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Hope, Ark. or Oyster Bay, NY or Hyde Park, NY?

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 30, 2009 NCR Today

Harold Pollack over at TNR has a provocative idea [1]: Whenever the health care bill is finally passed, President Obama should fly to Bill Clinton?s hometown of Hope, Arkansas and sign it there as a way of highlighting the role the Clintons? effort in 1993, though unsuccessful, nonetheless paved the way for Obama?s almost certain victory on the issue early next year. He notes that Lyndon Johnson went to Independence, Missouri to sign Medicare into law at the Truman Library, highlighting his predeccesor?s effort which also had been unsuccessful.

Pollack is undoubtedly right that Obama learned from the Clintons? earlier efforts, and that the political winds had changed by 2009, making it more likely to get some sort of health care reform passed. But, if Obama were to go to Arkansas to sign the bill, surely the commentariat would see it as a kind of put-down of the Clintons, highlighting his success in contrast to their failure. This would be wrong, but you know the press loves conflict and is happy to invent some even where none exists. Besides, I suspect Blanche Lincoln, the Arkansas Democrat facing a tough re-election fight next year, would prefer not to have the ceremony in her backyard.

But, Pollack is on to something. Certainly, Obama must give the pen with which he signs the legislation to Hillary and praise her efforts in the early 1990s in his speech. But, he should have the ceremony not in Arkansas but in one of two New York locations: Sagamore Hill, the home of Teddy Roosevelt who was the first president to urge universal health insurance, or Springwood, the estate of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who enacted Social Security. Invoking TR introduces a bipartisan note, and calls attention to the fact, noted yesterday, that once upon a time there were progressive Republicans. Invoking FDR places the health care reform effort as part of the social safety net the New Deal began to erect, pointing to the undeniable fact that citizens like entitlements. Of the two options, I like Springwood. People are still not sure what to make of this health care bill but seeing it in the tradition of Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid will help them see that it is part of an on-going, and beneficial, tradition of which they need not be afraid. Either way, Obama can show that the GOP of today has more in common with Herbert Hoover than they care to admit.

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Links:
[1] http://www.tnr.com/blog/the-treatment/place-called-hope