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THEY SAID IT

The most misused word in the health care debate is “reform.” Everyone wants “reform,” but what constitutes “reform” is another matter. If you listen to President Obama, his “reform” will satisfy almost everyone. It will insure the uninsured, control runaway health spending, subdue future budget deficits, preserve choice for patients and improve quality of care. These claims are self-serving exaggerations and political fantasies. They have destroyed what should be a serious national discussion of health care.

Robert Samuelson, “Obama’s Misleading Medicine,” July 27, 2009.

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HEALTH CARE REFORM: STUNNINGLY STUPID.

Over the past several days, we’ve read or heard several different explanations for why President Obama’s health care initiative is in serious trouble. Some argue that he overestimated his mandate and misread the electorate. Others claim that he misjudged the severity of the financial crisis and the public’s ability to focus on anything but the recession. And then there are those who question his trustworthiness, insisting that he misled voters last fall and continues to mislead them now.

All of these contain a grain of truth, some grains bigger than others. But if you really want to know what is going on with the health care reform debate and really want to understand why Obama and his promise of reform are in trouble, you need look only at the parties that would be hurt most by the proposed changes and the impact that those parties can and do have on the political environment.

Consider the following.

Everyone knows that when Washington “reforms” something, there will be winners and there will be losers. Generally speaking, the easiest way to smooth passage of reform is to ensure that the winners are more powerful than the losers. Obama and his “experts” seem to have forgotten this very simple rule.

If you look at the basic reform proposals, it is clear that “the elderly” have been singled out by the Democrats as the one big loser in this particular “reform” effort. For starters, they propose to cut Medicare funding by some \$500 billion to pay for the “government option.” Technically speaking, this is the opposite of a generational wealth transfer, since it actually takes a benefit given to retirees by workers and returns it to the tax-generating workers. The problem – or one of the problems – with this is that the seniors, those receiving or about to receive Medicare, have been paying into the system for all or nearly all of their adult lives. To

change the rules of the game at this late date and thus to take this benefit away from them now, just as they're beginning to collect, rather than fund it, is a major political mistake.

Second, everyone knows that rationing of care is part of this reform package, and that the elderly and near-elderly are the obvious targets of this effort. Betsy McCaughey put it this way the other day in a *Wall Street Journal* piece:

The assault against seniors began with the stimulus package in February. Slipped into the bill was substantial funding for comparative effectiveness research, which is generally code for limiting care based on the patient's age. Economists are familiar with the formula, where the cost of a treatment is divided by the number of years (called QALYs, or quality-adjusted life years) that the patient is likely to benefit. In Britain, the formula leads to denying treatments for older patients who have fewer years to benefit from care than younger patients.

Of course, the real kicker in all of this, a fact that largely goes unmentioned, is that the "seniors" in question here are – or soon will be – the Baby Boomers. And if we've learned anything in our collective half century of following demographic, social, and political trends, it's that no one has ever made a dime betting against the Baby Boomers. What Boomers want, Boomers get.

Think about it this way: There is a reason that Obama and his team were so adamant about passing this legislation before the Congress recesses next month. He knows that the longer this thing drags on, the more likely it becomes that 70-some million baby boomers are going to realize that when he talks about making "smarter decisions" about "end of life care," he's talking about *their* decisions and *their* end of life care.

It's one thing to blather on about amorphous concepts like cutting costs and spending less money on heroic measures. But it is something else altogether to try to sell a specific population on making those necessary sacrifices themselves, particularly when that specific population is the largest, most powerful, and most politically active generational cohort in American history. "Political suicide" is the phrase that springs most readily to mind.

The bottom line here is that even attempting a radical overhaul of the health care system was a stunningly stupid thing for Barack Obama to do. We hear a great deal about the rising costs of health care in America, but we hear precious little about one of the biggest causes of those rising costs, namely the fact that 70+-million baby boomers are starting to reach the age during which they will be the greatest consumers of health care services. It's simple supply and demand.

