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Op-Ed Columnist

Mitt Romney, Liberal Icon

By **GAIL COLLINS**

I need to apologize to Mitt Romney.

Here I was thinking of him as a failed politician with no discernible core values, who had once driven to Canada with the family dog strapped to the roof of the car.

But it's now becoming clear that he's the man we have to thank for our new national health care law.

"I mean, a lot of commentators have said this is sort of similar to the bill that Mitt Romney, the Republican governor and now presidential candidate, passed in Massachusetts," President Obama told Matt Lauer recently on the "Today" show.

Good work leading the way, Mitt!

We did not actually hear a whole lot about how Obama's health care bill was similar to Romney's during its long, torturous struggle through Congress. Particularly not during the parts that involved placating the Democratic left wing. Do you think Obama mentioned it during his Air Force One courtship of Dennis Kucinich? Possibly not.

But it really does seem as though the two plans are a whole lot alike, and Romney deserves

credit for working with the Massachusetts Democrats to get such an ambitious, sweeping reform enacted. However, since most of his party is currently crouched in the basement, waiting for the health care apocalypse to split the earth into smithereens, they're probably not going to be all that impressed.

The Republicans are dying for a disaster, and to be honest, even people who like the new law a lot have been worried that something really strange might be hidden in 2,000 pages of verbiage. (Did you know somebody stuck financing for abstinence education in there?)

This week there was an alarming report that AT&T was going to have to reduce its long-term profit estimates by about \$1 billion because of the new law — or, as the House minority leader, John Boehner, put it, the newly enacted “job-killing tax increases.” The AT&T charge was for accounting purposes, which is not as much real money as currency-based theology. But still, it did sound bad.

It turned out that the \$1 billion goes back to the famous 2003 Medicare prescription drug entitlement passed by a Republican-controlled Congress and paid for through their innovative pretend-it's-not-there financing system.

In order to keep businesses from ending their drug coverage and dumping their retirees on the federal system, Congress provided a 28 percent reimbursement for the benefits. And, the companies got to deduct the entire cost of the drug plans from their taxes. Including the government subsidy.

Yes! The job-killing tax increase in the new law involves no longer allowing big corporations to take a tax deduction for spending money we gave them. Somehow, this doesn't seem to have the makings of a Tea Party rally.

But there's always the insurance mandate. When it comes to roiling right-wing hysteria, nothing whips up a crowd like the law's requirement that everybody get health coverage.

Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter of Idaho, who is definitely the winner of the Most Fun Name for a Governor Award, kicked off the rebellion this week by signing a law requiring the state to sue the federal government over this provision. "If it is the proper role for government to mandate that citizens buy certain products, then I'm going to get potatoes in line for them just as quick as I can," Otter announced.

Idaho, you should not let your elected officials push the potato thing so hard. The state has a lot more to talk about — lovely scenery, great people, the world's largest factory for barrel cheese, the smallest number of doctors per capita in the country. And what about your state fruit, the huckleberry?

About that insurance requirement. Americans pay an estimated \$42.7 billion a year in taxes and higher health care premiums because of the cost of medical treatment for the uninsured. So you would think that conservatives in particular would believe that everybody ought to be held responsible for having their own coverage. Unless they're starting a new cutting-edge Let Them Die in a Ditch Movement.

"No more free-riders," Romney said frequently, back when he was a little more vocal about defending the Massachusetts plan. Lately, he's been vaguer on the subject, and when it comes to the new federal law, he's jumped on the repeal bandwagon. When someone from the liberal blog ThinkProgress asked Romney whether he thought the new federal insurance mandate — so very much like the Massachusetts one — was constitutional, he muttered something about it being "a big topic" and ducked into an elevator.

It's possible that he hadn't looked so uncomfortable since the time he was chased by a reporter who wanted to know if he thought Seamus the Irish setter had enjoyed driving to Canada on top of the family car.

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