



HealthCare.gov failure: While the schadenfreude lasts (Part One)

By: John Thomas Didymus - November 3, 2013

The technical problems plaguing the Obamacare federal website have ushered in a season of exquisite schadenfreude for the enemies of the Obama administration's health care law. While it lasts, it would be easy to recast the reality of effects and their causes in a manner that serves the agenda of those whose singular dedication has always been to promote the derailment of the program through systematic and calculated sabotage of its implementation.

That the opponents of the Obama administration's health care law have deployed all resources available to sabotage its implementation is not a conspiracy theory, as Politico rightly notes.

The enemies of Obamacare have never bothered to hide the fact of their scheming to scuttle the program. Recently, the conservative columnist George Will responded to an accusation of "schadenfreude" by a co-panelist Juan Williams on "Fox News Sunday" saying unabashedly "... I'm not even pretending to be sorrowful. Of course I want Obamacare to fail..."

If Obamacare implodes — it does appear set for what some have termed a “death spiral” — it won't be for the reasons that the opponents of the program will likely claim: That it failed due to defects that made it unpopular.

The myth perpetuated by opponents that the law is “wildly” and “incredibly” unpopular is far from the truth, as recent polls show.

Polls have found that while majority of Americans are critical of details of the law and its implementation and want it modified, only a minority want an outright repeal.

According to a new poll by the Kaiser Family Foundation released Nov. 1, of those who responded 47 percent said they want Congress to expand the law or keep it as it is. Only 37 percent of respondents said they want the law repealed.

A Gallup poll released Oct. 15 also shows that most Americans want the law modified rather than repealed. Fourteen percent said they want it expanded. Twenty-four percent said they want it kept as it is; 21 percent wanted it scaled back and 13 percent had no opinion.

Only 29 percent said they wanted it repealed.

Thus, we have an overwhelming 71 percent of Americans who don't want the law repealed, according to Gallup.

Obamacare is certainly not "incredibly" unpopular as Republican opponents claim, so it couldn't fail because the people don't want it.

That the law is controversial — as the polls show — is not surprising. Controversy could fairly be expected for any piece of legislation as complex and as far-reaching in its goals as the Affordable Care Act. But controversy is quite a different matter from the malevolently vitriolic resistance put up by Republicans so far.

One of the more revealing arguments that Republicans have presented to explain their opposition to Obamacare is that the administration failed to consult them and that a Democratic-controlled Congress forced the health care bill through without seeking for advice or consent of Republicans.

But the widened divide between both parties since Barack Obama's presidency made it impractical to hope for constructive interaction on implementation of the program. It is doubtful that any administration in similar circumstances would choose to wait on the opposition before proceeding with its signature program. That the opposition chose to exploit the knee-jerk reaction among a section of the population yet to outgrow Cold War-era phobias evoked by the word "socialism," is a fact that the administration could not help.

In a normal political environment, Obamacare could not implode simply because of reparable faults with the website. As Obama himself once noted, it should take only a few phone calls from the president to the House speaker to resolve most of the minor hurdles in the way of implementation of the health care law. But these problems have to be blown out of proportion to their significance in a poisoned political atmosphere.

If Obamacare fails, it won't be due to its faults but to the cumulative effects of deliberate sabotage of its implementation by Republicans. That is the truth that Republicans will deny, preferring to argue that it failed because it was a bad law.

Yet we know that Republicans have schemed openly, devising strategies to force failure of the law.

The Tea Party Patriots website admits the fact openly, noting an article published in the National Review soon after Obama's second term election victory, in which Michael Cannon, director of health policy studies at the Cato Institute, sketched over a dozen strategies that opponents of the health care law could adopt to bring about its downfall.

One of the critical strategies identified and which opponents of the administration have successfully implemented is overstressing the resources of the administration by forcing it to take responsibility for managing exchanges on its own.

The Tea Party Patriots website schemed publicly:

One of the strategies governors across the nation have used to oppose the Affordable Care Act is to force the federal government to run the exchanges. As Cannon pointed out, the federal government is not currently set up to run a whole series of exchanges...And with the federal government not set up to handle 27 exchanges – both financially and otherwise – this means the entire law could implode on itself.

Republican governors refusing to create state insurance exchanges forced the federal government to overstretch its resources by taking the responsibility of implementing a federal exchange serving 36 states even while congressional Republicans perfected their sabotage strategy by refusing to appropriate the funds the administration needed to take on the responsibility alone.

As Aaron Carroll, professor of pediatrics and director of its Center for Health Policy and Professionalism Research noted in a CNN article, the Obama administration asked for funds to implement the exchanges, hire navigators who will help people enroll and conduct a publicity outreach campaign to educate the public, but it got nothing from Congress.

Starved of funds, the Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, called on insurance companies and other NGOs to assist with donations, but congressional Republicans reacted with outrage. When she tried to divert funds from other programs, Senate Republicans opposed her.

But after the website rollout ran into problems in the midst of potent distractions of the government shutdown, the same Republicans who starved the HHS of funds began calling for heads to roll.