

Playing it again and again, and again

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In case you lost count, President Obama's remarks on Wednesday were his 35th major speech on health care reform. The news: this time he really, really, *really* means it when he says it's time to act.

At least I assume it was President Obama. It might have been an animatronic puppet filched from Disney World given its utter predictability. Even the backdrop was an imitation—a legion of white-coated health care workers, the same as at the president's speech on Oct. 5, 2009.

As for the speech itself, it was virtually indistinguishable from any of the previous 34.

It began as usual with the rhetorical trope whereby the president positions himself as the middle ground between two extremes, in this case single-payer advocates and "those who want to do nothing." One imagines that the president starts every day considering that there are those who want him to become a military dictator and those who want him to resign, but he's just going to go on being president.

Having shown how moderate and reasonable he is, the president launched into the usual factually inaccurate claims. "If you like your plan, you can keep your plan," he said. "If you like your doctor, you can keep your doctor." That's been a part of almost every one of Obama's speeches. However, as everyone from ABC News to Factcheck.org has pointed out, it's simply untrue. Under the regulations and mandates contained in the president's plan, the government would set minimum benefit levels for insurance plans. If your plan had too high a deductible or didn't contain benefits the government thought you should have, you would have to change plans to one that complied with the government's standards, even if the new plan was more expensive or contained benefits you didn't want.

As usual he also claimed that his plan would "bring down the cost of health care" and reduce premiums. Yet the president's own chief actuary has said that the plans under consideration "bend the cost curve upward," that is, actually increase the amount of health care spending. And according to the Congressional Budget Office, the bills do little or nothing to reduce insurance premiums. For millions of Americans, the Senate bill will actually make things worse, increasing insurance premiums by 10 percent-13 percent for Americans who don't receive insurance from their employer and buy their insurance through the non-group market. Those increases are over and above the increases that would occur if we did nothing, and would result in roughly doubling premiums by 2016, according to the CBO.

And there was the bizarre claim that the American people are "waiting for us to act. They are waiting for us to lead." But no major poll has shown majority support for health care reform in more than two months. In the most recent Real Clear Politics average of polls, 50.3 percent opposed reform, with just 40.8 percent in favor.

Finally, there was the predictable attack on insurance companies—no one's favorite industry these days, so a safe target—and the assertion that anyone who opposed his plan wants to do nothing.

As for substance, there were a few cosmetic concessions (an extra \$50 million to encourage states to experiment with malpractice reform, undercover stings to fight Medicare and Medicaid fraud, maybe allowing government-run exchanges to sell health savings accounts). But at its heart, the latest version of Obamacare has not changed. It still represents a top down, centralized, command and control approach to reform. The government would require everyone to have health insurance, would determine what benefits that insurance must include, would regulate insurance prices and physician reimbursement, and would micromanage how medicine is practiced. All this would be accompanied by higher taxes and most likely higher insurance premiums.

The president closed by endorsing an obscure parliamentary gimmick known as reconciliation

to bypass a Republican filibuster and force a bill through Congress. The American people might oppose health care reform. They might have elected Scott Brown in Massachusetts to be “the 41st vote” against the bill. They might be ready to vote out most any Democrat who supports it.

But never mind all that. President Obama knows best.

And he’s told us that—over and over again.

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[1] Healthy Competition: What’s Holding Back Health Care and How to Free It:

<http://www.amazon.com/Healthy-Competition-Whats-Holding-Health/dp/1930865813>

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