

Why Is Obama So Obstinate?

By BYRON YORK

Newspaper Enterprise Association

"There have been a lot of comments from every Republican about the polls," President Obama said near the end of the Feb. 25 White House summit on healthcare reform. "What's interesting is when you poll people about the individual elements in each of these bills, they're all for them."

What Obama was addressing was a dilemma that drives Democrats crazy. Polls show the public supports some parts of the Democratic national healthcare-reform plan, but adamantly opposes the comprehensive bill now dying a slow death on Capitol Hill.

Just look at the latest survey from CNN and Opinion Research. When asked if



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they support "preventing health-insurance companies from dropping coverage for people who become seriously ill," 62 percent say "yes". When asked whether they support "requiring all large and midsized businesses to provide health insurance for their employees," 72 percent say "yes". And when asked if they support "preventing health-insurance companies from denying coverage to people with pre-existing conditions," 58 percent say "yes".

On the other hand, asked what Congress should do on health care — pass the current bill, start work on an entirely new bill, or stop working on the issue altogether — a huge majority opposes the Democratic proposal now on the table.

Just 25 percent of those surveyed want to see the bill passed, 48 percent want Congress to start over, and 25 percent want lawmakers to stop working on health care altogether. Put those last two together, and an overwhelming majority of 73 percent does not want Congress to pass

the current bill.

The White House is cherry-picking the news it likes; that's what Obama was doing when he said the public is "all for" elements of the bill. But bring up the polls showing people just don't want the current bill, and the administration gets a little dodgy.

"Who knows what is in those polls, how they were taken, when they were taken?" White House healthcare spokeswoman Linda Douglass told Fox News during a break in the summit.

But why do people support some elements of the bill while opposing the bill overall? Some Democrats blame Republican misinformation. Some believe it's because the bill isn't yet a reality; people would love it, they say, if only it were passed. Others say the public just doesn't know what is best.

Few Democrats can accept the possibility that voters are telling them their whole approach is wrong. Big, compre-

hensive legislative proposals just make people nervous.

"We don't do comprehensive well," Republican Sen. Lamar Alexander said at the health summit. "We've watched the comprehensive, economy-wide cap and trade. We've watched the comprehensive immigration bill ... we've watched the comprehensive healthcare bill. And they fall of their own weight."

That's what's happening now. And it's something Democrats would know if they had listened to one of their leading pollsters.

Back during the 2004 presidential race, there was a debate going on inside the John Kerry campaign. Should the Democratic candidate push bold, far-reaching proposals? Or should he balance boldness with more modest initiatives?

Pollster Stanley Greenberg did some research. He found that, when considered individually, Kerry's most sweeping plans were more popular with voters than his

more modest ones. "Voters are ready to respond to new ideas, particularly bold ones," Greenberg wrote.

To further test the idea, Greenberg put together a hypothetical Kerry agenda — he called it "Bold Kerry" — which included all of the candidate's bold ideas.

Voters balked. They were uneasy with the big agenda, even though they liked some elements of it. "While voters are clearly open to bold initiatives to major problems, they may be less attracted to the candidate who wants to act boldly in every area, without exception," Greenberg concluded. "All together, that may have suggested an expanding scope for government beyond what people felt they could trust."

And that is what is happening now with health care. Ever since Inauguration Day, the White House has acted on the assumption that, because voters elected Barack Obama, they want "Bold Obama." All the evidence suggests that is wrong.

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Thought for Today "Remember, O Lord, thy tender mercies and thy loving kindnesses; for they have been ever of old. Remember not the sins of thy youth, nor my transgressions..." Psalm 25:6-7

Dr. Hendry Served Us All

The passing of Dr. Katherine Virginia (McMillan) Hendry of Blackshear was announced in this newspaper's obituary columns on Monday, the end of a Blackshear medical family that stretched back to the dawn of the 20th century. Her late father-in-law, Tracy Hendry, opened his share of human practice careers.

The late Dr. Hendry, who was born in 1908, was born in December 1908, was born in Georgia where she spent her life. She was a devoted wife and mother, and a dedicated professional. She was a member of the Georgia Medical Association and the American Medical Association. She was a devoted wife and mother, and a dedicated professional. She was a member of the Georgia Medical Association and the American Medical Association.

Both she and her late husband also did post-graduate work at Cook County Hospital, Chicago, Ill., where she completed a six-week course on anesthesia in 1953. He would study surgery during the comparable period.

Americans Want Jobs

We are pleased that President Obama chose to visit Savannah on Tuesday. We warmly welcomed him to our community and to Georgia, his first trip to the state since his inauguration.

