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HUFF
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"Go Out And Make Me Do It"

President Barack Obama's address to Congress Wednesday night was not just a litany of policy prescriptions. It was a call to action.

His approach took a page out of President Franklin Roosevelt's playbook.

FDR once met with a group of activists who sought his support for bold legislation. He listened to their arguments for some time and then said, "You've convinced me. Now go out and make me do it."

Even in the middle of the Depression, Roosevelt understood that the more effectively people created a sense of urgency and crisis, the easier it would be for him to push for progressive legislation -- what we now call the New Deal. FDR used his bully pulpit, including radio addresses, to educate Americans about the problems the nation faced, to explain why the country needed bold action to address the crisis, and to urge them to make their voices heard.

Having a president who inspires people to act collectively on their own behalf can make a difference. It gives people hope and courage to defy obstacles.

In his speech, Obama, the one-time community organizer, gave health care reform activists the signal to accelerate their grassroots organizing campaign to push for a bold plan that includes a public option and requires insurance companies to act more responsibly.

Over the summer, especially during the August Congressional recess, an unholy alliance of insurance industry muscle, conservative Democrats' obfuscation, and right-wing mob tactics stole Obama's thunder and put his health reform plan at risk. In his speech, Obama grabbed the initiative back. His fighting words changed the tone and shifted the momentum.

But he now understands that winning a victory on health care reform will require more than good ideas and inside-the-Beltway maneuvering with Congress. It will require a mass movement with a moral message, voter mobilization, marches, prayer vigils, stories of everyday people damaged by insurance industry practices, testimony by doctors and nurses frustrated by the insurance companies' priorities of profits over patients, and media savvy.

Part of Obama's speech was meant to reassure Americans that he did, in fact, have a real plan to fix the insurance mess. The President provided more specifics about his plan than he has in the past, explaining its key components, its benefits for people whose insurance policies cost too much or don't provide the services they need, people who don't have any insurance, and businesses for whom health insurance costs are a significant burden.

But what was especially impressive about Obama's speech was its moral vision, his insistence that in a country as great as the United States, health care should not be a privilege. This is a responsibility of a decent society.

He read from a letter he had just received from the late Senator Ted Kennedy, who asked that it be delivered after his death. Kennedy wrote: "What we face is above all a moral issue; at stake are not just the details of policy but fundamental principles of social justice and the character of our country."

Moreover, Obama took aim at the right-wingers - the talk show fanatics, the tea-party mob who disrupted town meetings, and their allies in Congress - who have been spreading "bogus claims" and "whose only agenda is to kill reform at any cost."

These are the extremists who have been spreading fear and confusion by warning that Obama's "socialized medicine" plan would create "death panels," subsidize illegal immigrants, pay for abortions, and force people to drop their current insurance.

Obama did not mince words. He called their claims "a lie plain and simple." This was the first time that the President used the word "lie" to describe the disgusting distortions that the extremist echo chamber -- Glenn Beck, Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa), Sen. Jim Demint (R-S.C.), Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Bill O'Reilly, Betsy McCaughey, RNC Chair Michael Steele, and their ilk - have been spreading.

He challenged the right-wingers' obsessive efforts to demonize all government action as stepping stones to socialism. Obama both defended government and acknowledged its limits.

"You see, our predecessors understood that government could not, and should not, solve every problem," he said. "They understood that there are instances when the gains in security from government action are not worth the added constraints on our freedom. But they also understood that the danger of too much government is matched by the perils of too little; that without the leavening hand of wise policy, markets can crash, monopolies can stifle competition, the vulnerable can be exploited."

Equally important, Obama finally took off the gloves and came out swinging against the insurance industry as the major obstacle to

significant reform.

"As soon as I sign this bill, it will be against the law for insurance companies to drop your coverage when you get sick or water it down when you need it the most," Obama declared. "They will no longer be able to place some arbitrary cap on the amount of coverage you can receive in a given year or in a lifetime. We will place a limit on how much you can be charged for out-of-pocket expenses, because in the United States of America, no one should go broke because they get sick. And insurance companies will be required to cover, with no extra charge, routine checkups and preventive care, like mammograms and colonoscopies."

