

Nixon and Health Care Reform

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Abstract:

While his legacy was undoubtedly tarnished by the scandal that cost him the Presidency – Watergate – Richard Nixon’s efforts to reform health care, dating back to his first campaign for the Presidency against John F. Kennedy, had profound effects on almost every subsequent proposal to reform American health care policy. Those who were in positions to enact national policy changes, from members of Congress to Presidents, often used many of the same ideas in each of their proposals, some of them having tenures in the Senate lasting through several decades. When one looks at the roots of these ideas, they can almost always be traced by to Nixonian policy.

In this paper, I analyze these links in an attempt to prove that health care reform should be seen as essential part of President Nixon’s legacy, arguably as much as his actions in Vietnam or other foreign policy. Because a large part of the historical works on Nixon focus primarily on his foreign policy, health care reform is largely associated only with Democratic politicians who came onto the national stage at the same time or even after President Nixon, despite the fact that he was a central figure in shaping American health care policy.

The paper I have written focuses primarily around Nixon’s health care proposals during the 1960s and the early 1970s in their relation to the actual policy enacted later, much of it having been finally put into law just recently with the passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Health Care Act and the Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010. I analyze why it took so long for these initiatives to be enacted into law while also exploring what gave Nixon’s ideas the resiliency that was needed to last long enough to finally be passed through Congress. I also explore why the ideas of a Republican President shaped the liberal agenda in this country for the past forty years.

In his book *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, journalist Hunter S. Thompson recalls an event in the 1968 Presidential election when he was given the opportunity to join then-candidate Richard Nixon on a car ride through New Hampshire. “But there was, of course, a catch”, Thompson writes, “I had to agree to talk about *nothing except football*.”¹ Thompson explains that he was familiar with the fact that Nixon often made allusions to football in campaign speeches, but he never actually believed that Nixon really knew anything about football. “But I was wrong,” Thompson explained, “Whatever else might be said about Nixon...he is a goddamn stone fanatic on every facet of pro football.” Thompson was surprised by the depth of Nixon’s knowledge on the subject and went on to make references to obscure plays in hopes of proving Nixon to be ignorant. He failed in this attempt because not only did Nixon recognize every play Thompson referenced, but he also referenced where one of the more obscure players being discussed went to college.

This story is a great example of how Richard Nixon was often seen as someone who tried to act like a member of the working class but actually was not, despite the fact that Nixon had a fairly typical middle-class upbringing in California. Thompson and others who interacted with him, despite whatever other negative feelings they held towards Nixon, seem to argue that this public image was actually genuine and that Nixon truly was someone who felt like he was a part of – and, perhaps more importantly, truly wanted to help – America’s middle class.

In Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America, historian Rick Perlstein explains that, “Before leaving each embassy residence, [Nixon] met with the household help, giving each laundress and butler and cook a thoughtful word and a handshake.”² Nixon himself stated, “They don’t vote, but it means a lot to them.” History has largely remembered Nixon as either a master

¹ Hunter S. Thompson. *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*. New York: Warner Books, 1974.

² Rick Perlstein. *Nixonland: the Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America*. New York: Scribner, 2008.

manipulator of foreign leaders or as the schemer behind Watergate, but there is also a man who seemed to deeply care about using his position to help make life better for members of the working class.

Perhaps this is the best explanation for why Nixon, as President of the United States, chose to propose one of the most radical and liberal efforts to reform health care in America, despite being a Republican.

President Barack Obama signed the Patient Protection and Affordable Health Care Act into law on March 23, 2010.³ Roughly six months before it appeared on his desk for his approval, President Obama gave a speech before Congress calling for health care reform, stating:

And if we fail to act, federal spending on Medicaid and Medicare will grow over the coming decades by an amount almost equal to the amount our government currently spends on our nation's defense. In fact, it will eventually grow larger than what our government spends on anything else today. It's a scenario that 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.⁴

A little less than 28 years earlier, President Richard Nixon gave a similar speech before Congress, stating:

One basic shortcoming of a solution to health care problems which depends entirely on spending more money, can be seen in the Medicare and Medicaid programs. Medicare and Medicaid did deliver needed dollars to the health care problems of the elderly and the poor... The predictable result was an acute price inflation, one basic cause of our health economic quandary of the past 11 years. In this period, national health expenditures rose by 188 percent, from \$26 billion in fiscal 1960 to \$75 billion in fiscal 1971. But a large part of this enormous increase in the Nation's health expenditure went, not for more and better health care, but merely to meet price inflation. If we do not lessen this trend, all other reform efforts may be in vain.⁵

This is not just similar sounding rhetoric. President Nixon proposed many of the ideas for health care reform that Democratic politicians would continue to advocate for over the course of four decades. Many of Nixon's proposed reforms would not be placed into law until President Obama was able to do

³ H.R. 148, 111th Cong., H.R. 3590 U.S. G.P.O. (2010) (enacted).

⁴ Barack Obama. "Text - Obama's Speech on Health Care Reform - Text - NYTimes.com." *The New York Times* - Breaking News, World News & Multimedia. 15 June 2009. Web. 05 Oct. 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/15/health/policy/15obama.text.html?_r=1&pagewanted=2>.