The nation may be politically divided. But red states like Georgia are struggling, and one of the best ways to unite Americans is to put more of them back to work.

In that regard, Savannah is doing many things right. Take Savannah's port, one of the nation's busiest. It's the only major U.S. port that has shown double-digit growth over the past three months, and, more significantly, it's the only major U.S. port where exports exceed imports (55 percent to 45 percent).

This port is a job engine for Georgia, yet it's in danger of sputtering if it can't be deepened to accommodate the larger container ships that will soon be using the improved Panama Canal. Without help from Washington to cover some of the cost of the \$500-million-plus project, a lot of good-paying jobs will dry up.

That's just one example. Job training is another. Programs at Savannah Tech, which the president visited, are vital.

The state-run vocational-technical school helps train workers for good-paying blue collar jobs for new industries. One is Efacec, a Portuguese company that's building an electrical transforming plant in nearby Effingham County.

The company is expected to employ 600 workers. Savannah Tech proves there is life — and good jobs — after high school for those willing to acquire skills and go to work.

Yet the state is hurting economically and can't fund

many educational programs. Washington must help here, too.

To win over Georgians' hearts and minds, we hope the president listened well as talked in his "White House to Main Street Tour."

We would like to see a shift in rhetoric toward a job creation plan that enhances our current economic and energy infrastructure, rather than efforts that will make living more expensive and jobs more scarce.

We disagree with the administration's cap-and-trade plan to achieve less carbon emissions. While wind and solar programs have clear benefits, the current proposal is too heavy-handed and will hurt economic recovery efforts.

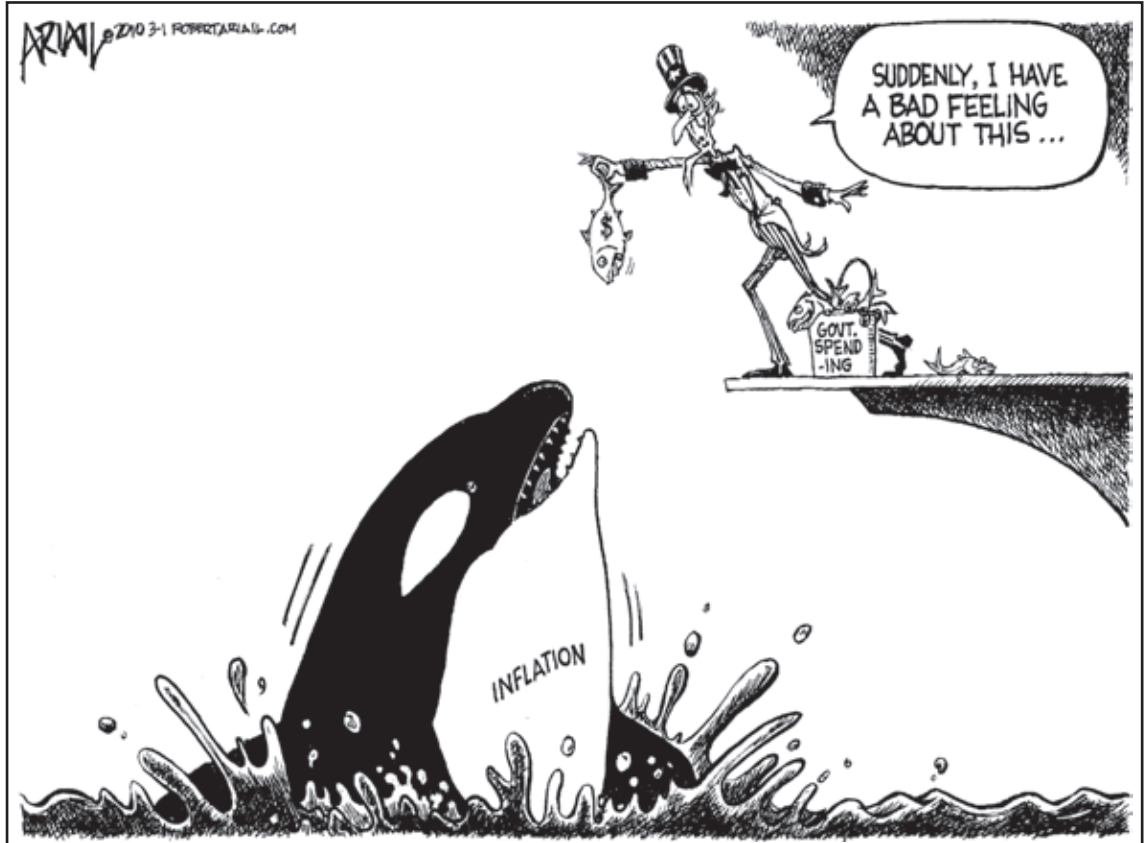
On health care, there's no question that some reform is needed. Rising costs threaten to take down the entire system, as providers struggle to cover expenses and businesses scramble to cover increasing premiums for their employees.