Given this, any broad reform package was always going to have to revolve around the basic premise of screwing the Baby Boomers, of artificially suppressing their demand for health care services. And it was always going to be a disaster.

And by heroically stepping forward to "solve" this impossible task, it has become Barack Obama's disaster. Unfair? Well, maybe. But who said life was fair?

WHY CAN'T WE ALL JUST GET ALONG?

Last week, our young president's domestic program began to unravel. This is, in our opinion, good for the markets, for the nation, and arguably for Barack's place in history, given that the majority of his ambitious plans would be unmitigated disasters if adopted. We don't want to get too optimistic about this too quickly, but as we put it last May "It looks more and more to us like we can expect a summer of what we used to call 'blessed gridlock.' And given what the Obama team has on its agenda, this is something for which Republicans [indeed all Americans] . . . should be eternally thankful."

The problem with Barack's domestic agenda has always been that it consists of a jumble of stale, left-wing ideas that make no sense individually and even less sense when viewed as a packaged panacea for the troubles of a nation whose giant population of aging citizens is about to discover that all their lives they have been happily investing their retirement and health care savings into two giant Ponzi schemes, both of which make the Madoff scandal look like a two-bit street scam.

Barack should have told the soon-to-be-retiring baby boomers that they blew it; that they have foolishly lived high on the hog for most of their entire adult lives on borrowed money. And even more foolishly, have invested billions of their hard earned dollars in Social Security and Medicare "trust funds," which weren't trust funds at all, but piggy banks that their crooked "representatives" in Washington used to buy their votes.

Moreover, he should have told them that there is not a damn thing that he, as president can do about it now, other than to work with them and their kids to try to ease the pain brought on by their stupidity and cupidity. But he didn't. Instead, he has promised to painlessly solve the unsolvable conundrum of years of fiscal corruption and mismanagement on the part of the government by borrowing even more money, while at the same time promising to address a whole list of other problems that no one even knew existed until he promised to "solve them."

Needless to say, this was foolhardy. But the American people will survive Barack's presidency, just as they did Jimmie Carter's. They will be a little thinner when it's all over, a little sadder, but hopefully a little wiser.

A bigger problem, as we see it, is that this president's foreign policy agenda is as big a jumble of disjointed, dream world ideas as his domestic one. The only difference is that it doesn't consist of a group of actual proposals, but is instead nothing more than a long list of chimerical goals, each of which is noble enough, but when viewed together, form a ridiculously ambitious game plan for a nation that is deeply in debt, in the midst of a recession, already fighting

two expensive, arguably unpopular wars, and that has enough of its own major problems right here at home to keep it busy for the next half century.

When reading Barack and Hillary's recent foreign policy speeches one wonders if they don't view themselves in the role of the Pope and Emperor in a secularized model of the medieval dream of a *Respublica Christiana* utopia. Indeed, Hillary's recent "major foreign policy speech" to the Council on Foreign Relations reminds one of Florence King's allusion to a *Roget's Thesaurus* "rolling brakeless down a hill" spewing out liberal clichés like ink from a squid. You don't believe us? The following phrases were all squeezed into this mind-bogglingly vapid unveiling of "a new mindset" and a "new era of engagement."

abandon rigid ideologies and old formulas . . . isolate and defeat terrorists and counter violent extremists while reaching out to Muslims around the world . . . encourage and facilitate the efforts of all parties to pursue and achieve a comprehensive peace in the Middle East . . . seek global economic recovery and growth by strengthening our economy . . . advancing a robust development agenda . . . expanding trade that is free and fair . . . boosting investment that creates decent jobs . . . combat climate change . . . increase energy security . . . lay the foundation for a prosperous clean-energy future . . . support and encourage democratic governments that protect the rights and deliver results for their people . . . stand up for human rights everywhere . . . work through existing institutions and reform them . . . use our power to convene, our ability to connect countries around the world, and sound foreign policy strategies to create partnerships aimed at solving problems . . . create opportunities for non-state actors and individuals to contribute to solutions . . . advance our interests by uniting diverse partners around common concerns . . . make it

