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RIGHT WING WATCH



To Hell with Health Care Reform: Religious Right Leaders Attack Obama, Spout GOP Dogma about “Socialism” While Fanning Flames on Abortion

Religious Right leaders have enthusiastically joined Republican-led opposition to health care reform efforts.

Much of the Religious Right’s organizing energy has been devoted to incendiary and false claims about the administration’s alleged stealth plan to force every health plan to cover - and force all doctors to provide - abortion services. None of these approaches are actually included in the plans working their way through Congress. In fact, anti-choice members of Congress are using health reform to institute a new nationwide abortion ban in private insurance plans – taking away coverage women already have.

In addition, Religious Right leaders have joined the parade of talking heads spouting bogus right-wing talking points about health care plans moving in Congress, falsely claiming that reform constitutes a socialist government takeover of the entire health care industry.

Focus on the Family’s James Dobson, on a recent [conference call](#) for anti-choice activists, sounded both those charges, calling reform legislation a “huge abortion industry bailout” as well as a “health care power grab by the federal government.” Operation Rescue similarly conflates the anti-choice and anti-government arguments, [urging](#) activists “to act now to stop Obama’s radical, socialistic abortion agenda...” The Christian Broadcasting Network has provided a major platform for anti-reform activists.

Why is the Religious Right throwing so much rhetorical and organizing energy into defeating health care reform? Several reasons.

Religious Right leaders share a deep and abiding hostility for President Obama and are using both the anti-choice and anti-government lines of attack to try to discredit him and diminish his political and legislative effectiveness. In the now-infamous words of Sen. Jim DeMint, unquestionably the number one congressional [mouthpiece for the radical Religious Right](#), “If we’re able to stop Obama on this, it will be his Waterloo. It will break him.”

In addition, Religious Right leaders see the abortion-funding question as a way to enrage and energize anti-choice activists who took a huge beating at the polls in 2008. And they see the attempt to defeat health care reform as a broader way to breathe new life into the coalition between social conservatives and economic conservatives that the Republican Party has relied on in recent years (at least since Religious Right groups made a bid for greater political influence by deciding that opposition to tax increases of any form was a “family value” and backing the Contract in America).

In the aftermath of the GOP’s 2008 electoral bloodbath, Newt Gingrich, Ralph Reed, and other strategists have launched their own efforts to revitalize the right wing. Turning health care reform into a battle against both “socialism” and “genocide” is a clear effort to unite both wings of the party, tarnish both the Obama administration and congressional democrats, and boost GOP prospects in 2010 and 2012.

A Family Research Council ad / web [video](#) supposedly showing the future after a government take-over of health care features a couple from the “greatest generation” complaining that the government won’t pay for the husband’s surgery, but is forcing them to pay for abortions. “Our greatest generation denied care, our future generation denied life,” says the ad, which concludes by urging viewers to contact their senators to “stop the government takeover of health care.”

The same political strategy is reflected in the creation of the Freedom Federation, a new confederation of Religious Right groups that managed to publish a long [Declaration of American Values](#) that said nothing whatsoever about the moral imperative to make sure all Americans have access to health care, but did insist that progressive taxation is un-Biblical. Among its commitments:

To secure a system of fair taxes that are not punitive against the institution of marriage or family and are not progressive in nature, and within a limited government framework, to encourage economic opportunity, free enterprise, and free market competition.

And when progressive people of faith organized a campaign to support reform, FRC [attacked](#) the effort, saying it advanced ""an anti-faith, anti-family anti-freedom agenda" and calling it "a new strategy to use the veneer of religion to cover a socialist agenda that will federalize another 17% of our nation's economy."

Of course, like GOP leaders, Religious Right leaders have not offered their own plan. The Family Research Council's Tony Perkins has picked up on the fact that just saying "no" is a risky option, and so he [says](#) things like "We need accessibility, affordability, portability, and transparency." But he's not very clear on how to get there. His political and book-publishing partner Bishop Harry Jackson, meanwhile, has not devoted a single one of his weekly Town Hall columns to promoting improved access to affordable health care, even though his 2008 book with Perkins said that making sure all Americans had access to health care was an important moral question.

