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OPINION

Treating the symptoms of U.S. health care crisis

At this rate, there'll be no cure for spiraling costs or lack of access

Let's give President Bush credit for turning attention to the nation's health care problems in his State of the Union address—even if you do not agree with his proposals.

President Bush believes that the best way to control costs is to push responsibility down to the health care consumer. If patients pay for their medical care, they will look for reasonably priced choices.



D.G. MARTIN

But, just as we are trying to understand a complicated new "choice based" Medicare drug plan, we may have a hard time getting excited about the President's complex set of choices of tax credits and health accounts.

The real tragedy of the President's health care proposals—and the various plans of those who oppose his ideas—is that they ignore the country's real health care crisis, which is this: The way we live and the way we eat is making more of us

sicker and sicker.

A few weeks ago, I had supper with former state representative Jack Hunt and members of his family, including his daughter Judy, also a former legislator. One of their guests was Dr. John Buse, director of UNC Diabetes Care Center, and a nationally recognized expert on the prevention and treatment of diabetes.

At that time, The New York Times was running a series of articles on a diabetes epidemic that is sweeping parts of New York. Diet, the lack of exercise, and other environmental factors are unlocking people's genetic predisposition toward diabetes at an alarming rate.

As a consequence of the onset of diabetes, these new victims will suffer countless expensive and debilitating health problems. Their suffering and the costs of treating them could, in most cases, be prevented or reduced, by changing their eating and living patterns.

Dr. Buse has said, "The great news is that with early detection and careful treatment, people can take control of their diabetes and live full lives without symptoms or complications."

I asked why we (through our government) are not pushing harder to encourage these life style changes.

Judy Hunt, who had a long bout with diabetes herself, cautioned that blaming the victims was not a solution to the problem.

I agree with her. And I think our country's people have a long history of resisting any effort for the government to tell us how to live our lives.

But we have made exceptions when people's dangerous acts are life threatening. Motorcyclists have to wear helmets. Taking certain drugs is a crime. We are not allowed to drive a car without a license.

But we let people at risk for diabetes eat and smoke and "loaf" their way to a dangerous end, one that will usually involve great expense to the community.

So why not address that problem?

One state governor is.

Until a few years ago, Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, the subject of a recent column in the New York Times column by Nicholas Kristof, weighed almost 300 pounds. (Apparently he shared some fast food eating habits with a former Arkansas governor.)

When Huckabee learned that he had developed Type 2 diabetes, he dramatically changed his life style. Diets of salad and an exercise plan that included marathon races brought his weight down to 180 pounds.

Another result: His diabetes is gone. Huckabee is a conservative Republican and not anxious to expand government. But, having learned personally how weight loss and exercise prevent disease, he has become an advocate for the government to do much more to promote healthy lifestyles.

He told Kristof, "...when I look at our state budget, and I see that every year our Medicaid budget is increasing by 9 to 10 percent, and I look at state employees' health plans and I see that those costs are escalating at double digits and twice the rate of inflation - as a fiscal manager, I have not only the right but frankly also the responsibility to see what can we do to improve this bottom-line cost."

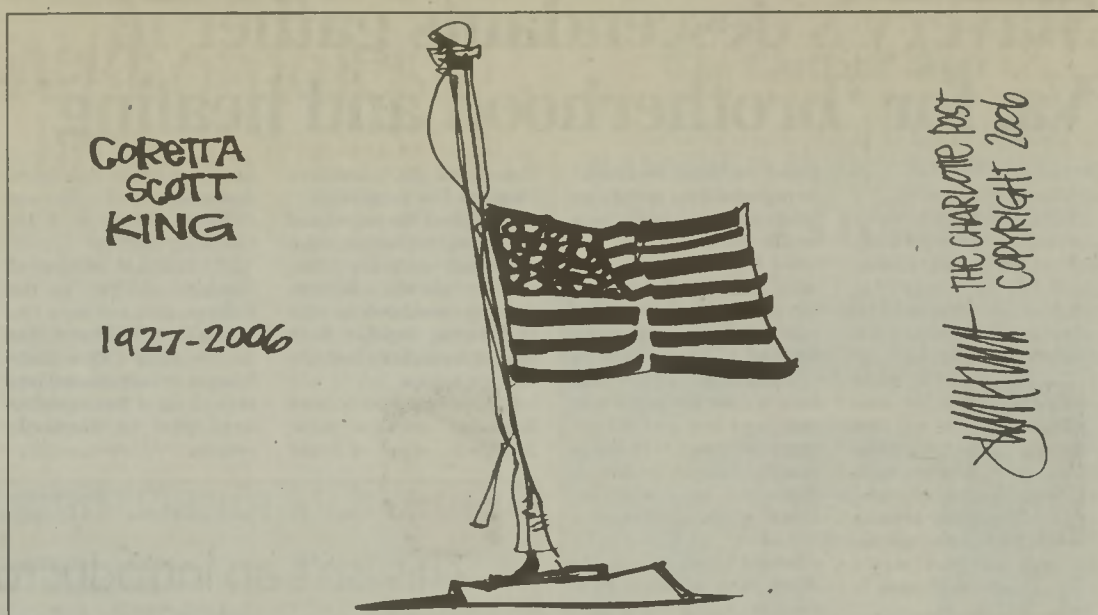
Until our leaders adopt the "Huckabee" approach, the debate about President Bush's proposals is not about "finding a cure" to our health care crisis, it is just a discussion of how to "treat its symptoms."

