

How to Fix the Medicare Mess

By Ben Peck

The Medicare overhaul legislation that Congress passed just before Thanksgiving does too much to help special interests and too little for the seniors and people with disabilities who rely on Medicare for their health care.

If Congress had been designing this legislation with people in mind, it would have added a drug benefit to the original Medicare program and insisted that Medicare negotiate directly with the drug companies for low prices on their drugs.

Unfortunately Congress only considered human need after it addressed the demands of the drug industry, the insurance industry and those ideologically zealous Congressional leaders who would like Medicare, as older Americans have come to know and rely on it, to wither on the vine.

First, Congressional leaders ensured that the legislation did not offend the drug companies—major patrons of both major political parties, but overwhelmingly generous donors to the Republican party.

The drug companies' primary concern is protection of the high prices they charge in the United States. Dutifully, Congress included a provision in the legislation prohibiting Medicare from using the market power of its 41 million members to negotiate lower prices. The cost of that provision: \$139 billion in additional profits to the drug industry over eight years.

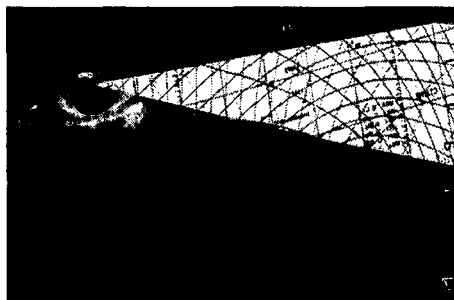
Next, the legislation had to appease the ideologues who insist that private health insurance plans be given a greater role in the Medicare program. Since private plans have recently been leaving the Medicare program in droves, the only way to lure them back was to pay them—big time. The 10-year cost of luring private plans back into Medicare: \$12 billion in new subsidies on top of \$67 billion in existing subsidies. Somehow we have a Congress saying that we save money by paying for-profit insurers about 25 percent more than original Medicare to provide coverage.

The ideologues argue that people with Medicare need more opportunity to enroll in private plans and that private plans will be a powerful new tool to control the costs of the program. They

believe both of these claims in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Dollars directed to drug companies or private insurance companies are dollars drained from health benefits, including coverage of prescription drugs, for people with Medicare.

After the second round of tax cuts enacted earlier this year, White House funding for a Medicare drug benefit already



was too little to provide comprehensive coverage. But after Congress attended to the interests of the drug and insurance industries, there was even less. The result is a drug benefit that many will find meager.

For most of the 41 million people with Medicare, the benefit would cut off once a person's total drug costs reach \$2,250 and would not start again until their drug costs hit \$5,100. That means that many people who depend on prescription drugs to control their blood pressure, cholesterol, diabetes or a host of other medical needs will be unable to afford their medicine come July or August. For some, the erratic nature of the benefit may be more dangerous than no coverage.

What is more, the benefit gets much worse as drug prices rise in the future. In 2013, the eighth year of the program, those with the largest drug costs would be responsible for approximately \$5,000 in drug costs. The legislation will be a huge step backward for millions of people with better coverage from their employers who will drop that coverage as a result of the passage of this legislation. For the poorest of the poor, the legislation offers worse coverage than they currently enjoy from their states' Medicaid programs.

However, for some, the legislation does offer real benefit. The near poor would enjoy enhanced benefits and once people's total drug costs reach \$5,100 the legislation offers generous coverage, paying 95 percent of costs. However, even the coverage for the low-income is limited by an assets test, which would mean that half of those eligible would not get the benefit because they would not be able to surmount the bureaucratic barriers to coverage.

The willingness of zealots to attack the program's fundamental character represents a relatively new development in Medicare, which enjoyed broad bipartisan support for most of its first three decades. This changed in 1994, when Newt Gingrich and other ideologically driven crusaders came to power in Congress.

Voters now need to hold the members of Congress who passed this bill accountable. They need to vote them out of office in 2004 and send back to Washington a Congress that will fix this mess.

A new Congress should start by passing legislation that focuses on the needs

Congress considered human need only after placating the drug and insurance industries.

of people with Medicare. The government should be given not just the power, but the mandate, to negotiate directly with the drug companies for lower prices.

Congress should enact legislation imposing prescription pricing parity with Canada. U.S. citizens should not pay double the prices for life-saving medicines that citizens in Canada and the rest of the industrialized world pay.

