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The Stigma Of The Unworthy Unhealthy

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There is something sublimely degrading about the beer bash President Donald Trump reportedly threw May 4 for House Republicans who passed his health care bill by the narrowest of partisan margins.

Start with the alleged host, who will say or do anything. By now it's apparent that the president is untethered to reality. If he were to be impeached, a compassionate chief justice might declare him incompetent to stand trial because he lacks the mental capacity to be responsible for his words or acts. But the Republicans who sniffed his musk last week aren't blissed by the clueless stupor his narcissism affords him. They're fearful of their constituents. No wonder that, of the 217 Congress members who voted his way, only two — one in Idaho, one in upstate New York — held district town halls this past weekend. They did not go at all well. When the rest of the cowering Republican conference is forced to face their voters, it will be similarly ugly.

They must be baffled by how devoid of mojo their old battle cries have become. "Jobs-killing Obamacare" packs no punch in an economy that's added more than 10 million jobs since the Affordable Care Act passed. "Disaster" and "death spiral" sound demented to someone who's gone from no insurance to comprehensive coverage. "Higher premiums, higher deductibles, higher co-pays" may in some cases be accurate, but for Americans long suffering from rising prices, the real news is the slowing of the rate of increase.

Republican capitulation to the Freedom Caucus' demand to torpedo Obamacare's coverage of pre-existing conditions has prompted hundreds of heartbreaking — and televised — stories of congenital defects, deadly tumors, chronic ailments, addictions and mental illnesses, whose long-term treatment was until recently made affordable by irrevocable insurance, but which now is slated for sacrifice in exchange for a trillion-dollar cut to Medicaid and a humongous tax cut for the wealthiest. Not only will those stories, juxtaposed with Rose Garden revelry, make for mercilessly effective ads in the coming midterm campaign; they also sound the death knell for the most toxic trope in the Republican rhetorical armory: the stigma of the unworthy unhealthy.

The label descends from the widespread distinction, as recent as a century ago, between the worthy and the unworthy poor. The worthy poor — widows, orphans, the blind — were indigent through no fault of their own, victims of random misfortune, life's vicissitudes, circumstances beyond their control. But the unworthy poor were the cause of their own impoverishment. Lazy, morally weak, addled by drink, gamblers: They had only themselves to blame. The worthy poor deserved charity; the unworthy, a kick in the pants.

The Depression altered the presumption that bootstrapping is the royal road to success. If there aren't any jobs, it doesn't matter how much moxie you have. From our common catastrophe came a new compact. Every person is worthy of basic human decency, a safety net to catch us, a freedom from want we pledge to one another. To secure it? Not the market, not inheritance, not the luck of our genes — the government. And so from Social Security to Medicare, unemployment insurance to food stamps, we committed public resources to promote the public good.

Universal health care was always the outlier in America — not just the notion that government should provide it, but the idea that it's an inalienable right. You could see that wariness, stoked by decades of propaganda, in a Wall Street Journal-Harris poll two years before Obama was elected. Asked whether unhealthy people should pay more for insurance, a majority of Americans — 53 percent — said yes. You can hear that same animus today in Alabama Republican Rep. Mo Brooks' defense of Trumpcare: "It will allow insurance companies to require people who have higher health costs to contribute more to the insurance pool that helps offset all

these costs, thereby reducing the cost to those people who lead good lives. They're healthy, they've done the things to keep their bodies healthy, and right now, those are the people who have done the things the right way that are seeing their costs skyrocketing."

"Moral hazard" is how economists describe the ability to evade the bad consequences of risky decisions. The Wall Street bailout, which prevented a global meltdown, absolved the banks of having hell to pay. I get why House Republicans almost sank it; it maddened me, too. To them, the ACA's passage two years later reprised that escape from accountability. It didn't penalize people enough for being addicted to nicotine, for consuming the sugar and fat marketed to them, for escaping a stressful day with a sedentary night.

The ACA has helped millions of Americans with illnesses unrelated to personal decisions get access to health care. At the same time, it established a no-fault policy for having made choices that are bad for you. Under current law, your right to treatment doesn't depend on how or why you became dependent on opioids or alcohol, or whether your high blood pressure or cholesterol might have been prevented by behavior change. All that counts is that you're seeking a path to health. We don't punish the sick for being unhealthy; life has done that enough. There are not the worthy unhealthy and the unworthy unhealthy. All there is is us.

This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me if you'd like at martyk@jewishjournal.com.