D.G. Martin is host of UNC-TV's "North Carolina Bookwatch," which airs on Sundays at 5 p.m.

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Grading Congress and the NAACP

If the last presidential election and the Supreme Court confirmation hearings of Samuel Alito proved nothing else, they showed how certain issues — especially a bortion rights and gay marriages — get pushed to the forefront while issues of true concern to most African-Americans get relegated to the background.



GEORGE E. CURRY

That's why I always look forward to the NAACP Report Card covering the most recent session of Congress. Like labor and other special interest groups, both liberal and conservative, the NAACP identifies issues of importance to African-Americans and then grade members of the Senate and House, based on their level of support. The NAACP has been doing this since 1914, just five years after it was founded.

Not surprisingly, there is a major difference in how members of the two major parties vote. For the most part, Democrats support the pro-civil rights agenda of the NAACP and Republicans, by and large, are hostile to civil rights. No Republican in either the House or Senate scored higher than a C. In fact, most earned Fs, including likely presidential candidates Senator John McCain of Arizona and Bill Frist of

Tennessee. The so-called Republican moderates — Lincoln D. Chafee of Rhode Island and Olympia Snowe of Maine earned a C and a D, respectively.

Republican strategists who contend they want a larger share of the Black vote are like umpires — they talk a good game, but they don't play ball. Not with the majority of African-Americans.

No group in its right mind votes against its self-interest. But African-Americans are asked to do just that.

In many instances, the Report Card shows that most Republicans were not even close to making a D. In the Senate, Jeff Sessions of Alabama; McCain and Jon Kyl of Arizona; Charles Grassley of Iowa; Sam Brownback and Pat Roberts of Kansas; Mitch McConnell and Jim Bunning of Kentucky; Thad Cochran and Trent Lott of Mississippi; Chuck Hagel of Nebraska; John Ensign of Nevada; Judd Gregg of New Hampshire; James Inhofe and Tom Coburn of Oklahoma; James DeMint of South Carolina; Frist and Lamar Alexander of Tennessee and John Cornyn of Texas all voted right only 5 percent of the time. Put another way, of the 20 issues cited by the NAACP, they voted wrong 19 times.

The one issue they generally supported the NAACP on was reauthorizing the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Act. Most of them opposed the NAACP and sup-

ported the nominations of four far right judges — Janice Rogers Brown, William H. Pryor, Priscilla Owen and John Roberts — voted against increased funding for AIDS, rejected additional funds for low-income home energy assistance, voted against a successful amendment that preserved \$14 billion in Medicaid funding over five years and against a move to lift the minimum wage from \$5.15 an hour to \$7.25 an hour over 26 months.

The entire Congressional delegations in six states — Alaska, Idaho, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Oklahoma and Wyoming — earned Fs. If the A-votes of Bennie Thompson, the lone Black member of the Mississippi delegation, were excluded, the Magnolia state would also have an all-F lineup.

Only two states — Massachusetts and Rhode Island — produced delegations that earned all As.

The Report Card includes a list of what the NAACP calls its "legislative quarterbacks," defined as members of Congress that have "championed the NAACP's legislative priorities or by offering an NAACP-supported amendment during floor consideration."

This is where the NAACP dropped the ball.

Why "salute" Sens. "Norm" Coleman of Minnesota, John Ensign of Nevada, Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, Gordon Smith of Oregon and Representative Mike Castle

of Delaware, all of whom earned an "F" on the NAACP Report Card? Not only did they receive failing grades, none supported the NAACP's position more than 45 percent of the time; of 20 highlighted votes, Ensign voted against the NAACP 19 times.

