

Obama's Media Blitz & Cloture

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 22, 2009 NCR Today

President Obama is all over the airwaves, appearing on news shows, speaking at televised rallies and, now, even appearing on David Letterman. He has recognized that he needs to be in the fight for health care reform, not only to help build popular support for his reforms but to bolster wavering Democrats. The reform effort is now so thoroughly associated with the President's political standing, that to oppose the reform is to cripple his presidency.

This is important because there are some conservative Democratic senators who might prefer not to vote for the eventual plan that emerges. And, with fifty-nine votes, and hopefully a sixtieth coming from Massachusetts if that commonwealth's notoriously fractious legislature does the right thing, the President does not have a vote to spare if he is to avoid a filibuster that would kill the plan.

It is unfathomable to me that any Democrat could resist a request from the President to vote for cloture, the parliamentary procedure that ends debate. If he cannot persuade them, surely Vicki Regge Kennedy can. They can vote against the eventual bill: Once you get past the filibuster, legislation only requires a majority of the chamber. And, I doubt that there would be any downside for a Democrat who votes for cloture and against the bill. If a future opponent tries to hold them accountable, they can say, "I did not support the plan but I thought the President had a right to an up-or-down vote on it." And, besides, there is not an ad man in the world with enough creativity to devise an ad that explains the Senate's arcane rules.

More importantly, imagine the headlines and the article ledes the day after the President signs a health care bill. "Achieving a legislative triumph that has eluded every President since Theodore Roosevelt?" seems like an obvious lede. "Historic Victory for Obama?" seems like an obvious headline. Against coverage like that, do you really think people will remember a cloture vote.

Obama knows what he is doing. It would be great for him if his many appearances produce an uptick in the polls for the reform effort. But, even if people's attitudes do not change, he has already largely obliterated the mental image of the angry town hall meetings in August. And, to the extent he has made it clear to Democrats on the Hill that this is a make-or-break issue for him, he is making it harder and harder for Republicans to stop a bill from passing. Their pleas to "start from scratch" give away the game. The train is leaving the station and they are desperate to stop it. But, they don't have the votes.

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