

# The audacity of hypocrisy

## Republicans are attacking Obama for the very positions and policies their party recently embraced

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In his book "What's the Matter With Kansas?" historian Thomas Frank described how conservatives use social issues such as gay marriage to divert attention from other issues and drum up popular support for conservative causes. The outcome of the recent midterm provides another chapter in the book. Even before President Barack Obama took office, several prominent and highly paid conservative talk show hosts said that they hoped he would be a "failure." Since that time, they and others have served up an unending frenzy of distortions and fear-mongering aimed at furthering their personal, financial or political interests.

The nation has been told that Mr. Obama is a "socialist" and a would-be dictator, largely on the basis of the so-called "individual mandate" in the health care bill. That ignores the fact that the individual mandate was first proposed by Republicans and the conservative Heritage Foundation as a more market-oriented alternative to a government-run, single-payer system. In 1993, 20 Republican senators introduced the Health Equity and Access Reform Act, which the respected, nonpartisan Kaiser Foundation, a health care study group, has shown in a side-by-side comparison to have striking similarities to the health care bill passed last year. Both have an individual mandate. Both ban exclusions for pre-existing conditions, call for insurance exchanges and offer subsidies for those who cannot afford to buy policies.

Even more on point is the insurance mandate program put in place in Massachusetts by then-Republican Gov. Mitt Romney. That many polls had Mr. Romney as the front-runner for the Republican Party nomination for 2012 at the very time that the Obama program was being opposed by every single Republican member of Congress is testimony to the intellectual dishonesty created by vituperatively partisan politics. The four Republican co-sponsors of the 1993 individual mandate who are still in the Senate, and even Mr. Romney (who the libertarian Cato Institute cited as having created the "prototype" for the Obama program) now rail against the same principle they had proposed and that Mr. Romney signed into law. And most recently, the language in the Republicans' Pledge to America used to describe an alternative agenda to the president's could easily have been given in any Obama speech during last year's debate.

The nation has been told that Mr. Obama is a reckless spender and he is decried for the TARP program, the auto company bailouts and the stimulus. That the TARP program was created by President George W. Bush, and that work on the auto industry bailout and a stimulus program began in the closing days of the Bush administration, has been lost in the din of battle. Most of the same members of the opposition who denounce the cost of

the Obama program voted for the Bush prescription drug benefit that is now projected to cost more than \$1 trillion. The Obama program is also now projected to cost \$1 trillion, but the Congressional Budget Office projects that, unlike Mr. Bush's drug program, Mr. Obama's plan should decrease the federal budget deficit over 10 years.

Remember, too, that the same opposition that warns against the cost of Mr. Obama's health care program approved, almost without any debate, funds for the ill-conceived invasion of Iraq, which is now projected to cost at least \$2 trillion to \$3 trillion when all costs are taken into account. These same budget deficit hawks became the first in American history to cut taxes in a time of war, funding the wars on borrowed money. They are the same people who inherited a large budget surplus and produced eight successive years of large budget deficits and a collapsed economy, which they handed off to Mr. Obama.

Like any government official, President Obama should be subject to criticism. Bringing health care up during the middle of an extreme financial crisis was certainly bad politics, for which principle he and the Democrats are paying a heavy price. Whether the health care program or the financial regulation overhaul will work are open questions (although the verdicts on TARP and the auto bailout seem favorable). Whether unemployment would be much higher or whether the economy would have collapsed without the stimulus are also open questions.

The political system is, in fact, dysfunctional and in need of massive change, as many of the voices of frustration and outrage rightly declaim. However, if that change is to take the form of a hypocritical opposition that says or does anything to regain a majority, and if public discourse is to be led by those who use half-truths, ad hominem attacks and hysteria, then heaven help us.

*David Wise is a businessman and writer who lives in Annapolis. A three-time delegate to the Democratic National Convention, he is now a political independent. His e-mail is [wisedw@comcast.net](mailto:wisedw@comcast.net).*