

Musical chairs at the White House

by Chris White

The wags were quick to point out that it was only those Presidents who had failed to get reelected who showed up at the White House on Sept. 14 for the signing ceremony of the job security and environmental side agreements to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Former Presidents Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon both stayed away.

A portent of things to come, perhaps? Actually, this kind of humor is only importing the old methods of the Kremlinologists — remember? Who stood where, and next to whom, in the reviewing line for this year's grand parade, and what should we all conclude from that? Surprisingly, less attention was given to the more interesting question of why it was that one less chair was provided by the White House staff than there were former Presidents plus Clinton to be seated. Was someone considered *de trop*?

The NAFTA signing ceremony kicks off Clinton's legislative campaign for the remainder of the congressional session. It is part of a double header. In the week of Sept. 20 comes the long-awaited Health Care Reform Plan. This is to be unveiled to the public, one can presume, to the accompaniment of the same kind of ceremonial goings-on, plus background briefings, plus dispatch of ranking and involved cabinet members to Congress, plus commandeering of the media, and so on.

Interesting it is, indeed, that the two programs which are supposed to be of such defining moment for the Clinton presidency should thus become linked. The President's fate will indeed be linked with what will now become his NAFTA agreement, and Hillary Clinton's health care plan. The media will surely be quick to tie his continued success to the "success" of the two programs. As usual it all comes out backward.

It is no exaggeration to say that if those two programs are passed, in any form, Clinton will join those unreelectable veterans of U.S. political life who provided the backdrop to

the signing ceremony, with as yet another failed former President. Defeat would possibly provide Clinton with another chance. But what about the country? Presidents come and go — they are supposed to; the country unified under the Constitution is supposed to remain. These two fall ventures of the Clinton administration could help put the final nail in the coffin.

Recipes for disaster

Both the programs proposed will make the problems they are supposed to deal with much, much worse. They do that because both assume what every other failed presidency of the past generation assumed, that the way to deal with current perceived crises is with more of the same poisonous brew that brought the crises into existence in the first place. So much for the fear of change, of replacing old ways of doing things. This was the specter Vice President Al Gore raised when he introduced the NAFTA side-agreement ceremony, and told everyone that this issue is much more than just a matter of Republican versus Democrat. Indeed, like the forthcoming health care reform, it is.

NAFTA is set fair, already, to become the name applied to all the accumulating failures in economic policy of the past years. Health care reform will rapidly become perceived as one of the biggest swindles ever perpetrated against the American people. And then, it will again be discovered, that those who vote because they agree with what the candidate before them might say, vote equally readily, next time around, against the foreseeable results of their own preferences. That's what happens when ignorance runs up against trickery and deceit, and ignorance doesn't have the brains to figure out that it's his propensity for self-deception which is the problem, not the huckster who sells him yet another re-labelled

bill of goods drawn out of the same shoddy inventory.

This is all reflected in the politics of the programs proposed. As Gore pointed out, it is more than just a problem of Republican versus Democrat.

What problem did Clinton run into with his timid stimulus package, and his budget? Bob Dole's Republicans. Which of the two parties has now emerged as the most solid proponents of the NAFTA agreement? Bob Dole's Republicans.

What does that mean for Hillary Clinton's health care blueprint? No one in their right mind would consider that the Republicans will not exact a price for their support for NAFTA. After all, the Democratic base of the minority President is in a shambles. House Leader Richard Gephardt (Mo.) is a defector from the NAFTA agreement. House Deputy Whip David Bonior (Mich.) has broken from it. The AFL-CIO joined Bonior and other congressional figures to oppose it. Sen. Max Baucus (D-Mont.) has warned that, even with Republican support, passage in the Senate is not assured. Next year is an election year. Why should the Republican faction carry water for Clinton. Only because the version of the health care plan which finally goes under the gavel for a vote will be something they also could accept.

Indeed, it is not Republican versus Democrat, if anyone still thought it was, no more than the NAFTA agreement is a trade agreement, or the health care reform plan is a health care reform plan.

What health care is really all about

Take the latter. Health care reform ought to take up the question of the provision of health care services. After World War II we had standards, laid down by Congress, which set parameters for education programs, construction programs, and much more. They were called the Hill-Burton standards, and roughed out national requirements in terms of people per doctor, hospital beds and nursing staff per person, programs for dealing with what was then still the chronic problem of tuberculosis, and others. The Hill-Burton standards were never met. The country is further from meeting them now than at any other time. TB is back, in new forms, and accompanies AIDS, threatening everyone. Anyone in their right mind would have to say we have a national health care breakdown.

That is not what "health care reform" is all about. Health care reform is about containing the financial costs associated with health care. Like everything else, we can't afford it. The cost of health care is killing us. Is that the problem? No. The problem is rampant usury and speculation in every aspect of national life, which loads parasitically and disproportionately onto health care, because the victim-host has no choice but to pay. The usury and speculation which are killing health care, through their effect on the financing of insurance programs, construction projects, and education, and through eliminating non-financially viable parts of the service, are also responsible for driving down wages and employment, such that where 40 years ago, one wage earner could support

a household with more than two children on one pay packet, now two earners, sometimes more, are needed to support less than two children. More than a 60% reduction in living standards in two generations, the bulk of the reduction in the last 10-15 years. No wonder we can't pay for health care or anything else.

Is that what they're talking about? Of course not.

'Affordable health insurance for all'

And here we go again; don't worry about the contents of the package, just look at the beautiful label. The fastest growing parts of federal expenditures include debt service, and Social Security and Medicare programs, otherwise known as entitlement programs. In the name of health care reform, we are going to get the destruction of the social welfare programs, such as they have become. What successive administrations have been unable to do in the name of "cutting" and "reforming" entitlement programs, is going to be implemented in the name of health care reform. And, look at the difference a name change makes. The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) is happy with what it has seen of the Clinton program so far, though it has opposed every other social program-busting attempt.

Medicare is going to be phased out, to be replaced with the new program. Health programs for the retired workers of major corporations, such as IBM and General Motors, are going to be taken over by the government; small businesses will contribute. Some \$90 billion is supposed to be "saved," for the purpose of deficit reduction over a period of five years. Costs of maintaining the elderly will be borne by all contributors, but not the corporations which have gutted the programs that were, earlier, set aside, and so on.

The plan is circulating in Congress. The Republicans, so far, are making supportive noises; they just want to emphasize that contributions will be "voluntary" and "individual," they want a broader attack on Social Security payments, and the retirement age raised from 55 to 62, to presumably thereby delay benefit payments seven years. And Americans are said to be 65% in favor of "health care reform." And, why wouldn't they be, given what we've got?

But like NAFTA, "health care reform" is the name for another multibillion-dollar looting swindle, combined with a covert government bailout of speculation bankrupt insurance companies and Fortune 500 management incompetence. This is the issue which, in Gore's words, goes beyond the traditional divisions between Republican and Democrat, and which ties both NAFTA and health care reform into the neat "his" and "her" bailout packages. They probably will be published with blue and pink covers. And, it is precisely the issue which dooms both as non-viable economically, and failures politically. It's tempting to wonder where the missing chair went. But what about the continued existence of the nation? Isn't that more important than perpetuating financial swindles, which will destroy everyone, in the name of change?