

OPINION

THE BATTALION

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A drug plan for none

Prescription plan falls short in giving senior citizens the help they deserve

Proposed bill steals from those who worked for what they have earned



JONATHAN STEED

For nearly a decade, senior citizens have waited to get a prescription drug benefit under Medicare. Politicians have made promise after promise telling them that help is coming. The House of Representatives approved a \$400 billion bill on Saturday to restructure Medicare and add a prescription drug benefit, and on Monday, the bill's road to passage in the senate was cleared. Although this seems to be a step in the right direction, the legislation does little to alleviate the burden placed on older Americans throughout the United States involving their prescription medications.

This bill is incapable of giving senior citizens the innate right to prescription drugs they deserve.

Many senior citizens throughout America live on a fixed income. Some rely on government programs such as Social Security for their livelihood. While Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal meant to ensure financial stability for the most vulnerable in society, it never foresaw ridiculous drug prices or other price gouging taking place in the United States. Thus, more of the income senior citizens live on is being spent on prescription drugs since costs are skyrocketing out of control.

For most older Americans, prescription drug use is not a choice of luxury: It is an issue of life and death. Scientific and medical technology has created an opportunity to prolong the lives of millions of people in the United States and throughout the world. Medication that lowers high blood pressure to medication that relieves arthritis pain should be available to every person who needs it. However, as drug prices continue to increase, senior citizens often have to make difficult choices.

The choice can come down to taking needed medication and eating a meal or paying an electricity bill. The situation has become so bad for senior citizens throughout America that some split their pills in half to cut down on prescription drug costs and make their medication last longer. This must stop. Senior citizens have made America what it is today. They are the ones who fought bravely on the beaches of Normandy during World War II. The "Greatest Generation" are the folks who built the infrastructure, the economy and the basic values that define America. To tell these men and women that they are not entitled to the medication they need for medical reasons is nothing more than a slap in the face. It is a slap in the face to the veterans who proudly served America in uniform. It is a slap in the face to the workers who literally built the United States into an economic superpower. It is a slap in the face to the teachers who educated generations of young Americans to provide great opportunity for all citizens. No older American should be denied the prescription drugs he needs to stay healthy and alive.

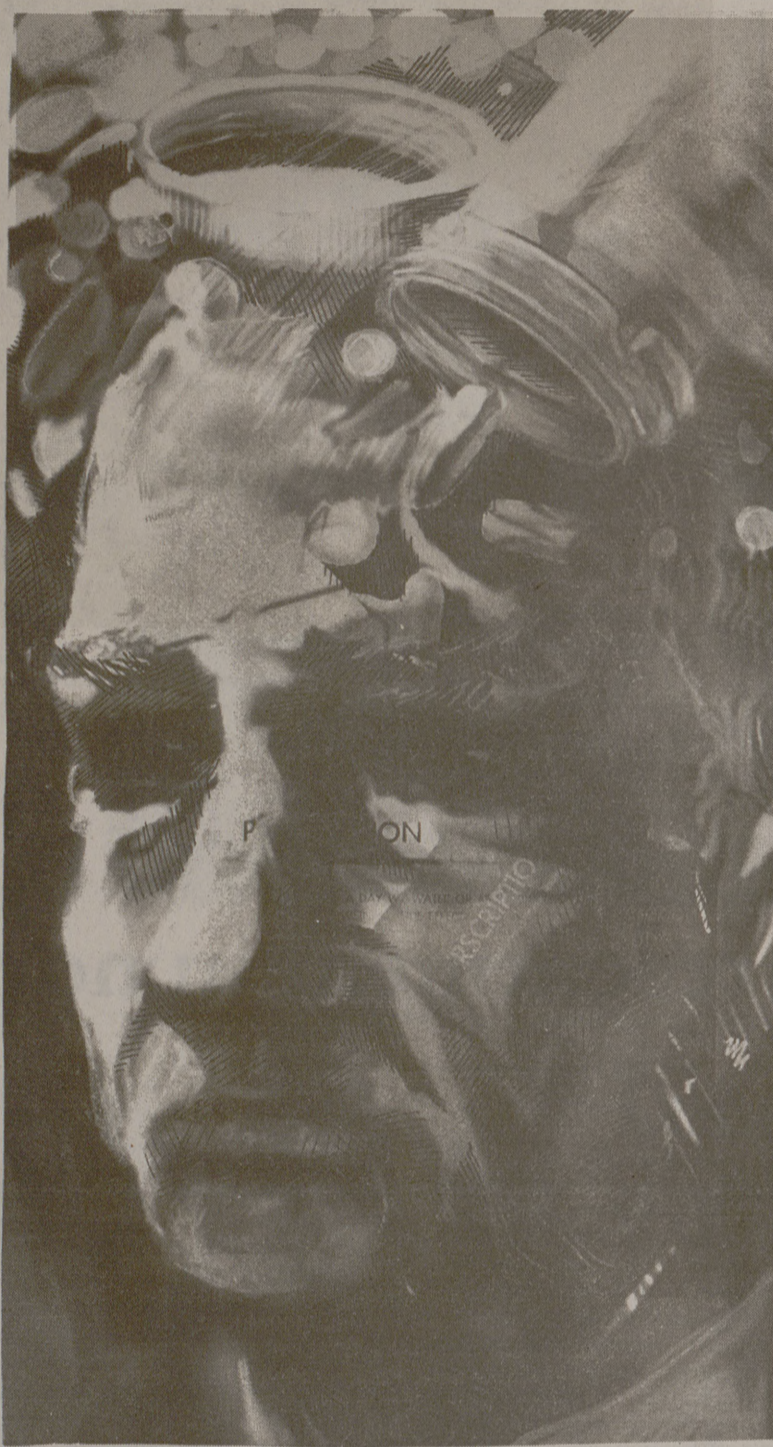
Unfortunately, many older Americans can't afford prescription drugs on their own. The pharmaceutical drug companies are making large profits off outrageous drug prices in the American free market. Many senior citizens go to Canada or Mexico where they can purchase the same medication for a fraction of the cost they would pay in the United States. Since the pharmaceutical industry refuses to lower its prices, and in fact has fought every attempt to lower drug costs or allow generic drugs into the marketplace, the government must be proactive in providing relief to senior citizens.

