



When Social Security was passed by Congress in 1935 and Medicare in 1965, there was indeed heated opposition. As Dana Milbank wrote in The Washington Post, Alf Landon built his catastrophic 1936 presidential campaign on a call for repealing Social Security....When L.B.J. scored his Medicare coup, there were the inevitable cries of “socialism” along with ultimately empty rumblings of a boycott from the American Medical Association.

But there was nothing like this. To find a prototype for the overheated reaction to the health care bill, you have to look a year before Medicare, to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Both laws passed by similar majorities in Congress; the Civil Rights Act received even more votes in the Senate (73) than Medicare (70). But it was only the civil rights bill that made some Americans run off the rails. That’s because it was the one that signaled an inexorable and immutable change in the very identity of America, not just its governance.

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