Editor’s Letter-Winter 2009

Scary Times for a Health Care Reformist

December 2, 2009 By Kate Ferguson

Several months ago, I went to a town hall meeting in my city, Hackensack, New Jersey. My Congressman, Steve Rothman (D–N.J.), was on a speaking tour, engaging public debate about President Obama’s plans for health care reform. Curious about the firestorm of controversy the issue sparked (which continues), I wanted to see for myself what had the naysayers so incensed.

When I arrived, the high school auditorium hosting the event was packed. I found a spot in the back and watched Rothman field questions and comments from a cross section of people—including the expected rabble-rousers.

Invariably, these folks came to heckle and jeer regardless of what Rothman said. One obnoxious woman standing in the back near me proved to be such a distraction that an event organizer was forced to remind her that common courtesy required she be quiet to let others have their say.

Her response? An opaque stare, vigorous flag-waving and jaw clenches that spoke volumes. I questioned whether she’d heard what Rothman or anyone else said. That she had an agenda of her own seemed clear.

Now I understood why other town hall meetings had erupted in sporadic episodes of fisticuffs.

In my local town hall, I witnessed how easy it is for mindless, unreasoning fear to overshadow the need we have in America for a better health care system.

Despite the abundance of information offered by President Obama and his staff about what his health care reform program is and is not, there are those who simply refuse to listen to him and accept the facts.

As one of the millions of Americans affected by skyrocketing health care costs and disparities that undermine the quality of our lives, I find it incomprehensible that so many people seem outraged by this crucial reform effort.

When potential gun-toting assassins attend meetings between the public and the president, I feel we’ve moved beyond having a civilized discourse on the issues.

Sure, there are valid questions and concerns that health care reform planners need to address, but the forum seems compromised.

Although President Obama has dismissed former President Jimmy Carter's assertion that the disturbing trend to demonize Obama is rooted in racism, I wholeheartedly disagree.

One Republican blamed the often irrational criticism on people's "fear of the future" and Americans' anger at the government and Wall Street. But since when has anger of this sort translated into a feeling that it's OK to get strapped to show your displeasure with the president's views.

And what about that Obama assassination poll on Facebook? Where are folks going with this? What exactly is it about health care reform that has struck such a nerve?

Oh, yes, it's the public option—a government-insured health care proposition included in the reform—that has folks up in arms (literally).

In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson instituted the government-run Medicare insurance program specifically for senior citizens. Although there was reluctance then to embrace that "public option," my research did not uncover any evidence that those who disagreed with the president proposed assassination as a private option to stop Johnson.

What's so different this time around? To me it seems clear.

The issue is now a matter of black and white.

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