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Friday, March 12, 2010

FIRST-PERSON: It was wrong then & now

By Kelly Boggs / Baptist Press

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Do you think healthcare will be voted on before Easter?

○ Yes

O No

Congress never meets set deadlines



[+] Text [-] ALEXANDRIA, La. (BP)--In 2005, Barack Obama, then-Senator of Illinois, made the following statement: "Reconciliation is therefore the wrong place for policy changes. In short, the reconciliation process appears to have lost its proper meaning. ... A vehicle designed for deficit reduction and fiscal responsibility has been hijacked to facilitate reckless deficits and unsustainable debt."

Vote on It: Average Vote:

President Obama made the statement when Republicans controlled the Senate and threatened to employ the procedure known as reconciliation in order to require a simple majority vote rather than the 60 votes necessary to end a potential filibuster.

It seems now that President Obama has the upper hand with Democrat dominance in the Senate he is more than willing to use reconciliation in reference to health care legislation he is desperate to pass.

While the process known as reconciliation is currently being tossed around by lawmakers, news anchors and political pundits, how many of us ordinary folk really understand what it entails?

According to a 2008 U.S. House report (http://budget.house.gov/crs-reports/RL30862.pdf) reconciliation is an optional procedure introduced in the Congressional Budget Act of 1974 "by which Congress implements budget resolution policies affecting mainly permanent spending and revenue programs."

One of the original purposes of reconciliation was to ensure that a minority couldn't block important business like passing a budget or reducing the deficit. Since its inception the procedure has been amended and now limits debate and amendments on a particular bill. The end result is that reconciliation favors the majority party.

The original intention of reconciliation had a fairly narrow



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3/15/2010



News Headlines - FIRST-PERSON: It w... purpose, according to The Brookings Institution, a nonprofit public policy organization based in Washington, D.C.

"econciliation," The Brookings Institution says, "was intended to bring revenue and direct spending under existing laws and into conformity with the levels set in the annual budget resolution." Initially, it was used to cut the budget deficit by increasing revenues and/or decreasing spending. Most recently its primary purpose has been to reduce taxes.

As then-Sen. Obama rightly observed in 2005, "he reconciliation process appears to have lost its proper meaning." Since its inception, Congress has used the procedure to enact far-reaching omnibus budget bills.

"The Budget Report" reveals that since its introduction, 19 reconciliation bills have been signed into law -- 17 of these have been by Republican presidents. Another three were written by Republican majorities in Congress, but were subsequently vetoed by President Bill Clinton.

It is worth nothing that President Clinton wanted to use reconciliation to pass his 1993 health care plan, but Sen. Robert Byrd , D-W.Va, insisted that the health care plan was out of bounds for a process that is theoretically about budgets.

"Reconciliation was intended to adjust revenue and spending levels in order to reduce deficits. ... it was not designed to ... restructure the entire health care system," said Byrd, according to The Cato Institute, a non-profit public policy research foundation headquartered in Washington, D.C.

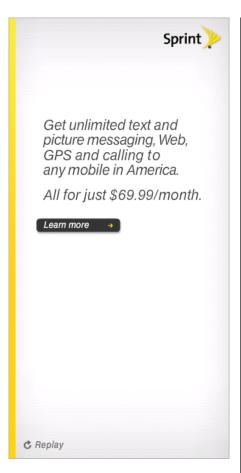
Byrd added that using reconciliation for health care would "violate the intent and spirit of the budget process, and do serious injury to the Constitutional role of the Senate."

Addressing the issue of reconciliation, again in 2005, then-Sen. Obama said, "You know, the Founders designed this system, as frustrating it is, to make sure that there's a broad consensus before the country moves forward."

I could not agree more with the then-senator, now president. Our Founders necessarily made it difficult for any legislation to be passed. It was part of their plan to keep the federal government constrained.

Like too many ideas that originate in Congress, the reconciliation procedure introduced in 1974 has been plagued by unintended consequences and, per its original intent, has been abused.

Currently, Democrats are seeking to justify the potential use of reconciliation to pass sweeping health care legislation by pointing out the fact that Republicans have also utilized the procedure. While it is true Republicans



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have employed reconciliation, it does not necessarily make their use of the procedure proper.

When elected officials try to justify the use of a legislative maneuver by pointing to the opposition's past misuse of the same procedure, it is clear we have a dearth of leadership.

There is only one person who can lead during this contentious debate over health care. It is the president. We were told during his campaign that he had the intellect, vision and compassion to lead America into the future.

President Obama can show statesmanship by leading from the middle on much needed health care reform or he can continue the current contentious course.

If the president advocates for the use of reconciliation to ram health care legislation through Congress, he will effectively toss a spitball at a majority of Americans.

Democrats may justify it by pointing to the fact Republicans have tossed their fair share of spitballs. In the end, however, a spit ball is still a spit ball, and reconciliation is a measure that is too easily misused by the majority.

Kelly Boggs is a weekly columnist for Baptist Press and editor of the Baptist Message (www.baptistmessage.com), newsjournal of the Louisiana Baptist Convention.

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