

# 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.

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## The GOP Can't Let the Dems Off the Hook for Obamacare

✘ Back in 2003, I supported George W. Bush's decision to take us to war in Iraq.

Whenever I mention that fact in one of my columns or somewhere else online, I receive harsh criticism and self-righteous condemnation from some of our friends on the left. Their mindset is basically that *Bush lied, soldiers died*. And because I agreed with the president's decision to go Iraq, I share some of the blame for all of the American (and innocent Iraqi) lives that were lost or forever altered because of that war.

Interestingly, these censors are the very same people who routinely sing the praises of Democratic leaders like Hillary Clinton, John Kerry, Joe Biden, and pretty much every other high-profile, past and present member of the Obama administration and congress who *actually voted* to send us into that war. They're also the same people who regularly sing the praises of former president Bill Clinton, who was not only a vocal supporter of going into Iraq, but was actually the man who made "regime change" our country's official policy on Iraq. This was, in part, because he believed that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, just as president

Bush did. Yet, it was apparently only a "lie" when Bush said it.

One could simply write off their selective outrage as an example of shameless hypocrisy, but I think there's indeed some significance in just how comfortable these people are in making such statements. I think it's a testament to how successful the Democratic party was in escaping public culpability for the Iraq War.

Once the death toll of the Iraq War began escalate, and it was more and more apparent that the situation was becoming a quagmire, it no longer seemed to matter that it was a bipartisan effort that had taken us there in the first place. The Democrats used the situation and the growing concerns of the American public for political leverage to turn on the beast of their own creation.

The media narrative turned to Iraq being "Bush's War," and this somehow allowed all of those Democrats to largely be absolved, in the eyes of the public, of their very crucial votes.

We're seeing a similar situation play out right now with Obamacare.

With the colossal failure of a \$600 million website, millions of people being thrown off of their health plans (with millions more to follow), and the revelation that our president repeatedly lied to the American public about several of the law's top selling-points, Democratic politicians are desperately trying to escape culpability for the disaster.

A number of vulnerable U.S. senators like Mary Landrieu of Louisiana, who are up for re-election in 2014, are frantically trying to figure out ways to make people forget that they gave us this monster with their votes. They're pretending that the millions of policy cancellations that have been widely reported just weren't foreseeable, when in fact they

absolutely were. Not only were they *foreseeable*, but they were *relied* upon in order to help pay for the cost of Obamacare.

Fox News' Greg Gutfeld recently referred to a tiled, on-screen collage of these senators as "the periodic table of idiots" for their refusal to recognize ownership for their own actions. While that might be a crass way of putting it, his point has merit.

Now, these desperate senators are throwing their support behind some nonsensical bill that is being advertised to reinstate those cancelled policies. As they very well know, however, the bill can't possibly work. I usually steer clear of using the tired, old metaphor of someone trying to *push toothpaste back into the tube*, but it very much applies in this instance. Only, these senators are just *pretending* to try and push the toothpaste back in. The bill is merely a prop – a phony neck-brace fraudulently worn during a personal injury court case. If these senators win their trials (i.e. their 2014 election races), all of the ridiculous props will be tossed into dumpsters faster than the shelf-life of a Blair Underwood television series. Sorry Blair. I know that was a cheap-shot.

The Republican party and conservative groups can't let the Democrats who voted for Obamacare escape culpability the way they did with Iraq. And really, this should be far easier than with Iraq because there are no GOP fingerprints on Obamacare whatsoever. With it passing on a strictly-party vote, and being signed into law by a Democratic president, there is no blame to be shared with the Republican Party, and thus those running against the Democratic incumbents.

Righties need to remind voters at every opportunity that  none of these Democratic politicians read the Affordable Care Act before voting for it, that they all ignored the concerns of their constituents, and that they all ignored warning after warning from those who *did* read the bill. They

need to remind voters that the Dems waged 1/6 of the American economy on a bumper-sticker solution with enormous ramifications that none of them could be bothered to consider. They need to run commercial after commercial, replaying videos of the the Democratic incumbents on the senate floor, repeatedly spreading the Obamacare falsehoods to the American public. The Republican candidates should be adjoined at the hip, at every campaign stop, to constituents who have suffered under Obamacare, whether it be from lost policies, a reduction in work-hours, job losses, or skyrocketing insurance premiums.

Accountability *has* to be the focus of next year's campaigns, just like it was in 2010. If it is, this country may actually achieve some relief from the most irresponsible piece of legislation signed into law in decades.

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## 5 Reasons to Be Thankful for Obamacare

- ❌ It's been nearly impossible to find any positive news about the Affordable Care Act lately.

Over the past few weeks, we've seen the roll-out of a \$600 million website that didn't work. We've discovered that the Obama administration outright lied to the American public about several of the law's selling points. We've witnessed the cancellations of millions of Americans' existing insurance plans, and sharp increases in premiums and deductibles of many of the plans that weren't cancelled. And just the other day, we found out that the number of people who have actually enrolled in Obamacare's healthcare exchanges has barely topped 100,000 – a profoundly embarrassing figure that was nowhere

near the administration's already weak projections.

