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METRO SECTIONS



Bloody fools on health care

To be completely honest, I wasn't focused. Whenever Sen. Bob Dole appears on my TV screen, with his Chernobyl P.R. Man smile and all that eyebrow action, my first thought is, "Damn, this guy's scary."

Then, no matter what Dole is saying, my eyes begin to glaze over. That's exactly where I was the night Dole gave the Republican response to President Clinton's State of the Union Address. Fading, glazed. And then, on the edge of sleep, I heard Dole say something about a chart drawn up by his colleague, Sen. Arlen Specter of Philadelphia.

The idea of Bob and Arlen putting their heads together, while frightening, was at least intriguing. So I sat up and tried to focus on the chart as Dole walked over to it.

All I could make out at first was a maze of lines and boxes, and I found myself wondering if Arlen had accidentally turned in a schematic diagram of the circuitry on his toaster.

But as I looked closer, and saw dozens of little boxes all connected to a bigger box, another thought occurred. Arlen was showing us how the various chapters of the National Rifle Association pour money into his political campaigns.

But why? It didn't make sense. And then I began to catch on.

Arlen had whipped up an Eagle Scout decoder chart, ostensibly to suggest that President Clinton's health-care plan is a big hairy mess, although I'm not sure how clean a plan for 250 million people can look.

The GOP and little me

After droning on awhile, Dole suddenly bent at the waist — I thought he was falling asleep, too — and waved at the bottom rows of boxes.

"You and I are down here somewhere," he said.

It was like an episode of Mr. Rogers, boys and girls. But I looked real

close, and sure enough. I saw myself in the second row from the bottom, buying a bottle of Pepto-Bismol at an AM-PM Minimart. Arlen Specter was a couple of boxes over, trying to sell an NRA membership to a gunman who was holding up a drugstore.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized how much brainpower went into the chart. And so, through the Freedom of Information Act, I got a transcript of the meeting that led to its development.

Dole: I've got it. We'll use a prop.

Jesse Helms: Let's draw up a chart, like that rabbit fellow, Ross Perot.

Orrin Hatch: It's uncomfortable for me to bring up, but I think we should draw a lot of breasts and penises.

Dole: I think Jesse's choking.

Alan Simpson: I know it's odd, but I feel an attraction to Anita Hill.

Strom Thurmond: My hair doesn't look like Orange Crush, does it?

Jesse Helms: As far as I'm concerned, there is no health-care crisis.

Orrin Hatch: Let's go with that.

Dole: Fine. Does anybody actually know anything about health care?

Arlen: I was just in the hospital.

Dole: Show of hands, boys? Good. It's unanimous.

A funny people, the Republicans.

Clinton's plan may need some work — and some trimming — but that's the point. It's a plan.

A party without a care

The Republicans, 12 years in power, never saw the need for one. As a result, medical fees are astronomical, 30 million people have no health insurance, and millions more struggle to pay for policies that give them few choices and many risks.

But in their defense, there's a good reason Dole and Specter are completely out of touch. Thanks to your tax dollars, they have a health plan that's so good, it's hard to imagine there could be a health-care crisis.

When Specter was ill last year, and didn't agree with the medical diagnosis, he was able to virtually order up the costly diagnostic procedure that detected a brain tumor and may have saved his life.

And now, after a career in which he's been almost invisible on health care, one of Specter's aides draws up what could just as easily be the management flow chart at a Taco Bell, and Arlen's a national hero.

I called his office and was told that 10,000 people have requested copies of the chart. Laminated, it makes a nice placemat. Or maybe people plan to enlarge it and look for themselves in the bottom rows.

Specter's office was nice enough to fax me my own copy. I put a magnifying glass to it — all those lines emanating from a single location, all those sharp turns and angles — and that was when it hit me.

The motorcade. The crowd. Lee Harvey Oswald. JFK.

It's Arlen's magic bullet chart.