

Debate reflects ongoing struggles for Democrats

Steven Thomma
Knight Ridder Newspapers

COLUMBIA, S.C. (KRT) — For half a century, the call to provide health care to all Americans has energized and united Democrats. But for half an hour this weekend, leading Democrats were reminded how much the details still divide them.

Rivals for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination used a Saturday night debate to launch a withering assault on Missouri Rep. Richard Gephardt's ambitious proposal for universal health care. Their main complaint: that Gephardt would finance the plan by repealing President Bush's tax cuts.

The barrage was in part about jockeying for position in the nomination fight. But it also was a reflection of how the party continues to struggle for a way to sell an essentially liberal New Deal-like idea in a conservative post-Reagan world.

Until Democrats find a way, they will have difficulty winning the moderate swing voters they need to retake the White House and also enact the dream of every Democrat since Harry Truman to provide health care to every American.

Gephardt believes he has found the way. His plan builds on the existing health care system of employer-provided health insurance and avoids the big government bureaucracy that doomed the plan proposed a decade

ago by Bill and Hillary Clinton.

To pay for it, Gephardt would essentially trade tax cuts. He would take away President Bush's tax cuts and grant new tax credits to businesses to offset their cost of providing insurance to their employees.

"If you like George Bush's tax cuts, stick with him, vote for him," Gephardt said in the debate.

"But if you want to finally solve this problem that's bedeviled our people for a hundred years, let's get it done. Let's get everybody in this country covered with good health insurance."

Demonstrating that his proposal is dominating the Democrats' debate — and helping to propel his campaign — major competitors lined up to attack.

One was Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina, who trades tough childhood stories with Gephardt as each strives to be seen by working-class voters as one of them.

Edwards accused Gephardt of betraying his class to benefit big business.

"That's taking money that people desperately need and giving it to ... the very people that we've had trouble with. We've had an enormous problem with the corporate culture in America," Edwards said. "It feels like saying you're in good hands with Enron."

Edwards added that repealing Bush's 2001 tax cut would raise taxes on more than just the wealthy — a rallying cry for many liberal Democrats. It also would repeal cuts that benefit

working-class people, Edwards said, including reduced tax rates on lower incomes and an increase in the tax credit for families with children. A family of four making \$40,000 would get an \$800 tax increase from Gephardt's plan, Edwards said.

Sen. Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut launched a broader attack, noting that the "big government" ideas that the party pushed successfully in the 1930s and the 1960s are now anathema to a nation with far less faith in expensive government solutions.

"This campaign presents our party again with a choice about whether we want to go backward to deal with our nation's problems like the terrible gap in health insurance for 41 million Americans, or whether we want to go forward with new ideas," Lieberman said. "We are not going to solve these problems with the kind of big-spending Democratic ideas of the past."

"And we can't afford them."

But any immediate political effect on Gephardt could be fleeting. For one thing, he might have been helped rather than hurt by appearing to be the only Democrat with a plan. Also, he has time to modify his plan. And others will soon add their own health care proposals; Kerry plans to unveil his plan within two weeks.

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News briefs

Fallujah remains tense after grenade attack

FALLUJAH, Iraq — Tensions remained high but hostilities were seemingly on hold Sunday in Fallujah, the city west of Baghdad where U.S. soldiers and Iraqis have clashed in recent days.

Many Republican Guards and other beneficiaries of Saddam Hussein hail from the city of about 200,000 people. U.S. soldiers continue to patrol streets and rooftops investigating "specific" threats against them three days after a grenade attack on a U.S. Army compound that residents identified as Baath Party headquarters. That came after soldiers fired at anti-American demonstrators.

But calm prevailed as local leaders and the U.S. military discussed how to patrol and protect vital places such as police and electric stations without offending local customs.

Sheik Mohamed Hamid Al-Shihan, a local tribal chief who said he spoke for about 2,000 people, said soldiers had offended residents by giving gum to children with wrappers that included pictures of naked women.

Taha Bedaiwi al-Alwani, governor of Fallujah, said that things had stabilized and that he and U.S. forces agreed that electricity issues are one of the first priorities.

"Our intention is to downgrade," said 1st Lt. Brent Andrew of North Kingston, R.I., executive officer of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment. "It's been peaceful overnight, but tense."

His boss, Capt. Mike Reidmuller of Fox Troop, 2nd Squadron, 3rd Ar-

mored Cavalry Regiment, said soldiers were trying to work with residents to stabilize tensions and make the city safe. A curfew was imposed, for example, but altered to end at 4 a.m. to allow for early morning prayers, he said. But, he added, "In cases where people direct hostile intent toward us, we will return and aim lethal fire."

—Maureen Fan,
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

Bush may scrap HUD voucher program

WASHINGTON — Lost amid the debates over President Bush's tax cut and his plan to revamp Medicare is an attempt to reshape the key program that provides housing assistance to the poor.

The administration wants to change Section 8 from a program that gives rent vouchers to nearly 2 million low-income families to a system of block grants that states would control.

With between \$1 billion and \$2 billion worth of vouchers lost annually to fraud and mismanagement, administration officials argue that Section 8 needs an overhaul.

"It's obviously not at the level we think it should be, if you're losing a billion dollars," said Donna White, a spokeswoman for the Department of Housing and Urban Development. "States would have the flexibility to tailor it to meet local needs."

But the administration is meeting stiff resistance from housing activists and state and local housing officials. Opponents argue that federal block grants are usually either "flat-funded" from year to year or increased by just minimal amounts, leading eventually to cutbacks in services.

Kim Schaffer, a spokeswoman for the National Low Income Housing Coalition, said that could force states to issue fewer vouchers, require the poor to pay rent, or serve people with higher incomes.

Under Section 8, which began during the Nixon administration, the federal government subsidizes private landlords to provide low-cost housing for poor families and other people on fixed incomes, such as the elderly and the disabled. Local housing authorities issue vouchers to qualified renters who pay no more than 30 percent of their income. The government pays the balance.

Section 8 advocates fear that the administration might put a time limit on how long families could live in publicly assisted housing, as they have put limits on welfare.

Opposition is broader than just housing activists and Section 8 managers. The National Association of Realtors and a half dozen other real estate and housing groups also oppose the plan, saying Section 8 "has become the cornerstone of federal affordable housing policy."

And opposition has emerged among Republicans in Congress, as well. Sens. John Warner and George Allen of Virginia have written a letter against the plan signed by 42 colleagues. And Republican Sen. Kit Bond of Missouri, who heads the Senate Appropriations subcommittee that oversees the HUD budget, said his experience as Missouri's governor taught him to be leery of federal block grants.

"Once you set up a block grant program, it never grows," he said.

—David Goldstein,
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

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