⁵ Richard Nixon. "President Richard Nixon's Special Message to the Congress Proposing a Comprehensive Health Insurance Plan." Address. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=3757>
| Accessed October 30, 2010.

so in 2010, thirty-six years after Nixon resigned the Presidency. Ben Stein, former speechwriter for President Nixon and media personality, on March 25th wrote:

But among the glorying, there was little or no mention of my former boss, Richard M. Nixon, and this was a monstrous wrong, one of an innumerable number of wrongs directed at Mr. Nixon. The flat truth is that in February 1974, with the hounds of hell baying at him about Watergate, with a national trial by shortage under way after the Arab Oil Embargo, with the economy in extremely rocky shape, and with large Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress, Republican Richard M. Nixon submitted to Congress a national health care bill in many ways more comprehensive than what Mr. Obama achieved⁶.

Most historians and contemporaries of Nixon would disagree with Stein in his labeling of Nixon as a successful domestic president. They are largely divided into two groups, one group highlighting his foreign policy achievements and another that focuses almost exclusively on his failures, most notably Watergate. The group that chooses to emphasize his achievements in foreign policy consist primarily those who worked for Nixon. One such advocate is James C. Humes, a speechwriter for four presidents – including Nixon – and historian, who writes in his book, *Nixon's Ten Commandments of Leadership and Negotiation*, that when Nixon asked him how he thought he would be remembered in history, he said, “Foreign policy achievements are writ large on the pages of history – look at Truman – his domestic scandals diminished with time” (19)⁷

The scandal Humes referred to was, of course, “Watergate”, which was a domestic scandal that cost Nixon the Presidency. Nixon himself was aware that his achievements on foreign policy would not be the only thing for which he was remembered, stating in reply to Humes, “Perhaps, but it depends on who’s writing the history”. (19) In some ways, Nixon was the more correct of the two, with the majority of scholarship remembering Nixon as a corrupt politician, the man behind Watergate. Thompson, who

⁶ Ben Stein. "Opinion: Giving Nixon His Due on Health Care Reform." Top News & Analysis, US, World, Sports, Celebrity & Weird News. <http://www.aolnews.com/opinion/article/opinion-giving-nixon-his-due-on-health-care-reform/19414702>

⁷ James C. Humes. *Nixon's Ten Commandments of Leadership and Negotiation: His Guiding Principles of Statecraft*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998.

actually worked primarily as a journalist for *Rolling Stone* and covered electoral politics, reflects on Nixon and his place in history in his book *Better than Sex: Confessions of a Political Junkie*:

Richard Nixon was a evil man – evil in every way that only those who believe in the physical reality of the Devil can understand it. He was utterly without ethics or moral or any bedrock sense of decency. Nobody trusted him – except maybe the Stalinist Chinese, and honest historians will remember him mainly as a rat who kept scrambling to get back on the ship. (241)⁸

Thompson is known for taking analysis to the point of absurdity, but much of his writing, particularly *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* is extraordinarily well-read and has arguably shaped the views that many have of Richard Nixon. No writing, however, compares to *All the President's Men*, by journalists Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, in terms of influence. The book focuses entirely on Watergate and its aftermath and gives little focus to Nixon's domestic policies. In an article for *The New York Times*, Jennifer Schuessler explains that even Nixon's memoirs fell "far short of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's 34-week run with *All the President's Men*, which included a whopping 20 weeks at No. 1."⁹

Simply put, few historians focus on or even acknowledge Nixon's attempts to influence domestic policy. The most notable person to write about the Nixon administration from a primarily domestic standpoint is arguably Alan Greenspan, who worked with Nixon on his presidential campaign and later served as Chairman of the Federal Reserve. Even his work, however, is limited because it revolves primarily around economic policy, mostly Nixon's wage and price controls. I argue the historical record should acknowledge the role Nixon played in drafting many of the proposals to reform health care in the United States. Many of his ideas have survived for decades to eventually become law and others are still discussed and debated to date, with the potential to become law sometime in the future.

⁸ Hunter S. Thompson. *Better than Sex: Confessions of a Political Junkie*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1995.

⁹ Jennifer Schuessler. "Inside the List." NYTimes.com. October 29, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/07/books/review/InsideList-t.html>, Accessed October 30, 2010.

Understanding Watergate, however, is key to understanding why history has thus far viewed Nixon the way it has. As pointed out in *All the President's Men*, the *Washington Post* reported in a front page story that “Five men, one of whom said he is a former employee of the Central Intelligence Agency, were arrested at 2:30 A.M. yesterday in what authorities described as an elaborate plot to bug the office of the Democratic National Committee here.”¹⁰ James McCord, one of the five men who broke into the office, was later found to be the security coordinator for Nixon’s Committee for the Reelection of the President, also known as CRP or CREEP. Nixon’s initial denial, saying that “The White House has had no involvement whatever in this particular incident”, was quickly disproved when a man named Frank Sturgis was tied to both the break-in at the Watergate hotel and also to a previous attack on the man who revealed the Pentagon Papers, Daniel Ellsberg.

The story gained more traction after a former White House aide named G. Gordon Liddy¹¹ was fired for “refusing to answer FBI questions about Watergate”. All of this research and investigation into Watergate and its related affairs was happening during the middle of Nixon’s re-election campaign in 1972, something both *All the President's Men* and *On the Campaign Trail '72* note.¹² As the story became more prominent in newspapers, mainly in *The Washington Post*, it eventually led to Nixon’s resignation as President and time in federal prison for many of the others involved. Nixon avoided

¹⁰ Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward. *All the President's Men*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007 [Kindle Edition, no page numbers available.]

¹¹ There were countless others involved in the Watergate scandal, however for the purposes of this study I chose to discuss only particular historical actors because they were the ones with strong ties to President Nixon and central roles in the break-in.

