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John Thune: Hunk Hawks Hideous Health Care Bill

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John Thune is the most handsome man in the U.S. Senate. Square jawed, gleaming smile, cowboy tan, the 6'4" South Dakota Republican's rugged good looks are antipodal to the mien of majority leader Mitch McConnell, whom Jon Stewart has definitively established is Yertle the Turtle's doppelgänger. If the human brain's positive bias toward attractive people didn't cue me to infer that Thune is a great guy, a real straight shooter, I'd be as outraged by the assault on Americans' health that Thune and his co-conspirators are currently waging, and by the subversion of American democracy they're using to ram it through, as I am when its public face is McConnell's.

Thune is a member of the all-white, all-male "gang of 13" staunchly conservative Republicans whom McConnell tasked two months ago with secretly writing a new GOP health bill in the Senate.

Because a parliamentary tactic will embed this Affordable Care Act (ACA) repeal — and alleged replacement — into a budget reconciliation bill, it's exempt from being filibustered by Democrats. That means the bill will need only 50 of the 52 Republican senators, along with Vice President Mike Pence's tie-breaking vote, in order to pass, instead of the 60 votes it takes to shut down a filibuster, which would require at least eight Democrats to defect.

Because the House also must pass the bill with only Republican votes, it needs to be mean enough to win over the House's far right Freedom Caucus, "mean" being President Donald Trump's new description of the formerly "beautiful" House health bill he fêted in the Rose Garden in May. That's why the American Health Care Act (AHCA) that McConnell and House Speaker Paul Ryan want Trump's signature on before July 4 likely will deprive 23 million Americans of health insurance; end Obamacare's minimum benefits, like mental health services and maternity care; deny coverage for pre-existing conditions; permit lifetime benefit caps; cut \$800 billion from Medicare and turn it into block grants to states, effectively killing the program — oh, and give the top 0.1 percent of households an average tax cut of nearly \$200,000.

I say "likely," since the actual content of the bill has been shrouded in secrecy. Because a majority of Americans oppose those changes to a law that a majority of Americans support, McConnell knows that his only chance to pass it before the public catches on and rises up is a total blackout of information as they write the bill, which is what's happening now, and once they reveal it, a blitzkrieg without committee hearings or time for town halls, hurtling toward a final vote within a matter of hours.

This is not normal. It's not how a bill affecting one-fifth of our economy is supposed to be considered. McConnell's plan is to make it seem normal, which is why they're deploying the credibility of John Thune's chiseled cheekbones: to sell a coup d'état as if it were a Schoolhouse Rock! civics lesson.

The day after a gunman opened fire on a Republican congressional baseball practice, prompting calls to for a return to civil discourse in our politics, Thune was on MSNBC's Morning Joe saying we all must do our part to achieve the unity that this moment requires. Speaking of unity, journalist Mike Barnicle piped up, what about the health care bill being written in secret? "Nobody knows what's in this bill," Barnicle said. As a starter, he asked, in the spirit of reaching across the aisle, of bipartisanship and openness, "How about ... telling us what's in this bill?"

Thune's answer made me marvel that a man with such good hair could deceive so baldly.

There's really no bill to share, he said. What's going on now is just discussions, just policy options. It will be openly shared when it's reduced to legislative language, he said, as though that's just how the lawmaking process works.

It's not. Drafts of bills are routinely made public long before legislative language is locked in. They're distributed as outlines, memos, letters, emails, talking points, PowerPoints, lists, charts, conference calls, cut-and-pastes, works in progress, principles, summaries, overviews, abstracts. They're the basis for innumerable meetings with constituents, stakeholders, interest groups, media, members of both parties, think tanks, analysts and experts. That's American democracy in action. What's happening now is not.

Besides, Thune added, there's been so much discussion of health care over the past decade, "it's like any of us are unfamiliar with what the issues are." We've already discussed them.

The ACA was the subject of hundreds of committee hearings and markups, hundreds of hours of congressional debate, hundreds of town halls and public forums and two years of news coverage. But that discussion was about expanding Medicare, not eliminating it; about increasing benefits, not cutting them; about providing health insurance to millions, not giving tax cuts to millionaires. If the media were to give the AHCA's issues the kind of scrutiny and airtime it gave Obamacare, Republicans would now be running from it like a dumpster fire.

To be sure, John Thune would make one handsome fireman. But I doubt even he could convince his colleagues in Congress to bunk in a burning building.

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