Attacking Obama

As Sen. DeMint made transparently clear, a major goal of the anti-reform crowd is to continue to portray President Obama as a radical who, with the help of congressional Democrats, is attempting to railroad the country into socialism. Much of Religious Right leaders' rhetoric on this front is indistinguishable from GOP political consultant talking points that are [recited](#) by the likes of RNC Chairman Michael Steele.

Here's FRC's Tony Perkins:

Mr. President, it is about you. It is about your insistence on rushing health care legislation that will affect over 16 percent of our nation's economy. It is about you championing legislation in Congress that will ultimately shut down private businesses and the private health insurance market and take away options for all citizens. It is about your champions in Congress insisting that abortion is a part of "basic health care" and that taxpayers should pay for it.

A variation that amps up the rhetoric even further comes from an FRC [action alert](#):

This week congress is debating President Obama's plan to seize control of your personal health care. It will produce a moral disaster that puts you and your family under the thumb of politicians and federal bureaucrats.

But with your help today, Family Research Council (FRC) will battle back against this massive, unprecedented attack on faith, family, and freedom.

Televangelist Pat Robertson appeared on Glenn Beck's [show](#) to sound the anti-Obama alarm:

Obama and his crew are taking advantage of this to insert socialism and government control. He, you know, winds up taking over the automobile industry, the banking industry and before long, health care. And it's a massive power grab to satisfy the left.

Matt Barber, Associate Dean with (Jerry Falwell's) Liberty University School of Law and Director of Cultural Affairs at Liberty Counsel, recently [denounced](#) President Obama's "über-extremism" and suggested that forced sterilization and abortions were just around the corner:

We have taxpayer-funded abortion, health care rationing for the elderly and infirm, and vaccination interventions in your living room. I fit all that into one sentence. Obamacare is nearly 1,100 pages long, and even the president hasn't read it. I see no evidence anyone has.

But half the fun is in finding out what other gems it holds. Forced abortion? Compulsory sterilization? Well, maybe not yet, but is it really that much of a stretch?

On a July 23 [teleconference](#) organized by a bunch of anti-choice leaders, Rep. Chris Smith, among others, used his remarks to directly attack the credibility of President Obama and his stated efforts to find common

ground on reducing the need for abortion. Another speaker said Obama is a “true believer” in abortion and believes “the end justifies the means.”

Some of the anti-Obama rhetoric has been even more pointed. Day Gardner, who represents an anti-choice group, said on the same conference call that President Obama “might have black skin” but “he does not care about black babies.”

Spouting Right-Wing Talking Points

The Obama administration and congressional leaders decided from the start that they would not seek to replace the current structure of private insurance with a single-payer system sought by many progressive reform advocates. But that decision has not in any way stopped Religious Right leaders from claiming that the plan represents a government “takeover” of health insurance. Religious Right leaders have fully embraced the anti-government rhetoric of the enemies of health care reform. Pat Robertson [called](#) it a move toward a “socialist colossus.”

The anti-choice Operation Rescue [calls](#) the plan:

“a complete socialization of our health care system...President Obama is demanding that Congress demand to approve what could be the largest transfer of private industry into the hands of big brother, before the American people can understand what is happening...he knows he must move quickly to ram-rod through what amounts to socialized medicine before the people can learn enough about it to oppose it.”

The Family Research Council’s Tony Perkins has been at the forefront of the attacks on Democratic health care reform proposals, spouting the anti-government line with [Lou Dobbs](#) on CNN:

“It calls the shots, one-size fits all. I don’t know if you’ve ever had one of those hospital gowns, they’re one-size fits all and important things left uncovered. And that’s what will happen with a health care plan.”

and on Focus on the Family founder [James Dobson’s radio show](#):

“government is now talking about taking over health care...I for one do not want to see the federal government taking over health care.”

James Dobson inadvertently made it clear how reflexively anti-Obama the right-wing opposition is when he responded to Perkins’ comments by [saying](#) “we don’t even know what it consists of but it’s not going to be good for most Americans.” Concerned Women for America insisted in an [action alert](#) that the plan would result in “a massive government take-over of health care....Massive increases in costs (and taxes), yet less access to services.” Perkins even took a clue from the folks who sabotaged the Clinton administration’s reform efforts by creating a [video](#) featuring flow charts to complain that reform would be “complicated.” No kidding.

