

From *Newsweek*:

An Ivy League Huey Long

By George Will
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In August our ubiquitous president became the nation's elevator music, always out and about, heard but not really listened to, like audible wallpaper. And now, as Congress returns to resume wrestling with health care reform, we shall see if he continues his August project of proving that the idea of an Ivy League Huey Long is not oxymoronic.

Barack Obama in August became a Huey for today, a rabble rouser with a better tailor, an unrumpled and modulated tribune of downtrodden Americans, telling them that opponents of his reform plan which actually does not yet exist are fearmongers employing scare tactics. He also told Americans to be afraid, very afraid of health-insurance providers because they are dishonest (and will remain so until there is a "public option" to make them "honest"). And to be afraid, very afraid of pediatricians who unnecessarily extract children's tonsils for monetary rather than medical reasons. And to be afraid, very afraid of doctors generally because so many of them are so rapacious that they prefer lopping off limbs of diabetes patients rather than engaging in lifestyle counseling that for "a pittance" could prevent diabetes.

Sen. Olympia Snowe, the Maine Republican whom Democrats hope will lend a patina of bipartisanship to their health legislation whenever it gets written, says that one thing we learned from the cacophonous town halls of August is "that there are many people who are satisfied with their health insurance." Actually, long before this debate began we knew that a large majority of Americans have insurance, and a large majority of that majority are content with their care. That is why the president has become shrill: There is no underlying discontent commensurate with the scale of the changes he is trying to propel.

Another reason that reasonable people are wary of any government plan for a grandiose rearrangement of the health-care sector's 17 percent of the economy is that, regarding grandiosity, the president, after less than eight months in office, is a recidivist. His health-care crusade comes after a \$787 billion stimulus (which has effectively made the Energy Department into the nation's largest venture-capital firm, scattering scores of billions of dollars to speculative energy investments) and the semi-nationalization of two car companies. August ended with the unembarrassable administration uttering a \$2 trillion "Oops!" by estimating that the 10-year budget-deficit projection is about \$9 trillion rather than \$7.1 trillion. The supposed means of paying for the president's \$1 trillion health-care plan include substantial Medicare cuts that will never happen, and the auction of carbon-emission permits that, instead, would be given away by the Waxman--Markey cap-and-trade legislation the House has sent to the Senate.

That legislation is a particularly lurid illustration of why no serious person nowadays takes seriously Washington's increasingly infantile bandying of numbers. The point of cap-and-trade is to impose a ceiling on the nation's greenhouse-gas (GHG) emissions primarily carbon dioxide. The legislation endorses the goal of holding the global carbon--dioxide level to a maximum of 450 parts per million by 2050. That. Will. Not. Happen.

Steven Hayward and Kenneth Green of the American Enterprise Institute do the math. The 450 level is less than the 2030 projected level for all countries other than the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's 30 developed nations. Which means the global goal would be unreachable even if in 2030 those 30 disappear if they have zero emissions. Waxman-Markey endorses the goal of reducing all of this nation's GHG emissions 83 percent below 2005 levels by 2050. In 2005, the United States' carbon-dioxide emissions were 6 billion tons, so an 83 percent reduction would permit about 1 billion tons what America's emissions were in 1910, when the population was 92 million and the economy was one twenty-fifth of today's. But by 2050, the population probably will be about 420 million, so per capita carbon-dioxide emissions would have to be 2.4 tons one quarter of 1910's per capita emissions.

Hayward and Green say that historical data indicate that the last time emissions were that low was 1875. And even before that, before widespread use of fossil fuels, wood burning by Americans may have produced more than 2.4 tons per capita. Today France, which generates approximately 80 percent of its electricity by nuclear power, and Switzerland, which generates most of its electricity by nuclear or hydropower, have per capita emissions of 6.59 and 6.13 tons, respectively.

Obviously Hayward and Green are correct that meeting the 2.4-ton goal "is not going to be seriously attempted." So why do the same politicians who want to radically expand government's control of health care pretend otherwise? Because they are not serious people. Which is why so many Americans are seriously alarmed.