

Introduction

The Great Quest

There's nothing like getting your hopes crushed to pieces. I rushed into Ethan's office to get on the phone with Saul Shorr, a brilliant bulldog of an ad man who had created our TV ads for the past five months. This was a conversation that I'd been looking forward to for more than a year. We were going to discuss the final ad campaign to help push the health care bill through Congress. The bill had survived the nasty tea party attacks in August, tens of millions of dollars in negative ads aimed at vulnerable Democrats up for reelection, and multiple Republican filibusters in the Senate. The press had written the health care bill's obituary over and over again. Now the President and Congressional leadership were only a few days from completing negotiations on a final agreement.

Shorr put a halt to the discussion before we had even begun.

"I hate to throw water on this whole thing, but I wouldn't count on having a deal after Tuesday."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Massachusetts," Shorr said. "It looks terrible. I don't think Coakley can win."

I hadn't been thinking at all about the Massachusetts special election for U.S. Senate, set for January 19, 2010. We'd heard that the Democratic candidate, Attorney General Martha Coakley, had made some blunders, but this was Massachusetts, the state that had mourned Edward Kennedy's passing just a few short months before.

Shorr's firm had been hired to run ads attacking Scott Brown, the Republican candidate for Senate. Shorr had re-

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viewed the polling and assessed the dynamics of the campaign. The picture wasn't pretty. Nor was a turnaround likely in the final few days. Blunders by Coakley, like putting down Brown for shaking hands outside Fenway Park and a misspelling of Massachusetts on a campaign ad, had come to symbolize her botched campaign. Worse, Coakley had lost the narrative. The press was throwing fuel on the fire, reveling as they always do in bad news for those in power. Brown was picking up momentum and the Dems didn't have enough time to reverse the tide.

I didn't want to believe Saul. I'm an optimist. You have to be in my business. But I knew in my gut that Saul was right. I was sick to my stomach for several hours. Could health care reform really all slip away? Ever since we had beaten back the tea party in August I'd been confident of the outcome. But Election Day is what most matters to elected officials. A defeat at the ballot box is the most powerful rebuke, capable of snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

By Tuesday the election's outcome was a foregone conclusion. At the weekly meeting White House staff held with progressive groups in Washington, the Administration assured us that we'd find a way forward, but they didn't sound convinced.

The obstacles thrown up by Brown's victory were both symbolic and real. A candidate who opposed the health reform bill had won the U.S. Senate seat held for decades by the champion of health reform, Ted Kennedy. If Massachusetts' voters could spurn his heir apparent, then no Democrat in the entire country was safe. That's the story the press was telling. In more practical terms, Democrats no longer had the sixty votes they needed to break a Republican filibuster and pass the bill. Even if Democrats braved the political storm, how could they approve the bill in the Senate? Not a single Republican had voted for it in December.

We saw little to hope for in what happened publicly in the next few days. The President, always eager to appear open to compromise, gave a TV interview in which he seemed willing to scale back the bill. That's not how I read his remarks, but then I knew by now that Obama liked to look like a concilia-

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tor, to appear to give some room, as he probed for a way to move forward. The White House denied that Obama meant to shrink from his ambitious agenda for comprehensive reform. But the press raised a huge cry because of Obama's apparent retreat.

Democrats in the House also believed that the President had given them a signal to step back from a comprehensive bill. Some, including a few stalwart supporters of reform, started to say publicly that maybe partial reform was the only option. Unbeknownst to me, or to my fellow foot soldiers in the fight for reform, White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel was advocating a scaled-back bill that would provide universal coverage only to children.

Ten days after the Massachusetts election, my Blackberry buzzed with a call from 991, an international area code. "Hello, Richard, is that you? Are you OK?" my father asked, with real concern in his voice. My parents were taking a long-planned cruise to the Pacific. "It's hard to get much news on the ship, but it sounds tough."

Given what my dad had been reading in the papers, his concern for my spirits was entirely justified. But the papers never told the whole story.

By that point I was feeling like we were back in the game — not quite with the confidence I had held all fall: a 90 percent sure bet. But I felt the odds were 60 percent and not just because I wear rose-colored glasses.

The White House staff told reform supporters privately that they were not going to retreat. Obama had given the House Democrats a pep talk, reiterating his determination to move forward. In the Senate, two key senators were publicly supporting passage of reform through a process that would circumvent any Republican filibusters.

