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KENNEDY FIGHTS FOR CHILDREN'S HEALTH INSURANCE

(As Prepared for Delivery)

Today, we continue our debate on the Children's Health Insurance Program. Yesterday, I spoke of the legislation that is before the Senate, and described the many concessions that the bipartisan coalition supporting this bill has made to broaden support for our proposal.

It is important to discuss and understand the specifics of the legislation, and our debate will make sure that our colleagues will be able to sort the truth from the many fictions about this bipartisan proposal.

But the core of our debate is not about this provision or that subclause – it's a fundamental choice on priorities.

We know what the President's priorities are. He is calling yet again for more money, on top of more money, on top of yet more money to pay for the war in Iraq.

The President has made his judgment. He's decided to pour even more of our national treasure into the sands of Iraq and to burden our economy with the immense costs of the war for years to come.

Every day the war goes on, we spend what's needed to cover a quarter million children.

Every week, we spend what's needed to cover 7.4 million children.

And in just 41 days of war, we spend what is needed to cover the ten million children who would benefit from the bill before us today.

We're told by the White House that we can afford 41 days in Iraq, and another 41, and another and another without end – but we can't afford to give our nation's children a healthy start in life.

We have a military surge to help the people of Iraq. I say we need a health care surge to help the children of America.

This Administration is quick to highlight their achievements on health care for the children of Iraq, but won't show the same commitment to the health of our own children.

In Iraq, American money has renovated 52 primary care clinics and re-equipped 600 others. But in America, children are denied essential medical services in the name of fiscal discipline.

In Iraq, our citizens have paid for 30 million doses of children's vaccine. But in America, we're told we can't afford basic preventive care for 10 million children.

The web site of the US Agency for International Development proudly notes a remarkable accomplishment, and I commend them for it. They have successfully vaccinated 98 percent of all Iraqi children against measles, mumps and rubella. If only we could do as well for our own children.

According to the CDC, only 91 percent of American children had received the same vaccine by the recommended age. The Administration should be as concerned that children growing up in Boston or Birmingham get their recommended vaccines as they are about the children of Baghdad and Basra.

That same web site proudly notes that USAID has "improved the health of vulnerable populations in Iraq by increasing access to high quality, community-based primary healthcare." That's just what we're trying to do in America with this bill.

In Iraq, it's an accomplishment. In America, it's a veto.

A bipartisan majority in Congress has made a judgment, too. Our judgment is that we must make room for decent health care for America's children. We must stand up to the empty rhetoric and hollow slogans of the White House, and give all children in America get the healthy start in life they deserve.

We need to know who is for working families across America – and who will stand in their way to getting quality, affordable health care.

We need to know who is for families like the Vega family in Greenfield, Massachusetts. CHIP helps Flor Vega, a working mother, buy an extra inhaler for her 5-year-old daughter, so she could have one at school and the other at home. CHIP also helped her afford a nebulizer, the small, portable device that pumps the asthma medicine into the lungs when an inhaler isn't effective. That means her daughter doesn't face sudden dangerous attacks of asthma that require her to go to the emergency room.

We need to know who is for families like the Lewis family in Springfield, Massachusetts. I met Dedra Lewis and her daughter Alexsiana when they came here to talk to me about the difference that CHIP has made in their lives. Alexsiana has a rare eye disease that requires expensive drops every hour of every day.

To take care of her daughter, her mother had to cut back her hours at work, and she lost her insurance. Without CHIP, they would be choosing between paying the mortgage for their home or paying for medicine that Alexsiana needs to keep her vision.

Family after family from coast to coast could tell similar stories. That's why families across America are calling on Congress to renew the promise of CHIP.

The task has not been easy, but we will not be deterred or deflected.

When Medicare was first proposed in the 1960s to allow the nation's senior citizens to live their retirement years in dignity, its supporters were attacked with much the same harsh rhetoric as we hear now about CHIP – it's "Socialized medicine." It's a "Government takeover." But Congress rejected that absurd rhetoric, and hundreds of millions of senior citizens have benefited immensely ever since.

American families face real challenges – higher mortgages, soaring gas prices, the ever-increasing cost of health care, and many other burdens.

They deserve real solutions, but the White House offers only hollow slogans.

Our opponents failed to stop Medicare, and they won't stop CHIP now. Medicare didn't pass on the first attempt, but its supporters came back again and again and again with the force of the American people behind them to ask – to demand – that Congress act. And the 1964 election made it happen.

And that's just what we'll do with CHIP, even if it takes the 2008 election to do it.

We'll keep at it until the children of America get the health care that they deserve and that the American people are demanding.

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