

COMMENTARY

W. James Antle III



AP FILE
Last week, Doug Elmendorf testified that none of the major Democratic reform bills reduce federal spending on health care.

A Democrat-run CBO may be Obamacare's biggest adversary

Doug Elmendorf is the skunk at Barack Obama's garden party. Last week, the director of the Congressional Budget Office blew a national debt-sized hole in the president's plans for the speedy enactment of Obamacare: Elmendorf testified that none of the major Democratic reform bills reduce federal spending on health care.

In fact, Elmendorf told the Senate Budget Committee that the House Democrats' plan would make the problem worse to the tune of \$239 billion. "In the legislation that has been reported, we do not see the sort of fundamental changes that would be necessary to reduce the trajectory of federal health spending by a significant amount," he told the panel's chairman, Sen. Kent Conrad, D-N.D. "And on the contrary, the legislation significantly expands the federal responsibility for health care costs."

Elmendorf undermined a key argument for the House Democrats' plan right as it appeared to be gaining momentum — both the American Medical Association and the American College of Surgeons announced their support last week. The escalating price tag, however, has caused a backlash among moderate-to-conservative "Blue Dog" Democrats and even diminished the physician lobbies' endorsement. Citing Elmendorf, the Cato Institute's Michael Cannon wrote, "The docs are supporting the Democrats' health care plans because the Democrats are buying them off."

But Elmendorf cannot easily be dismissed as a conservative or libertarian ideologue. He is a Democratic appointee at the CBO and a veteran of the Brookings Institution, a center-left think tank.

Although he has worked with economists across the ideological spectrum (as an assistant professor at Harvard, he taught with Martin

Feldstein, a former chief economics adviser to President Ronald Reagan), Elmendorf served in economic advisory positions during Bill Clinton's administration.

When Congress and the White House are controlled by different parties, the officially nonpartisan CBO becomes enmeshed in Washington's political battles. During the 1980s, CBO forecasters were at odds with the "rosy scenarios" allegedly painted by the Reagan administration's Office of Management and Budget. Similarly, Republican-appointed CBO directors sparred with the Clinton administration over deficit figures throughout the 1990s.

Yet when the president's party picks Congress' top green-eyed shade man, the CBO is widely seen as an honest broker and can have a huge effect whenever its analysis suggests the emperor has no clothes — or at least the emperor's numbers don't add up.

And unlike the politicians who frequently run OMB, the CBO's directors tend to be the workiest of workers. Elmendorf has previously worked on the Council of Economic Advisers, the Treasury Department, the Federal Reserve, and even has a prior stint as an analyst at the CBO from 1993-94.

Few people ever know the CBO director's name, but the facts and figures the organization churns out become the currency of the Washington policy debate. They decide whether a tax cut blows a hole in the deficit or pays for itself, and whether a major new spending program is revenue-neutral or a net drain on taxpayers.

Elmendorf's latest number-crunching makes him more influential on health care than any Republican in Washington.

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SOUND BITES

"The call for jihad and seditious takeover of the United States by Islam was made loud and clear [Sunday] in Chicago."

- Douglas J. Haggmann, director of the Northeast Intelligence Network, on a conference held by members of the fundamentalist Hizb ut-Tahrir party in Oak Lawn, Ill.

lawmakers literally signed on the dotted line that they thought the federal government should spend money on these projects."

- Steve Ellis, vice president of taxpayers for Common Sense, on the House-approved 2010 defense appropriations bill

for us after the fact."

- Andrew Moylan, director of government affairs at the National Taxpayers Union

"Ultimately, all health care systems ration care. It's a finite commodity. There's not an infinite amount

of doctors, hospitals or money. I think those countries that have markets at work give consumers greater influence over making those rationing decisions."

- Michael Tanner, Cato Institute

"[The House health care bill] would result in the greatest expansion of abortion since Roe v. Wade."

- Douglas D. Johnson, legislative director of the National Right to Life Committee, on the 2010 defense appropriations bill, approved by the House on Thursday

"No matter what happens, these

cookies are in there

DIRTY MONEY WATCH

WHO: Rep. Chris Carney, D-Pa.

WHAT: Carney received the following dirty money: PMA Group (PAC) \$5,000 in 2008 election cycle.

WHY IT'S DIRTY: PMA Group (Paul Magliocchetti and Associates) was a defense lobbying group that is now the focus of multiple federal investigations concerning allegations of influence peddling and other corrupt activities, mostly associated with earmarks. Before it was disbanded earlier this year, PMA Group's employees and its political action committee gave current members of Congress \$3.4 million between 1989 and 2008, with 79 percent of that going to Democrats, according to OpenSecrets.org.

WILL CARNEY GIVE IT BACK: Carney did not respond to *The Examiner's* request for comment.

THE SCORE: Number of Democrats who have given it back: 0
Number of Republicans who have given it back: 0

YOUR TURN: You can reach Carney's Washington office at 202-225-3731.

Don't know who your congressman is? Go to house.gov and look in the upper left-hand corner. Don't know who your state's two senators are? Go to senate.gov and look in the upper right-hand corner.

Dirty Money is researched and written by Kevin Mooney of *The Washington Examiner's* commentary staff.

