

August 31, 2009 Monday

Final Edition

**Obama taking page from '04?; Accusing health-plan critics of 'fear-mongering' was tactic he used in state Senate days**

By Lynn Sweet and Dave McKinney

Staff reporters

WASHINGTON-Barack Obama, deflecting criticism of his top agenda item to deal with the health care crisis, accuses opponents of "fear-mongering," telling lies and miscasting his proposal as "socialized medicine."

That wasn't President Obama in recent weeks, as the health care debate has been heating up in Congress and in town halls across the country. That was then Illinois State Sen. Obama, arguing on the floor of the Illinois Senate on May 19, 2004. If the themes sound familiar, it's because Obama is mustering some of the same rhetoric in 2009 he used in 2004.

At the time, Obama was already the Democratic nominee for the U.S. Senate -- but before his election was the foregone conclusion it became. GOP rival Jack Ryan had not yet dropped out and Obama was weeks away from the Boston speech that catapulted him to stardom.

Republicans were paying attention to Obama and his proposal to create a task force to study the Illinois health system, fearing it was a Trojan horse for a mandated universal health care, or, in their view worse, a single-payer system. "I want to say on record that I am not in favor of a single-payer plan," Obama said at the time.

One of those who gave Obama the toughest time that day was then Illinois State Sen. Peter Roskam -- who also moved up and on. Roskam, now a member of Congress, representing a Chicago west suburban district, opposes most elements in the Democratic-drafted health care bills that are coming out of the House.

That May 2004 debate "was a foreshadowing, I think, of how the president tends to argue," Roskam said on Saturday. Blasting Obama's bill, Roskam in 2004 said it would lead to "socialized medicine."

President Obama returned from his Martha's Vineyard vacation on Sunday to renew his drive to kickstart health reform legislation seriously stalled in Congress; Democrats are divided -- conservative Blue Dogs vs. the liberal Progressives --while most Republicans are presenting a united front of opposition.

If the past is prologue, the episode involving Obama's successful bid to pass what became the "Adequate Health Care Task Force" could be instructive. Obama won on a party-line vote.

Obama ultimately watered down the original bill because the insurance industry feared that the state was going to mandate coverage. Instead, Obama called for a task force to study coverage options, cost containment and portability of coverage, among other items.

"I would challenge you to find something in there that suggests anything remotely close to socialized medicine," Obama said that day.

Sound familiar?

The task force Obama helped create took shape in August 2005 and issued a final report to then-Gov. Blagojevich and the General Assembly in January 2007.

The group's basic findings -- that Illinois essentially should adopt a form of universal health care coverage and employers should help foot the bill -- wound up being incorporated into Blagojevich's ill-fated bid later that spring to impose a gross-receipts tax on businesses. That tax proposal withered, effectively killing discussion on universal health care for the remainder of time Blagojevich was in office.

There is much speculation going on whether Obama will take what he can get now from Congress and press for more on the health care front another day. Will Obama be an incrementalist? Let's look to the past for guidance.

Despite resistance from critics and potential long-term cost, Obama knew that setting up a task force to study universal health care in Illinois represented the first step toward all Illinoisans having access to health care that would not bankrupt them, said Sen. Don Harmon (D-Oak Park), a lead co-sponsor of Obama's legislation.

Obama's involvement in pushing this legislation "taught me he understood the incremental nature of the legislative process," Harmon said. "You don't always get everything you want," he continued. "But if you can't pass fundamental health care reform on the first day, you build the infrastructure you need to support it on the 100th day."