

Aug. 24, 2009

Déjà vu on universal health care?



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In January, he proposed enactment of a universal health care plan. Although he did not submit a specific bill, he indicated that it should be built upon the current system of private employer-based coverage. It would include, however, a mandate that all individuals must be covered, either by themselves, by their employers, or by a public program. Subsidies would enable low-income persons to comply with the mandate. Providers, employers, insurance companies, and individuals would all share in the responsibility — with government — to cut costs and finance the program.

Mindful that earlier efforts to expand health coverage had failed in the past, even as recently as the 1990s, he made an attempt to obtain bipartisan support for the plan. However, the Republican minority did not reciprocate. And by the summer, he still had not submitted a specific bill. The only bills under serious consideration were drawn up by Democrats and it was not clear that these proposals had his official support.

Of course, there were many issues besides health care that he felt he had to confront. For example, global warming was of great concern to Europeans. His stand on that issue was widely applauded abroad. But at the same time, a deteriorating economy was leading to growing concerns about a widening budget deficit. Eventually, his effort at providing universal health coverage ended in failure, largely due to concerns about the potential cost to the government and the deficit. In the end, there was not enough support among Democrats to pass the plan, despite that party's majority control of both houses. Some Democrats on the left opposed the plan because they wanted a single-payer public program. Other Democrats worried about the fiscal implications. And no Republican support ever materialized.

Will this be the story of President Barack Obama in 2009? That remains to be seen. However, the description above does apply to California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2007. Schwarzenegger's 2007 universal health proposal was based loosely on the program adopted earlier by Massachusetts — as is Obama's. And the fate of the Schwarzenegger plan provides a cautionary tale for the current effort by the president.