¹² As an interesting side-note, Hunter Thompson was accused of having participated in what was called “ratfucking” – the tactics used by Nixon supporters to cause disruption in the Democratic primary. Thompson writes in *On the Campaign Trail '72* that “ranking Muskie lieutenants told congressional investigators that Sheridan and I had conspired with Donald Segretti and other unnamed saboteurs to humiliate Muskie in the Florida primary. The accusation came as a welcome flash of humor at a time when I was severely depressed at the prospect of another four years with Nixon” (citation listed earlier, pg. 114)

prison time because his successor, President Gerald Ford, pardoned him before any charges could be brought against him¹³.

Nixon's resignation from the Presidency was the first of its kind. No one before or after Nixon has ever resigned from the Presidency of the United States. Perhaps because of this, Nixon found a unique place in American culture, something that arguably no subsequent President has done, with the possible exception of President Bill Clinton, who was President from 1993 to 2001. Actor John Travolta's portrayal of a Bill Clinton-like politician in the film *Primary Colors* is arguably the only case of a President of the United States being portrayed on film that even resembles the large number of movies about Nixon. In every decade since his resignation with the exception of the 1980s, a film about President Nixon has been nominated for an Academy Award. Two different actors have been nominated for portraying Nixon on film¹⁴.

Reinforcing the idea that Nixon's Presidency revolved around Watergate, almost all of the literature and films based on his life are entirely about Watergate. The post-modern novelist Kurt Vonnegut wrote a national best-seller titled *Jailbird* which follows a fictional, low-level Presidential appointee as he is released from prison after his involvement in Watergate. Ron Howard's 2008 film, *Frost/Nixon*, focuses around a series of interviews that Nixon had with British television personality, David Frost, and his efforts to get Nixon to apologize to the American people for Watergate. Even Alan Moore's graphic novel, *Watchmen*, which suggests a hypothetical future in which superheroes exist,

¹³ For more information on Watergate, I would recommend the following books: *The Final Days* by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, *Will: The Autobiography of G. Gordon Liddy* by G. Gordon Liddy, and *Watergate* by Fred Emery. Also worth noting is Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Jailbird*, which will be discussed more further on in this paper.

¹⁴ *All the President's Men*, the adaptation of Bernstein and Woodward's book, was released in 1976 and was nominated for several awards, including Best Picture. *Nixon*, a biopic based on Nixon's life, was directed by Oliver Stone and released in 1995 and was nominated for four Academy Awards. *Frost/Nixon*, an account of Nixon's interviews with British personality David Frost, was directed by Ron Howard and released in 2008, was nominated for five Academy Awards, including Best Picture. Anthony Hopkins was nominated for his portrayal of Nixon in *Nixon* and Frank Langella was nominated for his portrayal in *Frost/Nixon*. It is also worth noting that Joan Allen was nominated for Best Actress for her performance as Pat Nixon in *Nixon*.

dedicates a fairly decent amount of the plot to a fictionalized Vietnam War in which the United States is victorious and Nixon subsequently serves five terms as President of the United States. The 2009 film adaptation of the graphic novel which, despite having been released over twenty years after the graphic novel and changing some elements of the plot, keeps Nixon as a character, with Robert Wisden portraying him on screen¹⁵.

This widespread influence on popular culture serves as an explanation for two important avenues of inquiry. One is that it could serve as a possible explanation for why Nixon is so closely tied to Watergate and not some of his other achievements as President. *All the President's Men*, released in 1976, seems to have set the tone for subsequent portrayals of Nixon and his administration. Remarkably few works have strayed too far from this line of thought and those that have, like *Watchmen* and its film adaptation, still grapple with having to explain why Nixon could be seen outside of that lens.

Although this cultural obsession with Nixon has, for the most part, worked against him, it has also solidified his place in American history as an important figure and is arguably the reason his ideas have had such resiliency. In 1994, less than two years before his unsuccessful run for the Presidency, Senator Bob Dole of Kansas would say at Nixon's funeral that he "believe[d] the second half of the 20th century will be known as the age of Nixon."¹⁶ Nixon is still referenced in speeches on Capitol Hill and used as a reference point for many issues by pundits on television. Pundits and politicians are able to do this for a simple reason: most people are still, forty years later, familiar with Nixon and some of his ideas. The lack of a similar cultural obsession with subsequent presidents, particularly Jimmy Carter and George H.W. Bush, may be a possible explanation as to why they are overshadowed by Nixon.

¹⁵ *Watchmen*. Film. Directed by Zack Snyder. By Alan Moore. Screenplay by Alex Tse and David Hayter. Performed by Malin Åkerman, Jackie Earl Haley, Patrick Wilson, Billy Crudup, Matthew Goode, Jeffery Dean Morgan, Carla Gugino and Robert Wisden. United States: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2009.

¹⁶ Bob Dole. "AllPolitics - Senator Bob Dole's Comments at President Nixon's Funeral." *CNN.com - Breaking News, U.S., World, Weather, Entertainment & Video News*. Web. 14 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1997/gen/resources/watergate/dole.speech.html>>.

An equally if not more valid explanation, however, is that many of the people with the power to influence federal health care policy first got into the political arena during the Nixon administration. Many of these people have remained there until now, keeping many of his ideas alive each time they are re-elected. One such example is Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a four-term Senator from New York and former urban affairs advisor to Nixon. When analyzing his letters, *New York Times* reporter Sam Roberts points out that despite having worked in the Nixon administration, he would later work alongside then-First Lady Hilary Clinton on her attempts for health care reform, particularly from 1993 to 1994 when Clinton was working on what has since become largely known as “HilaryCare”. This is a connection that will be more thoroughly explored later in this paper¹⁷.

