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RESIST PUSH TO REPEAL OR CRIPPLE AFFORDABLE CARE ACT: *Claude Pepper's National Health Repeal Lesson*

By Robert Weiner and Nakia Gladden

This was the headline across cable TV news shows on July 23: "Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah, threatens a government shutdown over Obamacare." Opposition to the Affordable Care Act ("Obamacare") – with 39 House-passed repeals but none in the Senate — and the administration agreeing to delays and funding cuts are reminiscent of opposition to the Medicare Catastrophic Coverage Act, originally written by former Florida U.S. senator and congressman Claude Pepper.

Mr. Pepper's bill was enacted in July 1988 and repealed 16 months later. We should have learned from that lesson. Instead, Affordable Care Act supporters are battling not just attempts to repeal the law but a more subtle, bit-by-bit "defund and destroy" strategy.

Mr. Pepper believed that catastrophic protection, which he introduced in 1987, was necessary to protect persons who suffered from long-term illness, treatment for which could deplete their families' savings. The bill capped out-of-pocket expenses, expanded nursing facility and hospital benefits, and offered outpatient prescription drug coverage. The bipartisan bill was signed by President Reagan. It created The Pepper Commission to address the issue of long-term care and home care. Mr. Pepper was chairman until he died in May 1989.

Health care lobbyists and insurance companies put their PR machines in motion to repeal the law. They organized hundreds of protests and bombarded members of Congress with irate mailers. As now, they converted seniors' support to opposition. Seniors were told they were paying too much, and they mobilized. The pressure drove Congress to repeal the bill on Nov. 22, 1989.

Fast-forward to Obamacare. The health industry is conducting a similar lobbying campaign, and has targeted seniors to repeal or defund the law.

Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, and Sarah Palin first pushed the notion that the bill would create "death panels" for senior citizens, to determine if they were too old or too at-risk to receive benefits, ignoring that insurance companies do exactly that.

Claiming, "We don't want government in our health care," opposition leaders forgot to tell seniors that's what Medicare is, and seniors love it. Rep. Louie Gohmert, R-Tex., stated,

"How much more socialist can you get than a government telling everybody what they can do?"

Whether out of common sense or a desire for money, some former opponents have come around. Rick Scott became one of seven Republican governors to favor the law's Medicaid expansion, saying, "While the federal government is committed to paying 100 percent of the cost, I cannot, in good conscience, deny Floridians that need it access to health care."

Unfortunately, his decision has not been welcomed by other Florida Republicans, including former Gov. Jeb Bush and Florida House Speaker Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, even though nearly 1.3 million new Medicaid recipients under the law would have their insurance paid by the federal government.

Florida's 22nd congressional district, which includes parts of Palm Beach and Broward counties and is represented by Democrat Lois Frankel, has 147,000 residents who lack health care insurance but are now eligible for it. According to Rep. Frankel, "The Obamacare plan is going to take 33 million (uninsured) people and put them into the insurance market" across the nation.

Supporters need to remain firm. In December, as part of the "fiscal cliff" deal, the administration agreed to take out the CLASS Act, which provided long-term care insurance benefits to employees: Mr. Pepper's dream. Last month, President Obama delayed the Obamacare employer mandate. Republicans earlier required the administration to bar educational funding for the bill, forcing Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius to do outside fund-raising to inform people they are eligible. Twenty-four Republican governors are refusing to authorize the law's optional insurance exchanges or Medicaid expansion – denying any coverage to over 15 million Americans.

Last week, President Obama re-launched an effort to keep the law in place, and stated that it helps to "deliver more choices, better benefits, a check on rising costs, and higher quality care. We're already seeing those effects take place." The law has already put millions of young people on parents' plans, covered patients with pre-existing conditions and given families insurance rebates from overcharges.

It is a myth to say we have the best health care. The U.S. spends almost twice as much as the rest of the world while ranking 51st in life expectancy and 52nd in infant mortality, according to the CIA World Factbook. If we ever want to catch up, it's important that we learn from the repeal of Claude Pepper's Catastrophic Coverage Act and not have reform blocked by insurance industry-driven repeal.

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