

Wrath of Seniors Hovers Over U.S. Medicare Debate

Nov. 21, 2003

Reuters

WASHINGTON D.C. - In the so-called Medicare "war room" deep in the U.S. Capitol, Democrats Friday night showed a 14-year-old videotape of enraged senior citizens in flowered shirts pounding on the car of one of the nation's most powerful lawmakers outside the Golden Diner Club in Chicago.

The lesson, they said, is that the fight over the mostly-Republican authored bill to add a drug benefit to Medicare and inject market competition won't be over until it's over. They predicted a backlash.

"Seniors know a bad deal when they see one," said Illinois Democrat Rep. Jan Schakowsky.

In 1988, Congress passed a law to cover "catastrophic" health expenses under Medicare, and to provide some assistance in paying for prescription drugs.

The politician in the car, Illinois Democrat Dan Rostenkowski, then the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, was a champion of the bill and maintained that people never properly understood it.

Within a few months, as senior citizens' outrage over its costs mounted, Congress took the unusual step of repealing most of the catastrophic legislation.

Medicare still does not cover prescription drugs and as lawmakers have wrestled for six years with how to fix that, the memories of the catastrophic fiasco have hovered above them.

That bill was different in several crucial respects to the drug benefit bill the House could vote on later Friday night or early Saturday.

The AARP, the nation's largest lobby for older people, endorsed the Medicare drug bill. Its director, Bill Novelli, defended that position, saying reports of member outrage are exaggerated. Only 1,000 to 1,500 people have resigned from the 35 million member organization, he said.

But Democrats, who have been pointing to the millions of dollars the AARP receives through its relationship with insurers, say they are being inundated with callers who say they are quitting the organization. In several states, older people have staged demonstrations to cut up their cards.

Liberal Democrats are not the only ones who remember that episode. "I'm voting no," said Arizona Republican Sen. John McCain. "I'm old enough to remember catastrophic."