By looking at the way that health care policy in the United States has been shaped by the motivations of America’s most powerful politicians, I hope to show in this paper that Nixon has had a profound impact on American health care policy in the United States. I will do this by looking at the writings and speeches of Nixon and his contemporaries, most notably the Kennedy brothers but also other Democratic senators and politicians including President Carter, and then I will compare them to more modern figures, such as President Bill Clinton and his wife Hilary as well as President Barack Obama. In order to tie all of this together, I will use the writings of some of Nixon’s contemporaries who are still alive as well as journalists who covered his Presidency. Two of Nixon’s speechwriters, James C. Humes and Ben Stein, are now writing more reflective pieces about Nixon and his Presidency and will be referenced throughout this paper. Finally, I will bring in analysis from modern economists and writers, like Nobel Prize winner and *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman.

This is a unique approach to this topic because very little academic work has been done on analyzing Nixon’s health care initiatives since the passage of health care reform during the Obama

¹⁷ Sam Roberts. "Moynihan in His Own Words." *The New York Times - Breaking News, World News & Multimedia*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/20/nyregion/20moynihan.html> (accessed September 20, 2010).

administration. Medical technology has gone under some profound changes between Nixon's resignation of the Presidency and the election of Obama. For example, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), a scanning device designed to produce images of the human body, has become fairly commonplace in American hospitals. The first use of this technology on live human being, however, was not until 1977, three years after Nixon's resignation.¹⁸ Because of these notable improvements in health care technology since his administration, further exploration of how Nixon's ideas hold up in the modern era seems prudent.

Up until Obama's health proposals were actually passed, it would have been impossible to analyze how they compared to Nixon's as they were constantly changing. Now, with many of these proposals having become law, it is possible to compare them to the initiatives Nixon introduced over four decades ago. Many of Nixon's contemporaries, like Daniel Patrick Moynihan, played an important role in shaping the health care policy that was eventually enacted into law.

Nixon and Moynihan had something important in common: working class roots. In *Nixonland*, Perlstein states that Moynihan became Nixon's "new favorite White House staffer" and goes onto explain further:

This Orthogonian named Daniel Patrick Moynihan was a hard-charging and convivial Irish-Catholic striver out of New York whose alcoholic father had abandoned his family to relative deprivation when Daniel was ten...Nixon recruited [Moynihan] by pleading that he was hardly the hard-hearted conservative of legend, that he was a child of the Depression and knew poverty, too. Richard Nixon always exaggerated the degree of his youthful privation, simultaneously self-pitying and self-aggrandizing. But then, so did Daniel Patrick Moynihan (384)¹⁹.

It is easy enough to see why Moynihan and Nixon got along so well and why Nixon's ideas on how to reform health care resonated so thoroughly with Moynihan. Whether they actually were working

¹⁸ "This Month in Physics History: MRI Uses Fundamental Physics for Clinical Diagnosis." *APS Physics / APS Home*. Ed. Alan Chodos and Jennifer Ouellette. Web. 14 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.aps.org/publications/apsnews/200607/history.cfm>>.

¹⁹ Rick Perlstein. *Nixonland: the Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America*. New York: Scribner, 2008.

class Americans or not, both Moynihan and Nixon believed that they were and used that as justification to propose radical health care reform.

The fact that Perlstein labels Moynihan as an “Orthogonian” is revealing. The term “Orthogonian” refers to a member of the Orthogonian Society, a fraternity at Nixon’s alma mater, Whittier College, which was actually founded by Nixon when he was a student there. The organization’s website explains that the group was founded “with the goal of developing an organization that represented men who believe in hard work and the power of diversity and diverse perspectives, 16 men embarked on the challenge of creating an organization where ‘average’ men accomplished exceptional feats”²⁰. Nixon actually formed the group after being denied in an attempt to join the Franklins, a group of wealthy students on campus.

The Orthogonian Society was formed as an alternative to the Franklins for students who saw themselves as more working class. Nixon did see himself primarily as a member of America’s middle class. At Nixon’s funeral, Dole said:

One of his biographers said that Richard Nixon was one of us. And so he was. He was a boy who heard the train whistle in the night and dreamed of all the distant places that lay at the end of the track. How American. He was a grocer's son who got ahead by working harder and longer than everyone else. How American. He was a student who met expenses by doing research at the law library for 35 cents an hour while sharing a run-down farmhouse without water or electricity. How American.²¹

It is easy to see why Nixon felt uncomfortable with the Franklins and wanted to create an alternative for working class students. By creating the Orthogonian Society, Nixon made for himself a group that he felt comfortable in. The organization has a quote from Nixon listed on their website: “I have often said, what is really important in a person’s life is whether they made a difference, a

²⁰ "About Us." The Orthogonian Society | About Us. <http://whittiercollegeorthogonians.com/about/>. Accessed October 30, 2010.

²¹ Bob Dole. "AllPolitics - Senator Bob Dole's Comments at President Nixon's Funeral." *CNN.com - Breaking News, U.S., World, Weather, Entertainment & Video News*. Web. 14 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1997/gen/resources/watergate/dole.speech.html>>.

difference for the benefit of others.” It is interesting that Nixon founded this group and that Moynihan identified with it enough to join. This shows the mindset that the two likely had when discussing health care reform, identifying more with the common man in need of health care than they would with the insurance executives trying to hold higher profit margins.

