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 additonal 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.

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, its 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.