

EDITORIAL

A good plan

Birth control coverage for women will save lives and dollars.

AN advisory panel of medical experts has just made an excellent recommendation: that all insurers should be required to cover contraceptives and other preventive services for women free of charge.

Birth control is essential to a woman's, and a family's, health and well-being. Making it accessible on all insurance programs is a very good thing. It will result in far fewer unintended pregnancies and abortions, and will save far more than it costs.

Announced Tuesday, the recommendation was the result of a review requested last year by U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius as part of the 2010 Affordable Care Act. Administration officials are expected to accept the recommendations by Aug. 1, and the measures could take effect for many insurance

It will save far more than it costs.

plans by January 2013.

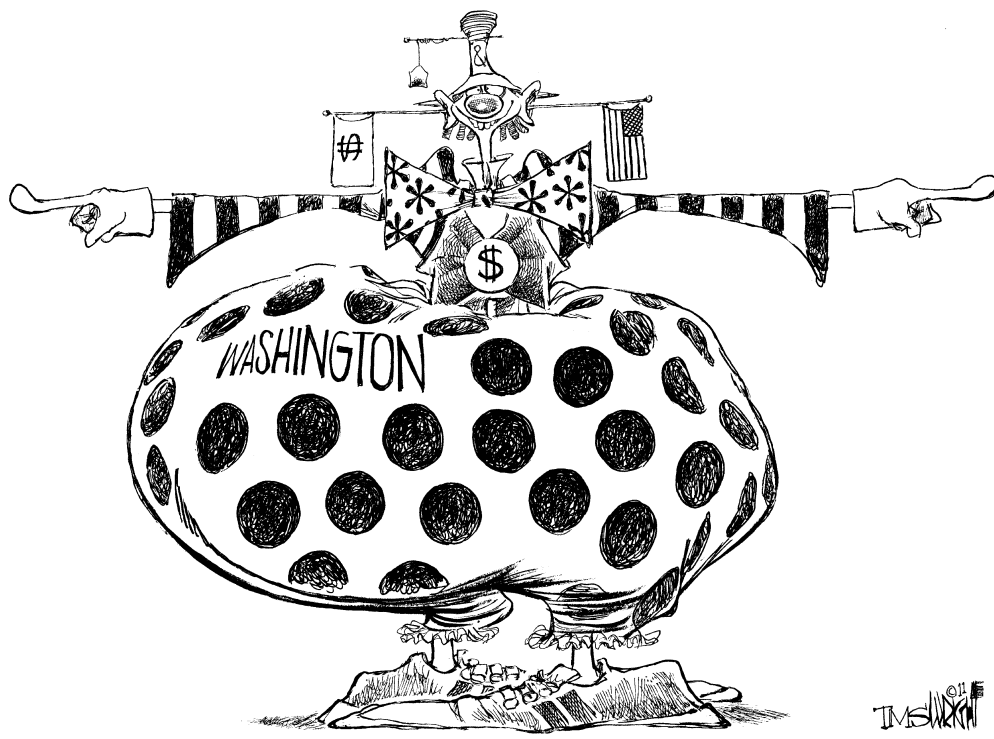
Other recommendations include diabetes and cervical cancer screening, HIV counseling and screening, counseling to prevent unwanted pregnancies, and screening and counseling to detect and prevent domestic violence.

The report, prepared by the nonpartisan Institute of Medicine, was praised by medical professionals and women's groups, but drew fierce opposition from abortion foes and social conservatives. Many of them took great exception to the inclusion of "morning-after" contraceptives like Plan B and Ella, characterizing them as a form of abortion. But experts claim those contraceptives do not cause abortions, and the Food and Drug Administration classifies them as contraceptives. And while one can appreciate opposing positions, the plain truth is that American women almost universally practice birth control.

A new study by the Guttmacher Institute finds that 99 percent of all U.S. women, including almost 100 percent of evangelicals and 98 percent of sexually active Catholic women (even though their church officially bans it) use or have used contraception.

But even with such wide use of birth control, about half of all pregnancies are unplanned. This is why contraception is the most important of its recommendations, stressed the report.

We're convinced. What took so long?



Government can stimulate demand

Now is not the time for fiscal prudence

By RONALD SOLIGO and JOE BARNES

THE economy is in trouble. U.S. gross domestic product grew at a feeble 1.9 percent annual rate in the first quarter of the year. Unemployment actually increased last month to 9.2 percent, a figure that underestimates true un- and under-employment. America may not be headed for a double-dip recession, but the recovery — never particularly robust — is very fragile.

This should come as no surprise. The federal stimulus is winding down. Local and state governments continue to slash budgets and payrolls. And conventional monetary policy has reached its limits, as interest rates hover at 50-year lows.

Students of Economics 101 will understand that GDP is the sum of purchases of final goods by the various sectors of the economy. Conventionally, these are divided as households (consumption), business (investment), government and the rest of the world (U.S. exports minus imports). If GDP and employment are to grow, one or more of these components must grow.