Besides Moynihan, many other prominent Democratic Senators began their tenure in the Senate during the Nixon administration and some are still serving today. Joe Biden, Senator from Delaware, was elected to the Senate in 1972, the same year as Nixon’s landslide re-election to the Presidency. He went onto be elected Vice President in 2008 and has had a profound influence on all policies proposed by the Obama administration. Ted Kennedy, arguably one of the most influential politicians regarding modern American health care policy in the twentieth century, was elected in 1962, only serving one term before Nixon was first elected to the Presidency. He would go onto serve in this capacity until his death in 2009, only a few months before the passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Health Care Act.

Chris Dodd, Senator from Connecticut, was elected to the House of Representatives in 1974, not during Nixon administration, but near enough to it that many of Nixon’s ideas were still being discussed in recent terms. As Ronald D. Elving points out for CNN, “the Class of 1974 had 75 Democrats to just 17 Republicans (the ‘Contract’ Class of 1994 would have 73 Republicans and just 13 Democrats). This huge influx of Democrats was known as the ‘Watergate babies.’”²² Dodd was part of this group.

At the time that this paper is written, Dodd is still serving in the United States Senate, although he has announced that he is not pursuing re-election this year. Elving explains that “in the 103rd Congress, the inauguration of President Clinton (himself an unsuccessful candidate for Congress in the Watergate year of 1974) gave Democrats a chance to legislate again. But by then the number of ‘Watergate babies’ had dwindled to 14.” Regardless of the fact that this represents a significant drop for

²² Ronald D. Elving. "Rebels of '94 and 'Watergate Babies' Similar In Class Size, Sense of Zeal - 01-24-98." CNN.com - Breaking News, U.S., World, Weather, Entertainment & Video News. <http://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1998/01/26/cq/elving.html> (accessed October 06, 2010).

the number of “Watergate babies” serving in Congress from their membership in 1974, there is little doubt that fourteen members of Congress, many of them now prominent politicians, had a chance to radically shape legislation during the Clinton and Obama administrations.

Timothy Writh, who served in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, reflects that the “Watergate babies” “were reflections of JFK as president, not FDR.” This is important to keep in mind as many of Nixon’s proposals to reform health care contained similarities to Kennedy era ideas. However, the biggest difference is that, surprisingly, Nixon’s proposals were actually much more liberal than Kennedy’s ideas. In a message before Congress on February 9, 1961, Kennedy said, “Only a part of the responsibility rests with the Federal Government.”²³

Later Democrats, particularly Obama and even some of the “Watergate babies”, would later integrate the more liberal aspects of Kennedy’s ideas into their proposals, focusing more on his ideas about Social Security. In that same message to Congress, Kennedy said, “In our Social Security and Railroad Retirement systems we have the instruments which can spread the cost of health services in old age over the working years, effectively, and in a way consistent with the dignity of the individual.” It could reasonably be argued that by focusing on the more liberal aspects of Kennedy’s plan, Democrats in Congress and the executive branch of the federal government would be able to avoid giving Nixon credit for his health care proposals while also emulating his ideas.

Part of this may be rooted in the fact that Kennedy was largely perceived as more likeable than Nixon. As Steven Sample, the former President of the University of Southern California, writes in his book, *The Contrarian’s Guide to Leadership*:

A leader’s ability to comfortably tell jokes and humorous anecdotes is important because it tends to make him appear accessible (even when he’s not). Among U.S. Presidents,

²³ John F. Kennedy, John W. Gardner, and Carl Sandburg. *To Turn the Tide*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1962.

Lincoln, Kennedy and Reagan clearly had this ability, and Nixon and Carter clearly didn't.²⁴

While Kennedy had the “myth of Camelot” that gave an aura of greatness to all of his ideas and proposals, Sample correctly points out that Nixon had trouble even telling a joke. This is a perfectly valid explanation for why the “Watergate babies” and others found Kennedy to be a much more inspiring figure than anyone in Congress ever seems to have found Nixon to be.

Another person who came to play a crucial role in shaping domestic health care policy in the United States was Alan Greenspan. Originally brought into politics as an economic advisor to Richard Nixon's campaign for the Presidency in 1968, he went on to serve as Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors under President Ford and then was appointed Chairman of the Federal Reserve by President Reagan. Greenspan served in this capacity until his retirement in 2006, only two years before the end of President George W. Bush's administration.

Despite the fact that the first Presidential election after Watergate led to the election of a Democrat, Jimmy Carter, most of Nixon's health care proposals would not be seriously addressed until the Clinton administration during Hilary Clinton's efforts, which were referenced earlier and will be expanded upon more later in this paper. Even factoring the Clintons into the equation, the Obama administration appears to be the group that took Nixon's proposals most seriously. This is not to say that Carter did not make an attempt to pass health care reform. In fact, in a message to Congress, Carter wrote:

I am transmitting to the Congress two major pieces of legislation to improve our health care system: The Hospital Cost Containment Act of 1977 to hold down rising health care costs, and the Child Health Assessment Program (CHAP) to improve health services for children of low-income families... Like the cost containment program, the CHAP legislation is a crucial first step. Other children's health programs also require significant improvement, and the Administration will take steps to meet these needs. But the CHAP program is urgently needed to assure that more low-income children receive regular, high

²⁴ Steven B. Sample. *The Contrarian's Guide to Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003. Print.

