



THE VIEW

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A LAST DEEP BREATH BEFORE CONGRESS RETURNS

BY

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It seems that we are in the 10th week of August, and yet we are only two-thirds through. Congress is still out of session, but the members are ever so accessible to their constituents and the Obama family is on vacation in Martha's Vineyard. Perhaps this is the best opportunity that we will have to take a deep breath and consider where we are in the still early days of this fast paced administration.

The news continues to be dominated by the economy, health care reform, and the two wars halfway around the world. A random assessment of how each of these categories impacts us and the government decision-makers is in order. First, what grade should be given the performance of the Obama administration on the economy? Can I be forgiven for hedging and giving the President an incomplete? I request permission to do this because the improvement in the economy appears to be continuous and even possibly gaining momentum. Fed Chairman Ben Bernanke even used the word "growth" with regard to recent economic performance. The political issue here is whether or not President Obama and the stimulus package will be given credit as many say it should or whether the notion held by Republican-leaning economists hold sway that the economy would have turned the corner anyway without the stimulus. The solution to this question as arrived at by the American public will have a lot to say about the ultimate fate of health care reform and about the outcomes of the 2010 mid-term Congressional elections looming ever closer on the horizon.

This brings us to health care reform. I have done my best to avoid this issue, but alas it must be discussed in this space at some point so it might as well be now. What grade should the President be given in his effort to overhaul the nation's health care system? At this stage going into the home stretch that begins with the fall term of Congress I must give him a D-. President Obama's health care effort is in shambles and hardly resembles a project that would have been devised by the same team that created such an effective campaign juggernaut that propelled Obama to the Presidency. The missteps are numerous. Perhaps Obama was naïve in leaving the creation of the legislation to the Congress. Obama could have and should have ridden the crest of his popularity in guiding this signature legislative

effort. Instead, he turned the process over to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid. Where Obama wore a crown, the Democratic Congressional leadership wore bull's-eyes on their backs. In this regard, President Obama is finding it exceedingly difficult to reel the legislative effort back in and get a "do over". Add to this the timing issue. While it was perhaps smart for The President to take advantage of his immense popularity upon entering the White House, the economy threw him a curve. The recession made the massive stimulus package a necessity and the public, fresh from seeing friends, neighbors, and themselves lose jobs and watching their retirement plans go in the tank, became easy prey for the psychological terrorists bent on further scaring the public away from any health care reform devised by the government. The question for the Obama administration was: Do we forge ahead and take advantage of the immense popularity on display on Inauguration Day, or do we wait on the economy to rebound and risk squandering that initial good will? On the other hand, the timing could not have worked more in favor of the Republicans and other opponents. Add the trillion dollar health care bill to the agenda of the Tea Party crowd and send Congress home to their districts to confront them during the entire month of August. Now the bi-partisan consensus that the nation's health care system is in dire need of reform is all but forgotten.

Almost lost also, in the shouting over health care, has been the winding down of the war in Iraq and the heating up of the one in Afghanistan. There have been more than a few allusions to the early days of Lyndon Johnson's Presidency when he engineered the passage of several pieces of landmark civil rights legislation, Medicare and Medicaid, and presided over the escalation of the war in Viet Nam. In short, Johnson launched his massive "War on Poverty" as part of his Great Society program while plunging deeper into a costly war. The combination did Johnson in as he chose not to run in 1968. It is doubtful that President Obama will make any such choice, but his determination to accomplish a monumental amount of change in an environment where change is deliberate and slow may prove costly as his administration matures.

So as we approach September what will happen on these and other fronts? The Republicans will return to town refreshed and reinvigorated and the Democrats wary and embattled. If the economy continues to improve some fragmented health care bills will pass making incremental changes but comprehensive reform will remain elusive. Public disenchantment and policy dilemmas with regard to Afghanistan will continue to grow more menacing. Take this week to replace the batteries in your remote control. It will be a wild fall.



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