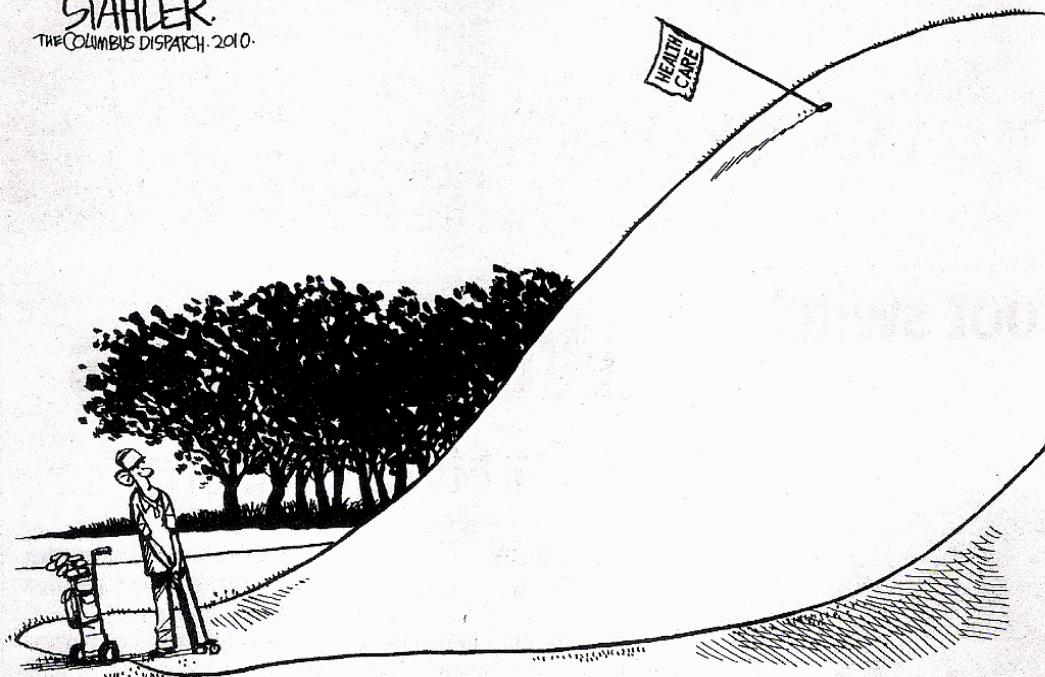


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Do the right thing, pass health care reform now

At last, Americans who want an affordable, more accessible health care system made their voices heard on Tuesday in Washington, D.C., during a civil disobedience protest. Hooray!

The debate over our nation's failing health care system has turned into a classic tug-of-war between the "Haves" and the "Have-Nots," but the players in this high-stakes game are not equally matched.

The "Haves" are those who are healthy, have secure jobs and health insurance, and those who are affluent. Many of these people see health care reform as a sacrifice they are unwilling to make for the "Have-Nots" — those who are unhealthy, working for employers who do not offer health insurance, and those who cannot afford health insurance because they are self-employed or unemployed, or who can't get insurance due to a pre-existing medical condition.

The Republicans have portrayed the "Have-Nots" as just "poor" and low-income people," but a lot of middle-class Americans are uninsured, because they make too much money to benefit from existing government health-care programs, but not enough money to afford health insurance and support their families. One should also consider that if you lose your job and become seriously ill, you could easily get catapulted into the "Have-Not" group.

The "Haves" have an entire industry of high-priced insurance lobbyists and diehard Republicans, who are eager to see President Barack Obama fail, in their corner. While the "Have Nots" have some activists, noble policymakers and a group of fickle-minded Democrats on their team, some who are more concerned about being re-elected than making sure people do not suffer or die because they do not have health insurance or be victimized by



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private insurance companies who put profits above their clients' welfare.

No matter what you think of President Obama's positions on the complex issues facing our nation, I think most people would agree, that at least Obama has a backbone and he is willing to make the tough decisions and stand by his convictions, unlike many of his spineless colleagues in the Democratic Party. At a recent rally in Glenside, Pennsylvania, Obama said, "I don't know how passing health care will do politically, but I do know it's the right thing to do." We need more politicians, locally and nationally, who are willing to stand up for what is right, rather than what is popular or politically expedient.

The Republicans, many of whom never flinched when it came to sending our troops into an unjustified war in Iraq that cost more than 4,000 American lives and ran up the deficit, suddenly are so conscientious about a bill that could save American lives and reduce our enormous deficit by an estimated \$1 trillion. If the Republicans were sincerely committed to fixing America's health-care system, they would have done so during the eight years they controlled the White House or they would have worked with Democrats to develop meaningful legislation to provide health care to the 46 million uninsured Americans. Instead, the Republicans, intent on undermining Obama, have once again resorted to name-calling, scare tactics

and a shameless misinformation campaign.

Sadly, the Democrats have allowed them to do it, by retreating behind closed doors, demanding special favors for their votes or rolling over when health care reform became seemingly unpopular no doubt due to the Republicans organized smear campaign and last summer's orchestrated heated town meetings. Thank God Obama is not in armed combat with these guys, because when the bullets start firing, they will run for cover, leaving him to fend for himself.

It's time for the Democrats to do the right thing, with or without the Republicans, and pass a health care bill that closes the gap between the "Haves" and the "Have-Nots" and puts the needs of Americans first. We can either be proactive now or reactive later. If nothing is done, insurance companies will continue to arbitrarily deny coverage to sick people; millions of uninsured Americans will continue to suffer needlessly or die from preventable diseases; and insurance premiums will continue to escalate due to lack of competition and regulations, and healthy people opting out of the system. Additionally, more public hospitals will be in jeopardy of closing, as the uninsured, desperate for medical care, inundate emergency rooms and urgent-care facilities seeking treatment for ailments that are neither critical nor urgent, because they can't afford a private doctor or they have been turned away from doctors because they do not have health insurance.

The health-care bill is not perfect. It does not have a public option, but it offers much-needed consumer protections, promises to reduce insurance premiums and covers 31 million uninsured Americans. This is no small feat.

— Shirley L. Smith is a resident of St. Thomas.