

Amending Marshal Lyautey (7/29/09)

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Washington Post: *What does the delay in voting mean for the chances of a health-care bill passing?*

My job is policy, not political prognostication, but here's my guess: Delaying the House vote till after recess means a bad bill doesn't become a bad law that harms small business - and just about everyone else. The present H.R. 3200 is an unworkable bill. (**Here are 10 reasons why.**) Ramming it through the House on the fly could complicate the job of crafting any bill that helps small business, helps health care, and can pass both houses.

Reform is not a slam-bang, do-it-today, enjoy-it-tomorrow proposition. Small business needs relief in the short-term and the long-term. They need health-care costs to rise more slowly, and eventually decline, while preserving and improving quality of care. They need quality insurance at a price they can afford. Congress can't accomplish that with 1,000 or more pages of detailed prescriptions. A successful bill has to give consumers, providers, and firms sufficient flexibility to discover new ways to deliver quality care and coverage. The present House bill does exactly the opposite.

The Congressional Budget Office believes H.R. 3200 would accelerate health-care spending and create a tremendous fiscal drain. Delaying the vote by a few weeks will do little or no damage to long-run health-care improvements. But passing a flawed bill or gumming up the legislative process with bills that can't pass can do enormous damage.

President Kennedy once spoke of France's Marshal Lyautey, who asked his gardener to plant a tree. In Kennedy's words, "The gardener objected that the tree was slow-growing and would not reach maturity for a hundred years. The Marshal replied, 'In that case, there is no time to lose, plant it this afternoon.'"

Kennedy's story is a great homily against procrastination. However, if the gardener has no planting soil or fertilizer, if his shovel is broken, if there's lightning and thunder outside and if the Marshal hasn't decided which kind of tree to plant - maybe waiting a few days is a good idea. ... That's kind of where things stand before recess.