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## Obama's Historic Health-Care Victory

By [ROBERT DALLEK](#)

The hundred years' war over national health insurance is coming to an end. Or is it? Even if Congress passes a bill in January, as seems very likely, the fight won't end. While the results of the law play themselves out over the next few years, we will continue to hear charges and countercharges over the virtues and defects of the new system.

If the reform works as intended by expanding health insurance to an additional 30 million Americans and reducing the national debt, the Democrats will pillory the Republicans for the indefinite future. The GOP's uniform opposition—only one congressman and no Republican senators supported the bill—will make it vulnerable to charges of wrong-minded thinking about the suffering of fellow citizens on a scale with Herbert Hoover's failed response to the Great Depression. That cost his party five presidential elections.

Should the bill fall short of promised gains, it will reinforce national prejudices against big government and facilitate another round of conservative Republican dominance of national politics.

Nonetheless, Democrats will continue to enjoy their standing as the more compassionate advocates of needy Americans. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's pronouncement—"Better the occasional faults of a Government that lives in a spirit of charity than the constant omission of a Government frozen in the ice of its own indifference"—remains a standard of action that has sustained New Deal and Great Society laws for three quarters of a century.

However the political future unfolds, the Obama White House can take great satisfaction from winning passage of a reform on a par with Franklin Roosevelt's 1935 Social Security law, and with Lyndon Johnson's 1964 Civil Rights bill, and the 1965 Medicare and federal aid to education laws.

FDR had an economic crisis of unprecedented proportions in 1933 when he drove 15 major bills through the Congress, and super majorities in the House and the Senate in 1935 when he won passage of Social Security.

Johnson's mastery of the Congress in getting a revolutionary civil rights bill passed in 1964 partly rested on his use of President Kennedy's martyrdom. JFK's unfinished business included not only civil rights but also an \$11 billion tax cut to spur a sluggish economy, Medicare and federal aid to education. By 1965, when LBJ pressed Congress into passing highly controversial health-care and education bills, he

could invoke not only the completion of Kennedy's legacy but also rely on two-thirds liberal majorities in both houses, which were the result of Johnson's landslide victory over Barry Goldwater the previous November.

Mr. Obama had a much higher mountain to climb in passing national health insurance. True, he won a convincing majority in 2008, and his party has a solid majority in the House and the 60 Senate votes needed to defeat any Republican filibuster. But these are pseudo-advantages: The conservative House Democrats and his dependence on unreliable Senate allies like Connecticut's Joe Lieberman and Nebraska's Ben Nelson forced compromises on the public option and abortion that made his liberal backers grudging supporters.

Nor should we lose sight of the fact that Mr. Obama is fighting two wars and has stirred considerable controversy by promising to expand the fight in Afghanistan. Roosevelt's struggle in 1939-41 to take the United States into World War II sounded the end of reform efforts. After Pearl Harbor, FDR announced that "Dr. Win-the-War has replaced Dr. New Deal." Johnson was never willing to acknowledge the incompatibility of guns and butter, but the reality was that his war in Vietnam meant the end of further advances for the Great Society and the War on Poverty.

Mr. Obama may have been fortunate in having the health-care debate so far along when he announced the surge in Afghanistan. But his success with the keynote domestic initiative of his presidency guarantees nothing about future financial and environmental reforms. Increased casualties in Afghanistan and the possibility of a stalemated conflict could wreak havoc on other bold domestic changes, and possibly even jeopardize his chances for a second term.

For the moment, however, he has carried off something of a minor miracle. The national health-insurance law is not the full measure of what it could have been. But then, in time, both Social Security and Medicare expanded beyond their original coverage. The same seems likely with President Obama's reform—better titled the Edward M. Kennedy National Health Insurance Law, which would be a fitting tribute to the individual who fought longest and hardest to make this measure a reality.

—Mr. Dallek is a presidential historian. His latest book, "The Lost Peace: Leadership in a Time of Hope and Horror" will be published next year by HarperCollins.

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