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Michael Tanner: Final 'reform' push: twisting arms

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Story Highlights

Whether or not you believe former Rep. Eric Massa's bizarre accusations of locker-room confrontations, there is no doubt that the Obama administration and its congressional allies are willing to use every trick in the book to get this health bill passed. Opponents can expect the political equivalent of a horse head between their sheets.

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ARTICLE

President Obama's attempts to ram health care reform through an increasingly reluctant Congress are starting to resemble a really eventful episode of "The Sopranos."

Whether or not you believe former Rep. Eric Massa's bizarre accusations of locker-room confrontations and conspiracies to drive him from office, there is no doubt that the Obama administration and its congressional allies are willing to use every trick in the book to get this bill passed.



FILE PHOTO: U.S. Rep. Eric Massa (D-NY) announces his support for legislation that would use the tax code to punish executives who receive large bonuses after being bailed out by the federal government during a news conference at the U.S. Capitol March 17, 2009 in Washington, DC.

Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

They've already bought votes with pork and special deals – the "Louisiana purchase" (\$300 million to bolster that state's Medicaid program, which swayed Sen. Mary Landrieu); the "Cornhusker kickback" (\$100 million to Medicaid there, sweetening the pot for Sen. Ben Nelson), and Florida's "Gator Aid" (a Medicare deal potentially worth \$5 billion, a hefty price for Sen. Bill Nelson's vote). Plus the millions for Connecticut hospitals, Montana asbestos abatement and so on.

Nor were the Obamans willing to let a little thing like election laws stand in the way. They rewrote Massachusetts law to allow for an appointed senator to hold office for several months, hoping to get the bill through before the special election that Scott Brown ultimately won. Their plans spoiled, they even considered holding up Brown's seating to let the appointed senator continue to vote on health care – until public outrage forced them to back down.

And, of course, there has been an unprecedented willingness to ignore congressional rules – from the failure to appoint a "conference committee" to negotiate differences between the House and Senate bills, to their current plans to use the reconciliation process to bypass a Republican filibuster.

Expect the tactics to get even dirtier now.

Those who support the president can expect favors. No sooner had Rep Jim Matheson (D-Utah) suggested that he might be willing to switch his vote and support the latest version of Obamacare than his brother was nominated for a federal judgeship.

Alan Mollohan (D-W.Va.) is also on the undecided list. And, purely by coincidence no

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doubt, the Justice Department just announced that it is dropping an FBI investigation that has been swirling about the congressman. Gosh, if only Charlie Rangel were one of the undecideds.

Those who oppose the president can expect the political equivalent of a horse head between their sheets.

Some of this is just traditional electioneering: On-the-fence Arkansas Sen. Blanche Lincoln is getting a primary challenger with some backing

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from the national Democratic machine.

But some of it is much nastier. Massa's story may have credibility issues, but other opponents of the bill are also starting to feel the heat. For instance, Rep. Bart Stupak (D-Mich.), whose opposition to abortion funding has become one of the bill's biggest hurdles, is now seeing attacks on his ethics.

MSNBC host Rachel Maddow recently questioned the legality of the low rent that a conservative Christian group charges Stupak for his DC apartment. She even noted ominously that disgraced South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford stayed at the same building. The liberal blog Daily Kos has picked up on the charges and suggested that both the IRS and the House Ethics Committee investigate.

"Politics ain't beanbag," as Mr. Dooley noted. Presidents have always twisted arms and made deals. And when two-thirds of voters are opposed to your plans, you may have no choice but to play hardball.

But when Obama promised to change the way Washington does business, we didn't think he meant making it a "family" business.

Michael Tanner is a senior fellow at the [Cato Institute](#) and coauthor of *Healthy Competition: What's Holding Back Health Care and How to Free It*.

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