Message to Congress: take away the Christmas gifts for the drug and insurance industries and, for once, make the health of older and disabled Americans the national priority it deserves to be. ■

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Dissing Dubya

By Susan J. Douglas

As you know, many of us are more outraged over this presidency than perhaps any other (which is saying something). We're also exasperated with the Democratic Party which, our dreams of Green aside, is currently the only lot that can possibly get these theocrats out of office. But as we're learning from the mainstream media, whose latest negative news peg about Howard Dean is that he's too "angry" to be president, we're not supposed to display our fury over Team Bush's multiple crimes. Angry just doesn't go with the PR-driven, entertainment-oriented nature of modern campaigning. At the same time, as "The Daily Show" reminds us every night, Team Bush does provide America with many laughable moments. I mean, really, that Baghdad photo op of Dubya with the roasted turkey looked exactly like something you'd see in *The Onion*. ("The turkey has landed," quipped the front-page headline in the *London Independent*.) So, if "angry" is out, then let's get happy and start making a lot more fun of our Emperor wannabe.

As I understand the hint Dean and others are being given by the pundits, the various candidates hoping to run against Bush need to lighten up and be not so, well, serious. While most of us feel that fury is exactly what is called for at this moment, ridicule and condescension often can be more powerful than indignant attacks. Recall how well they worked for Reagan when he kept chiding Walter Mondale, as if he were an adolescent, with his dismissive mantra "There you go again." The more Bush struts around with queens and dons flight jackets and other military apparel, the more mockery he invites—and needs.

Here's my proposal. Inspired by Nicholas D. Kristof's "Name That War" contest in the *New York Times*, which produced fabulous nominees such as "Operation Bushwack Iraq" and "Bushkrieg," I'm putting forward a similar contest to rename a host of Bush policies and, indeed, to offer some new nicknames for that lover of nicknames, Bush himself.

The idea is to get the Democrats to stop attacking each other, to stop being so

lethally humorless, and instead to bandy about and debate the merits of the various titles and sound bites you all propose. In the process, maybe we can elevate Bush's derision quotient to its proper level.

Here are some categories to consider.

Name that electorate: Team Bush thinks that most Americans are morons. Any decent candidate will remind voters over



and over that Bush thinks they're too dumb (projection, perhaps?) to notice the difference between image and reality. Bush thinks that if he just jets into Baghdad for two hours and serves up some yams, that people won't notice that he killed a congressional proposal to increase the benefits to families whose relatives die in combat, that he proposes closing seven VA hospitals, and that some veterans have to wait two years for a doctor's appointment. (See Dave Lindorff's "Dishonorable Discharge" in the November 26 issue of *In These Times* and Graydon Carter's scathing editorial on Bush's record in the December issue of *Vanity Fair*.) He also thinks they won't notice that November saw the highest casualty rate since Bush invaded Iraq. His little cameo appearance is supposed to obliterate the fact that he won't attend the funerals of those killed in Iraq. So, behind closed doors, at his "beloved ranch" in Crawford, what do you think he calls us dumb stumps? We need something that conveys his true contempt for those he refers to in public as "the American people."

Nickname that president: Bush is like the proverbial used-car salesman, and certainly like the fraud posing as the Great and Mighty Oz, but both are way too hackneyed. Alfred E. Neuman already is overdone (though so apt). Molly Ivins has

given us "Shrub" and "Dubya," which convey the gaping mismatch between the man and his station, but neither captures his inveterate duplicity. So, next competition: What is a really great, derisive moniker for this PR poser, whose various photo ops seek to mask the fact that he's, well, a liar and a fool.

A subset of this category: Can we please have a nickname for him every time he dares to wear military gear and pretends he knows anything about serving in the armed forces?

Rename those "initiatives": Let's start with, for example, "Healthy Forests," "Leave No Child Behind" and the entire Iraq fiasco with its various "Operations." Team Bush has raised the rhetoric of inversion to a shameless new level, not of "double-speak," but "opposite speak." So, pick those initiatives, like PRIDE (Personal Responsibility and Individual Development for Everyone), e.g., the new welfare "reform" proposal that increases the number of hours recipients—including single mothers with kids under the age of 6—have to work to get assistance. Or take a crack at the "Medicare Modernization Bill."

Rename those backdrops: You know the ones I mean, designed by former TV producers that say things like "better care, more choices" and cover the wall behind Bush as he announces some program (like the new Medicare) that does just the opposite of what the backdrop says. The name should capture the "subliminal seduction" efforts here.

While I believe that Howard Dean—and anyone else labeled as too "angry"—should say "Yes, I am angry" and explain why, given millions of Americans are, in fact, "angry" too. This deluded, self-important, arrogant administration requires vigorous deflation. Not only are they trying to steal our foreign policy, the courts, the environment and the constitution, they are actually trying to steal our language and its meanings. So dip those pens in acid, and get to work. ■

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