NYT COLUMNIST DAVID BROOKS: "THE COOPER CONCERNS"

Columnist recalls 1993 health care debate

By DAVID BROOKS

I'm not a Hillary-hater.
She's been an outstanding senator. She hung tough on Iraq through the dark days of 2005. In this campaign, she has soldiered on bravely even though she has most of the elected Democrats, news media and the educated class rooting against her.

But there are certain moments when her dark side emerges and threatens to undo the good she is trying to achieve. Her campaign tactics before the South Carolina primary were one such moment. Another, deeper in her past, involved Jim Cooper, a Democratic congressman from Tennessee.

Cooper is one of the most thoughtful, cordial and well-prepared members of the House. In 1992, he came up with a health care reform plan that would go on to attract wide, bipartisan support. A later version had 58 co-sponsors in the House - 26 Republicans and 32 Democrats. It was sponsored in the Senate by Democrat John Breaux and embraced by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, among others.

But unlike the plan Hillary Clinton came up with then, the Cooper plan did not include employer mandates to force universal coverage.

On June 15, 1993, Cooper met with Clinton to discuss their differences. Clinton was "ice cold" at the meeting, Cooper recalls. "It was the coldest reception of my life. I was excoriated."

Cooper told her that she was getting pulled too far to the left. He warned that her plan would never get through Congress. Clinton's response, Cooper now says, was: "We'll crush you. You'll wish you never mentioned this to me."

In the weeks and months following that meeting, the Clinton administration reached out to Cooper. As David Broder and Haynes Johnson wrote in "The System," their history of the health care reform effort, President Bill Clinton invited Cooper to go jogging and play golf. Others in the Clinton White House thought Cooper was right on the merits, and privately let him know.

But Hillary Clinton set up a war room to oppose Cooper, who was planning to run for the Senate in 1994. As the Broder and Johnson book makes clear, Clinton and her aides believed Cooper was pursuing his own political agenda. They accused him of crafting his plan in order to raise money from the insurance and hospital industries. They said he was in league with the for-profit hospitals to crush competitors and monopolize the industry. They did this despite the fact that Cooper's centrist health care approach was entirely consistent with his overall philosophy.

At one meeting in the West Wing, a source told Broder and Johnson, Clinton "kind of got this evil look and said, ‘We've got to do something about this Cooper bill. We've got to kill it before it goes any further.' "

Clinton denounced the Cooper plan as "dangerous and threatening." Deputies were dispatched to Tennessee to attack his plan. Senator Jay Rockefeller said that Cooper is "a real fraud. I hope he doesn't make it to this place." According to Newsweek, Clinton brought an aide with a video camera to a meeting with senators and asked the senators to denounce Cooper on the spot.

The Clinton effort backfired. It temporarily raised his profile back home. Her health care reform failed, too. She says she's learned the lessons from that failure, but she remains icy toward Cooper. Her health care memos, including a three-page memo drafted in preparation for her meeting with Cooper, have not been made public by the National Archives.

Moreover, the debate Clinton is having with Barack Obama echoes the debate she had with Cooper 15 years ago. The issue, once again, is over whether to use government to coerce people into getting coverage. The Clintonites argue that without coercion, there will be free-riders on the system.

They've got a point. But there are serious health care economists on both sides of the issue. And in the heat of battle, Clinton has turned the debate between universal coverage and universal access into a sort of philosophical holy grail, with a party of righteousness and a party of error. She's imposed Manichaean categories on a technical issue, just as she did a decade and half ago. And she's done it even though she hasn't answered legitimate questions about how she would enforce her universal coverage mandate.

Cooper, who, not surprisingly, supports Barack Obama, believes that Clinton hasn't changed. "Hillary's approach is so absolutist, draconian and intolerant, it means a replay of 1993."

He argues that her more coercive approach would once again be a political death knell. No Republican will support it. Red state Democrats will face impossible pressures at home. It's smarter to begin by offering people affordable access to coverage and evolve from there.

Cooper is, of course, a man who has been burned in the past. But it is legitimate to wonder if adults can really change all that much. A defter politician would have reached out to Cooper and made an attempt to address the concerns he represents.