

The Six Million Dollar Man vs. the One BILLION Dollar Website

☒ Bloomberg's Peter Gosselin recently reported that the taxpayer cost of Healthcare.gov (aka the Obamacare website) has now surpassed one billion dollars. Yes, that's *billion* with a *b*!

This is certainly a far cry from the original projected cost of the project, which was stated to be no more than \$93.7 million. When we found out through numerous reports back in October that the *actual* cost had already exceeded \$600 million, though, it didn't seem like much of a stretch to believe that the \$1 billion dollar marker would indeed be surpassed. As is often the case when it comes to spending, the government met our expectations.

Sadly, even after all of that money, the website still has many, many problems.

Just Monday in fact, the Washington Post reported that a whopping one third of all signups on Healthcare.gov contain serious errors that were created by the computer system. As someone who has an extensive background in systems development, and has worked on million-dollar, web-based systems, I'm not at all surprised by this news.

When a system isn't storing user-information in a database correctly, that's an enormous problem. It can cause a slue of additional, often catastrophic issues that often won't be fully recognized until later. The *ideal* solution, when this kind of thing happens, is to shut down the data collection mechanism of the system as quickly as possible, until developers can fix the problem. The longer users are allowed to enter data that the system is corrupting, the harder it

will be to later go back and correct that data.

That's why it was truly absurd for Kathleen Sebelius to continually insist to congress and reporters that leaving the system up while repairs were being made to it was the smart choice. It wasn't. In the private sector, developers often don't even have that choice, though they wish they did. In most cases, they aren't afforded the luxury of just pulling a system offline because their customers depend on that system for their everyday needs.

In the case of Healthcare.gov, however, they *absolutely* could have pulled its plug until the problems were fixed. Many public servants were calling for that very action. So were many journalists. And if the plug *had* been pulled, I can guarantee you that nowhere near one third of the website's signups wouldn't have been corrupted. Yet, the egos in the Obama administration wouldn't have that, because they believed it would do them additional political damage to bring the site down. They believed it would be read as an admission of defeat. Thus, their pride further drove up Healthcare.gov's costs, and the American people are continuing to flip the dime for it.

One of the frustrations often felt by fiscal conservatives like me, is that most Americans simply haven't a clue how totally perverse this culture of reckless government spending is. Sure, we all bitch and moan about how much money Uncle Sam takes out of our paychecks every couple of weeks, but I don't think the majority of the country – even a majority of those working and paying federal taxes – truly understands why such fiscal irresponsibility demands public outrage.

Even with our national debt now racing toward \$18 trillion, most people still just don't get it.

So, I thought it would be a fun little exercise to look at the hugely expensive, painfully flawed Healthcare.gov website in

the context of something most Americans do have an interest in: Entertainment television.

Remember that old television series from the 1970's starring Lee Majors called *The Six Million Dollar Man*? It was the story of a former astronaut named Steve Austin who was "rebuilt" by the U.S. government with bionic implants after suffering a severe accident. He then worked for a government agency to help protect the country from danger.

I used to watch re-runs of that show when I was a kid, and thought it was pretty darned cool at the time. I also remember thinking that \$6 million – the cost of rebuilding Steve Austin with bionic technology – was an astronomically large amount of money. And from what I later read, the creators of the show actually put a lot of thought into coming up with that \$6 million tag, estimating the fathomable cost of such a technological advance if it were possible to make.

That's a lot of money. As far as government technology goes, however, Steve Austin was apparently one heck of an awesome bargain.

For \$6 million, we got a guy who could run at speeds of 60 mph, had the strength of a bulldozer, was equipped with zoom and infrared vision, and saved countless American lives. For \$1 billion, we got a plethora of 404 errors along with instructions to call a service representative at a 1-800 number.

For \$6 million, we got a guy who generated a cool slow-motion, grinding sound when he ran. For \$1 billion, we got the sound of angry profanities shouted at computer screens across the country whenever the entry of time-consuming data was lost.

For \$6 million, only extremely cold temperatures and zero gravity space caused Steve Austin's bionics to malfunction. For \$1 billion, entering your birth date in an input field has been known to cause Healthcare.gov to malfunction.

For \$6 million, we got a guy who saved the world from nuclear Armageddon multiple times. For \$1 billion, we got a website where many Americans can't even find a plan that saves them money on their visits to the doctor.

The Office of Scientific Intelligence, the U.S. government office that Steve Austin worked for, diligently protected the secrets of its \$6 million investment through state of the art, top level security systems. If a recent report from CNBC is accurate, there was essentially *no* security built into the Healthcare.gov website (the Obama administration's \$1 billion "investment"). Multiple cyber-security experts, including one that testified in front of congress last week, recommend that the site should be completely shut down until numerous, concerning security issues are addressed. Another estimates that the required changes could take up to a year to employ and adequately test.

And I think we can all agree that Kathleen Sebelius, the supervisor of the 1 Billion Dollar Website, is no Oscar Goldman, the supervisor of the 6 Million Dollar Man. Just the fact that Goldman actually knew what was going on at his own agency is proof of that. 

Now, I fully realize that this is a silly comparison. I'm contrasting a work of fiction to a real-life situation that many of us simply *wish* was a work of fiction. But I must say, as a novelist and thus a fiction writer myself, the debacle that *is* Healthcare.gov, and in much larger part the Affordable Care Act itself, is the kind of stuff that writers like me *wish* they could dream up, merely for the sake of entertaining others.

Unfortunately, it's all very real. Only the talking points are fictional. The result is the country being dragged into this liberal fantasy where people receive benefits without other people paying a cost. And now far too many of us are forced to deal with rising premiums, rising deductibles, more expensive

healthcare, retiring health plans, fewer work hours, and fewer options for healthcare services, all in order to try and support that fantasy.

If only Lee Majors could get us out of this, and do so for a reasonable \$6 million.