quality primary and preventive care.... I call upon the Congress to act favorably on both of our new health initiatives.²⁵

Despite these proposals, Carter did fail to see any kind of major universal health care reform passed through Congress. There are two likely explanations for why Carter proved unable to pass major health care reforms, even with a Democratic Congress. One is that his administration simply had too many other issues to deal with. Foreign policy dominated the Carter administration, much like, as many historians, such as James C. Humes, would argue, it did to the Nixon administration. Carter, however, has blamed Ted Kennedy, saying, “The fact is that we would have had comprehensive health care now, had it not been for Ted Kennedy's deliberately blocking the legislation that I proposed. It was his fault. Ted Kennedy killed the bill.”²⁶

Paul Krugman, Nobel Prize-winner in economics, writes in an Op-Ed piece for *the New York Times*, “many of the retrospectives on Ted Kennedy’s life mention his regret that he didn’t accept Richard Nixon’s offer of a bipartisan health care deal. The moral some commentators take from that regret is that today’s health care reformers should do what Mr. Kennedy balked at doing back then, and reach out to the other side.”²⁷ Krugman does go on, however, to point out that “today’s political scene is nothing like that of the early 1970s.” Whether or not Kennedy made the right decision at the time is not as important as the fact that Nixon and Carter have similar arguments: Kennedy, for political reasons, killed their attempts to institute major health care reform.

Kennedy, who served in the Senate for nearly five decades and had significant influence over the other Democrats in the Senate – arguably the “Watergate babies” in particular because of the fondness

²⁵ Jimmy Carter. "Jimmy Carter: Health Care Legislation Message to the Congress." *Jimmy Carter: Health Care Legislation Message to the Congress*. The American Presidency Project. Web. 13 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=7401>>.

²⁶ Christopher Weber. "Jimmy Carter Blames Ted Kennedy for Health Care Reform Delays." Politics News, Elections Coverage, Political Analysis and Opinion. <http://www.politicsdaily.com/2010/09/16/jimmy-carter-blames-ted-kennedy-for-health-care-reform-delays/> (accessed October 06, 2010).

²⁷ Paul Krugman. "Missing Richard Nixon." *The New York Times*, August 30, 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/31/opinion/31krugman.html> (accessed September 20, 2010).

for President John F. Kennedy that Wirth pointed out – may have been the real reason that health care reform stalled for so long. His approval seems to be the major reason Nixon’s proposal was not signed into law during his administration, not the actual policy Nixon proposed. Krugman, who is generally regarded as a liberal analyst, points out that “in some ways [Nixon’s proposal] was stronger [than Obama’s]. Right now, Republicans are balking at the idea of requiring that large employers offer health insurance to their workers; Nixon proposed requiring that all employers, not just large companies, offer insurance” and then asks, “So what happened to the days when a Republican president could sound so nonideological, and offer such a reasonable proposal?” Carter “feels that Kennedy acted out of personal spite” in rejecting his proposal, he stated, “He did not want to see me have a major success in that realm of life.”²⁸ In the same interview, he went onto speculate that Kennedy did so because he wanted to be the President who passed health care reform.

If this is to be accepted, and there is evidence behind Carter’s claim, then it means that Nixon and Carter’s health care proposals – which were remarkably similar – were not rejected because of what was actually being proposed. Instead, it means that they were rejected because of Ted Kennedy’s own political ambitions. It seems Kennedy, who still held presidential ambitions at the time, may have wanted to only pass health care reform under an administration of his own. This explains why Democrats discouraged the passage of Nixon’s bill: they never actually had a problem with it themselves. As Nixon’s proposal was far too liberal for Presidents Ronald Reagan or H.W. Bush to seriously consider proposing again before Congress, this explains why it took until the Clinton administration to finally make health care a major focus again. With Ted Kennedy no longer harboring Presidential ambitions, the Clintons likely saw an opportunity to push health care reform through.

²⁸ Joel Connelly. "Jimmy Carter Disses Edward Kennedy." Seattle Blogs | Seattle Pi | Seattlepi.com. <http://blog.seattlepi.com/seattlepolitics/archives/221683.asp> (accessed October 06, 2010).

The Clintons were not alone in this assessment. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who was mentioned earlier as an advisor on urban affairs to Nixon, was now a Senator from New York and worked closely with the Clintons, specifically then-First Lady Hilary, on getting health care reform passed. Roberts highlights that when recounting a conversation between Mrs. Clinton and a health-care policy expert, Moynihan wrote, “He had studied the subject all his life, she had studied the subject three weeks and already knows more than he.” Then later, after being elected to the Senate herself in 2000, Hilary Clinton wrote to Moynihan saying, “If I had listened to you about health care in 1994, I would be far better off today — but more importantly — so would the nation’s health care system.” This exchange is revealing in that it shows the Clintons – and the Democratic Party as a whole – coming around to Nixon’s ideas for health care reform. Even though Clinton’s efforts were ultimately not successful, it is revealing that Nixon’s colleagues are the most influential proponents of health care reform as the United States entered the new millennium.

Bill Clinton, however, was succeeded by a Republican, George W. Bush, in 2001, who was an advocate of Marvin Olasky’s “compassionate conservatism” philosophy – with Bush even going as far as to write the foreword for one of Olasky’s books on the subject. The idea behind compassionate conservatism is that government, while an effective tool in some situations, is often better off supporting non-governmental organizations in order to make progress toward specific goals. This philosophy stood in stark contrast to Nixon’s ideas, which were, comparatively, very liberal. When speaking before Congress, Nixon cited examples of government intervention in health care as effective in the past – something Bush would undoubtedly have disagreed with – and went onto explain that:

The National Health Insurance Standards Act would require employers to provide adequate health insurance for their employees, who would share in underwriting its costs. This approach follows precedents of long-standing under which personal security--and thus national economic progress--has been enhanced by requiring employers to provide minimum wages and disability and retirement benefits and to observe occupational health and safety standards.