more difficult for others to abdicate their responsibilities or abuse their power . . . offer a place at the table to any nation, group, or citizen willing to shoulder a fair share of the burden . . . induce greater cooperation among a greater number of actors . . . tilt the balance away from a multi-polar world and toward a multi-partner world . . . pursue principled engagement with those who disagree with us . . . elevate development as a core pillar of American power . . . update and create vehicles for cooperation with our partners . . . integrate civilian and military action in conflict areas . . . leverage key sources of American power, including our economic strength and the power of our example . . . build stronger mechanisms of cooperation with our historic allies, with emerging powers, and with multilateral institutions . . . pursue cooperation in a pragmatic and principled way . . . put special emphasis on encouraging major and emerging global powers – China, India, Russia and Brazil, as well as Turkey, Indonesia, and South Africa – to be full partners in tackling the global agenda . . . reach out beyond governments, because we believe partnerships with people play a critical role in our 21st century statecraft . . . etc., etc., *ad nauseam* . . .

The immediate question that arises when reading this ode to the wacky ideas of Francois Fourier, Étienne Cabet, and Robert Owen is whether this insipid speech was forced on Hillary and whether she was embarrassed about having to give it. But then, one recalls her memorable interview with the *Washington Post* in the opening days of the Clinton dual presidency, and one realizes that this CFR speech was Hillary in all her glory. After all, this is the same person who told the *Post* of her “burning desire to make the world around me -- kind of going out in concentric circles -- better for everybody.” This is

the person who sagely observed that “it’s not going to be easy, redefining who we are as human beings in this postmodern age.” This is the person that the *Post* said was “in the midst of redesigning America’s health care system and replacing Madonna as our leading cult figure,” and who “has goals [that] appear to be so huge and so far-off – grand and noble things twinkling in the distance – that its hard to see what she sees” as she “floats comfortably above the fray of day-to-day Washington.”

During the Clinton years, when the world was enjoying the afterglow of the end of the Cold War and the demands on the American presidency were seemingly small, one could chuckle when reading this self-absorbed, liberal nonsense. But these aren’t the Clinton years. These are the post-9/11 years; these are years in which American men and women are dying on the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq, in which fanatics in North Korea and Iran are building nuclear weapons, in which terrorists stalk the globe, bent on killing Americans and destroying American assets.

Dream world liberalism isn’t amusing anymore. It is dangerous because the indisputable fact is that wars and social unrest are much more likely in Hillary and Barack’s cotton candy world than in one in which America is proud of its Judeo-Christian heritage and willing to defend it against evil – yes, evil; a world in which America’s interests are well defined and prioritized, its tolerance levels known and respected among the various major players, and its friend-enemy designations are clearly understood.

Indeed, can anyone be blamed for not knowing how horribly a nation must act before it is denied inclusion into Barack and Hillary’s circle of “full partners in tackling the global agenda?” Traditional friend-enemy models are apparently no longer useful in making this determination, falling as they apparently do into the category of “rigid ideologies” and “old formulas” that, as Hillary said in her CFR speech, “no longer apply.”

It’s fairly clear from reading the pronouncements of Hillary and Barack that Iran, the Taliban, al-Qaida, and North Korea are not considered by them to be either

friend or partners of America. But it is not at all clear that the friends and partners of these self declared enemies cannot be friends and partners of America too. Hillary explained it this way to the CFR: “we will not tell our partners to take it or leave it, nor will we insist that they’re either with us or against us.” In fact, she said, that “in today’s world” it would be (are you ready for this?) “global malpractice” to expect one’s friends and partners to take one’s side in a dispute with one’s enemies.

No one can say where this deliberate ambiguity and disingenuous twaddle on the part of the foreign policy leaders of the “world’s last remaining superpower” will lead. At present, Iran and North Korea are aggressively testing Barack’s tolerance for threatening behavior and impudence. At some point, Israel will have to join in this dangerous game, especially given the Obama administration’s vagueness regarding traditional friend-enemy designations.