On the House side, the initial panic was easing. Support for passing a watered-down bill was drying up. Democrats understood that it was impossible to deliver on the key promises of reform, including stopping insurance companies from denying

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coverage for preexisting conditions, unless they passed comprehensive reform.

Plus, we had an ace in the hole in the House: Speaker Nancy Pelosi. She had made it clear to the Democratic caucus that she wasn't giving up. A week after the Massachusetts election, Pelosi told the press: "You go through the gate. If the gate's closed, you go over the fence. If the fence is too high, we'll pole-vault in. If that doesn't work, we'll parachute in. But we're going to get health care reform passed for the American people."¹

Pelosi backed up her passion with extraordinary political acumen. She had already proven herself to be the most effective speaker in years. She knew how to align her caucus, slowly, carefully giving her members the time and political space to find a way forward. Now she was declaring that retreat was not an option, while giving Democrats the time to find a way over that fence.

"It's going to be OK," I told my father. "Don't believe what you read in the papers or see on Fox," which was the only TV news they could get on ship. "There's a lot going on behind the scenes. It's tough, but we're going to get this done."

"I'm glad to hear that. We'll call again soon." But his tone was more like he was offering condolences to someone who was in denial after being diagnosed with a terminal illness. He clearly loved me and wanted to protect me from being hurt.

There's one more reason that I was optimistic. Almost three years ago to the day of Scott Brown's election, in January 2007, I'd had the first conversation with colleagues about creating a campaign to pass comprehensive health reform, anticipating the election of a Democrat as president in 2008. For the past fifteen months Health Care for America Now — HCAN for short — had been organizing Americans around the country, so that we would be ready for these kinds of moments. We knew that finally making health care a right in the United States would be a monumental struggle. It was our job to carry members of Congress through the darkest storm. I still believed we would win the prize that had eluded presidents and progressive activists for almost a century.

Fighting for Our Health

Fighting for Our Health is the story of the organized progressive campaign that fought for the health care reform bill of 2010. This story will not be found in conventional journalistic histories of efforts to enact reform, which focus on what the President and Congressional leaders did. The only outside forces described are major health industry players, such as the prescription drug and health insurance companies. The only grassroots actors are the tea party activists. In this version, health care was enacted because the President and Congress made smart deals with powerful interests, braving popular wrath. If progressive forces are included in the narrative, they appear on the sidelines.

The first reason I wrote this book is to tell a story of what really happened. When the health care narrative graduates from journalism to history, the historians will have a source that describes the crucial role played by the organized progressive campaign to win reform.

The campaign we built was many years in the making. It had its roots in a part of the American left that originated in the Vietnam War era. I have been working in that tradition, building community-labor coalitions to fight for economic justice issues, since 1980. The success of Health Care for America Now stemmed from lessons learned and relations built during thirty of the most conservative years in modern American politics.

That's the second reason I wrote *Fighting for Our Health* — to provide lessons to others trying to create a more just America. Health Care for America Now undertook several specific strategies that differentiated it from previous progressive campaigns. By explaining what we did in detail, I hope that the things we did right, the mistakes we made, and the tensions we faced will provide lessons to allies in other fights.

The fight for health care reform did not end with the President signing the bill into law. Its key provisions, those that will make affordable health coverage available to millions of uninsured and underinsured Americans, do not take effect until 2014. The responsibility for implementing those provisions is

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shared by the federal and state governments, and the states will play a central role. An aggressive campaign by Republicans and their supporters, like the United States Chamber of Commerce, aims to eviscerate the law in Congress. The Supreme Court will review challenges to the law's constitutionality. In each state, the health insurance industry will battle consumers about how the law's provisions will be implemented. I believe that the lessons we learned will inform and inspire the work needed to see that the promise of health care reform is fulfilled.

Universal health care has been the holy grail of the American left. Like any great quest, the struggles to achieve it are rich in history and drama. I invite you to ride along with me on this journey, which is why I've written this history as a personal memoir as well as a memoir of a movement.

I can do only scant justice to all the extraordinary people and organizations that worked to win passage of health care reform in 2010. *Fighting for Our Health* concentrates largely on the work done through the Health Care for America Now coalition. Many other groups poured everything they had into this fight as well. My hope is that in capturing a little of what so many did, that all of those who helped make history will see themselves on this quest. I hope that readers for whom the fight for health care reform was no more than newspaper headlines, cable-news theater or material for Comedy Central will also come to understand the role that ordinary people played — and can still play — in creating a better, more just America.