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HEALTH CARE REFORM

# Backbone, please

By caving in to lies and hysteria, the administration and Congress are allowing the fringe to set the health care agenda. Bring back the provision for end-of-life directives.

Score one for hysteria and lies. Score another for lack of backbone, an all-too-common malady that seems to mandate paralysis in this nation on serious problems. And it all portends badly for reason prevailing over fear in the national health care debate.

Lawmakers are declaring dead a provision that would allow health consumers to *voluntarily* get advice on end-of-life directives. They also are saying that a public health care option is now expendable.

First, the end-of-life directives. Talk to health care experts, and they will tell you that such directives are necessary in making sure that a person's last days go according to wishes. But this morphed into "death panels" and "pulling the plug on grandma" — fictions thoroughly debunked. And it didn't matter.

This perfectly reasonable provision would have allowed such visits to be paid for as part of sensible medical planning by consumers. It's been declared dead on the Senate side by so-called "centrist" GOP Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa.

This cedes far too much power to the fringe that pushed the lies and emboldens them to Swift-boat any other provision. That so many are willing to believe is a testament to the efficacy of fear-mongering in

U.S. politics.

In addition, the Obama administration indicated last weekend that it is willing to forgo a public health care system to drive down prices in the private sector. In our view, this would have had to have been crafted so as not to unfairly compete with the private sector. But the reluctance to pursue this is not based on the ability or inability to do that but on denying the fringe yet another issue — the merits of the proposal be damned.

What we have coming to roost is the longstanding, purposely cultivated notion of government being bad, that more is therefore very bad and that any bold government pursuit epitomizes Big Government, socialism, even.

There are legitimate concerns to have about reform and its costs. But it's clear that too many simply seek wedges useful for the larger goal of killing all reform, making useful debate an early casualty.

That these provisions are so easily jettisoned says that the reformers, starting with the president, need to more clearly deliver their messages, that facts without backbone have limits in this charged political landscape and that, absent backbone, such blather about "death panels" and "socialism" will win every time.