This is where things become tricky. While the House of Representatives passed a so-called prescription drug benefit under Medicare this past weekend, the bill is nothing more than a giveaway to the big pharmaceutical companies, insurance companies and HMOs.

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., points out that the legislation will dismantle Medicare as it is known today by allowing private insurance companies to compete with the government-funded Medicare program in covering senior citizens' health care and drug costs. In some ways, the new bill is perhaps the biggest gift to the pharmaceutical industry the Republicans could possibly give. Corporate CEOs and others can now celebrate in their high-rise offices at the success of their lobbying efforts in Congress at passing a sham bill. Yet while they celebrate, senior citizens are being denied a real, honest prescription drug benefit under Medicare.

Some might argue that a prescription drug benefit is too expensive or that it isn't the government's role to provide drug relief to its citizens.

However, the federal government's ability to lower drug prices shouldn't be looked at as an antagonistic welfare program, but rather as a helpful government safety net for those who can't afford needed medications. Surely providing prescription drug relief to the Greatest Generation is the least we can do for those who have given the United States so much.



PAUL WILSON • THE BATTALION



MATT MADDOX

Monday's near passage of a bill to add prescription drug coverage to Medicare raised an interesting question: At what age is it ethically right to steal from someone else? The \$400 billion Medicare bill will be one of the greatest thefts perpetrated in American history, guaranteeing that today's college student will spend an even greater percentage of his adult life working to pay government taxes. Republicans and Democrats alike deserve the blame, but so do the apathetic non-voters of generation X that allow the politicians in Washington to sneak out of the back window with their freedom and economic prosperity.

A basic tenet of economics is that "there is no free lunch." This is just as true with prescription drug costs, where if the users of the drugs are not footing the bill, someone else is. This cost will be paid by working Americans, the majority of whom are too young to be eligible for Medicare. Even senior citizens will not be immune to the higher cost of living that will accompany such a government subsidy. With Medicare already hanging precariously above bankruptcy, expanding the troubled program is asking for failure.

Explosive costs are nothing new to government-provided healthcare. The original Medicare program signed into law in 1965, estimated that it would only cost \$9 billion to operate in 1990. In actuality, Medicare cost \$65 billion in 1990. According to the office of Texas doctor and Rep. Ron Paul, the cost on the proposed program is likely to approach \$4 trillion over the next 10 years. With the ever-growing number of individuals eligible for Medicare due to the baby boomer generation aging, the program will only get more expensive.

Supporters of the prescription drug coverage bill claim that the current situation of Medicare is a crisis that, if not resolved, will hurt older Americans. It should come as some surprise then, according to The Washington Post, that a 2002 government survey of Medicare users found only 4.2 percent thought that getting their needed prescription drugs was a "big problem." Meanwhile, the program will force senior citizens already providing for their health care in another way into the government program. According to The Washington Post article, in 1999 nearly 30 percent of retirees had coverage from a previous employer. Another 20 percent had coverage through Veteran's Affairs or Medicare. Twenty-five percent more had insurance and, for the very poor, pharmaceutical companies provide free or heavily discounted drugs. With the prescription drug program in place, there will be little reason for employers to continue to provide the benefits to their former employees or for individuals to pay for insurance.