Even Maggie Gallagher, the anti-gay zealot who leads the National Organization for Marriage’s attacks on equality in the states, [got into the act](#) recently:

The reality is that for the already insured, Obamacare will mean less care, rationed by government. For the uninsured it will mean much greater expense. Less care, higher costs.

The Right Kind of Health Care Rationing

A key line of attack on health care reform is that efforts to control health care costs would result in some kind of sinister health care “rationing” – as if our current system of insurance company restrictions and tens of millions of people without insurance do not result in a particularly brutal form of rationing.

The Christian Broadcasting Network has been [pushing](#) the rationing line. During a [story](#) anchor Wendy Griffith summarized claims by a representative of National Right to Life by saying, “what I hear you saying is that this would put the government in the position of playing God.” A spokesperson for “Conservatives for Patients First” insisted that government control was bad because health care should be a decision between

you, your doctor and your family. There's no discussion here about the millions of Americans driven into foreclosure or bankruptcy by medical bills – sometimes people with insurance that turns out to be relatively useless against a catastrophic medical expense. Perkins has even [complained](#) that the health plan would disadvantage people who under the current system “want to” sell their house because they are so desperate to pay for medical treatment.

The schedule for this year's Values Voter Summit, the annual gathering of Religious Right leaders sponsored by FRC, Focus on the Family, and other right-wing groups, features no sessions on the importance of making sure that all Americans have access to health care, but does include the following item on its schedule:

OBAMACARE: RATIONING YOUR LIFE AWAY

Long lines, refusal of care, months waiting for needed surgeries, rationing of treatments, mandates in support of abortion. These are all results of the health care plan currently being debated and placed in the United States, affecting all aspects of your life from your family decisions, to your paycheck to your tax bill. Is it the role of the federal government to provide womb to tomb healthcare? What about personal choice?

CWA [warned activists](#) that under Obama's plans, “The disabled and elderly – anyone who bureaucrats decide won't get ‘healthier’ – will get cut off.” In other words, they said, “The bills being debated will determine who decides which patients will get what (if any) treatments, and literally, who will live and who will die.”

Wendy Wright of CWA, on the Religious Right teleconference call, summarized her reasons for opposing the health care bill: “it will take your money to empower bureaucrats” to essentially decide “who will live and who will die”

Abortion

Religious Right groups are working hard to inflame anti-choice activists by claiming falsely that there is a so-called “abortion mandate” in the health care reform bills moving through Congress. They are also going one step further, using manufactured outrage over health care reform to launch a broader attack on Planned Parenthood to try to strip it of federal funding that now supports its clinics' non-abortion family planning and women's health services.

The fact is that abortion is not referenced in any of the bills in the same way other medical procedures are not specified. But a group of anti-choice members of Congress, led by Representatives Bart Stupak (D-MI) and Joe Pitts (R-PA), is pushing an extreme measure that would result in a new nationwide abortion ban in the private health insurance market. Most private plans currently offer abortion as an option – but women who have this coverage would lose it under the extreme Stupak-Pitts proposal.

Fanning the flames

The major focus of Religious Right organizing has been to fan the flames of anti-choice extremists by insisting that the health care bills, which do not mention abortion, would require, in the words of one Concerned Women for America [alert to activists](#), “abortion on demand, unregulated and taxpayer funded.”

Douglas Johnson, National Right to Life Committee legislative director, says “the public is awakening to the Obama Administration's attempt to smuggle into law the greatest expansion of abortion since Roe v. Wade.” Said Rep. Chris Smith on the recent conference call, “if we fail, millions of children will die.”

Operation Rescue Founder Randall Terry has repeatedly [warned](#) that any taxpayer funding for abortion services would trigger massive refusal by anti-choice activists to pay their taxes and “violent convulsions” by some anti-choice zealots.