And when the coming money-crunch hits the American people hard, our guess is that they are going to question the importance of Barack’s and Hillary’s ambitious and expensive plans to “help more people in more places live up their God-given potential.” Moreover, it seems likely that a host of individuals from both the left and the right are eventually going to begin asking questions about the wisdom of the Obama administration’s expensive commitment to the happiness of the Afghan people, whose principle occupation seems to be growing poppies for the global narcotics market and whose loyalty to the American partnership seems to rest on little more than the continued supply of Viagra to the tribal elders.

Several weeks ago, we argued that at some point, in the not too distant future, there will appear upon the American political landscape a new version of the old-style, fire breathing, charismatic, “man-of-the people” populist, who will gain attention by attacking the Barack regime’s moral sophistry, condescending attitude toward ordinary working class Americans, propensity to publicly denigrate America’s contribution to global well-being and harmony, and its Wilsonian-like enthusiasm for sacrificing American

independence on the altar of global governance. With this prediction in mind, we will close these comments on Barack’s foreign policy with a few paragraphs from a speech made in 1919 by Henry Cabot Lodge Sr. in opposition to Woodrow Wilson’s efforts to gain American participation in the League of Nations. And we will ask you, gentle reader, to think about whether a similar speech by a modern day populist would find favor with a large number of Americans.

You may call me selfish if you will, conservative or reactionary, or use any other harsh adjective you see fit to apply, but an American I was born, an American I have remained all my life. I can never be anything else but an American, and I must think of the United States first, and when I think of the United States first in an arrangement like this I am thinking of what is best for the world, for if the United States fails, the best hopes of mankind fail with it.

I have never had but one allegiance - I cannot divide it now. I have loved but one flag and I cannot share that devotion and give affection to the mongrel banner invented for a league. Internationalism, illustrated by the Bolshevik and by the men to whom all countries are alike provided they can make money out of them, is to me repulsive . . .

We would have our country strong to resist a peril from the West, as she has flung back the German menace from the East. We would not have our politics distracted and embittered by the dissensions of other lands. We would not have our country’s vigour exhausted or her moral force abated, by everlasting meddling and muddling in every quarrel, great and small, which afflicts the world . . .

OBAMA AND RACE, AGAIN.

The overwhelming majority of the commentary on the Henry Louis “Skip” Gates/Cambridge Police Department/Barack Obama story has focused on one of two subjects, either the back and forth “he said/they said” between Gates and the police or the political stupidity of Obama’s decision to place himself smack dab in the middle of an issue about which he admittedly did not have all the facts and which had exactly nothing whatsoever to do with the presidency or even the federal government. Both are interesting stories, fascinating even. And both will likely grow more interesting in the weeks ahead, when the recordings from the 911 call and arrest are released and as Obama continues to see his poll numbers and standing among law enforcement types drop as a result of his presumptuousness. But for long-term political impact, neither story addresses the broader moral.

In the grand scheme of things, the arrest of Skip Gates is a non-issue. The guy may be a “respected academic,” but he is also a professional racist, which is to say that his arrest last week perfectly fit his own narrative about America. In a column last week, *National Review’s* Jay Nordlinger wrote the following:

A headline about the recent Henry Louis Gates scandal read, “Charges dropped against black Harvard scholar.” Wouldn’t it be nice if the racial element were taken out of it? Could that ever happen? Ever? Can there be a confrontation between a black citizen and a white policeman (who is also a citizen) without the elevation, or demotion, of the confrontation to a “racial incident”? Could Gates ever be merely – merely! – a Harvard scholar, instead of a “black Harvard scholar”?

We sympathize with Nordlinger and likewise wonder what happened to the dream of a “color-blind society.” But we think he is missing the point. To answer his question: No, the racial element simply cannot be taken out of it. Gates cannot simply be a “Harvard scholar” because he is, as a scholar,

dedicated principally to the concepts of race and racial division in America, which is to say that he revels in the idea of being the “black Harvard scholar.” He is, you may note, a professor of African American studies and, more notably, the chairman of the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African-American Research.