And in the meantime, too many go without coverage.

Democrats and Republicans must find common ground. It doesn't have to be all or nothing. Instead, do something. A compromise package is better than no reform at all.

Obama's visit wasn't a campaign stop (although there's no mistaking some of the political reasons behind it, such as getting out of Washington and appearing presidential).

Instead, Savannah was more like a stage where many things were already scripted. Fine. We understand that. However, we would have wished for the president to spend more time with real people, especially those who run small businesses like cabinet maker Chris Williamson of Garden City.



Hard Ball

Politics Hurts U.S. Congress

By COKIE ROBERTS
And STEVEN V. ROBERTS
Newspaper Enterprise Association

During the 1960s, Cokie's father, Hale Boggs, served as the Democratic whip in the House of Representatives. For much of that time, the Republican leader was Gerald Ford, and in an interview with Cokie a few years before his death in 2006, Ford recalled the close personal relationship between the political rivals.

The two of them would regularly get in a car on Capitol Hill and head downtown for a lunchtime debate at a place like the National Press Club. Their differences were real, and their conversation spirited, recalled Ford, but then they would get back in the car and continue their friendship.

We thought of this story when Sen. Evan Bayh, an Indiana Democrat, recently announced his retirement by denouncing the "brain dead" politics of Capitol Hill. "There is too much partisanship and not enough progress," he says. "Too much narrow ideology and not enough problem-solving."

Most Americans agree, and Bayh gave the *New York Times* a series of reasons for this paralysis: The filibuster has been "increasingly abused by both parties"; lawmakers spend "huge amounts of time" raising money and kowtowing to special interests; ideological factions, promoted by cable TV, breed a culture where "compromise is a sign of betrayal or an indication of moral lassitude."

All good points, but none are more important than the issue raised by Ford and echoed by Bayh, whose father, Birch, served in the Senate from 1963 to 1981. Members of Congress are far less likely today to know one another, talk to one another, like one another or respect one another. "While romanticizing the Senate of yore would be a mistake, it was certainly better in my father's time," writes Bayh, and he tells this story to make his point: "In 1968, when my father was running for re-election, Everett Dirksen, the Republican leader, approached him on the Senate floor, put his arm around my dad's shoulder, and asked what he could do to help. That is unimaginable today."

It sure is, and one of the main reasons is that members of Congress are far less likely to move their families to Washington. It's easier to commute by air these days, housing costs in the capital have skyrocketed, and many spouses have careers back home that are difficult to uproot. More seriously, many candidates are running

against Washington as Gomorrah-on-the-Potomac, a sinful city that corrupts the soul. So if they win, they cannot move their families here even if they want to. They're trapped by their own rhetoric.

The Boggs family bought a house in suburban Washington and moved here full time when Cokie was 8 (we still live in that house). Next door was the family of Ab Hermann, a prominent Republican official on Capitol Hill, and on many evenings, Hale and Ab would share a drink, a walk and a story or two. Congressional wives knew one another as well, collaborating at the PTA or running charitable organizations together. And so did their children. Cokie went to dancing school with Richard Nixon's daughters.

Ab Hermann's daughter, Jo Ann Emerson, is now a Republican member of Congress, and she mourns the loss of those cross-party connections: "There was much more closeness among all members of Congress, we did things socially, you hardly see any of that anymore."

Ellen McCarthy grew up in our neighborhood while her father, Gene, served in the Senate from Minnesota. She is now a congressional staffer who briefs new members on life in the capital, and while she urges them to bring their families here, most spurn her advice because they fear "going Washington." The result, she says, is that lawmakers "don't spend any time with each other, they don't get to know each other as people, and I think it's a loss to the country."

Ideas abound for easing that loss. Bayh suggests a monthly lunch attended only by senators from both parties. "Listening to one another," he says, "absent the posturing and public talking points, could only promote greater understanding."

Political scientist Norm Ornstein recommends changing the congressional schedule from Tuesday to Thursday to Monday to Friday, with one week out of four devoted to going home and seeing constituents.

This would be a "major incentive" for lawmakers to move their families here, argues Ornstein. "It is much harder to demonize your colleagues if you stand next to them, watching your kids play soccer on Saturdays," he says.

That's true. Friendships, such as the one between Hale Boggs and Gerald Ford, lubricate legislation. Without them, the machinery of government seizes up and stops running.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Steve and Cokie Roberts can be contacted by e-mail at stevecokie@gmail.com.

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