Consumption is an unlikely source of growth. Given high levels of unemployment and consumer debt, the household sector is not in a position to power a robust recovery. Neither is the business sector. Businesses are not going to invest without some convincing signs that expenditures by other sectors are increasing. It doesn't make sense to invest in additional capacity when there is no demand for the new output. Finally, the rest of the world is not going to bail out the U.S. economy. U.S. exports have grown a little over the past year, but with

contractionary policies being pursued in many countries, including Europe and even China, exports cannot be counted on to drive the economy. Besides, if the U.S. economy does start to recover, its imports will increase, partially offsetting the stimulus effect of exports.

That leaves the government sector. It used to be accepted wisdom that in a recession, governments would and should run deficits. Deficits would automatically rise, since a fall in GDP and a rise in unemployment would result in a decrease in tax collections and a rise in transfer payments such as unemployment insurance. Trying to balance the government budget in times of recession by reducing government outlays will only exacerbate the recession. The time for fiscal prudence is when employment levels are high. Indeed, governments should run a surplus when times are good so as to reduce debt and make room for deficits when times are bad.

Unfortunately, our political class forgot this lesson and we saw purportedly responsible people saying things like "deficits don't matter." Alan Greenspan, former chair of the Federal Reserve Board of Governors, even argued in favor of budget-busting tax cuts on the grounds that too little federal debt would result in a bond market too thin to sustain open-market operations by the Fed. The result was that the surpluses in the 1990s turned into large deficits in the first decade of this century. And now that the economy is in dire straits, many of the same politicians who voted for deficits are screaming for massive cuts to government expenditures. They apparently have not learned the difference between pro- and countercyclical policies.

Since many state governments are required by law to balance their budgets, the federal government is the only level

of government that can stimulate total demand. There are voices on the right that argue that further tax cuts, along with expenditure cuts, are the solution. Yet these individuals have not put forward an explanation as to how that will help the economy and employment. The argument is often simply to insist that businesses will invest and hire workers if taxes are reduced. But the effects of cuts in taxes are uncertain at best. This is particularly true of tax cuts for businesses. Firms are already facing record-low interest rates and are sitting on piles of cash. A tax cut is unlikely to affect their decision-making. Furthermore, even if businesses were prompted to invest more, there is no guarantee that they will choose to invest in the U.S. as opposed to overseas.

Cutting taxes on personal income can have some effect if those cuts are focused on middle- and lower-income families. But even here, families may choose to use any tax relief to pay down their accumulated debt and to build contingency reserves in case they too become unemployed.

The obsession over deficits in a time of severe recession has led to the neglect of employment objectives. Alas, history is full of examples where blind adherence to ideology has resulted in catastrophic outcomes.

It's time for the pragmatists to assert themselves. Major budget cuts should be deferred until unemployment drops to more normal levels. And we should strengthen, not weaken, the federal safety net, both to protect individuals and sustain consumption.

Soligo is a professor of economics at Rice University and Rice Scholar at the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy; Barnes is the Bonner Means Baker Fellow at the Baker Institute.

Romney keeps eye on big picture



E.J. DIONNE JR. says while President Obama is distracted by the battle over the debt ceiling, one rival is focusing on job creation.

WHILE the nation's capital was in the midst of furious rounds of negotiations and recriminations over what kind of deal would be made to raise the debt ceiling, political reporters received a missive from Mitt Romney's presidential campaign that served as a reminder of how irrelevant this kerfuffle might feel next year.

The headline read, "Romney for President Launches New Web Video: Obama Isn't Working: Where are the Jobs?"

The video spoke to the difficulties that new college graduates are having finding work in a brutal job market. This bit of campaign propaganda went straight at the core of President Obama's political base — young Americans who volunteered for him by the tens of thousands in 2008 and powered him to victory in state after state. If joblessness disillusioned enough of those voters, the president will be in trouble.

Romney's exercise was just a passing bit of politics unlikely to make many waves in an environment obsessed with debt and fears of betrayal among conservatives and liberals alike. But it was hugely instructive.

The Romney video was more in touch with what voters are worried about than anything going on inside our famous Beltway. Consider a Gallup Poll released last week. Asked what was the most im-

portant problem facing the country, 31 percent of Americans said the economy and an additional 27 percent specifically said unemployment and jobs, for a total of 58 percent. Only 16 percent listed the deficit or the debt.

While the president is snared in a trap set by the Republicans over the debt ceiling, Romney is campaigning on the electorate's animating issue. It's a nice division of labor for the GOP. Obama is caught up in the tea party's priorities. Romney isn't. It's upside-down politics.

Then there is Romney himself. The conventional wisdom is that he is a weak front-runner, short of support from the Republican establishment. There's some truth to this. The interest in Texas Gov. Rick Perry's probable candidacy reflects a hunger on the Republican side for more choices. Yet Perry will also prove to be a flawed candidate who is far to the right of the country. And on one front, he will enter the race with the worst of both worlds. With his Texas swagger, he will remind those who don't like George W. Bush of George W. Bush. But many supporters and confidantes of the former president don't like Rick Perry at all, regarding him as a lightweight who has turned on his patron.