We don’t mean to be uncharitable to Gates, but it is clear from his own discussions of the incident that from the very moment the Cambridge police arrived on the scene, he was intent on ensuring that it would be a “racial” incident, irrespective of the investigating officers’ attitudes and behavior. As countless others have noted, Gates did his own stereotyping and pre-developed his own narrative as soon as the police arrived. The actual events that followed were irrelevant. Gates “knew” how this would play out beforehand, which is to say that the actual incident will matter not one whit to Gates’s scholarship or to his broader political ideology. Just another day for “a black man in America.” Never mind that the town of Cambridge has a black mayor, the state of Massachusetts has a black governor, and the United States of America has a black president.

As for Obama’s dip in the polls, this aspect of the story also lacks long-term political significance. Obama may have stepped in it when he called the Cambridge police “stupid,” and he may have offended a number of law enforcement officers and officials. But we doubt that his “gaffe” will have any long term impact. His reaction was entirely consistent with his other views on civic society, which is to say that it wasn’t really a gaffe at all, merely an unfortunately timed expression of his beliefs. He was dipping in the polls anyway. And this will mean nothing in the long run.

So why, then, does the story matter at all? Or does it?

As it turns out, the President, his spokesman, and Professor Gates are all correct when they insist that this incident contains a “teachable moment.” As you may have guessed, though, we don’t agree with them as to what lesson should be learned from the incident.

Upon Barack Obama's election to the presidency, there was a brief though interesting debate over the effect that said election would have on the broader black community. Most analysts argued that it would have none, or at least very little. A handful argued that it would have a negative effect; their presumption being that racist whites would likely attribute any and all of Obama's failures to blacks as a whole. And still others hoped that Obama's election would have a positive impact, by demonstrating once again the vibrancy of the American dream, which would in turn help to pull the African American community back into the political mainstream.

We'll reserve comment on the first two, but it appears to us that this last one, that Obama would help to bring blacks into the political mainstream, is wrong. And if there is a moral to the Henry Louis Gates story, this is it.

Long time readers will recognize that we have been heralding the mainstreaming of black political participation for a long time now. We put it this way in a piece we wrote during the 2008 primaries:

We speculated in 1998 and reaffirmed over the years, that black America would, over time, cease to be much different from white America, or America in general. We argued that as more black Americans attended college, moved into the middle class, and became part of the social and economic mainstream, more would become part of the political mainstream as well. As evidence of this "mainstreaming," we pointed to politicians like [Floyd] Flake, Obama, Harold Ford, Jr., and a handful of others in the Democratic Party, as well as J.C. Watts, Michael Steele, Ken Blackwell, Herman Cain, and Vernon Robinson in the Republican Party. We didn't expect this mainstreaming to translate into an immediate change in partisan affiliation and voting patterns, but we did expect the eventual moderation of both rhetoric

and suggested policy changes from black politicians. Moreover, we expected the political collapse of the kind of grievance-mongering championed by the likes of Sharpton and Jackson.

Unfortunately, this paragraph led up to the following admission: "It is now clear that we were wrong. Dead wrong, in fact." We noted then and continue to note now, that, in general, the political opinions proffered by black Americans as a group are well outside of the political mainstream. Opinion poll after opinion poll show that blacks generally reacted differently than the rest of the country (including other minority groups) to 9/11, to the wars waged in response to 9/11, to Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, and to the prosecution of the so-called "Jena Six." The old line black leaders, people like Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, have a deep and profitable personal stake in maintaining this political dislocation. What we hadn't figured is that they were not alone.

As it turns out, the Democratic establishment also has a stake in maintaining this outlier status because it ensures that at least one segment of the population will remain perpetually dependent on them.

