

Joe Scarborough Is Shocked, Yet Awed by Single-Payer Logic by Leslie Savan

Something rather remarkable happened on Tuesday's *Morning Joe*. Rep. Anthony Weiner of New York pointed out that the health insurance industry has no clothes, and Joe Scarborough, after first trying to spin it some gossamer threads, broke down and said, By God, you're right, this emperor *is* a naked money-making machine!

Well, he didn't use those exact words, but Joe did seem to finally get that America has granted insurance companies the right to create bottlenecks in the financing of health care in order to extract profits out of the suffering of ordinary people--without providing any actual health care whatsoever.

"Why are we paying profits for insurance companies?" Weiner asked Scarborough. "Why are we paying overhead for insurance companies? Why," he asked, bringing it all home, "are we paying for their TV commercials?"

Weiner, who recently warned that President Obama could lose as many as 100 votes on a health bill if a public option is not included, really wants single payer--Medicare for all Americans is his goal. What a crazy, way-out, reckless notion, Joe went into their encounter believing. But Weiner asked some simple, direct questions that no politician, much less Obama or HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, has managed to pose:

What is an insurance company? They don't do a single check-up. They don't do a single exam, they don't perform an operation. Medicare has a 4 percent overhead rate. The real question is why do we have a private plan?

"It sounds like you're saying you think there is no need for us to have private insurance in health care," Joe asked at one point.

Weiner replied: "I've asked you three times. What is their value? What are they bringing to the deal?"

Scraping the bottom of a seemingly bottomless pit of spin, Joe is repeatedly left speechless, "stunned" and "astounded," he said, by the questions themselves. Indeed, when confronted with unfettered capitalism's massive failures, the right usually has nothing to say. The "free market" is supposed to eternally grow, not crash under its own greed. They're left ideologically crippled.

But unlike, say, Lou Dobbs, who began [dobbering](#) when confronted with similarly direct argument for single-payer, Joe was able to take a deep breath and return from a break with his eyes opened.

He even repeated Weiner's points clearly: The government would take over only the "paying mechanism" of health care, not the doctors or their medical decisions

themselves. His ears perked up every time Weiner mentioned that the nonprofit Medicare spends 4 percent on overhead, while private insurers spend 30 percent.

And Joe, who has been criticizing mob rule at town halls, seemed to appreciate the way Weiner counters the fearmongering over Medicare: After decades of railing against the program's wasteful, "runaway" spending, Republicans have done a 180 and are now trying to [scare seniors](#) that the Democrats' proposed Medicare cuts will come directly from their medical care and not, as is actually proposed, from wasteful, stupid practices in the system--like, as Weiner mentions, putting people into a \$700-a-night hospital bed when all they really need, and often prefer, is a visit by a homecare attendant in the two-digit-a-day range.

Maybe the real turning point came when Weiner asked, "How does Wal-mart offer \$4 prescriptions?" Joe and co-host Mika Brzezinski looked as if they'd been thwacked by a hardback copy of *Atlas Shrugged*, and sat back to let the congressman explain it all to them:

They go to the pharmaceutical companies and say, "Listen, we have a giant buying pool here. You're going to give us a great deal."

Who's bigger than Wal-Mart? We are, the taxpayers. Do we do that? No. Because we have outsourced this to insurance companies who don't have necessarily as much incentive to keep those costs down because, frankly, they are getting a piece of the action.

Progressives tend to understand this stuff, but many conservatives won't trust such logic, especially in the abstract, which is how most Dems have been communicating. But Weiner, aware that if you can't visualize something it ain't going to stick, argued with a specific, familiar visual--that of a successful, supercapitalist, and, as [Mika might say](#), "real American" company. And suddenly, as the mote dropped from the MJ crew's eyes, Weiner went from "scaring American citizens," in Joe's words, to instant celeb.

"That was SO great!" said Mika, as she and Joe asked Anthony to please, please come back soon, this week if possible!

"You have succeeded in doing something that no one else has done on this show in two years," said Joe, his fists rapidly knocking the table in excitement. "You made me speechless. And you made me speechless because you so clearly came here and stated your position."

While maintaining that he and Weiner have "different worldviews," Joe nevertheless raved, "This is fascinating, and one of the problems with the president's message is that it's muddled." And, damn, that's true.

Could this episode herald a Single-Payer Awakening? Or is this just the thrill of logic running up Joe's leg, soon to be forgotten as corporate media try to undermine real reform of a system that feeds the nets millions in ad revenue? When the big mainstream players shouted in unison to prematurely declare the public option dead, I couldn't help but think: In the corporate media's total takeover of ideas, they, too, have a death panel--made up of three or four conglomerate owners and chaired by Rupert Murdoch--that will determine whether an idea lives or gets its plug pulled.

On Thursday, *Morning Joe* replayed Weiner's best hits, but Joe was occasionally dobbering himself, complaining that our health care problems come down to costs, costs, costs but "now all the President is talking about is a moral imperative." (Of course, Obama put morality on the table only yesterday; until then, he focused on costs, costs, costs.)

We'll see how far this relative openness to single-payer goes. In the meantime, though, the education of Joe Scarborough is, as always, a sight to behold: