

Socialism Threat Has Long History for Health-Care Overhaul Foes

Heidi Przybyla Heidi Przybyla – Mon Sep 14, 12:01 am ET

Sept. 14 (Bloomberg) -- The debate is about health care. The threat is of a march toward "socialism." The words come from a famous voice.

Not Sarah Palin in 2009. It was Ronald Reagan in 1961.

From here, its a short step to all the rest of socialism,

Many of the arguments against President Barack Obama's overhaul effort are refrains from previous debates over health- care policy and Social Security dating to Presidents Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Harry Truman.

"There are substantial echoes of the past rhetoric in what we're hearing today," said presidential historian Robert Dallek.

In 1945, the AMA helped portray Truman's proposal for national health insurance as a creep toward communism. Three years later, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce produced a pamphlet, "You and Socialized Medicine." In 1993, the health-insurance industry tried to scuttle President Bill Clinton's proposed overhaul by funding ads featuring a fictional couple who decried a "government takeover" of health care.

Slipping Support

Similar lines of attack by Republicans have been used to counter Obama's health-care plan, and support for his effort has dropped. Fifty-three percent of Americans believe Obama wants to eventually take over the health-care system, according to an Aug. 28 to 31 CNN/Opinion Research Poll.

Former Alaska Governor Palin, the 2008 Republican vice presidential candidate, warned in an Aug. 7 statement on Facebook of health-care rationing that would lead to “death panels” for the sick and the elderly if Obama’s plan were adopted, and later said Obama’s plan would lead the country toward socialism.

The experiences of Truman, Kennedy and Clinton offer lessons for Obama, said Richard Rapaport, a visiting scholar at the University of California at Berkeley who has researched the AMA’s initiative in the 1960s, dubbed “Operation Coffeecup.”

Once the public associates the word “socialism” with a plan, it’s hard to change the impression, he said. In 1945, when Truman addressed Congress about a national insurance plan, 75 percent of Americans supported the proposal. By 1949, after it was targeted by opponents, only 21 percent did, according to a book by former Democratic Senator Tom Daschle, “Critical: What We Can Do About the Health-Care Crisis.”

‘More of a War’

Rapaport said emotions run even higher today.

“It’s escalated into even more of a war than it was back then,” Rapaport said.

Still, he said, the public would come to embrace programs put in place.

“Whatever bill gets out of this, once it gets in front of the people,” he said, “they’ll want to continue it.” He cited the controversy over Medicare’s creation. Today, he said, Americans “would kill if it was taken away.”

While the opposition campaign led by the AMA scuttled a 1961 Senate bill, Medicare was enacted four years later under President Lyndon Johnson. Today it provides health insurance for 45 million elderly and disabled Americans.

In his Sept. 9 speech to Congress to pitch his health-care proposal, Obama sharpened his response to critics.

"To my Republican friends, I say that rather than making wild claims about a government takeover of health care, we should work together," Obama said.

Steele Not Convinced

Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Steele said the speech showed Obama "continued to try and sell his government-run health-care experiment."

The plan seeks to extend coverage to those lacking insurance, control health-care costs and prevent insurers from denying coverage. Opponents say the legislation -- especially a proposed government-run insurance plan that would compete with private insurers -- would open the door to the takeover of an industry that accounts for one-sixth of the economy.

"We know that if there's a government insurance company, pretty soon there won't be any other insurance companies," Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said last week.

During a Sept. 1 candlelight vigil in favor of the so- called public option in Sarasota, Florida, protesters showed up carrying signs depicting Obama as The Joker, the clown villain from the "Batman" movies. Others carried signs that read "Socialism."

The efforts may be working.

Public Option

Fifty-two percent of Americans disapprove of Obama's handling of health care, compared with 28 percent in April, according to a Sept. 3-8 survey by Roper Public Affairs and Media.

While the messengers today may be different, the message is familiar.

In 1961, Reagan was instrumental in stalling Medicare. In the record distributed to 3,000 doctors' wives, he decried the "foot in the door" approach to socialized medicine.

Unless "big government" was stopped, "you and I are going to spend our sunset years telling our children and our children's children what it once was like in America when men were free," he said.

Rapaport said the wives were asked to hold coffee klatches where friends and neighbors would be presented with the record and stationery to write members of Congress.

Even then, the approach wasn't new.

In 1935, Republican Congressman Daniel Reed of New York warned against Franklin Roosevelt's Social Security program: "If this bill becomes law, the lash of the dictator will be felt."

To contact the reporter on this story: Heidi Przybyla in Washington at hprzybyla@bloomberg.net