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Pelosi's Really Dumb Idea

by Michael Sean Winters

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Speaker Nancy Pelosi needs to go. She has a case of Beltway-itis that is incurable and is now imperiling the passage of health care reform. How else to explain her publicly floating the idea that the House will use a parliamentary maneuver to pass the final health care bill without actually voting on it. It's more insider and process-oriented than most people want to know. But I like it because people don't have to vote on the Senate bill, Pelosi said yesterday. Hard to know whether this anti-democratic (with a small d?) sentiment is more obnoxious because of its political stupidity or because it is offensive to democratic norms. Voting is what members of Congress do. The Republicans are entirely right in lambasting this calculated attempt to evade responsibility.

In the current political climate, Pelosi's comments are profoundly stupid. It is the GOP that has been focusing on the "process," because it is true that people are disgusted at the way legislation makes its way through Congress, especially this piece of legislation. And, whenever we are talking about the process, we are not talking about the merits of the bill. Pelosi's words were guaranteed to land on page one, when the front page should be focused on the content of the legislation, the fact that we are so close to attaining universal health insurance, a goal that has eluded presidents from Roosevelt to Truman to Nixon to Clinton. Instead, the caption reads, "Pelosi may try to pass health bill without vote."

Beltway-itis has plagued the White House and the Congress throughout the process. Take the public option. Had Democrats proposed that any citizen can buy into the same insurance plan that members of Congress have, the entire debate would have been different. The populism that always lies just below the surface of American politics on both the left and the right would have manifested itself in support of the provision. Instead, the GOP framed the public option as a government takeover, a charge that persists even though the public option is no longer a part of the bill.

In many ways, Pelosi has been an effective Speaker. She wins votes. But, the task of political leadership is more than winning the vote this week. It is about framing that vote in such a way that it becomes defensible in the fall's midterm elections. If she is so blind as to the significance of her words, she should take an early retirement and let someone else take the gavel.

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