



Why Obama Can't Brush Off Health Care Protests

by LIZ HALLORAN



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Robert Spencer/Getty Images

Protesters argue their positions on health care outside of President Obama's town hall meeting on Tuesday in Portsmouth, N.H.

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A hint of the gathering storm came more than two weeks ago, when a polite older woman named Mary called into an AARP-sponsored health care "tele-town hall" with a question for President Obama.

"I have been told," Mary said, that under a new health care plan, Medicare recipients would "be visited and told to decide how they wish to die."

That prompted a grin from the president and, initially, a flip response. "I guarantee you, first of all," Obama said, "we just don't have enough government workers to send to talk to everybody to find out how they want to die."

That blithe treatment of Mary's fear, however baseless, suggested that the White House underestimated the level of anxiety its health care overhaul initiative has caused, and the opportunity it has presented for opponents to promote fear-mongering rumors.

The latest debunked rumors range from outrageous claims of government-sanctioned euthanasia to federally mandated abortions. But dismissing the protesters as isolated, non-representative collections of cranks and, perhaps, racists, would be a strategic blunder for the White House.

Fears Spur Ugly Encounters

And there are signs that the White House is now taking the protesters seriously.

After a week of wall-to-wall media coverage of Democratic members of Congress being harangued by constituents at sometimes ugly, and occasionally violent, town hall meetings, the president held his own televised forum Tuesday in New Hampshire to beat back lies and "boogeyman," he said, and take on those who want to "scare and mislead the American people."

He has another town hall scheduled Friday in Montana, and another Saturday in Colorado.

During his press briefing Wednesday, White House Spokesman Robert Gibbs downplayed the protests. "I doubt we're seeing anything that's representative of town hall meetings, despite the food fight" being shown on cable news, he said.

But the raucous protesters outside Obama's New Hampshire event point to the broader challenges that face the White House as it seeks to overhaul health care: a creeping skepticism among older, and disproportionately white, voters that the government is on their side and tepid enthusiasm among many liberal, grassroots activists.

Chris Lehane, a Democratic strategist and California-based pollster who routinely conducts swing-voter focus groups, says the vocally disaffected represent a very real phenomenon that has been rising around the country since before Obama's election. It is growing in the face of a damaged economy, a series of bank and Wall Street bailouts, and big-dollar government programs to stimulate jobs and stave off foreclosures.

"I've never seen as angry an electorate as this one," says Lehane. "They're as scared as I've ever seen them, and that manifests into anger."

"There is a general fear that the American dream is not going to be there for them or their children," he said. "There is concern about trust broken between government and the people."

The Passion Is With The Protesters

A growing problem for the White House, strategists say, is that passion now resides on the side of health care overhaul opponents.

There is the public manifestation of that passion, and the private. A new Gallup Poll shows that nearly half of those surveyed said they disapprove of the way Obama is handling health care policy; 43 percent said they approve. And Wednesday, the federal deficit hit a record \$1.27 trillion.

Tony Perkins, who heads the conservative Christian Family Research Council, sees the protests as a continuation of the anti-tax "tea parties" of earlier this year, and a healthy expression of dissatisfaction.

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- Chris Lehane, Democratic strategist

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