Barack Obama may, at one time, have seen himself as a "post-racial" president. And truth be told, given his occasional speeches on personal responsibility and the need for black fathers to play a vastly increased role in their children's lives, we suspect that his personal sentiments on matters of race are far closer to the post-racial ideal and mainstream that we once envisioned. But he is also a creature of the Democratic establishment, meaning that he understands the political necessity of black America's outlier status, understands the power and the pervasiveness of the grievance culture among Democratic elites, and has absorbed enough of the racist nonsense that he is, at least in part, conflicted.

Unfortunately, the people who suffer for all of this are the nation's African Americans, and especially young African Americans.

And that brings us, at long last, back to Gates and Obama. When the President of the United States admits that he doesn't know the facts, yet still calls the police stupid, and then proceeds to launch into a diatribe about how police, in general, are prejudiced against minorities, he does several things. First, he misstates the nature of the events that took place. Second, he disparages law enforcement in general, calling its practitioners racists. Third, he perpetuates myths about law enforcement and race. And last, as a result of two and three above, he increases the paranoia in the black community and thus exacerbates its political dislocation. The Manhattan Institute's Heather McDonald explains:

Obama does not seem to understand the power of his office. If he is going to weigh in on something as crucial to the health of cities as policing, he had better get his facts straight. But everything that he said about the Cambridge confrontation was untrue. He presents a highly telescoped version of the events that echoes Gates's implication that he was arrested on the burglary charge: "The Cambridge police acted stupidly in arresting somebody when there was already proof that they were in their own home," Obama intoned. But Gates was arrested for disorderly conduct; his being in his own home is irrelevant.

Obama then decided he was going to give us a history lesson: "What I think we know separate and apart from this incident is that there's a long history in this country of African Americans and Latinos being stopped by law enforcement disproportionately. That's just a fact."

This statement has many possible meanings, all of them untrue.

The ACLU and other anti-police activists have alleged for years that blacks are the victims of disproportionate and

unjustified traffic stops, a charge that has become received wisdom among large swathes of the population. It happens to be contradicted by drivers themselves. The Bureau of Justice Statistics regularly polls tens of thousands of civilians about their contacts with the police. Virtually identical proportions of white, black, and Hispanic drivers – 9 percent – report being stopped by the police, though in 2005, the self-reported black stop rate – a 8.1 percent – was nearly a percentage point lower than the self-reported white stop rate (8.9 percent). The stop rate for blacks is lower during the day, when officers can more readily see a driver's race.

As for urban policing – where the police have victim identifications and contextual and behavioral cues to work with – blacks *are* stopped more, but only in comparison with their proportion of the entire population. Measured against their crime rate, they are understopped. New York City is perfectly typical of the black police-stop and crime rates. In the first three months of 2009, 52 percent of all people stopped for questioning by the police in New York City were black, though blacks are just 24 percent of the population. But according to the victims of and witnesses to crime, blacks commit about 68 percent of all violent crime in the city. Blacks commit 82 percent of all shootings and 72 percent of all robberies, whereas whites, who make up 35 percent of the city's population, commit about 5 percent of all violent crimes, 1 percent of shootings, and about 4 percent of robberies.

These figures are not police-generated; they come from the overwhelmingly minority victims of crime in their reports to the police. Such crime reports

mean that when the police respond to community demands for protection against crime, information-based police deployment will send officers to minority neighborhoods where crime is highest. When the police respond to a call about a shooting, they will almost never be told that the shooter was white, and thus will not be searching for a white suspect.

The bottom line here is that both Henry Louis Gates and Barack Obama have done the American black community a great disservice by reinforcing FALSE stereotypes about the ways in which authorities and law enforcement officials in particular handle matters of race. Gates, we surmise, did so deliberately, thereby legitimizing his academic interests and providing himself with future “research” avenues to pursue. Obama, we believe, did so out of ignorance and political instinct. He said what he said because he believes it, which is unfortunate.

In either case, though, any lasting impact of this story will be on the black community at large, not Gates or Obama. They are largely irrelevant, except as messengers of a tired, false, and damaging message.

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