Obama explained that a public option is needed to challenge the insurance companies' near-monopoly. And he did so by invoking the conservative principle of competition.

"My guiding principle is, and always has been, that consumers do better when there's choice and competition," Obama said, "That's how the market works."

He continued: "Unfortunately, in 34 states, 75 percent of the insurance market is controlled by five or fewer companies. In Alabama, almost 90 percent is controlled by just one company. And without competition, the price of insurance goes up and quality goes down. And it makes it easier for insurance companies to treat their customers badly -- by cherry-picking the healthiest individuals and trying to drop the sickest; by overcharging small businesses who have no leverage; and by jacking up rates."

Speaking to senior citizens whom right-wingers have tried to frighten by claiming that Obama's proposal would weaken Medicare, Obama said, "don't pay attention to those scary stories about how your benefits will be cut -- especially since some of the same folks who are spreading these tall tales have fought against Medicare in the past -- and just this year supported a budget that would essentially have turned Medicare into a privatized voucher program."

"The only thing this plan would eliminate," said the President, "is the hundreds of billions of dollars in waste and fraud, as well as unwarranted subsidies in Medicare that go to insurance companies -- subsidies that do everything to pad their profits, but don't improve the care of seniors."

No doubt the top executives of the major health insurance companies -- such as **HealthNet, WellPoint, CIGNA, Aetna, United Health Care Group**, and **Humana** -- were listening closely to Obama's speech. They've spent tens of millions of dollars on campaign contributions and lobbying to thwart Obama's plan. The President avoided attacking them personally, but chose instead to indict the system which they oversee.

"Insurance executives don't do this because they're bad people," Obama observed. "They do it because it's profitable. As one former insurance executive testified before Congress, insurance companies are not only encouraged to find reasons to drop the seriously ill, they are rewarded for it. All of this is in service of meeting what this former executive called 'Wall Street's relentless profit expectations.'"

"Now, I have no interest in putting insurance companies out of business," Obama said. "They provide a legitimate service and employ a lot of our friends and neighbors. I just want to hold them accountable. And the insurance reforms that I've already mentioned would do just that, but an additional step we can take to keep insurance companies honest is by making a not-for-profit public option available in the insurance exchange."

"The driving idea behind reform," Obama said, "has been to end insurance company abuses and make coverage available for those without it."

For those progressives worried that Obama's address would turn into a concession speech, abandoning his core values to pass any watered-down bill, the President proclaimed: "I will not back down on the basic principle that, if Americans can't find affordable coverage, we will provide you with a choice."

With those words, Obama issued a challenge to the American people and, in particular, to the activist organizations -- the labor unions, community groups, faith-based groups, seniors groups like AARP, netroots groups like MoveOn, Organizing for America (the group created by his campaign volunteers), and Health Care for America Now (HCAN), the key coalition spearheading the grassroots citizens campaign for health care reform. (People interested in having their voices heard should connect with HCAN).

Obama was letting them know that even the President of the United States can't reform the health insurance system on his own. To get Congress to adopt his plan - especially to get the conservative and centrist Democrats like Senators **Max Baucus** (Montana), **Blanche Lincoln** (Ark.), **Kent Conrad** (N.D.), **Jeff Bingaman** (N.M.), **Ben Nelson** (Neb.), **Mary Landrieu** (La.) and **Evan Bayh** (Indiana) - Obama needs an army of ground troops to join the battle. Only a grassroots movement can transform people's anger, frustrations and hopes into focused public action, creating a sense of urgency equal to the health insurance crisis facing the country.

"Now's the time to deliver on health care," Obama insisted.

Obama reminded the members of Congress that "a strong majority of Americans still favor a public insurance option of the sort I've proposed tonight." But Obama understands that powerful special interests - particularly the insurance industry - can offset public opinion unless the public is organized and mobilized.

Tonight, Obama was telling the American people that he shares their desire for bold health care reform, but he was asking for their help to change the political climate so Congress will respond to what most Americans - not the insurance lobbyists - want.

Echoing FDR, Obama was saying, "Go out and make me do it."

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