

A Giant Leap Backward

By Melvin Konner

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Now it's official. The Republican House plans to cut a total of \$452 billion out of Medicare and Medicaid over the next seven years. Medicaid would lose \$182 billion, even though it covers a disproportionately large number of children as well as elderly people who have spent themselves into destitution to qualify for it. Later this month, the measure is to be voted on as part of the budget reconciliation package, and Speaker Newt Gingrich plans to block a Presidential veto by forcing the country to the verge of default on our national debt. International markets await news of this potential disaster with thousands of pairs of hands poised over keyboards.

Default would be only the latest step in the third worldization of America. The gap between rich children and poor children here is larger than in Switzerland, France or any of the 15 other industrial nations examined in a report this year by the Luxembourg Income Study, a non-profit group. Not only that, we have

Melvin Konner, who teaches anthropology at Emory University, is a member of Physicians for a National Health Program.

a health care delivery system that overtreats the well-to-do — not actually a good thing for them — while all but withholding treatment from 43 million uninsured citizens.

Where will the savings from health care cutbacks go? Republicans argue that the money will insure that Medicare and Medicaid remain solvent. But they are also pressing for a huge tax cut for the middle class and well-to-do; presumably that money has to come from somewhere. And of course nothing Republicans do will

Medicare and the third worldization of America.

be allowed to slow profit-taking in the health care industry, whose profits outpace national corporate averages by far. Characteristically, the American Medical Association came out in support of the Republican plan only after payments to doctors were carefully protected.

Few people may realize that our much praised health care system, about to be made worse, is already an international disgrace. The most scientifically advanced medicine in the world has limited practical or

moral value when nearly a fifth of the population cannot get to it. During the past few years, while the spirit of health-care reform was being born and then started dying, the throng of the uninsured swelled from 37 million to 43 million. This trend will only worsen. Cutbacks are closing emergency rooms and clinics, and the great public hospitals are being sold off or destroyed in New York, Los Angeles and other cities. Does anyone care where the poor will go?

Republican leaders say they have a mandate to cut costs. But only about 38 percent of eligible voters went to the polls in 1994 and only slightly more than half of those voted Republican. The result is perfectly democratic, but it is not a mandate. Sixty percent of voters currently say they are dissatisfied with Congress. Time will tell whether the voters of 1994 were indulging in conservatism or merely in volatility.

Mr. Gingrich says he wants to renew America, but the only thing he is likely to renew is the frustration and anger of people who can only gape at the good life, and good health care, without hope of having it themselves. Senator Phil Gramm, a Presidential candidate, invokes the Second Coming on the campaign trail. Which Second Coming? The one brought on by Armageddon, or the one that many Christians believe grows gradually in the world through the imitation of Jesus Christ?

Deep in the Judeo-Christian tradition are such sentiments as "Do justice to the poor and fatherless; deal righteously with the afflicted and destitute." A modern politician who transfers wealth from the suffering to the comfortable and cuts off poor people's access to decent medical care might wonder how he would stand in a Second Coming.

America is taking a great step backward. All other industrial countries seem to know something we don't: having no place to take a sick child does not encourage people to identify with their country or its interests.

Americans have always been torn between self-reliance and compassion. Those who think that conservatism is now set in stone should study American history; they are only watching part of the arc of a pendulum swing. Compassion, fairness, cooperation — these are the forces that will stop this swing, whether in one year, five or seven.

In the meanwhile, millions will suffer and some will die, needlessly, for want of decent medical care. □

