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Boehner, Cantor Question White House on Proposed Health Care Summit

GOP Leaders: “Assuming the President is sincere about moving forward on health care in a bipartisan way, does that mean he will agree to start over so that we can develop a bill that is truly worthy of the support and confidence of the American people?”

Washington, Feb 8 -

February 8, 2010

The Honorable Rahm Emanuel
Chief of Staff
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. Emanuel:

We welcome President Obama’s announcement of forthcoming bipartisan health care talks. In fact, you may remember that last May, Republicans asked President Obama to hold bipartisan discussions on health care in an attempt to find common ground, but he declined and instead chose to work with only Democrats.

Since then, the President has given dozens of speeches on health care reform, operating under the premise that the more the American people learn about his plan, the more they will come to like it. Just the opposite has occurred: a majority of Americans oppose the House and Senate health care bills and want them scrapped so we can start over with a step-by-step approach focused on lowering costs for families and small businesses. Just as important, scrapping the House and Senate health care bills would help end the uncertainty they are creating for workers and businesses and thus strengthen our shared commitment to focusing on creating jobs.

Assuming the President is sincere about moving forward on health care in a bipartisan way, does that mean he will agree to start over so that we can develop a bill that is truly worthy of the support and confidence of the American people? Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius said today that the President is “absolutely not” resetting the legislative process for health care. If the starting point for this meeting is the job-killing bills the American people have already soundly rejected, Republicans would rightly be reluctant to participate.

Assuming the President is sincere about moving forward in a bipartisan way, does that mean he has taken off the table the idea of relying solely on Democratic votes and jamming through health care reform by way of reconciliation? As the President has noted recently, Democrats continue to hold large majorities in the House and Senate, which means they can attempt to pass a health care bill at any time through the reconciliation process. Eliminating the possibility of reconciliation would represent an important show of good faith to Republicans and the American people.

If the President intends to present any kind of legislative proposal at this discussion, will he make it available to members of Congress and the American people at least 72 hours beforehand? Our ability to move forward in a bipartisan way through this discussion rests on openness and transparency.

Will the President include in this discussion congressional Democrats who have opposed the House and Senate health care bills? This bipartisan discussion should reflect the bipartisan opposition to both the House bill and the kickbacks and sweetheart deals in the Senate bill.

Will the President be inviting officials and lawmakers from the states to participate in this discussion? As you may know, legislation has been introduced in at least 36 state legislatures, similar to the proposal just passed

by the Democratic-controlled Virginia State Senate, providing that no individual may be compelled to purchase health insurance. Additionally, governors of both parties have raised concerns about the additional costs that will be passed along to states under both the House and Senate bills.

The President has also mentioned his commitment to have “experts” participate in health care discussions. Will the Feb. 25 discussion involve such “experts?” **Will those experts include the actuaries at the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS),** who have determined that the both the House and Senate health care bill raise costs – just the opposite of their intended effect – and jeopardize seniors’ access to high-quality care by imposing massive Medicare cuts? **Will those experts include the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office,** which has stated that the GOP alternative would reduce premiums by up to 10 percent? **Also, will Republicans be permitted to invite health care experts to participate?**

Finally, as you know, this is the first televised White House health care meeting involving the President since last March. Many health care meetings of the closed-door variety have been held at the White House since then, including one last month where a sweetheart deal was worked out with union leaders. **Will the special interest groups that the Obama Administration has cut deals with be included in this televised discussion?**

Of course, Americans have been dismayed by the fact that the President has broken his own pledge to hold televised health care talks. We can only hope this televised discussion is the beginning, not the end, of attempting to correct that mistake. **Will the President require that any and all future health care discussions, including those held on Capitol Hill, meet this common-sense standard of openness and transparency?**

Your answers to these critical questions will help determine whether this will be a truly open, bipartisan discussion or merely an intramural exercise before Democrats attempt to jam through a job-killing health care bill that the American people can’t afford and don’t support. ‘Bipartisanship’ is not writing proposals of your own behind closed doors, then unveiling them and demanding Republican support. Bipartisan ends require bipartisan means.

These questions are also designed to try and make sense of the widening gap between the President’s rhetoric on bipartisanship and the reality. We cannot help but notice that each of the President’s recent bipartisan overtures has been coupled with harsh, misleading partisan attacks.

For instance, the President decries Republican ‘obstruction’ when it was Republicans who first proposed bipartisan health care talks last May. The President says Republicans are ‘sitting on the sidelines’ just days after holding up our health care alternative and reading from it word for word. The President has every right to use his bully pulpit as he sees fit, but this is the kind of credibility gap that has the American people so fed up with business as usual in Washington.

We look forward to receiving your answers and continuing to discuss ways we can move forward in a bipartisan manner to address the challenges facing the American people.

Sincerely,

House Republican Leader John Boehner (R-OH)
House Republican Whip Eric Cantor (R-VA)