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Paul Ryan gets a taste of his own shameless demagoguery

By Dana Milbank, Published: May 25

If history, as Mark Twain said, does not repeat itself, this must be one of those weeks when it rhymes in unusually precise pentameter.

On Wednesday morning, Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.), author of the House Republicans' plan to end the Medicare guarantee, awoke to find that his plan was being blamed for the loss of a solidly Republican congressional seat in a New York special election on Tuesday. So he headed over to the cameras in the Cannon House Office Building Rotunda to vent about Democrats' "Mediscare" tactics.

"The president and his party have decided to shamelessly distort and demagogue Medicare," he protested to his former House GOP colleague Joe Scarborough, now host of MSNBC's morning show.

Moments later, he took his complaint to Fox News morning man Steve Doocy. "It's a preview of the scare tactics, distortions, demagoguery, to try and scare seniors," Ryan charged.

He's right about that. Democrats and, particularly, liberal activists, are engaged in some shameless demagoguery (one group's ad shows a Ryan look-alike pushing an old woman and her wheelchair off a cliff). And Ryan is well qualified to call out shameless demagoguery and scare tactics: Over the past two years, he has practiced both.

Speaking on the House floor in 2009, he said the Democrats' health-care legislation would "take coverage away from seniors," "raise premiums for families" and "cost us nearly 5.5 million jobs." Later, he said the health plan would bring about government "rationing" of health care.

He also labeled the plan "a government takeover of our healthcare system," claimed America was at a "tipping point" toward a "European social welfare state," and gave a wink to the "death panel" allegations. His suggestion that the legislation would result in the IRS getting "16,000 agents" to police the health-care law was knocked down as "wildly inaccurate" by Factcheck.org.

Demagoguery is just one way in which the fight over Ryan's Medicare reform has followed the rhythm of President Obama's health-care reform. In both cases, the proponents decided to act without bipartisan support. Opponents whipped up opposition at televised town-hall meetings. Proponents discovered that their nuanced explanations of the policy couldn't compete with the other side's shrill sound bites. Endangered lawmakers began to waver, and voters registered their disapproval in special elections (Scott Brown in Massachusetts, and now Kathy Hochul in New York). But the advocates, figuring the public would side with them once all the facts came out, refused to budge.

One difference is Republicans have no chance of enacting Ryan's plan this year or next — a point Senate Democrats made anew on Wednesday by scheduling a symbolic roll call to vote down the plan. But Democrats are determined to take the issue to voters in 2012, the way Republicans did in 2010 with health care. After Tuesday night's victory — involving the New York seat once held by Ryan's mentor, Jack Kemp — Rep. Steve Israel, who runs the House Democrats' campaign, called it "a very serious warning sign to Republicans who would continue this reckless scheme to terminate Medicare."

Ryan responded just as the Democrats had responded during the health-care fight: with bookish analysis. Ryan, on Scarborough's show, went into a numbing discussion of Burkean conservatism, the Brookings Institution and long-forgotten government commissions.

"Paul, so that took you about two, two and a half minutes to explain," Scarborough pointed out.

"That's the problem," Ryan acknowledged.

Yet even 2 ½ minutes was more succinct than Ryan's earlier effort Wednesday: a 4-minute, 54-second video that employs stick figures, dotted lines and drawings of dollars, doctor bills and medical symbols with snakes.

Ryan might be worthy of more sympathy if he hadn't been one of the people clubbing Democrats with slogans about trampled liberty as they labored to explain exchanges and cost curves. Now Ryan is the one trying to define the narrow difference between "premium support" and "vouchers" while Democrats accuse him of forcing seniors into destitution.

To his credit, Ryan acknowledged on Wednesday that his own side had been guilty of the same. "Both parties do this to each other," he told CNBC's Maria Bartiromo at a forum Wednesday hosted by the Peter G. Peterson Foundation. "Every time you put out a reform plan to fix this, the other party uses it as a weapon against you. . . . What that ends up doing is inflicting political paralysis."

Ryan had a chance to break this historical cycle when he released his budget. But instead, he cast aside bipartisan solutions and said he wanted to take the issue to voters. Democrats gave him exactly what he asked for.

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