And it doesn't appear that the news will be getting any better either. Several economists and policy experts are projecting that when Obamacare's employer mandate kicks in next year, many more millions of Americans will have their insurance policies cancelled, their work hours cut back, or perhaps even lose their jobs as a result of employers adjusting their business models to comply with the ACA's regulations.

Still, I think it's important, especially with the Thanksgiving holiday quickly approaching, to take an optimist's approach in our assessment of Obamacare. This *is* the season, after all, where we're supposed to take a step back and feel thankful for the many things we have in our lives. And with the Affordable Care Act now playing a significant role in many of our lives, I figured I'd list five reasons for why we should all be thankful for it:

### **New Jobs**

After five years of unemployment above 7%, and a more and more people continuing to drop out of the American workforce, we can at least take some satisfaction in knowing that at least three jobs were created as a result of Obamacare. I'm talking, of course, about those of the super-cool "bros" from the "Thanks, Obamacare" campaign running in my home state of Colorado (pictured below).



Super-cool Obamacare bros

We've seen them discussed a fair amount on cable news lately, those beer-guzzling, radical dudes who've been telling us how gnarly it is to have their keg-stand stunts and girlfriends' birth control covered under Obamacare. Sure, one might interpret their jobs as serving no practical purpose other

than reminding people that Colorado recently legalized pot, but with young adults having an especially tough time in this economy, it's nice to that there is indeed work available for those with unidentifiable talent.

And really, this could just be the beginning of a big jobs boom within certain industries. Just think of all of the new personnel that country clubs across the nation will surely need to hire in order to accommodate the needs of the many doctors who'll soon be retiring early from their practices to avoid all the crippling regulations and bureaucracy put into law by the Affordable Care Act. Sure, we'll have fewer practicing doctors among us, but for every medical professional that society loses, we may just gain a new golf caddy!

### **Smarter Spending Habits**

With less take-home income in our pockets as a result of the rising insurance premiums, deductibles, and healthcare in general, we're less likely to spend our money on things we really don't need... like family vacations, eating out, hobbies, and all those other extraneous activities that make life enjoyable.

### **A More Honest America**

We've all done it before. We've told our bosses or friends that we were late for work or an event because a doctor's appointment ran long, even if that wasn't quite the truth.

But thanks to Obamacare, there's an increased likelihood that if we use that excuse in the future, we won't be lying. Our country is already dealing with an alarming shortage of primary care providers. And with the remaining providers being discouraged from keeping their offices open by the massive bureaucracy behind Obamacare (while people who are newly insured are being added to the numbers seeking regular treatment), significantly longer waiting lines are undoubtedly

in our future.

Thus, we can thank Obamacare for relieving us of the pressure of having to come up with phony excuses for our tardiness.

### **Easier Christmas Shopping**

Let's face it: Shopping for Christmas presents for our children can be a trying experience. The toys and games our kids want aren't always the kinds of things we would prefer they have, whether it be due to price, impracticality, or other reasons. Yet, our children write up their gift lists each year, present them to the Santas at the local malls, and go to bed on Christmas Eve dreaming about waking up the next morning and finding some of those items waiting for them under trees or in stockings.

With a high-profile precedent recently set by President Obama, however, parents have been handed a creative public-relations tool for dealing with disappointed children who end up not getting what they wanted. Parents can simply tell them that their choice was "sub-par" and that they're not smart enough to know what they really wanted.

### **Therapy for Internet Addiction**

Internet addiction adversely affects many families in this country every year, whether it comes in the form of online gambling, excessive video game playing, pornographic websites, or an unhealthy amount of time being wasted on social media.

Obamacare, however has changed all of that. For every hour someone spends online trying to figure out how to use the Healthcare.gov website without it crashing or losing the data they've entered, they're spending one less hour feeding their self-degrading Internet vices.

In fact, it stands to reason that because the user experience on Healthcare.gov is so excruciatingly bad, it might actually

cause many people to sour on the Internet all together. That's a good thing, because when someone's sitting out on their front porch, feeling defeated and sobbing over their experience, they're less likely to suffer from computer eye strain and Carpal Tunnel Syndrome. 

So you see, there *is* room to look at Obamacare from a glass-half-full perspective. And if we can keep that in mind throughout the holiday season, it might help us momentarily forget about all of the additional hardships that are coming our way once the healthcare law is fully implemented.

Happy Thanksgiving everyone!

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## **Healthcare.gov is Merely a Preview of Obamacare**

 I don't often feel sorry for the Obama administration, but in the case of the massive technical problems plaguing the Healthcare.gov website, I almost do. It has to be awfully embarrassing, after all of the heated opposition to the Affordable Care Act and the Democrats' impassioned defense of it, to have the program's technological interface completely crap out from the very onset.