Typical of such rhetoric is Operation Rescue's [message](#) to its activists:

"Congress is being pressured to pass a bill that would not do what Obama is telling the nation it would do. It would force Americans to pay for abortions against their will and their consciences. We must speak out now against this radical march to socialism and state funded child-killing. We cannot allow even one dime of our money to pay for abortion."

...

"America is about to experience an unparalleled assault on the pre-born child. If Obama succeeds in financing abortion in his health care plan, it will set the pro-life movement back two decades and cost the lives of millions of innocent babies. If we don't act today, we could come back from our summer vacations to a very different America," said Newman.

From Catholic League president Bill Donohue:

"If the Bush administration had said that it wants to seek 'common ground' on gun control, and then decided to subsidize handguns in high crime areas, it would have been condemned from high heaven. The Obama administration's game of playing footsy with the abortion industry should similarly be condemned. Indeed, it represents the audacity of duplicity to dialogue about abortion and then send the public an invoice for killing kids in utero."

"Bailing out" the "abortion industry" or "taking out" Planned Parenthood

A number of Religious Right leaders, including Focus of the Family's James Dobson, refer to the bill as a "bailout" of the "abortion industry." Some have called it a bailout specifically for Planned Parenthood, and used the health care debate to advance their attacks on family planning funding.

The attack on Planned Parenthood has been a long one. Last fall, Bishop Harry Jackson [told](#) participants in a rally on the National Mall that the organization was waging genocide against black Americans and that rally participants needed to "take Planned Parenthood out." On the recent teleconference by anti-choice groups, Jackson again referred to the "genocidal targeting of black fetuses." On the same call, Dr. Alveda King, MLK's niece and a "Pastoral Associate" of Priests for Life, [called](#) abortion "genocide" and referred to Planned Parenthood as "the billion-dollar business that has killed more black children than the KKK." Alveda King's inflammatory rhetoric was echoed by Day Gardner of the National Black Pro-Life Union, who also compared pro-choice African American leaders to Black slave-traders. Jesse Jackson, she said, had "sold his soul to the abortion devil."

Distraction from the Religious Right's real goal

Writing for American Prospect, Dana Goldstein has [rebutted](#) right-wing claims about the current health care proposals.

In a letter to Congress, National Right to Life Committee legislative director Douglas Johnson warned, "A vote for this legislation, as drafted, is a vote for tax-subsidized abortion on demand." This rhetoric is beyond hyperbolic -- it is downright deceptive. "When federal law discusses family planning, it never includes abortion," says Adam Sonfield, a senior policy associate at the Guttmacher Institute, which researches sexual and reproductive health. "The federal government would never talk about it in that way."

"Reproductive rights are under threat in the health care reform debate, not ascendant," argues Goldstein, noting that "in playing the abortion card, the real goal of anti-choicers is not only to maintain existing restrictions on abortion access, but to use health reform as a vehicle to expand them to the majority of American women." She explains:

In the Senate, anti-choice Republicans say they will oppose any health reform plan that subsidizes abortion coverage or even includes, in the proposed [health insurance exchanges](#), private insurers that cover abortion. Currently, 87 percent of health plans offer some abortion services. That means if Democrats capitulate, the majority of women who currently have abortion coverage could lose it. The result would be a near-blanket restriction on women's access to insurance-subsidized abortion, one far more radical than the Hyde Amendment...

...Republicans would like nothing more than to use health reform to withhold from [Planned Parenthood] its \$300 million in federal support, which clinics use to provide services such as cancer screenings, pre-natal care, and sex-ed for teenagers.

The Bottom Line

With the occasional rhetorical bone thrown to the needs of millions of Americans and families poorly served by the current health care system, Religious Right leaders have eagerly embraced a right-wing free-market fundamentalism to oppose federal government efforts to expand access to health care. They are using the current debate to rally anti-choice troops with false claims that we are on the verge of a massive expansion of abortion in America funded by taxpayers, and to sow fear and distrust of the Obama administration by claiming that he is using health care reform to create a “socialist colossus” that will play God by stripping individuals of their health care choices. The legitimacy of these claims is about on par with the legitimacy of their attacks on the gay-rights movement, which is to say, non-existent. But Religious Right leaders rarely let the truth stand in the way of a political or fundraising goal.