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1 word you won't hear in politics: 'sacrifice'

Politicians are loath to tell us that solutions may have drawbacks

By Scott Canon
McClatchy Newspapers

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. — 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 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 any 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

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Republican 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."

Just as 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 Kennedy in 1961 urged his countrymen to "ask what you can do for your country," and attracted young volunteers to the Peace Corps, but he 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.

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