

THE MANY IRONIES OF HEALTHCARE REFORM:

Sad, Wicked, Amazing, Delicious, Socratic, Dramatic, and Cosmic

By Nick Gier

Using tax penalties, as we did [in Massachusetts], encourages "free riders" to take responsibility for themselves rather than pass their medical costs on to others. . . . Here is where the federal government can do something we could not: Take steps to stop or slow medical inflation.

—Mitt Romney, *USA Today*, July 30, 2009

If you accept that it's a tax, then you also have to accept that the Supreme Court was right not to strike down Obamacare. If you're Romney, you also have to concede that you raised taxes exactly the same way in Massachusetts.

—Timothy Noah, *The New Republic* (July 6, 2012)

There are many types of irony: sad, wicked, amazing, Socratic, dramatic, cosmic, and delicious. The tasty ones are those that make you smile and smack your lips as you savor the incongruities of improbable events.

Let us begin with the most scrumptious ones. The individual mandate—the principle that all Americans should be required to buy health insurance—was originally proposed by conservatives at the American Enterprise Institute and Heritage Foundation.

In a 1989 lecture Stuart Butler of the Heritage Foundation offered this distinction: “If a young man wrecks his Porsche and has not had the foresight to obtain insurance, we may commiserate, but society feels no obligation to repair his car. Health care is different. If a man is struck down by a heart attack in the street, Americans will care for him whether or not he has insurance.”

In the 1990s conservatives used at least two principles in their argument for the individual mandate: (1) the obvious truth that the larger the insurance pool the smaller the risk; and (2) the idea of personal responsibility. Following Republican principles

(including states' rights), no one will pay a penalty if everyone takes responsibility for her/his own health care in the free-market state insurance exchanges.

Critics of the Affordable Care Act confuse the tax for noncompliance with the new taxes that are designed to pay for providing about 30 million Americans with health insurance. The non-partisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates that 4 million Americans will refuse to buy insurance, and at \$95 per individual the total would be \$380 million in 2014.

In 2003 a Republican House passed an unfunded senior drug benefit, which, according to Ronald Reagan's own budget director, added \$15.5 trillion to the national debt. In stark contrast the Affordable Care Act raises taxes to pay for extensive new coverage and close the noxious "doughnut hole," in which seniors pick up the full cost of their drugs. The non-partisan Joint Committee on Taxation estimates that even with the new taxes Obamacare will reduce the deficit by \$437.8 billion by 2019.

The Affordable Care Act also implements a long-over-due increase in Medicare premiums for those making over \$250,000, citizens who can well afford to pay more for their health coverage. Timothy Noah of *The New Republic* wants to know why Republicans are not up in arms about this tax increase, rather than "kick up a fuss about a pipsqueak tax on health-insurance-shirkers." He answers his own question: Grover Norquist has no problem with raising payroll taxes.

Instead of raising income taxes, many Republicans do support raising taxes on alcohol and tobacco. According to the Center for Disease Control, the former causes about 79,000 deaths per year, while the latter is responsible for 443,000 deaths. A Harvard Medical School study concluded that each year there are 45,000 unnecessary deaths because of the lack of adequate medical care. Not having health insurance is just about as dangerous to your health as drinking too much, so a penalty on refusing to insure yourself and your family is just as reasonable as these "sin" taxes. People can harm themselves by passive neglect just as badly as they can by active drinking and smoking.

One of the most delectable ironies in the healthcare debate is that Republicans kept saying that Obama's individual mandate was a tax, but the Democrats kept denying that it was. Chief Justice John Roberts joined the liberals on the court and ruled that it was. Contrary to his top adviser, Romney said that he agreed with Roberts. So why aren't conservatives praising Roberts and celebrating a victory? That's a spicy irony.

There is nothing ironic in Democrats not wanting the mandate to be a tax. Ever since Ronald Reagan, who, here is an amazing irony for you, raised taxes in every year except one, the Democrats know full well that they will be crucified if they propose any tax increases. Conservatives are now accusing Democrats of lying about the mandate and taxes, but that makes Romney also a liar when he said that those who did not comply with Romneycare would only pay a penalty, one which is actually much higher than that in the Affordable Care Act.

The most delectable ironies abound in the history of Romneycare. Bay State Democrats, just as Obama was in his debates with Hillary Clinton, were against the mandate, but Romney vigorously supported the idea and won in the end. He now insists that he never raised taxes while he was governor, but he did impose the mandate tax and lot of fees in lieu of taxes. A study done by the National Conference of State Legislatures concluded that in 2003 Massachusetts had the highest state fees in the nation. The \$502 million raised by taxes disguised as fees was enough to close the Bay State's budget deficit.

It is sad irony that the Mormon Romney, whose coreligionists are famous for their honesty and probity, not only speaks falsehoods, but repeats them even after they have been publicly corrected. In stark contrast to Obama who has, for the number of statements tested by Politifact.com, spoken truthfully 77 percent of the time (with 5 "pants on fire" out of 475 statements), Romney has a truth record of only 59 percent (with a record number of 13 "pants on fire" out of 141 claims).

