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## Amid war, recession and health care debate, politicians loath to mention sacrifice

By SCOTT CANON  
The Kansas City Star

Reversing climate change will create green jobs. Tax cuts spur the economy. Everybody wins when everybody is covered by health insurance. Putting the American military to work in the Middle East could bring democracy to the region and American security in its wake.

That's what we're told, what we're sold.

Then comes the bill.

Attacking climate change may create some jobs, but weaning industry and individuals off of fossil fuels is sure to strain overall economic growth. Cutting taxes tends to add to the deficit, perhaps begetting higher taxes later. Providing health care to more than 46 million uninsured Americans will cost real money.

Politicians prefer not to talk about all the pesky sacrifices that are needed to give bold action a chance to succeed. This is a country where prosperity has been the norm, an era when technology has made so many things so much easier.

Is it no wonder that Americans, shocked already by a year of economic shakiness, aren't eager for sacrifice?

"Political leaders never want to talk about the negative trade-off, but the reality is there aren't any easy, quick answers to our big problems," said Cindy Williams, a defense budget analyst at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Our leaders are, after all, playing to their audience. Don't we all want more over less? And wouldn't it be swell if somebody else picked up the tab?

"There's a selfishness in the land," said Alan Simpson, a former U.S. senator from Wyoming. "In my 18 years (in the Senate) I never heard anyone come in and ask for less. Not once."

We are torn. Polls tend to show that two in three Americans think the government ought to take care of those who can't fend for themselves. Yet according to a Pew Center poll, two-thirds of us believe "many people today think they can get ahead without working hard and making sacrifices."

The same way a car salesman prefers to talk about leather seats rather than how you will have to scrimp on restaurants to pay for a new ride, politicians are shy about bringing up the costs of things. Benefits are just so much more, well, appealing.

Politicians "think people want to hear something that sounds painless. They have experience on their side," said Diane Lim Rogers, the chief economist for the deficit watchdog Concord Coalition and author of the Economist Mom blog.

Running for president in 1984, Walter Mondale promised to raise taxes, and lost. In his presidency, Jimmy Carter prodded Americans to turn down their thermostats and, with the help of the Iran hostage crisis, was not re-elected in 1980. Running for president as an independent in 1992 and 1996, Ross Perot warned about a country dooming itself to debt. He lost — twice.

Sure, John F. Kennedy in 1961 urged his countrymen to "ask what you can do for your country" and attracted young volunteers to the Peace Corps, but was pretty vague about what the rest of the country ought to give.

Even Carter's much-derided 1979 "malaise" speech that declared a war for energy independence did not include a call for sacrifice.

Look at today's debate over health care reform, Rogers said. President Barack Obama's administration wants to do

two things. First, insure the uninsured. Second, halt runaway medical bills.

“If we’re going to cover more people with health care, that means we cannot continue to subsidize every form of health care for everybody,” Rogers said. “Obama likes to talk about it as if we’re only getting rid of the things we don’t like — as if we can just take a cheaper blue pill instead of the more expensive red pill.”

Republicans, Rogers said, are hypocritical. They claim to want to protect Medicare against the cost reforms that Obama hopes can pay for universal coverage.

They’ve made their own efforts to rein in the entitlement program. Democrats, Rogers said, are wimps. They are unwilling to talk candidly about the tough choices — rationing services or increasing taxes — needed to keep the country’s health care system from imploding.

Capitol Hill might yet produce something that will cover more people and work to put an end to your hospital’s proverbial \$10 aspirin tablet. Still, Rogers said, it is hard to imagine a reform that wouldn’t trim Medicare benefits or come with a tax or dip into somebody’s pocketbook.

Americans are more likely to go along with a change if the same people pushing reform were the ones talking candidly about the costs, Rogers said. Without that, she said, Republican criticisms seem all the more damaging because they appear to be exposing dirty secrets about a plan that Obama and congressional Democrats are pushing.

Or consider climate change — an issue that still is greeted with great skepticism in some quarters but was acknowledged as a crisis even by George W. Bush’s administration. The path to a solution may not doom us shivering in the dark. Still, we might have to settle for smaller cars and houses, to hop on airliners far less, miss some of our affordable fresh produce in the winter.

The Obama White House has chosen not to push for a tax on carbon emissions — which many analysts say could most directly curb the buildup of greenhouse gases. Instead, the administration favors a cap-and-trade system that will let the pollution of some be offset by the green behavior of others.

“We can allow climate change to wreak unnatural havoc, or we can create jobs utilizing low-carbon technologies to prevent its worse effects,” Obama said in June.

So, to hear our chief executive talk, the choice is between disaster and more jobs. Which would you pick?

Advocates for tackling global warming decisively prefer to talk about the dangers of inaction — much like those advocating a health care overhaul. Even some of those environmentalists say an effective campaign against climate change must include acknowledge the short-term costs.

“You can go too far in suggesting win-win solutions,” said Frank Ackerman, an economist at Tufts University in Medford, Mass.

Ackerman said he believes strongly that the greater cost to society would come with “increasing economic and human losses to a more violent and unpredictable climate ... if we do nothing.” Make that sale, and the initial costs become easier to talk about, he said.

Obama has been much like his White House predecessor. A search of their speeches over the last two years finds the terms “sacrifice” regularly — but almost always looking backward in thanks to the military, not in pleading for civilians to give up something for the common good.

George W. Bush defined his presidency in the hours and days after Sept. 11, 2001. Under his administration, the Taliban was pushed from power in Afghanistan.

But critics note that Bush didn’t appeal to average Americans to pitch in. Two years after the attacks, pollsters found Americans would rather pay for their security and health care by delaying tax cuts than add to the deficit.

But there would be no new taxes to pay for that war effort, or the subsequent campaign to topple the Iraqi regime. Rather, Bush encouraged Americans to keep shopping lest the terrorist attacks succeed in further unsettling an antsy U.S. economy.

And even as it became harder to recruit troops, and as he regularly acknowledged the pain felt by troops and their families, Bush — the father of service-age twins — did not make a call for military service.

“He never seemed to ask for anything from anyone,” Richard Vatz, a professor of rhetoric and politics at Towson University in Towson, Md., said of Bush.

Vatz said the political polarization that has marked the last two decades only makes it more difficult for politicians to

call for sacrifice.

To do so, he said, simply provides an opening for the opposition.

“We don’t even agree on the facts,” Vatz said. “You don’t have agreed-upon threats.”

The resulting discussion with the body politic lacks the frankness that could breed responsible policy.

“Bush cut taxes and increased spending. Now Obama is not promising to cut taxes, but he’s promising that the federal government will provide everything from cradle to grave,” said David Boaz, the executive vice president of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

“In both cases, they can say government can take on more and still put off the taxes.

“... Politicians should be honest,” he said. “They should tell people what the trade-offs are.”

When Washington political consultant Martin Hamburger counsels Democratic candidates, he encourages win-win talk on the campaign trail. When he sees his side struggling in the health care debate, he concludes that’s because it just isn’t promoting the benefits of its argument forcefully enough or pointing out the fallacies of the other side in a sufficiently clever way.

But calling for Medicare cuts, or higher income taxes, or a military draft? They just don’t poll well.

“It’s very hard to ask people to sacrifice,” Hamburger said.

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