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OPINION | DECLARATIONS

On Health Care, a Promise, Not a Threat

McConnell warns GOP senators they may end up having to work with the Democrats. They should.



Sens. Joe Manchin (D., W.Va.) and Susan Collins (R., Maine). PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES/CQ ROLL CALL



By

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We are coming up on a great American holiday. There will be fireworks and children frolicking in pools; there will be baseball games, cookouts and flags. America will be looking and acting like America. So this is no time for gloom.

This moment in fact may be, perversely, promising. The failure so far of Senate Republicans to agree on a health-care bill provides an opening. Whatever happens the next few days, moderates and centrists on both sides can and should rise, name themselves, and start storming through.

The difficulties the Republicans have faced were inevitable. They are divided; they don't have the will or the base. The party is undergoing a populist realignment, with party donors, think-tankers and ideologues seeing things more or less one way, and the Trump base, including many Democrats, seeing them another. The long-stable ground under Republican senators has been shifting, and they're not sure where or how to stand. The president, philosophically unmoored and operating without a firm grasp of the legislation he promotes, is

little help. He has impulses and sentiments but is not, as the French used to say, a serious man. He just wants a deal and a win, and there's something almost refreshing in this, in the lack of tangled and complicated personal and political motives. It makes so much possible.

Many Republican senators see that the American people are not in the mood for tax cuts to the comfortable and coverage limits on the distressed. Democratic senators, on the other hand, are increasingly aware that ObamaCare is not viable, and in some respects is on the verge of collapse.

This gives both parties motives to join together and make things better.

Republicans believe they must repeal ObamaCare because they've long promised to do so. Keeping promises, especially in our untrusting political climate, is a good thing. But polling suggests America isn't eager that promise be wholly kept. The Senate's repeal-and-replace bill is deeply underwater in most polls, barely above water even with Republicans. If you campaign promising mayonnaise but once you're in office voters start saying they prefer mustard, Politics 101 says, at least for now, hold the mayo.

Here again is our big wish: that both parties join together and produce a fix. It would no doubt be ungainly and imperfect, but it would be better than the failing thing we have. And Americans, being practical, will settle, for now, for better.

The GOP's donor class would likely hate the eventual bill, as the Democratic Party's nihilist left, which wants no compromise, would hate it. But their opposition would suggest to everyone else the bill must be pretty good.

There is the beginning of a movement in the Senate for a bipartisan approach. Republican Susan Collins of Maine has it exactly right: Asked if she thinks it necessary for both parties to work together, she said: "That's what we should have done from the beginning." Republican Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia said on Fox News Wednesday night: "I'm ready to roll up my sleeves and work with the Democrats." Republican Ron Johnson of Wisconsin says it's a 'mistake' to attempt a partisan fix. Democrat Joe Manchin, also of West Virginia, says he's "ready" for a bipartisan effort. The New York Times reports senators from both parties met privately weeks ago to discuss core issues. Mr. Manchin was there along with Democrats Joe Donnelly of Indiana and Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota. Among the Republicans were Sens. Capito and Collins, Bill Cassidy of Louisiana and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina.

That's a good start.

Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, disappointed in the GOP failure earlier in the week to get to yes, told his own members, in front of the press, that if they can't get it together, they'll have to work with the

Democrats. It sounded like a threat, not an invitation; he seemed to be saying Republican voters wouldn't like it. Many wouldn't, but the polling suggests many would.

This column respects history and tradition. I've banged away on the fact that any big legislative change that affects how America lives, especially on something so intimate and immediate as health care, *has* to receive support from both parties or it will never work.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, in creating Social Security in 1935, knew he had to get Republicans behind it and owning it, or America would see it as a Democratic project, not an American institution. In the end he persuaded 81 Republicans to join 284 Democrats in the House. So too with the creation of Medicare in 1965: Lyndon Johnson wrestled and cajoled Republicans and got a majority of their votes.

Every president until Barack Obama knew this. He bullied through ObamaCare with no Republican support, and he did it devilishly, too, in that he created a bill so deal-laden, so intricate, so embedding-of-its-tentacles into the insurance and health systems, that it would be almost impossible to undo. He was maximalist. His party got a maximal black eye, losing the House and eventually the Senate over the bill, which also contributed to its loss of the presidency.

Is it fair that both parties must fix a problem created by one party? No. But it would be wise and would work.

Here is a thing that would help: a little humility from the Democrats, and a little humanity.

It would be powerful if a Democratic senator would go on the Sunday shows this weekend and say something like this: "Republicans have

proved they can't make progress. They're failing in their efforts, and I'm not sad about it, because their bill is a bad one. But I'm not going to lie to you, ObamaCare has big flaws—always did. It was an imperfect piece of legislation and it's done some things my party said wouldn't happen, such as lost coverage and hiked deductibles. The American people know this because they live with it. The answer is to do what we should have done in the past, and that is joining with Republicans to hammer out changes that will make things better, that we all can live with, at least for now. We'll make it better only by working together. I'm asking to work with them.”

That person would be a hero in the Beltway, which prizes compromise and constructiveness, and admired outside it. “My God, it isn't all just partisan for her.”

The Democratic Party made this mess. It's on them to help dig out of it. If they show some humility, Republicans would look pretty poor in not responding with their own olive branch.

Show some class, help the country. When it's over, use whatever words you want: “We forced Democrats to admit the bill was flawed and dying.” “We forced Republicans to back down.” America won't mind the propaganda, they're used to it. Just make a bad thing better.

Don't give what you produce a grandiose name. Call it the Health Reform Act of 2017. There will be more. Wait till we're debating single payer in 2020.

But move now. Do the work, break Capitol Hill out of its shirts-and-skins stasis. Solve this thing.

A happy 241st anniversary to America, the great and fabled nation that is still, this day, the hope of the world.