On healthcare Romney repeats a falsehood that many Republicans spout: "Obamacare means that up to 20 million Americans will lose the insurance they currently have, the insurance that they like and they want to keep." An ad by the

Chamber of Commerce adds “including senior citizens who are on Medicare” to lower its veracity to “pants on fire.”

Also false are Romney’s claims that the Affordable Care Act “cuts Medicare by \$500,000 billion,” that “ending Obamacare saves \$95 billion,” and “Obama is ending Medicare as we know it,” which also ignited his bottom. Romney supports the Ryan budget that truly does end it. The CBO has calculated that repealing the Affordable Care Act will add \$210 billion to the deficit over ten years, and that it reduce (not cut) Medicare costs. This is just one of the many ways in which Obamacare will reduce the deficit.

In an op-ed in *USA Today* (7/30/09) Romney ironically conceded that only the federal government was in a position to control our soaring medical costs. This of course contradicts his current position that the states should decide everything on their own. After analyzing Romney’s column, Ryan Grimm concludes (*Huffington Post*, 3/4/12) that the 2010 Democratic Congress did everything that Romney asked for: sufficient time and reflection, a Senate bipartisan effort, provisions for cost containment, deficit reduction (verified by the CBO), and rejecting the public option. That is yet another delicious irony.

So far I’ve not detected any Socratic irony in this campaign. In Plato’s dialogues Socrates is notorious for playing the ignorant fool and then revealing his razor sharp reasoning skills at the end. The Republicans are like Socrates’ opponents, who claim to know but are really ignorant.

With his remarks on Obamacare, Rush Limbaugh takes the grand prize and proves once again that Sen. Al Franken was right in calling him a “big fat idiot.” (Socrates would have had a field day with Limbaugh.) For Politfact.com Limbaugh’s pants went combustible with this whopper: “Obamacare is the largest tax increase in the history of the world.” (That distinction most likely belongs to some medieval Christian king.) The largest middle class tax increase in American history happened when Ronald Reagan signed the Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act in 1982.

Republican leaders are smart people, so do they, with their own wicked irony, know the facts but distort them for political gain? Florida Gov. Rick Scott earned both

law and business degrees and was CEO of health insurance giant Columbia/HCA, which in 1997 paid \$600 million in fines for fraudulent Medicare billing.

One would think that Gov. Scott would know something about health care, but five recent statements examined by Politifact.com have been rated as “mostly false, pants on fire, false, false, and false.” It is incorrect that small companies will go out of business because of Obamacare; it is untrue that Medicare expansion “will cost Florida \$1.9 billion a year”; the Affordable Care Act will *not* ration care; Obamacare will *not* “be the biggest job-killer ever”; and Americans will *not* pay more in the state insurance exchanges.

It is a amazing irony that some opponents of Obamacare are say that they will move to Canada if it is not repealed. Where were they when conservatives criticized the single-payer system that Canadians have been enjoying since 1966 at half the cost of American medical care? Russ Limbaugh embarrassed himself for the umpteenth time by declaring that he will move to Costa Rica, where they of course have universal health care.

It is also ironic that many of those who oppose Obamacare want a much more efficient single payer system instead. In February of 2009 a *New York Times/CBS* poll showed 59 percent agreed with the statement that “the government should provide national health insurance.” Those who said that Uncle Sam should cover all medical problems made up 49% of the respondents. Except for the mandate, nearly every other part of the Affordable Care Act has overwhelming support, including the insurances exchanges.

It is a sad fact that the U.S. could have set up a single-payer system decades ago. During World War II, the National War Labor Board convinced the IRS to exclude employer-paid medical premiums as taxable income. As a result 62 percent of American workers were covered by their employers’ health plans by 2006. Over the years a huge private health insurance industry, with some of the highest CEO salaries in the nation, grew dramatically. With the lobbying power of these companies and most all other businesses, the single-payer option is not politically feasible. I now agree with Sen.

John McCain that the \$700 billion per year that should be paid out as taxable wages could easily cover all uninsured Americans.

Congress provides exquisite dramatic irony not only with regard to health care, but nearly every other problem that confronts the nation. Some of the most entertaining plays are those in which some of the actors don't have a clue about what is going on (e.g., Iago's machinations against Othello), but the audience knows full well what is going on. The Congress thinks that it is trying hard to do the business of the people, but even the American people—uninformed as they are—realize what fools they really are.

But wait, there might some cosmic irony that trumps all others. The great William of Stratford-on-Avon once wrote that "all the world is a stage." It is not impossible that the remnants of some alien culture are traveling in deep space and have the ability to spy on us. They have destroyed their planet and most of its life forms, and they, too, as the audience in a play, can see what a mess that all of us have made of Life on Earth. Only the cynics among them would chuckle, smack their lips, and take pleasure in our demise.

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