Bush would have disagreed with almost everything that Nixon said in his speech before Congress. In that speech, Nixon was arguably citing minimum wage intervention on the government's part as a positive step. Conversely, President Bush would not allow for the minimum wage to be raised until Democrats took control of Congress in 2006. Compassionate conservatism and Nixon's National Health Insurance Standards Act were simply not compatible and this explains why Bush too chose not to advocate for its passage, despite the two Presidents belonging to the same party.

This all leads to the 2008 Presidential elections, in which Barack Obama was elected as President of the United States. Nixon's ideas are now experiencing an interesting rebirth, they are being advocated for by almost all Democrats in Congress and the Democrats control both houses. Now, with Obama in the White House and key figures from the Watergate era like Joe Biden in important policy positions – he was elected Vice President – and Hilary Clinton and Ted Kennedy largely sidelined in terms of what they could do on domestic policy,²⁹ Obama had an opportunity to pass the health care proposals that Democrats were wanting to see enacted: proposals that had a lot in common with Nixon's original proposals, the main difference being that Nixon's proposals actually were further to the left.

Obama had made health care reform an essential part of his campaign platform. On his website, Obama created a section where he encouraged Americans to submit their stories of where the modern health care system had failed them, in order to give a human element to his proposals. One of the submissions that he featured on the website was Donna from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, who wrote:

...I thought at least I had good health care and disability benefits to count on. About three years ago my health inexplicably began to downhill. I was shuffled from doctor to doctor with no diagnosis. After much suffering and desperation I finally found out what was destroying me - Tertiary (or systemic end stage) Lyme disease. As the recent antitrust case in Connecticut so well illustrates, Lyme disease is a very contentious issue. It is now

²⁹ Hilary Clinton was chosen to be Secretary of State in the Obama administration, a position in which she is currently still serving, and Ted Kennedy was now terminally ill with brain cancer. Kennedy would eventually die from the disease, but not before strongly advocating for the passage of Obama's proposals.

the number one epidemic in the US with no end in sight. There is still no reliable test and no cure. At this point I am so ill that I have lost my job, spent all I have on doctors bills and IV drugs that my insurance refuses to pay for and I will still need treatment, if I don't want to die from this horrendous PAINFUL killer disease. And, I may not get disability either, despite the severity of my illness which will leave me with permanent damage, as it wasn't diagnosed early on. Lyme is the first big test of what managed care can do to deny thousands of people health care they paid for and should get... I don't feel I should die because they think they can pretend my disease doesn't exist. They have even gone so far as to attack physicians with the guts and compassion to try to treat Lyme patients. I want to live and get back to work helping others. God bless you and the First Family. I am so proud of you and pray that you will give America back her soul. We can and should do better. No one should suffer or die from treatable illnesses in this country simply because they cannot afford to pay.³⁰

Obama's use of other people's personal stories to support his health care proposals may explain why he succeeded where Nixon did not. His stories added a human element to reform that Nixon was never really able to capture in his speeches. As Sample pointed out earlier in this paper, Nixon often struggled to produce anecdotes that made him approachable. While Sample's book was written before Obama was elected to the Presidency, it is fair to say that Obama undoubtedly has this ability.

Obama also wrote in his book *The Audacity of Hope* that:

We know that our health-care system is broken: wildly expensive, terribly inefficient and poorly adapted to an economy no longer built on lifetime employment, a system that exposes hardworking Americans to chronic insecurity and possibly destitution. But year after year, ideology and political gamesmanship result in inaction, except for 2003, when we got a prescription drug bill³¹ that somehow managed to combine the worst aspects of the public and private sectors – price gouging and bureaucratic confusion, gaps in coverage and an eye-popping bill for taxpayers. (22-23)³²

Obama also criticizes Bush's effort to privatize social security, echoing back to President Kennedy's ideas about what role Social Security should play in private life. Obama does, however, cite Bill Clinton's efforts to reform health care as something that may have helped the economy but criticizes

³⁰ Donna. "DONNA - Phila, PA | BarackObama.com." *Health Care Stories for America* / *BarackObama.com*. Web. 14 Dec. 2010. <<http://stories.barackobama.com/healthcare/stories/4228>>.

³¹ Obama is referring to Medicare Part D which was passed during President Bush's first term with the support of a Republican Congress.

³² Barack Obama. *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2006.

some aspects of his plan. By acknowledging that Clinton's plan did not pass and also did not appeal to people across the political spectrum, Obama was forced to look elsewhere for a health care proposal to emulate. Nixon's, which was rejected for political reasons instead of policy-related ones, had its appeal. In his book, Humes points out that Nixon was often incredibly skilled at shaping legislation that would have a wide-ranging and long lasting appeal³³.

The problem with Nixon's ideas is, as Krugman points out, that they are arguably too liberal for a country that has shifted to the right. He writes that, "Given the combination of G.O.P. extremism and corporate power, it's now doubtful whether health reform...will be anywhere near as good as Nixon's proposal, even though Democrats control the White House and have a large Congressional majority."³⁴ This prediction largely proved true when Obama was finally able to sign two major health care bills into law: the Patient Protection and Affordable Health Care Act and the Health Care and Reconciliation Act both of which were passed in 2010 and can be accessed on the government's website.

