

In Sunday television interviews

Obama seeks to defuse opposition on healthcare, Afghanistan

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In a Sunday morning media blitz, Barack Obama appeared on interview programs on the three major television networks and two cable channels to discuss his proposed healthcare restructuring program as well as the escalating US war in Afghanistan.

The programs were taped back-to-back on Friday afternoon, with interviewers from ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN and the Spanish-language Univision queuing up at the White House. (The right-wing Fox television did not participate). The wall-to-wall appearances, unprecedented for a US president, were arranged by the Obama administration in response to growing public concern over its most important domestic and foreign policy initiatives.

As a political event, the interviews were shallow, uninformative and extremely repetitive. All the interviewers focused on the same three subjects—healthcare, Afghanistan, and the claim by former president Jimmy Carter that opposition to Obama is largely motivated by racism. Obama dismissed Carter's claim briefly, spoke extensively on healthcare and Afghanistan, and was hardly pressed by his deferential questioners.

In a sign of the vast social gulf between multi-millionaire television hosts and ordinary working people, none of the three network interviewers—George Stephanopoulos of ABC, David Gregory of NBC, and Bob Schieffer of CBS—asked Obama a single question about the economy and the rising toll of joblessness. John King of CNN, who did raise the subject, asked one question, accepted a perfunctory expression of concern and cautious optimism from Obama, and then moved on.

On healthcare, Obama sought to reassure working class and middle class families, as well as retirees, that their existing medical coverage would not be affected by legislation now going through Congress. He presented the

healthcare restructuring as a social advance that would expand coverage for the uninsured, downplaying his previous emphasis on cost-cutting, which is the real core of healthcare “reform.”

On ABC, for instance, he gave a list of four supposed principles of his healthcare agenda, starting with providing affordable health insurance for the uninsured as the first principle, followed by restrictions on insurance company practices that deny benefits to those already insured. Then he listed, in third and fourth place, “deficit neutrality” and “driving down our costs over the long-term.”

This shift in emphasis provoked the only aggressive questioning, as several of his interviewers pushed him to define what sacrifices he would impose on the American people. NBC's David Gregory asked, “What are the hard choices that you are now asking the American people to make? And who are you gonna say no to — in order to get health care done?” Obama made an answer that largely avoided the question.

On ABC, he claimed that among his “core principles” was that healthcare reform had to be good for “middle class families” who “have seen a doubling of their premiums over the last decade.” Despite being repeatedly asked by George Stephanopoulos about slashing spending for Medicare, Obama refused to even use the word “cut” to describe any aspect of his policies.

This evasiveness is clearly driven by political considerations, as Obama and his advisers have concluded that constant references to cost-cutting, particularly in Medicare, have raised alarm bells among wide layers of working people and the retired. As a result, the only change in Medicare that Obama would agree to discuss in detail—and which he raised on his own in several of the

interviews—was repealing Medicare Advantage, the partial privatization of Medicare enacted under the Bush administration, which provides nearly \$18 billion a year in subsidies to insurance company profits.

The other specific on healthcare that Obama raised in the interviews was his support for the individual mandate—a requirement that every person in the United States must purchase health insurance. This provision, backed by fines on those who fail to do so, expresses the reactionary basis of the Obama healthcare reform, which is subordinated to the profit interests of the giant healthcare, drug and insurance companies.

Instead of establishing health care as a basic right to which every person is entitled as a social necessity, the individual mandate would compel all Americans under the age of 65 to pay tribute to private, profit-making insurance companies, unless they are so poor that they qualify for the Medicaid program.

In his CNN interview, Obama underscored his fundamentally right-wing social outlook, in response to a question about the hysterical claims that he advocates a “government takeover” of healthcare. Obama said, “You know, I’m amused. I can’t tell you how many foreign leaders who are heads of center-right governments say to me, I don’t understand why people would call you socialist, in my country, you’d be considered a conservative.”

On Afghanistan, the other major topic of the interviews, Obama gave a glimpse of the internal disputes raging in Washington over the clear failure of the eight-year effort by American imperialism to establish a stable puppet regime. These divisions have been exacerbated by the sharp shift in public opinion over the past few months against the war in Afghanistan.

Obama went out of his way to rebuff suggestions that a further increase in American troop strength, on top of the 21,000 additional troops sent this year, was inevitable, presenting that decision as still an open question. He claimed that the 21,000 troops had been sent “to make sure that we could secure the election” in Afghanistan, which was held August 20 and has proven to be a debacle, with widespread evidence of fraud by officials working for the incumbent president, Hamid Karzai.

He even claimed that his goal was to “narrow” the scope of US objectives in Afghanistan and guard against “mission-creep.” In his NBC interview, Obama remarked, “I don’t have a deadline for withdrawal. But I’m certainly not somebody who believes in indefinite occupations of other countries.”

On CNN, he was asked whether the White House had told General Stanley McChrystal, the theater commander in Afghanistan, to hold back any request for troops, as CNN had reported earlier in the weekend. Obama denied this, as well as a suggestion that Karzai had stolen the presidential election. “How much fraud took place and whether that had a substantial effect on the results of the election, I think that is something that we’re going to have to wait and see in the next few weeks,” he replied.

There have been other press reports suggesting a conflict between McChrystal and the White House over the proposal for additional troops. McClatchy news service reported Friday evening that “conflicting messages” from the administration “are drawing increasing ire from US commanders in Afghanistan and frustrating military leaders.”

“Three officers at the Pentagon and in Kabul told McClatchy that the McChrystal they know would resign before he’d stand behind a faltering policy that he thought would endanger his forces or the strategy,” the news service reported. “Dithering is just as destructive as 10 car bombs,” one unnamed US official in Afghanistan told McClatchy.

The reports of conflicts between the military and the White House have led to demands by congressional Republican leaders that General McChrystal return to Washington and testify publicly before House and Senate committees, on the model of the public appearances by General David Petraeus two years ago, that led to the collapse of any pretense of Democratic congressional opposition to the war in Iraq.



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