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The issue: This past week, the Congressional Republican leadership, headed by Speaker Paul Ryan, presented the GOP's bill, the "American Health Care Act," which will replace the Affordable Health Care Act (a.k.a. Obamacare). As was expected, the bill has triggered a heated debate on the left and right alike. The bill has been passed by two House committees, and is expected to go to the House floor in two weeks or so after it is discussed by the Budget Committee. While it is likely that some Republicans will dissent, the bill's chances to garner a majority in the House remain quite good. Meanwhile, the fate of the bill looks more than uncertain in the Senate at the moment.

The background: A comprehensive discussion of the complex bill would be impossible in the framework of a short essay. The current analysis will concentrate on the political struggles between the Republicans and the Democrats, and within the Republican party as well. The traditionally conservative idea of promoting greater individual responsibility is the underlying philosophy of the bill. Nevertheless, the new bill creates a larger role for the state than traditional conservatism would typically approve: the new bill seems to be a continuation of the 'big state' concept introduced by the George W. Bush Administration. The professed goal of the new bill is to reduce insurance premiums, partly by generating more competition among the insurers, and to keep insured the roughly 20 million people who have been brought into the health care system by ObamaCare. The bill also aims to bring an additional 25 million Americans into the system. As Rep. Paul Ryan and others have pointed out, there is only one insurer in almost half of the states. In response, Republicans have advocated for enabling the insurance companies to operate across state borders. Moreover, the Republicans prefer giving citizens a tax credit on a sliding scale in order to assist them to take out insurance; the tax credit would start at \$2,000 per year for eligible people under 30 and would rise to \$4,000 for those over 60 years of age. The downside of this approach is that eligibility will not be means-tested, but will instead depend on age alone, failing to take individuals' financial situations into account. The bill would also end additional Medicaid funding in 2020. Altogether, it would reduce Medicaid costs by \$370 billion over the next few years. Another hotly debated issue is the defunding of Planned Parenthood. As early as 1976 the Hyde Amendment prohibited the use of federal money for abortion except for cases of incest or rape. Abortion rights and access to abortion is a key liberal issue and has figured as one of the main battles in the so-called cultural war between the conservatives and the liberals at least since the Roe v. Wade (1973) Supreme Court decision. The bill would also retain some elements of ObamaCare, including the provision that previous health condition should not be an excuse to deny health care coverage, and the provision that those under the age of 26 are covered under their parents' insurance. Overall, left-leaning think-tanks and researchers predict that some 7-15 million people will drop out of the health care system.

These issues evoked a furious response from the Democrats, who seem to be united to vote against any health care bill proposed by the Republicans. In fact, history would repeat itself to some extent: not one single Republican in the U.S. Congress supported Obamacare in 2010, and it is almost certain that no Democrat will vote for the current bill. In short, healthcare, like almost all other questions in the U.S. in the past few decades, has become over-politicized—a victim of partisan politics. From the legislative point of view, the Republicans might overcome the Democrats' unified opposition by pursuing a process of reconciliation in the Senate. Reconciliation may be applied, in accordance with the Congressional Budget Act, if and when the piece of legislation under consideration affects federal spending, revenues or the national debt. As Medicaid constitutes a huge chunk of the federal budget, Republicans might be able to make a strong argument for reconciliation. However, the Republican leaders in the Senate should be extremely circumspect, as under the Byrd Rule any senator can block the reconciliation process if any of the proposed bill's provisions does not change the budget. Overall, the Democratic Party's intransigent opposition to the new bill should not have come as a surprise for the Republicans.

From the point of view of the sponsors and supporters of the GOP bill, the real challenge may come from the Republican Party itself. Negative reactions by radical conservatives inside and outside of the party include Sen. Rand Paul's comment that the new proposal is simply 'Obamacare Lite.' Paul also predicted that the bill would be "dead on arrival" in the Senate. Sarah Palin, the former vice-presidential running mate of John McCain and an important leader among diehard conservatives, uttered the dreaded four-letter name for moderate Republicans when she declared that the bill is RINO (Republican In Name Only). Members of the Congressional Freedom Caucus (with strong Tea Party support) visited President Trump and tried to persuade him to endorse a more radical break with Obamacare. (For instance, to end additional Medicaid funding as early as 2018 instead of 2020.) Influential pressure groups including the Heritage Action, FreedomWorks, and the Club for Growth also expressed their dismay and opposition to the bill. The conservative Washington Times published an op-ed which claimed that the bill is 'self-destructive' for the Republican Party. In essence, the author of the article accused the sponsors of the bill of surrendering to the Chamber of Commerce and corporate lobbyists, and betraying the "Trump-revolution" in the process. Even more centrist Republican Senators advise caution, and pointedly suggest that there is no need to hurry. They seem to suggest that the current GOP bill needs further development. The suggestion itself is a devastating critique of the Republican Representatives and Senators alike. For about seven years, they have been unable to put together a coherent alternative healthcare bill. This fact reveals the deep fault lines within the GOP; it seems that no one really wanted to get burned with a proposal, any proposal—because healthcare reform is not only a "hot potato" but a "tar baby," too; taking the wrong stance on the issue can destroy political careers.

Donald J. Trump should muster all his skills as a negotiator to ensure a healthcare bill is passed—the sooner the better. The "repeal and replace" of ObamaCare was one of his signature issues during the campaign, but the fight over the bill is a reality check for President Trump. If he fails to unite the Republican Party behind a new healthcare bill, his time in the White House as a "lame duck" may come much earlier than it has for past presidents. However, there is very little that indicates so far that it is "business as usual" with Donald J. Trump in the White House.