Both bills were unanimously rejected by Republicans in Congress. The "Watergate babies", in Congress, however, almost all voted to support the bill. The only major difference between these bills and Nixon's National Health Insurance Standards Act is that Obama's bills actually went less far than Nixon's proposal did. As Krugman pointed out earlier – and Nixon also stated in his speech before Congress – Nixon's proposals would have required all employers to provide health care for their workers while Obama's does not.

The combination of three factors is what led to this unique situation where the proposals of a Republican President could have a lasting impact on the liberal agenda in the United States. Nixon's continuing influence over politics, even after his death, through culture allowed for anything with his

³³ James C. Humes. *Nixon's Ten Commandments of Leadership and Negotiation: His Guiding Principles of Statecraft*.

³⁴ Paul Krugman. "Missing Richard Nixon." *The New York Times*, August 30, 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/31/opinion/31krugman.html> (accessed September 20, 2010).

name on it to have a poignancy that simply is not present for other previous Presidents like Jimmy Carter, who proposed similar measures to reform health care³⁵. Many of Nixon's advisors – like Moynihan and Greenspan – later gained positions where they had the power to influence and shape policy, often with the support of those who were elected in opposition to Nixon himself. Finally, Obama saw the potential downfall of going too far with his proposals – as President Clinton did in his earliest years in the Presidency – and choose to emulate his plan after a proposal that did not face such radical opposition. Even though Nixon's proposal was rejected, it was not rejected because of the other party's issues with the actual policies being proposed, something that Obama, a Democrat facing potential Republican opposition in Congress, likely took note of.

Even Obama's own writing indicates that he knew he would be unlikely to obtain the support of many Republicans, thus he was forced to turn to a proposal that had the support of Democrats in Congress. As many of these Democrats were elected to Congress during – or immediately after – Nixon's administration and had previously shown a willingness to support the policies if given Ted Kennedy's clearance, Obama had an opportunity to bring these proposals back to the forefront of American politics again. With the acknowledgement that the work environment in America had changed, Obama was able to alter Nixon's proposals enough to appeal to moderate Democrats. The final piece was that Ted Kennedy, now understanding that his death was imminent, finally came out in support of a health care proposal.

It is ironic that the proposal Kennedy finally supported was both based on and – even more ironically – it was even less liberal than the Republican proposal he had originally rejected. However, with his support, Democrats were able to push through major health care reform over Republican opposition. Whether or not these bills will actually help reform health care in the United States in a

³⁵ Jimmy Carter. "Jimmy Carter: Health Care Legislation Message to the Congress." *Jimmy Carter: Health Care Legislation Message to the Congress*. The American Presidency Project. Web. 13 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=7401>>.

positive way remains to be seen, but there can be little doubt that a combination of forces came together to push many of Nixon's proposals through, even after his death.

When asked about his opinion of Nixon in a 1973 interview with *Playboy* magazine, the author of *Jailbird*, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., said:

Well, I don't think he's evil. But I think he dislikes the American people, and this depresses us. The President, particularly because of television, is in the position to be an extraordinarily effective teacher. I don't know exactly how much Executive responsibility a President has, or how much the Government runs itself, but I do know that he can influence our behavior for good and ill tremendously. If he teaches us something tonight, we will behave according to that tomorrow. All he has to do is say it on television. If he tells us about our neighbors in trouble, if he tells us to treat them better tomorrow, why, we'll all try. But the lessons Nixon has taught us have been so mean. He's taught us to resent the poor for not solving their own problems. He's taught us to like prosperous people better than unprosperous people. He could make us so humane and optimistic with a single television appearance. He could teach us Confucianism... How to be polite to one another—no matter how angry or disappointed we may be—how to respect the old.³⁶

Vonnegut's analysis of Nixon could not have been farther from the truth. This should perhaps not be surprising for an interview in which Vonnegut states, "You understand, of course, that everything I say is horseshit." Vonnegut's idea that Nixon "taught us to resent the poor for not solving their own problems" is an inaccurate assessment of a man who fought for comprehensive health care reform in order to help most workers in the United States. Richard Nixon was a man who fought until the end of his presidency to reform health care, a proposal that, if passed, would have gained him very little politically or personally. He seems to have done so almost exclusively out of a desire to help the common man in America live a better life. He would likely be pleased to see that President Obama has finally succeeded where he failed.

Perhaps another quote from that interview more accurately describes Nixon:

Part of the trick for people my age, I'm certain, is to crawl out of the envying, life-hating mood of the Great Depression at last. Richard M. Nixon, who has also been unintelligent

³⁶ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. "Playboy Interviews Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. - Celebrity Questions - Interview with Kurt Vonnegut, Jr." *Playboy Magazine*. Web. 13 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.playboy.com/articles/kurt-vonnegut-jr-interview/index.html?page=1>>.

and unimaginative about happiness, is a child of the Great Depression, too. Maybe we can both crawl out of it in the next four years.

It could be argued that of the two of them, only Nixon ever truly “crawled out” of the Great Depression. Despite the fact that it was proposed four decades ago, Nixon’s health care proposals are arguably most notable for how strikingly modern they are. While Vonnegut would attempt suicide after this interview, Nixon would live onto see his proposals debated for decades and, even after his death, they would continue on as an important part of the public debate about health care in the United States, with much of it eventually becoming law.

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