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?? ???? ?????! / Ni shagu nazad!

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 30, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

??? ???? ?????! / Ni shagu nazad!? Order number 227 was given by Stalin on July 28, 1942 to the defenders of Stalingrad and those on other fronts during the most difficult time on the Eastern Front in World War II. It translates: Not one step back!

As the government shutdown nears, President Obama and congressional Democrats should take Order 227 as his motto in the face of on-going attempts to meddle with the Affordable Care Act (ACA), also known as Obamacare.

The latest poll indicates that if there is a government shutdown, 44 percent of the American people will blame the Republicans. 35 percent will blame the Democrats. Of course, there are 35 percent of Americans who will blame Obama if it rains, so there is nothing the Democrats can do to shake that number. But, more worrisome is the 16 percent who say they would apportion blame equally if the government shuts down. I do not understand how they reach such a conclusion. Mr. Obama is many things but intransigent is not one of them. Ask Vladimir Putin.

American politics is beset by a specific curse, the low-information voter. I do not know who these people are. I wonder what they watch on television or if they read a newspaper. Who knows where they get their information. Yet, they hold the balance come election time and so it is vital that the Democrats draw very clear lines, make very coherent, easily understood arguments, and draw obvious distinctions if these low information voters are to understand that any government shutdown should be blamed on the GOP. This is not a heavy lift. Even low information voters know that Democrats tend to love government and Republicans tend to hate it. This prior narrative can fit neatly with the idea that those who hate government anyway are more inclined to shut it down.

Funding the government is a budgetary matter. The Democrats should make clear that they are happy to negotiate cost-savings with the GOP to reach a compromise on the Continuing Resolution (CR) to fund the government. But, they must insist that the budget process not be used to address an unrelated issue like the ACA. Indeed, they should point out that the ACA will actually help cut government spending, so delaying its implementation will only make the government funding issue worse, not better.

But, the Democrats must do more. The latest CR to pass the GOP-controlled House does not cut the ACA, but it delays its implementation for a year. The idea is to create more uncertainty, the soil in which fear grows, and bring that fear to a head next year, one month before the midterm elections. The Democrats must counter with the obvious fact that the uninsured have been waiting long enough to get insurance. They must ask: Why are Republicans so intent on keeping poor folk from getting insurance? In addition to the effort to defund the law at the federal level, Republican governors have deployed an array of monkey wrenches they have tried to throw at the ACA. I suspect, over time, all state governments will sign up to expand Medicaid and adopt health care exchanges for the simple reason that their citizens will demand it: Why should citizens in Connecticut or Maryland have access to Medicaid while citizens in Texas and Alabama do not?

The decision by the House Republicans to adopt the Tea Party effort to defund Obamacare as their own is perverse at many levels. But, it is not hard for the Democrats to point out that introducing an unrelated issue into budget negotiations is always a bad idea. It is like a family trying to decide where to take their summer vacation and one of the kids, who is not getting his way, adds the complaint that he does not get to watch his television favorite show when Dad wants to watch football, or a married couple fighting about the bills, and the husband introduces a complaint about which side of the bed to sleep on. People hate when that happens. It is what is happening now in the GOP-led House.

The administration has not helped its argument by introducing delays of its own in the rollout of the ACA. I have long thought that Obama would be well advised to fire Secretary Kathleen Sebelius because of her knack for picking fights with the Catholic Church. It should be clear to all that she should now be fired for her incompetence. That said, there is a difference between a delay imposed by a glitch and a delay imposed on ideological grounds. The Democrats need to co-opt the argument that all delays are alike.

The Democrats also, as I have argued before, need to do a better job selling Obamacare. I am still waiting to have the entire country know the name of a five year old with a pre-existing condition who was unable to get health insurance before the ACA was passed but who has it now because of the law. At the Democratic National Convention, the Democrats finally introduced precisely one such girl. But, we saw her once. Her name, if memory serves, was Zoe. If the White House had launched a series of ads featuring Zoe, so that her name became as ubiquitous as the name of Ryan White once became, we would not be having this fight. Better late than never. The Democrats need to personalize the effects of the ACA and then shame the Republicans: Do you want to deny little Zoe her health care? Is that what you want to defund?

And, where is the Catholic Church in this fight? How much attention has been focused on the controversial contraception mandate compared to the little attention focused on enrolling people into the health care exchanges? We should be using our vast array of social service providers, as well as our parishes, to encourage people who lack insurance to sign up for it, and, further, to encourage them to sign up for one of the mandatory plans that does not cover abortion. I have no objection to the legal fights against the contraception mandate ? well, I have some, but that is a different story ? but that struggle should not so blind us to the moral good which is enrolling poor folk for health insurance that we do nothing. How about a Fortnight for Enrollment?

I am sure that Mr. Obama and his political team do not cherish the idea of using an order once given by Stalin. They should not use the words, but they should grasp the concept. Not one step back. The ACA is not a government takeover of health care ? I wish it were! I wish the U.S., like the rest of the industrialized world, paid half of what we pay for health care and achieved similar if not better outcomes for the overall health of the nation. But that, too, is a different story. What is clear is that for many millions of Americans, the implementation of the ACA will be a great boon, and for almost no Americans will the ACA be a great burden. Obamacare is not a step down the road to serfdom. For many millions of Americans, it will liberate them from the fear induced by a lack of health insurance. It is a thing worth fighting for. Not one step back.

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