

Obama stumbles over lack of health care candor

November 6 2013, by Stephen Collinson

To panic on the left and delight on the right, President Barack Obama is battling to stop his second term being consumed by his misfiring greatest achievement.

Obama stands accused by critics of brashly lying about implications of his signature [health care law](#) even as his aides frantically fix a faulty sign-up website that raised questions about the reform's long-term fate.

He is in a classic political fix—on camera delivering a definitive statement which is, or at the least appears, untrue.

Dousing Republican attacks over Obamacare, the president repeatedly told Americans, "If you like your plan, you can keep your plan."

But when thousands of people started getting notices from private health insurers saying their policies would be cancelled because of new rules under Obamacare, the White House had a huge political problem.

It was a reminder that the reality of implementing a massive social reform is more complex than the political bromides often voiced to pass it.

So far, Obama's efforts to extricate himself have backfired.

On Monday, he tried to rewrite the record.

"If you had or have one of these plans before the Affordable Care Act came into law and you really like that plan, what we said was, you could keep it, if it hasn't changed since the law has passed."

But with Obama on camera with his simple, if incomplete, earlier explanation, his attempt to coin a retroactive caveat seemed clumsy.

Asked if Obama now regretted his previous mantra, his spokesman Jay Carney tried his own political dodge.

"Well, the president, as awesomely powerful as the office is, can't go back in time."

But Republicans pounced.

"The president already has a Nobel prize for peace—I think he's shooting for one in fiction," Republican Congressman Trey Gowdy told Fox News.

Republican Senator John Thune said Obama had assured Americans "if you like your insurance, you can keep it. Period. And of course, now we're finding out that he is modifying that."

Concern among Obama allies prompted top Senate Republican Mitch McConnell to crow over "foxhole conversions" and a "stampede away from the president's signature accomplishment."

Democratic Senator Barbara Mikulski meanwhile warned: "I believe there has been a crisis of confidence created in the dysfunctional nature of the website, the cancelling of policies and sticker shock from some people."

So how bad will it get for Obama—and will the row over his own

questionable candor fritter his remaining political capital?

"I think it will hurt. It will not be fatal, it will not doom his presidency, but this one will stick," said Jack Pitney, a professor of political science at Claremont McKenna College, California.

Already, polls show Obama's approval rating tumbling—down to the low 40 percent range.

A former Republican National Committee official, Pitney drew a comparison between Obama's "You can keep it" pledge and the broken "no new taxes" vow that undermined the first president George Bush.

The White House, however, has long believed that once Americans experience the benefits of Obamacare, its political toxicity will fade.

They argue that many Americans got insurance cancellations because Obamacare mandates a higher standard of coverage than that offered by many current policies in the individual insurance market.

"When you reorder one-sixth of the American economy, there are going to be some people who are unhappy with the experience," said Democratic Senator Christopher Murphy, adding that, in the end, there would be "far more winners than losers."

Bruce Buchanan, a political science professor at the University of Texas, argued Obama could contain damage because his statement lacks the "veniality" of some misstatements by presidents.

"The reality is that these people, if they get through this inconvenience, will see what they are replacing (their insurance with) is better than what they are losing."

"That takes away the idea that people are being robbed."

Obama, while arguing the cancellations only affect five percent of health care consumers, has adopted a dual fight back strategy.

He promises "one last campaign" to implement the health care law and to convince especially young people vital to making its economics work, to sign up—including with a trip to Dallas Wednesday.

"We are going to look back a year from now, three years from now, five years from now, 10 years from now and the American people are going to understand that this country finally, after decades, we are going to make sure that every single person can get affordable [health care](#)," Obama said.

The president is also playing what the Politico website called "issue roulette" to infuse his stalled second term with a sense of purpose.

He met CEOs at the White House Tuesday to up pressure on House Republicans to unblock a comprehensive immigration reform bill.

On Friday, he will travel to New Orleans to discuss the economy and the Wall Street Journal reported the White House was considering a new push to raise the minimum wage.

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Citation: Obama stumbles over lack of health care candor (2013, November 6) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-11-obama-stumbles-lack-health-candor.html>

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