

deal-making with the health care industry was the very integrity of reform. No less than the Republicans, Democratic critics believed that to compromise was to water down their principles. Had they insisted on purity, however, there likely would have been no health care bill at all. Though the House of Representatives managed to pass a bill with a weak version of the public option, without Republican support, Senate majority leader Harry Reid needed every Democrat on board, as well as independent senator Joe Lieberman of Connecticut. Lieberman tends to vote with the Democrats, but he made it clear that he would not support a public option, and the legislative effort to provide it died.¹²⁴

The political stakes were high for the actors, like the president, who stood to face a crippled agenda if he could not bring off the reform he had promised, and for the Republicans, who had sworn to bring Obama to his Waterloo over the issue. For the health care industry, the stakes were more substantive—how much would they have to give

away to keep reform within tolerable limits? The stakes for the American people were more substantive as well. For the uninsured and the uninsurable, the stakes were the difference between regular access to quality care and a patchwork of critical care cobbled together in emergency rooms and free clinics. For all Americans, the insured as well as the uninsured, the stakes were runaway health care costs that limit our ability to spend money on other necessities, or costs brought under control, with savings ultimately reducing the federal deficit. Those on the left and the right seem to believe that, by holding out, their side could have achieved all their goals, but the truth is that American politics is about compromise, and a health care reform proposal that didn't try to incorporate multiple views and goals was probably not going to be passed at all, especially given the tenuous nature of the Democratic majority in the Senate. What was at stake in bringing the industry groups to the table in the health care reform effort was the very fate of health care in America. Whether or not the reform was strong enough to improve it remains to be seen.