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## The Push for A Prescription Plan

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The battle over prescription drugs has been joined, in a manner of speaking, on Capitol Hill. Yesterday morning, the Republicans, led by House Speaker Dennis J. Hastert, marched to the east front steps and surrounded themselves with a brigade of seniors from the United Seniors who were arrayed in red caps and star-spangled kerchiefs. They applauded vigorously as Hastert announced his intention to push a prescription drug bill through the House by Memorial Day.

The chairman and chief executive of the United Seniors Association, Charles Jarvis, praised the Republicans for devising a plan that allowed the retired to keep the plans they already have and that would not force them into a "one-size-fits-all government program." Jarvis also praised the drug companies, whose advertising budgets, lobbying activities and CEOs' salaries have received bad notices elsewhere; he said they have shown great creativity in creating discount cards.

Response from the Democratic camp was swift and scornful. Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle invited House Democratic leader Dick Gephardt to a joint press conference where they dissected the Hastert initiative -- although they didn't have an alternative to present. It is, among other things, "a Trojan horse," according to Daschle, which would bring in all sorts of extraneous factors. Its reliance on private industry (under Medicare supervision) dooms it, Daschle said -- the private insurance companies have already vetoed the idea of playing a role.

Sen. Ted Kennedy, the whale in the ocean of Hill health care experts, was scathing in a statement he issued with uncommon speed:

"The House Republicans . . . offered platitudes rather than a realistic proposal that meets the needs of senior citizens. . . . Unfortunately, seniors may be better off purchasing a bus ticket to Canada than relying on this Republican proposal."

Prescription drugs have shot to the top of the charts in election-year politics. In some locales, medicine has elbowed out terrorism and the economy, which until the recent upward climb was supposed to carry the Democrats back home in both houses.

Sen. Max Cleland of Georgia, who is in a fierce fight for reelection, and targeted by the White House, gets the drug question in both town and country. How come, people want to know, drug companies are spending \$60 million on ads that nag people to nag their doctors for certain remedies that they can't afford to buy?

The Republican plan does nothing to reduce the price of drugs, says Rep. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), who periodically leads busloads of bargain-seeking constituents on the 14-hour round trip to Canadian pharmacies.

He points out that the savings are enormous. Take tamoxifen, for instance, which is prescribed for breast cancer. In the United States it costs \$300 for 180 10-milligram pills. In Canada tamoxifen can be had for \$29, a savings of \$271.

Brown says tamoxifen was developed at U.S. taxpayers' expense at the National Institutes of Health. "We are rewarded by exorbitant prices for it in our own country." He says his constituents are "puzzled by something as silly as a trip to another country to buy medicine instead of changing the law."

Right after the Daschle-Gephardt response came another prescription press conference. It drew a sizable audience in the Senate radio-TV gallery. The sensation was Sen. Zell Miller, the lordly former governor of Georgia who spends most of his time lecturing his fellow Democrats on their liberal follies -- their opposition to guns and tax cuts, which he says cost them the last election and will harm them again. But here was Miller standing up to approve a Democratic enterprise, shoulder to shoulder with Sen. Bob Graham of Florida, and co-author of a prescription drug bill. "The elderly people of this country have suffered too long," he said.

"Talk is cheap around this place," he went on dolefully, hinting at a reason for not enjoying the nation's capital as much as he thought he would and for his speaking longingly of the farm and the dogs he left behind in Georgia. He is so conservative that the members of the precarious majority of one are nervous around him, figuring he will bolt the party any minute.

The Graham-Miller initiative, which they contend is gap-free, has the blessing of the AARP. It has not yet been endorsed by the Democratic Caucus. Daschle, who is accustomed to the Republican charge that he would rather have the prescription drug issue than a prescription drug bill, says he wants to move a measure through the Senate that will bring relief and surcease from pain, for seniors.

The trick will be to knead the several demands and imperatives of members up for reelection and produce something that will be acceptable to Ted Kennedy as well as Zell Miller.

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