

Freedom and Fear

KUFM Commentary

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One of the major rallying points for those opposed to health care reform is the charge that it is a threat to freedom. A closer look at this view, however, shows that reform, in fact enhances liberty, and that those who believe otherwise seem motivated by fears that go well beyond health care itself.

If you walk by the ROTC building on the University of Montana campus, you may notice a phrase, carved in stone, over the doorway. It reads, “Health is the first of all liberties.” To make sense of this claim, you might simply recall the last time you suffered a significant illness or injury and how it limited your freedom to pursue your life as you wished. If you are among the millions of Americans who live with a chronic disease or disabling condition, you recognize all too well how certain opportunities are less available to you.

Furthermore, good health is central to our well-being and functioning in society. Having good health allows you a greater range of opportunity to live the life you want. Health care thus enhances equality of opportunity and therefore freedom.

One might also ask the health care reform protesters: How free are the 18,000 fellow Americans who die every year from lack of health care? How free are the 47 million people who lack any health insurance? How free are those who *have* health insurance to follow a dream of leaving their current employment to pursue the path in life they really want—to open a new business, to travel for a while, to risk a new adventure in life—any path that comes without guaranteed health care? How free are people to choose doctors or health care facilities that aren’t part of the insurance plan they were forced into by their employer’s choice? How free are people to disclose their health histories fully, when doing so may result in loss of coverage? How free are the thousands of people who go bankrupt every year because they cannot pay their health care bills?

The president’s health care plan eliminates or minimizes most of the restrictions on freedom the current system imposes. The so-called “death panels” that reform critics have invented actually refer to a clause in one proposal that encourages physicians to talk with patients about their end-of-life wishes—maximizing a patient’s choice to die on his or her own terms as death encroaches. Advance care planning means more freedom, rather than less.

If freedom is really the issue, where were the concerns about liberty when the government enacted the Patriot Act? Where were concerns about financial liberty when the same government turned a fiscal surplus into trillions of dollars of debt?

I believe that the protests likely arise out of fear. Foremost is the fear of government control of health care, but the fear may go well beyond that. Americans, as President Obama has noted, have always had a healthy skepticism of government. But we’re now entering a time when historical circumstances require that governments do more to take on the responsibilities

that only governments can, and these responsibilities are larger and more threatening than ever before.

Universal health care has long been a neglected moral obligation for the American people. But as the numbers of uninsured swallow more and more of the middle class and take an increasingly bigger bite out of American business, we finally have awakened enough attention to take on the job. Likewise, issues such as rescue of the financial system, global security, education, and public health can be adequately addressed only through government action. Government is the only means that can provide the leadership to act collectively—including the private sector—to solve problems such as these. On its own, the private sector's motivation for maximizing profits and shareholder return are not well suited to address problems that require sacrifice and coordinated solutions.

Unfortunately, this requirement for smart government solutions comes against a backdrop of a preceding administration whose general philosophy was that government is generally bad, and whose approach was to staff positions as favors to politically loyal individuals, rather than on the basis of competency or belief in the positive and necessary role of government in securing the general welfare.

Other dynamics may also be at work here, including the inevitable and well documented racism that resists any public program that extends benefits to diverse communities. And some people simply fear the governance of an African-American man.

America is becoming more progressive because it has to. A broader cultural shift is underway, and such changes always make people uncomfortable. But the time for shirking responsibilities to the public welfare and to social justice is past. And in the name of freedom, health care reform is one important step forward.

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