It was Bush who made Rick Perry by sweeping him in as lieutenant governor in 1998. Running for re-election, Bush's victory margin was 1,385,229 votes. Perry, running separately, received only

68,731. I had a chance to watch the creation of Perry when I visited a Republican phone bank in Texas shortly before the general election. Republican volunteers weren't interested in pro-Bush Democrats who would then vote against Perry. Bush's campaign concentrated on pulling to the polls only those voters who supported both of them.

The ingenuity of this strategy, engineered by Karl Rove, barely got Perry through. So you can imagine that there's now some resentment in the Bush camp over the snide comments Perry has been making about Bush as a big spender.

Which brings us back to Romney. There is little doubt that the Bush forces in Republican politics — they still have a lot of influence — will do all they can to undermine Perry, as they have been trying to undermine Michele Bachmann's candidacy. Unless Tim Pawlenty and Jon Huntsman show more signs of life than they are demonstrating now, this will leave Romney as the alternative.

That's why Romney is running more of a general election race than a primary campaign. If Romney can keep himself disentangled from the tea party-engineered dysfunction in Washington, he can cast himself as the business guy who always kept his eye on the one ball voters themselves are watching: jobs. Obama, in the meantime, will be the president who negotiated a budget deal that is likely to leave no one particularly happy — and may do little or nothing for job growth.

True, Obama has to govern and Romney doesn't. But for now, Romney is making the most of a mess his party helped create but from which he will try to keep a happy distance.

Dionne's email address is ejdionne@washpost.com.

LETTERS

BARC

REGARDING "His odds are improving" (Page A1, July 16), your story praised BARC because it has reduced the euthanasia/kill rate. The part of the story that you did not report was the major reason the euthanasia rates have dropped.

Certainly we have seen an uptick in adoptions, but the major reason the euthanasia or kill rate has dropped is the hours that one can surrender a pet or trapped animal have been greatly reduced.

When I started trapping feral cats, I could drop them off at BARC 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Now, the intake hours are 5 hours a day, 5

days a week. So the intake hours have dropped from 168 to 25. No wonder the kill rate has dropped.

Education and enforcement are the most effective tools to reduce the kill rate. Until the citizens and the government get together and tackle this issue, we will continue to see animals killed on a daily basis in Houston.

The missing part of the story is the kill rate of native animals. Cats and dogs kill countless native reptiles and birds. However, few people care about the native birds and reptiles.

— DENNIS WOODWARD, Houston

Roosters

REGARDING "59 fighting roosters will be euthanized" (Page B3, Friday), I read with interest the article regarding the fighting birds seized in San Antonio. These roosters will eventually be put down by lethal injection.

Aren't there cheaper and easier ways to kill a chicken? Couldn't they then be used for food at the animal shelter?

More importantly, the article stated that the birds have been in custody since July 10 and were evaluated to determine each bird's ability to readjust for possible adoption.

Now I may be missing something, but if these birds can be readjusted for possible adoption, it seems they would be quite valuable for some other purpose and should not be put down by lethal injection.

— JAMES SHELLEY, Pearland

Think zoning

REGARDING "City looks at new high-rise rules" (Page B1, July 16), it's about time the Houston Planning Commission took notice of the need for protecting neighborhoods from having a large building next to a single-family dwelling — not just high-rise developments.

Los Angeles has been working on protecting neighborhoods for some time, and Houston is a little too late to protect some homeowners who already have these monster houses surrounding them.

No, deed restrictions and the existing land use are not enough because they are not always enforced. And the city's permit department isn't any help. They keep issuing permits to anybody for whatever. The time has come for thinking about zoning again. People are fed up with such diverse building requirements.

— M. SAVAGE, Houston

Philosophy

REGARDING Rick Casey's "So many Latinos, so few elected" (Page B1, July 17), there is another, and more relevant, reason for the election of an Anglo over a Latino in Harris County Precinct 2. It is not race; it is political philosophy.

There are conservative Latinos. Is it not possible that they would prefer a conservative Anglo over a liberal Latino?

As a conservative Anglo I would support Herman Cain or Marc Rubio over a liberal Anglo. In other words, I support a candidate for what he or she believes. Not their race or their gender. That makes me an American and not a hyphenated one.

It does seem that it is usually the liberal tactic to play the race issue and ignore the fact that minorities can be conservative.

— ANN LEE, Houston

BIBLE VERSE

I waited patiently for the LORD; and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings.

— PSALM 40:1-2

HOUSTON CHRONICLE

JACK SWEENEY, Publisher and President
JEFF COHEN, Executive VP & Editor
JOHN WILBURN, Opinion Director

VIEWPOINTS C/O Houston Chronicle, P.O. Box 4260, Houston, Texas 77210, viewpoints@chron.com, Fax: 713-362-3575

HEARST newspapers
Houston Chronicle is a division of the Hearst Corporation

LETTERS POLICY

We welcome and encourage letters and e-mails from readers. Letters must include name, address and telephone numbers for verification purposes only. All letters are subject to editing.