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## **Bad Medicine**

**by Sheldon Richman**

Those who have been hungering for a real political debate in this country can't help but be deliriously overcome with the news that CBS's *60 Minutes* will feature 10 face-offs between former Democratic President Bill Clinton and former Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole. The history of political thought will never be the same.

Think of it: the maudlin advocate of the "third way" — that is, the middle ground between freedom and tyranny — will square off against the acerbic former senator who so richly earned the title "Tax Collector for the Welfare State." Now that's a debate the American people can get their teeth into.

I was about to ask what the CBS suits could have been thinking, but then I realized that this pairing exquisitely reflects the state of political debate in America today. Once people in this country argued over whether government should be big and pushy or small and demure. But those days are gone. Now the argument is over how you like your coercive meddling: direct or indirect. Either way, there will be coercive meddling by the ham-handed state. So Clinton and Dole are perfect representatives of the political views that dominate accepted thinking.

There are exceptions to this lineup, but roughly it goes like this: the Democrats' program has government providing things to people directly, while the Republicans' program has government subsidizing private companies to provide the same things. This is passes for black and white in the current scene. But as anyone with a moral sense should be able to see, these are colors barely distinguishable from each other.

A few examples: The Democrats want government to dispense schooling to the nation's children. They might like the federal government to do it, but they'll settle for the state and local governments, as long as from their Washington perches they can dictate what goes on in the classroom. If parents don't like it, they can lump it. The Republicans will have none of this. Under President Bush, state and local governments ladle out learning also under Washington's supervision, but if that's not satisfactory, he will let parents take their kids to other government

schools. He might even consider letting them move their kids to nongovernment schools brought to heel by government-controlled funding. This is called vouchers.

To us recalcitrants there is less difference here than meets the eye. In both cases, dispensers of the government money ultimately call the shots. The Republicans do it by an indirect route and call it “school choice.” But government is the death, not the fount, of choice. Real choice would let parents keep their money and buy education in the free market.

Another example is prescription-drug coverage for the elderly. The Democrats want to add it to Medicare. (I’d sooner bunk with a pit bull than believe their cost estimates.) The Bush Republicans will have none of this “socialized medicine.” Their plan would also offer drug discounts — bigger ones if the elderly go into private managed-care arrangements. They promise to spend less than the Democrats.

The distance between those two positions is an illusion. In both cases, the money would come from the taxpayers and be controlled by the bureaucrats. The Democrats would deal with the drug companies, the Republicans with the HMOs. Either way, strings will be attached and the medical marketplace will be further hampered from efficiently providing life-saving products and services.

The Democrats are honest. They say they want a monster government bureaucracy controlling drug prices and giving orders to the pharmaceutical industry. The administration is dishonest, or maybe just dumb. It wants to subsidize private medical plans, while telling us that this “free-enterprise approach” will control costs. But it is not a free-enterprise approach at all.

The Bush plan, like the Democrats’ alternative, still has government in the middle of the medical system. A bureaucracy will control the money. A bureaucracy will set the standards. A bureaucracy will enforce its expectations. When the plan doesn’t work — when costs skyrocket — there will be a clamor for more controls. This is far different from the free market, in which entrepreneurs prosper by satisfying consumers.

Whichever plan gets the nod, it’ll be bad medicine.

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