

Obama fighting back, at last!

Written by Ron Walters

Thursday, 17 September 2009 15:51

President Barack Obama took off the gloves in his speech to Congress on health care reform, seeming to hear those who said that he was not leading, that he had not been specific enough; they did not know where he stood on some of the critical issues. Of course, many of these charges are a mystery to me, perhaps because I paid attention to the speeches that previewed the aims of his initial White House Summit on health care, the bi-partisan meetings in the White House on health care, the many speeches he has given on town halls all over the country, the Saturday messages on health care, and the many other places where he has given his views on this subject.

Where have they been? Well-regarded TV hosts, guests, distinguished newspaper opinion writers and others appear to want to create conflict to boost ratings, because they are really not that separated from the normal goings on in the governing process. I heard the same thing during the campaign about Obama; his critics claimed “lack of specificity” when he had laid out 328 specific policy proposals.

No matter. Obama tried to allay their concerns by citing improvements that would occur for those who wanted to keep their health care. Nothing would change except that: Insurance companies would be prevented from denying coverage for pre-existing conditions, dropping people from coverage, placing caps on benefits, caps would be placed on out-of-pocket expenses, and companies would be required to cover routine screening.

For those who did not have health care and worked, they would be covered by employers, but if they left their jobs, they would be able to take their coverage with them. They would also have access to an exchange of companies and a Public (Option) program that would be available at an affordable cost, and have a tax credit to subsidize their purchase of health care.

The President stressed the personal responsibility for people to seek to obtain health care under the options available and collective responsibility for companies to provide affordable coverage to their employees. If not there would be fines, but a hardship waiver would be available that would cover 95% of businesses.

Then he turned his attention to rejecting the myth-making of Republicans. They had, for example, conjured up the notion that “death-panels” would be set up by the government to determine end of life choices for many, that Republican Sen. Grassley and others called “pulling the plug on grandma.” He said there were specific provisions in the bill that would outlaw immigrants from receiving federal subsidy for health care, and denied that federal funds could be used for abortions as against existing law.

He addressed the Public Option as one part of the exchange that would be set up, most of which would be private insurance companies. The aim would be to bring insurance costs down and keep quality up by having a government option, not having the government run the whole system. And although he said he would not sign a bill that was not revenue neutral, not adding costs to the deficit, he did not make the same pledge for the public option that is highly popular with the American people – not just the Left. It seems to have been left in a negotiating posture.

Perhaps growing tired with the games being played by Republicans who appeared to want a

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bi-partisan bill, but would then go and criticize the measures in the bill that had come out of the House, he sounded tough in saying that he still wanted bi-partisanship, but the time for game-playing was over, that he would “call them out” if they were not serious.

In fact, this was generous in light of the fact that Republicans visibly rejected much of what he was saying and one, Rep. Joe Wilson of South Carolina, even shouted that the president was a liar on his statement about not covering immigrants. The Wilson saga was out of character because never in the history of modern America has any sitting president been called vile names from the floor in the middle of a speech to Congress. Is this because the man behind the podium was Black and the person who shouted at him was from the slave-holding south? I think so. Wilson should apologize on the floor of the House, or be censured by the House for his statement. The Democratic Party should exact the same kind of accountability that Republicans would have if the situation had been reversed.

Otherwise, it was a very good and timely speech that addressed the issues. At the end of that week, conservative radicals had a “march on Washington” and the media said tens of thousands had come. But who cares, they lost.

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