentators, reducing the party’s appeal to moderates and independents.

This dramatic realization is one incentive to get Republicans to work harder in passing health care reform in some bipartisan shape or form. But this is not likely, since their preference so far has been to deny Obama any chance of bipartisanship. Another motivation to bring them to the table should be the

awareness that, if the rising cost curve of health care is not brought under control, the economic recovery that is starting to show will only be temporary, the deficit will continue to grow and other countries will not be so accommodating in holding US debt. But political expedience on their part may overtake even this fundamental concern about the future economic stability of the country.

On his part, Obama will have the problem of dealing with the liberal wing of his party: the left will be furious if, with a majority in both Houses, their version of health care reform does not pass, and the President settles for a weaker, watered down version. Indeed, in general terms, the biggest and most immediate test for Obama will be how far he allows the left in Congress to go before he decides to rein them in. In order to regain control of the health care debate, the President held his own town hall meeting in New Hampshire this past Tuesday. His message was clearer and more focused as he answered genuine concerns and questions from the audience. But to what extent he was able to calm down the prevailing anxiety in the country at large still remains to be seen. Outside the town hall, two groups of irate citizens on the opposite ends of the political spectrum confronted each other, yelled and shook their fists, but the police were able to restrain them without much effort.

In spite of the turbulent TV images that have inundated the airways this week, the majority of the electorate in this country is still moderate, rational and centrist. They want health care reform and they want it to include a government-run option, which they may or may not buy into, but which they see as an important way to spur competition, in the understanding that it is competition and not monopolies that help control costs. They also want reform of the way private insurance companies ration care, for example, by denying coverage to those with pre-existing conditions. They are appalled at the crazies on the right, with their false claims about a bill they have not read, and their outrageous claims of Socialism and Nazism, which they merge into one demonic ideology. They are tired of their pseudo-religious zeal and self-righteousness, their insistence on rejecting Darwin's theory of evolution along with global warming, climate change and stem cell research, their violent outbursts, and their tendency to speak in terms of Good (themselves) and Evil (the rest). And they are embarrassed at the subtext of racism that underlies most of the extremists' demented claims, and which becomes crystal clear in their assertion that President Obama is not an American citizen.

On the other hand, most citizens are also wary of ultra-liberals on the left, who want to use the Democrats' prevalence to entrench new vast social programs, over-regulate the financial system and corporate pay, and raise taxes to levels that would choke growth and productivity; they are afraid they will forever bankrupt the government and the country.

Six months into his presidency, Obama faces sinking approval numbers and the possibility of a major defeat. After a string of solid successes that included, among others, passing an 800 billion dollar economic stimulus plan, expanding children's health insurance, and rescuing the banking system, his agenda may get bogged down in the politics-as-usual Washington culture he promised to change. It will take all his will power and discipline to stay focused, get back on

message and resist the blows. His ambition will have to be tempered by patience, caution and political skill. As his aura wears off, the coming battles will be the final test of his courage and determination to succeed.

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