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A Dickens of a President

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By Harold Meyerson

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We should, I suppose, credit Lynne Cheney's love of the classics, or perhaps William Bennett's tireless efforts to instruct us in the great moral tales. Whatever the reason, it is clear that the Bush administration, in its campaign to prevent the states from providing health insurance to children in families of modest means, has paid careful heed to the following passage (which I abbreviate for reasons of space) from [Charles Dickens's](#) "Oliver Twist." In it, the plucky young hero has been chosen by the other boys to ask the managers of the poorhouse in which they're locked up to increase their daily servings of gruel, lest they starve.

He rose from the table; and, advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, said:

"Please, sir, I want some more."

"What!" said the master.

"Please, sir," replied Oliver, "I want some more." The master aimed a blow at Oliver's head with the ladle; pinioned him in his arm; and shrieked for the beadle.

The board were sitting in solemn conclave, when Mr. Bumble rushed into the room and, addressing the gentleman in the high chair, said, "Mr. Limbkins, I beg your pardon, sir! Oliver Twist has asked for more!" There was a general start. Horror was depicted on every countenance.

"For MORE!" said Mr. Limbkins. "[A]fter he had eaten the supper allotted by the dietary?"

"He did, sir," replied Bumble.

"That boy will be hung," said the gentleman. "I know that boy will be hung." Oliver was ordered into instant confinement; and a bill was pasted on the gate the next morning, offering a reward of five pounds to anybody who would take Oliver Twist off the hands of the parish.

How else to explain what's historically distinctive about [George W. Bush](#) and his administration save to note that this is the only American presidency that takes its moral guidance from Limbkins, Bumble and kindred Dickensian grotesques? How else to explain a president whose concern for the financial interests of private health insurance companies so greatly exceeds his concern for the health of his nation's children?

Last Friday night, while Congress was in recess and the president was taking his summer repose in Crawford, Dennis G. Smith, director of the administration's Center for Medicaid and State Operations -- the Bumble to Bush's Limbkins -- announced new standards designed to impede the states from providing health coverage to uninsured children from families with yearly incomes in the vicinity of \$50,000. Admittedly, \$50,000 for a family of four isn't Dickensian poverty, but neither does it permit the purchase of any serious health coverage if the parents' employers choose not to provide it.

Many of the nation's largest states, including a number with Republican governors (such as [Arnold Schwarzenegger's California](#)), have therefore elected to provide health coverage to children from families making two to three times more than the federal poverty level, which is \$20,650 for a family of four. On Friday, the administration cracked down on this mischief, announcing that federal funds would not be available for such misguided efforts to protect the health of children.

The administration fears that parents in the designated income groups will forgo enrolling their children in private plans. States that wish to provide insurance for children in families with income at 250 percent of the poverty level, Smith told the [New York Times](#)' Robert Pear, "must establish a minimum of a one-year period of uninsurance for individuals" before children become eligible. They also must show that the number of children insured by private employers has not dropped by more than two percentage points over the preceding five years.

In other words, if a state wants to insure a chronically ill 2-year-old whose parents' employer has dropped his health coverage, it has to wait until he's a chronically ill 3-year-old.



Even as our president demands that the states monitor the health of insurance companies, the findings on the health of our children make for grim reading. Nearly 9 million American children lack health coverage, a number that rose by 360,000 last year. Deficiencies in childhood diet and medical care are among the leading reasons Americans are falling behind dozens of other nations on indexes of health and height. But we cannot allow our children to receive health coverage that might reduce the private insurers' market share -- to eat more than the supper allotted by the dietary, as Mr. Limbkins nicely put it.

Lynne Cheney is right about the necessity of the classics. It takes a Dickens, or a Dante, to understand the moral malignancy of the president and his men.

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