They didn't carry the ball for Black America, they fumbled it.

The NAACP should be ashamed for sucking up to the enemies of civil rights by anointing them as quarterbacks. As the NAACP should know from rushing to the defense of Philadelphia Eagles Quarterback Donovan McNabb in a dispute with the president of the local NAACP chapter, a quarterback is a team's star player. He directs the team's offensive plays. The voting record of some of the NAACP's quarterbacks is offensive — and perhaps that accounts for the NAACP's confusion.

One piece of advice to the NAACP: If you're going to assign them a position on the gridiron, call them defensive linemen. Then, there would be no confusion about their wanting to prevent any forward progress.

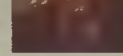
GEORGE E. CURRY is editor-in-chief of the National Newspaper Publishers Association News Service and BlackPressUSA.com. He appears on National Public Radio three times a week as part of "News and Notes with Ed Gordon."

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Alito causes strategy shift for blacks

The Republicans exhibited their power by successfully getting Judge Samuel Alito through the confirmation process. What does this mean for Black political strategies? I have argued in the past that the line-up of power in the government should occasionally cause Black leaders to shift tactics at the national level.



RON WALTERS

At this moment in history, it appears that the Supreme Court will not be as favorable to Black interests as it has in the past. In fact, its new conservative activists may legislate in a manner that changes the framework of civil and human rights substantially, stopping in its tracks the progress made and, in fact, making laws that support a version of White upper-class privilege. In that event, the major opportunities for corrective action lay in the Congress and the White House, both of which are subject to electoral participation.

With mid-term elections looming on the horizon that could change the complexion of the House and Senate, these elections take on a sense of urgency probably greater than other mid-term

elections in the past because of the clear and present danger now presented by the potential for negative action vested in this Supreme Court. Recent Gallup polling indicates the electorate is now shifting toward Democrats in their party preference, and other polls find that if the elections were held now, Democrats would stand a good chance of pulling the dramatic upset that Republicans did in the 1994 "revolution" in which they took control of the House and Senate.

The seeds of discontent are obviously the war in Iraq that is going badly, but other recent issues have contributed, such as: the deep cuts in the social budget featuring a \$13 billion whack in Pell Grants, lobbying scandals that have caught up several high-profile Republican leaders and now the revelation that the White House has been conducting an illegal, secret program that has spied on the American people.

So bad is it, that in Texas a recently released poll by the University of Houston shows that Rep. Tom Delay, the vaunted sheriff of the Republican party who is in the process of losing his position as House whip over his ethics scandal, has lost 50 percent of the political support in his district since 2004. This makes him vulnerable

to a challenge by Democrats.

This year, in some critical elections, blacks voting power could make a difference. The adjustment I would make is that because of the smaller number of competitive congressional district races, more emphasis needs to be put on statewide turnout that affects senate and gubernatorial elections.

A big turnout by Blacks in statewide elections where their population is significant could affect the results on my priority list, where there are both Senate and gubernatorial races such states as: Florida, Maryland, New York, and Texas. Then, there are Senate elections alone in Mississippi and New Jersey; and races for governor alone in Alabama, California, Michigan, Georgia, Illinois, and South Carolina.

Right now, the partisan difference in the U. S. Senate is 55 Republicans and 44 Democrats (one Democrat-leaning Independent), which is the reason that Democrats could not win on a straight party-line vote to block Judge Alito — or any other significant measure they choose.

So, Democrats need a shift of six seats. But in the House of Representatives, since there are 232 Republicans to 202 Democrats (one Democrat-leaning Independent) there needs to be a shift of at least 16 seats

in the House elections to give Democrats control. This is a much tougher task due, as suggested, to the fact that the number of competitive congressional districts has shrunk in the past two decades. Then, there are 28 Republican Governors and 22 Democrats and theatre needs to be a shift of seven for Democrats to gain control of most of the state houses. This is vital, since much of the policy initiative at the local level comes from state policy direction and resources.

No doubt, the black political infrastructure will gear-up for these elections, with both partisan and non-partisan organizations alike trying to turnout the vote. But the new reality is that, with the Supreme Court turning Rightward, black leaders prepare seek opportunities for change by shifting more toward effective strategies of electoral participation.

So, when they come around this year, you better be listening, real good, and preparing vote. But how they come around is beginning to matter more.

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