

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

OPINION

In Defense of Political Obfuscation

Saying almost nothing has its uses and is harder than it seems.

By
BARTON SWAIM
Jan. 14, 2014 7:12 p.m. ET

At a White House press briefing earlier this month, spokesman [Jay Carney](#) was asked why the administration is now de-emphasizing the goal of getting seven million people enrolled by March 31 on either the federal or one of the state health-insurance exchanges. More than one official, including the Health and Human Services secretary, had mentioned that goal, but with only 2.1 million enrolled at last count the goal is unlikely to be met.

Clearly Mr. Carney couldn't be expected to admit that the administration had been preposterously optimistic, but just as clearly he couldn't say that seven million was still the goal. So he said lots of things without saying anything. He pointed out that seven million was originally a Congressional Budget Office estimate, that some estimates had been lower and some higher, that "success looks like having millions of people sign up," that "so many efforts are under way to reach different populations with the message of the options available to people for quality, affordable health insurance." The words kept coming.

[Enlarge Image](#)



White House press secretary Jay Carney *Associated Press*

Language is used for all sorts of reasons other than to convey thought accurately. We use it to suggest a general attitude, to distance ourselves from others—and sometimes just to say something rather than nothing. Mr. Carney didn't intend any of the many words in his answer to convey specific content. At one point, manifestly needing to fill silence with words, he remarked that "it's important to understand that there's not some magic number—6,999,999—and the system collapses, one more than that and it functions perfectly."

But this isn't to criticize Mr. Carney. Politics necessarily involves the use of words and sentences stripped of content.

The subject puts me in mind of a job I once held as a governor's writer. My boss's firm policy was that every letter sent to our office would get a personal response from him. Since as a practical matter that was impossible, the task of responding was given to several members of the staff, including me. I was assigned the offbeat letters. What were his thoughts on "the American dream"? What sort of barbecue did he like best? What did he think about solar energy? Why had he never worn a wedding ring? What would he say to a young person considering a run for political office?

In most cases, the trick was to say almost nothing, but to use as many words as possible. Consider that last question, the one about getting into politics. You couldn't have the governor say affirmatively that the correspondent should run for office. If you did, you ran the risk of some nitwit running for county council claiming he'd been endorsed by the governor and brandishing a letter to prove it. On the other hand, you couldn't tap out a hollow two-sentence reply—that would have seemed too curt.

The only solution was to write two or three paragraphs of largely meaningless sentences about how essential it is to engage in the political process, about the importance of sticking to one's principles even when the costs may be high, about the need for integrity and courage in the political arena, and so on. To get the response to its proper length—say, three paragraphs—you'd need to load in as many superfluous phrases as the sentences could bear.

"I believe" would become "I have every reason to believe," and platitudinous observations would be prefaced by the words, "What I'd say—and I am absolutely certain about this—is that . . ." The phrase "going forward" was useful, as was "from where I stand."

I felt a little like a football coach at the end of a game's first half. Inevitably a reporter shoves a microphone into his face and asks what he'll do differently in the second half. Clearly the coach can't say anything meaningful, but he can't say nothing either. So he says something without saying anything: "We need to stop the run . . . our receivers have to start catching the ball . . ."

Maybe a football coach's empty verbiage is more defensible than a political spokesman's, but it's well to remember that meaningless sentences are an inevitable part of any functioning democracy, and not a sign of its sickness.

At the same time, though, press secretaries should bear in mind the biblical proverb: "In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin."

Mr. Swaim reviews books for the Journal.

