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OPINION

Obama: cut to spend on health care

BY RICH LOWRY

Where does Newt Gingrich go to get his apology? He proposed slowing the rate of growth of Medicare and Medicaid in the mid-1990s and was clobbered by Democrats and the press for waging war on the elderly and the indigent.

Now, almost every other day, Barack Obama finds another hundred billion dollars to cut out of Medicare and Medicaid. He just announced the discovery of another \$313 billion in savings over 10 years, on top of \$300 billion he had already proposed. Soon enough, he will make Gingrich — who infamously sought \$450 billion in savings over seven years in 1995 — look like an extravagantly generous steward of the nation's health programs.

No liberal outcry greeted Obama's proposed budgetary savagery because everyone knows it's in the cause of more government spending. Obama must embrace a simulacrum of spending discipline to have any hope of passing a health-care program that will cost at least \$1.2 trillion over the next 10 years. The game is simple: Pretend to cut so you can spend.

Medicare and Medicaid spending has steadily outpaced inflation through the decades, and accounts for 23 percent of the federal budget. Medicare's unfunded liability is an astonishing \$89 trillion. As Obama put it in his speech to the American Medical Association, there's a risk the programs will "swamp our federal and state budgets, and impose a vicious choice of either unprecedented tax hikes, overwhelming deficits or drastic cuts in our federal and state budgets."

Sounds alarming. So why turn around and immediately spend the \$600 billion in savings? Shouldn't it be used to shore up the rickety finances of these already-existing health programs rather than to create a dubiously financed, entirely new health program?

Obama's Medicare and Medicaid savings will be sustainable over time only by beggaring doctors and hospitals. Compared with the private system, Medicare pays only 81 cents on the dollar for health expenses; Medicaid pays only 56 cents on the dollar. Obama relies on the tried-and-true practice of cutting the payments more. This means there will be fewer doctors willing to accept Medicare and Medicaid patients, and

more cost-shifting to the private system to make up for deficient government payments.

When Obama himself says that the federal deficit is "unsustainable," and when the chairman of the Federal Reserve warns that spending cuts or tax increases are necessary "to stabilize the fiscal situation," it's obviously not the time for a new entitlement program and another \$1.2 trillion in government expenditure.

If Obama thinks he can responsibly squeeze a couple of hundred billion out of Medicare and Medicaid, fine, he should do it and pocket the savings to improve the long-run fiscal picture. And we can adopt modest reforms to make it easier for people to get and keep health insurance, reforms with zero risk of tipping the country further toward fiscal ruin. Obama will then have more time and energy to devote to repairing the government's balance sheet. Newt Gingrich ought to have some ideas how to do it. ■

— Rich Lowry is editor of the *National Review*.

GUEST OPINION

PBA must cease efforts to intimidate voters

BY ANTHONY THOMAS

Chairman of Citizens for a Better Fort Myers Government



THOMAS

Who could have imagined that, in 2009, some members of the law enforcement community would attempt to deny people of a city in the deep South the right to vote?

That is exactly what the local police union, the Police Benevolent Association is threatening to do to the citizens of our city. The oppressive tactics used today are part of a pattern that has been employed by the PBA for the past 2½ years to intimidate supporters of the citizen oversight panel.

Last year, PBA President Cecil Pendergrass held a news conference and announced that police officers would be going door-to-door to get people who signed the petition to withdraw their support. Our ACLU attorneys quickly responded to the city manager's office that any such attempts would be viewed as voter intimidation and forwarded to the U.S. Justice Department's civil rights division. Then, after the *New York Times* and *St. Petersburg Times* sent reporters to our city to do a story about the PBA's actions, they ceased their proposed efforts.

It is apparent that the union never

intended to go door-to-door in Dunbar. No one would commit such a blatant transgression; they only wanted to chill our efforts to collect signatures. This insidious strategy worked, as some of our citizens did become fearful of signing the petition. However, in spite of that tactic, we still collected the necessary signatures to put it on the November ballot.

Now, the PBA, having lost the support of a substantial number of our citizens, has seen the city council unanimously impose a weaker and less-effective review board. The PBA realized it has lost the political debate. So what does the PBA do? It sends out another news release and says it wants to go to court to stop the people's vote.

Let me be clear: We will resist any effort by the PBA to disenfranchise the voters of our city. Too many lives have been lost and too much blood shed for the people to exercise their constitutional right to vote.

We are confident that legal precedent is on our side, specifically a recent Orange County case, provides no support for the PBA's legal efforts. However, more importantly, we are confident that the moral and equitable underpinnings of our efforts to bring accountability to our law enforcement community are strong. Our effort should not and cannot be challenged in good faith by members of our community with its best interest in mind.

What we seek is a community voice and transparency. As the words etched into stone on the façade of the Federal Court-

house in downtown Fort Myers state, "The First Duty of Society is Justice." We seek only a mechanism whereby both our law enforcement officers and the community can ensure that no individual, regardless of his or her socio-economic standing or color is denied his or her right to fair treatment before entering our already overburdened judicial system.

These efforts to intimidate the voters by questionable press releases or our court system are despicable. They represent nothing short of efforts to quiet voices primarily in our minority communities. Certainly in this time, we recognize that such efforts are socially and morally foul. Members of our community have the constitutional right to express themselves through fair and transparent vote, free of intimidation. We have fought too long and hard in the South for these rights. Our forefathers faced Gov. Wallace's raging fire hoses to stand up against intimidation by law enforcement. Let it be known that we today remain resolute to stand up against those same figurative hoses, in the form of press intimidation, baseless legal action or whatever other tactic the PBA may attempt.

We have come too far and we are not going anywhere until we have our right to a fair vote. ■

— Anthony Thomas is chairman of Citizens for a Better Fort Myers Government.

MOMENTS IN TIME

► On **June 24, 1997**, U.S. Air Force officials release a 231-page report dismissing long-standing claims of an alien spacecraft crash in Roswell, N.M., 50 years earlier. Titled "The Roswell Report, Case Closed," the document stated that there was no evidence that any kind of life form was found in the area in connection with the reported UFO sightings.

► On **June 25, 1956**, the last Packard

automobile is produced, marking the end of production at Packard's Connor Avenue plant in Detroit. Packard continued to manufacture cars in South Bend, Ind., until 1958, but for those familiar with Packard, the last 1956 is considered the last true Packard.

► On **June 26, 1807**, lightning hits a gunpowder factory in the small European country of Luxembourg, killing more than 300 people. When lightning struck

the underground fortress, the ammunition housed within ignited on contact, causing a massive explosion.

► On **June 27, 1829**, in Genoa, Italy, English scientist James Smithson dies, leaving a will that decreed the whole of his estate should be used to fund the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. The amount was more than \$500,000, a fortune at the time. ■