The most confusing part about the issue of prescription drug coverage is understanding the motivations of the parties involved. Republicans, the party once opposed to socialized medicine such as "Hillary Care," have switched sides to pick up votes as the presidential campaign season heats up. The American Association of Retired Persons, the largest lobby in Washington, D.C., favors the bill. Also, older Americans are the most active voting demographic in the country. Republicans, including President George W. Bush, have seized this as an opportunity to advance their party while abandoning the principle of limited government. This has left conservatives angered. Congressman Mike Pence summed up the feeling on the House floor last week. "I did not come to Washington to create entitlements," he said.

Democrats, traditionally the party of big government and welfare programs, are torn on how to respond to the Republican effort. Liberals in the party tend to favor the bill as it indeed takes the country down the path of socialized medicine. On the other hand, Democrat party leaders have attempted to block the bill, fearing it would give Republicans an advantage with voting older Americans.

Republican and Democratic party leaders have attempted to justify their unusual positions by claiming that the bill privatizes Medicare. A small provision within the bill does make an attempt at allowing for private competition in the future, but that is negligible compared to the real reason behind either groups' stance.

Older Americans must realize that this program will only help a handful of their peers at everyone else's expense. Young people, especially those earning a higher education for a better job, should realize that they will be the ones paying for this legislation for the entirety of their careers. Until this generation makes itself a voting constituency to be reckoned with, the portion of older Americans that feels that it is entitled to others' income will not have to steal it. Politicians will do that for them.

Jonathan Steed is a senior political science major.

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MAIL CALL

Elephant Walk reporting unclear

In response to Jenna Jones' Nov. 24 article:

The class of 1926 took a walk around the campus as freshman in 1922 to muster spirit for a struggling football team. In the fall of 1925, the senior class of 1926 took a walk around campus to remember the times they spent at A&M.

Every year since Elephant Walk has been held before the University of Texas game, regardless of where the game is held.

The senior class did not vote to change the time that the senior class gift was announced; that was decided by the Class of 2004 Council. The vote last fall determined what the gift would be. Traditionally, students voted on the gift in the spring of their senior year and it was announced at Ring Dance. We have now changed the practice so that students vote in spring of our junior year and will announce it at Elephant Walk so the

senior class can begin the preparations while still students.

Seniors should be at Kyle Field at 12:45 p.m. for their picture and speaker; their walk begins at 2:04. Juniors should be at Law/Purvey Field at 2:05 p.m., and their picture and speaker begins at 2:45 p.m. at Kyle Field.

Hayley Henderson
Jr. E-Walk Director
Class of 2005

Race and color are not synonymous

Whenever the issue of diversity is discussed someone will inevitably make a comment like, "diversity is more than race." As true as that is, please realize that race itself is more than skin color. A person's race reflects his heritage and history and also has a lot to do with his culture values, beliefs, etc. Anyone who does not believe this should take a course in world history next semester or go to the library and read a couple of books. If you refuse

to do this, then I ask that you leave this University; ignorance and refusal to learn is not what being an Aggie is.

Cody Sain
Class 2006

Diversity does not exist at Texas A&M

The question many of us should be asking is what are the reasons for the lack in visibility of the diverse groups on campus? Once students with different opinions, backgrounds and cultures feel as though they can truly coexist and be vocal on this campus, diversity will be a reality. Diversity is not simply a spreadsheet representing the racial and ethnic makeup of the campus. An area is not diverse based solely on its diverse makeup, but by the contributions that its diverse members make to the community as a whole.

The reason many of us have become so jaded by the word diversity is because of the way in which we have transformed a state of

being into a holiday. Diversity is more than the various table displays at MSC Open House or those seemingly random cultural events that are celebrated at Rudder Fountain. These once-a-semester events make it appear as though a person is only Jewish for the week of Hanukkah, black in the month of February, gay for Pride Week and a Republican only on Election Day.

The Aggie community must become active participants on campus and speak about issues of diversity on a daily basis. When prospective students see that this

campus is a haven for discussion among all Aggies, students of all backgrounds will feel welcome to attend Texas A&M.

Chris Carter
Class of 2001

The Battalion encourages letters to the editor. Letters must be 200 words or less and include the author's name, class and phone number. The opinion editor reserves the right to edit letters for length, style and accuracy. Letters may be submitted in person at 014 Reed McDonald with a valid student ID. Letters also may be mailed to: 014 Reed McDonald, MS 1111, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843-1111. Fax: (979) 845-2647 Email: mailcall@thebattalion.net