I suppose my sympathy stems from my background in systems development. I've certainly worked on my share of complicated web-based systems over the years, and the truth is that not

all of them ran smoothly at first. Heck, not all of them ran smoothly weeks later. I remember all too well those automated text messages that would occasionally wake me up at three in the morning, signaling that something was wrong with a server. It meant that I needed to quickly get dressed, throw on a hat, and drive to the office building where I worked, all while more and more text messages tortured my cellphone. When I got there, I'd meet with one or two other analysts and we'd spend the next couple of hours feverishly running diagnostic checks, rolling back updates, and debugging code in order to fix the problem before our customers on the East Coast began logging in.

Those were not fun times. Thus, I feel for the developers who are working hard to get the system working properly while the world is watching. I really do.

On the other hand, the vast problems with Healthcare.gov are far more than just simple "glitches" as the Obama administration keeps telling us. The problems have stemmed from poorly written code that can't handle the heavy volumes of traffic that anyone older than the age of five should have seen coming.

Some people are citing the debacle as evidence that Obamacare itself is a failure. I tend to think that's a premature conclusion. There are plenty of reasons for why Obamacare will fail. It's an ill-conceived monstrosity. The least of its problems is website navigation.

Yet, one can't help but look at what's going on with the Obamacare website and find a metaphor for exactly why the Affordable Care Act itself won't work.

Both were painfully naive undertakings. You can't just take over 1/5 of the U.S. economy with a brand new entitlement program whose success relies on a desperately flawed funding system, and think that massive problems won't come from it.

Likewise, you can't mandate that all uninsured Americans sign up for that program (or face a government fine) and direct them to do so through a website that can't even handle heavy Internet traffic.

The cost of both was grossly underestimated. A few years back, when president Obama was selling the Affordable Care Act to Americans, he repeatedly stated that the program would cost \$900 billion over 10 years. However, the Congressional Budget Office projected earlier this year that the *actual* cost of the ACA will be \$1.8 trillion in its first decade. That's **double** of what we were told. Likewise, the original cost of Healthcare.gov was projected to be no more than \$93.7 million. The *actual* cost of the website, however, was well over \$600 million. Yes, a whopping \$600 million for a website that doesn't even work.

To give you a little context for how truly obscene that dollar amount is, let me cite a paragraph from a recent column written by Andrew Couts of *Digital Trends*:

*"Facebook, which received its first investment in June 2004, operated for a full six years before surpassing the \$600 million mark in June 2010. Twitter, created in 2006, managed to get by with only \$360.17 million in total funding until a \$400 million boost in 2011. Instagram ginned up just \$57.5 million in funding before Facebook bought it for (a staggering) \$1 billion last year. And LinkedIn and Spotify, meanwhile, have only raised, respectively, \$200 million and \$288 million."*

Unbelievable.

Of course, no one in Washington cares about such costs because they aren't the ones flipping the dime. *We* are. To them, it's like Monopoly money.

Also like Obamacare, there's no real concern with quality assurance when it comes to the Healthcare.gov website because

the motivation just isn't there to make things better.

When I was a full-time systems analyst, my coworkers and I understood that a failure of service and repeated usage problems would lead to a loss of customers. A loss of customers would mean less company revenue. Less company revenue would mean less company investment, including employee salaries. Less money available for employee salaries meant that our ability to provide for ourselves and our families was on the line.

So, we were always highly motivated to put forth our best effort, do everything we possibly could to please customers, and make every cent that was put into a system count. That's is how the private sector works.

When the government's in control of something, however, no one really cares about pleasing the customer (who is the American public). There's little motivation to be efficient. It's the reason why the DMV is such a nightmare. It's the reason why no one in their right mind would ever choose to use a public restroom over a private one.

Private ventures are driven by success. Public ventures are driven by dependence. Which do you think are most likely to factor in quality and ease of use?

Speaking of *ease of use*, how many people do you think gave up on Healthcare.gov and the health care exchanges over the past week and seriously considered just paying the federal fine to avoid all the hassle? After all, according a recent AP poll, three-fourths of Americans who tried to register for *health insurance* through the ACA experienced problems. That, along with all of the reports from different states revealing how shockingly few people have actually signed up, suggests that people just don't want to deal with the complexities.

That's the same concern that medical professionals have with the Affordable Care Act. In a Deloitte survey of U.S.

physicians taken a couple of months ago, 60% expect an exodus of early retirements among doctors over the next three years. The reason? Doctors don't want to deal with another bureaucracy that requires them to fill out even more forms, write more letters, and respond to more inquiries. They don't want to deal with the additional hassle of government reimbursements, less control over how they run their clinics, and less take-home pay that is all associated with the increasing costs and regulations that come with the ACA.

When a process becomes too complex, people abandon it. And that's just another reason why Obamacare will fail. 

The good news for the Obama administration is that websites can be fixed, typically without having to start over. The Affordable Care Act, on the other hand, really can't. It's fatally flawed, resembling a computer virus more than an inefficient system. And maybe, as some have suggested, that was the point all along – a way of getting us switched over to the ultimate liberal dream of a single-payer system.

If that's the case, I'm not sure even a system reboot in 2016 could save us.