

Obama administration's top political advisor over the weekend that the President will change his position on entitlement reform, the deficit, and debt in a speech he will deliver tomorrow afternoon.

According to the administration officials, the President will now propose an outline of his goals in these areas. Apparently the President is finally ready to acknowledge problems that the rest of the country has been waiting for him to address. It is unfortunate that he had to be dragged into this discussion. But those on the left and right who have been clamoring for presidential leadership on these issues have to welcome the President's long-awaited decision to engage on them.

We all look forward to hearing what the President has to say, but it is my hope that in doing so, he offers more than the outline his political adviser suggested. As we know, House Republicans have put forward a detailed plan that seeks to preserve and protect Medicare for current beneficiaries and strengthen Medicaid, in part, by giving States more flexibility to implement it. At a time when thousands of baby boomers are retiring every day, putting even more pressure on our already overburdened finances, creative solutions like these are needed.

Hopefully the President will put forward a plan that does not just pay lip-service to the commitments we have made to seniors and the poor, but which acknowledges the unique problems that this generation and a rising generation of Americans face. Too often, it seems, Democrats in Washington claim to be interested in helping those in need, when what they really seek is to protect big government. Meanwhile, Republicans are developing solutions that will enable us to keep our commitments to seniors even as we create new opportunities for the young and middle class with low-tax policies that lead to private sector job growth. Whereas Republicans see America growing its way to prosperity, Democrats seem to want to constrict opportunities for everyone, so everyone is forced to do with less—except, of course, the politically connected and those who are lucky enough to get a waiver.

But at least the President is joining in the conversation. Hopefully that conversation is an adult one, and does not devolve into the kind of unhelpful scripted, and frankly juvenile, name-calling that we saw in the closing hours of the debate over the continuing resolution last week. We all know that both sides will have to play a part in addressing the crises we face, so we would do well to leave all dishonest rhetoric aside. Both sides want to preserve what is best about America. If both sides acknowledge that up front, as we move from a conversation about billions to trillions, we will have much progress even though we have much work ahead of us.

I yield the floor.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

MORNING BUSINESS

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the Senate will be in a period of morning business until 11 a.m., with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each, with the time equally divided and controlled between the two leaders or their designees, with the majority controlling the first half and Republicans controlling the final half.

MEASURE PLACED ON THE CALENDAR—S. 783

Mr. REID. Madam President, it is my understanding S. 783 is at the desk and due for its second reading.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will report.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (S. 783) to provide an extension of time for filing individual tax returns in the case of a Federal Government shutdown.

Mr. REID. I object to any further proceedings with respect to this bill.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Objection is heard. The bill will be placed on the calendar.

Mr. REID. Madam President, it is my understanding that in this time for morning business, Senators are permitted to speak for up to 10 minutes each; is that right?

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Correct.

A MORAL BUDGET

Mr. REID. Madam President, I am always moved to hear the Pledge of Allegiance that marks the beginning of a new legislative day in the Senate. On the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the Civil War, the words "one nation, indivisible" mean more today than most other days. Along with Chaplain Black's inspired invocation, the pledge motivates us and reminds us of the true purpose of our work. Together, they recall our responsibility to our country, to our countrymen, and to our conscience.

I am particularly pleased to see the Senate open this morning. As we all know, last week at this time, even as recently as just a few evenings ago, whether the government would stay open was a very real question. As I said here late on Friday night, I am pleased we reached an agreement on a budget in time to keep the country operating.

I am pleased that the budget will make historic cuts, saving the country money so we can lower our deficit and do a better job of living within our meanings.

At the beginning of this debate and throughout the last few weeks, I reminded the Senate that in this negotiation, as in any negotiation, neither

side would get everything they wanted. From the start I also expressed my firm belief that what we cut would always be more important than how much. That is because our Nation's budget is a representation of our values and of what we value. It is one of the many ways we demonstrate as a Congress and a country what matters most to us, what is important. This concept is not unique to Democrats.

As the Speaker of the House and the chairman of the House Budget Committee have both said, our budget is a moral document.

Those following the budget debate have noticed something unmistakable. While both parties may agree in principle that a budget is more than simply a collection of numbers, our positions couldn't be more different. We stayed true to our values. We value the rights of Americans to afford a healthy life. That is why we passed historic health reform last year, but Republicans tried to use the budget to repeal those rights. We stayed true to our values, and we didn't let them.

We value women's health, but Republicans tried to use the budget to make it harder for women to get contraception that reduces abortions. Their budget also tried to make it harder for women to get cancer screenings, and they even tried to slash funding for cancer research. We stayed true to our values and we didn't let them.

We also value seniors' ability to support themselves, but Republicans tried to use the budget to slice the Social Security Administration. That would have meant delays for seniors and disabled Americans who count on the benefits they have earned over a lifetime of hard work. They also tried to use the budget to reopen the doughnut hole which would have sent seniors' prescription drugs skyrocketing. We stayed true to our values; we didn't let them.

We value our children's education, but Republicans tried to use the budget to kick little boys and girls out of pre-kindergarten programs and slash Pell grants that help so many students afford college. We stayed true to our values and we didn't let them.

We value our environment, but Republicans tried to use the budget to give polluters a free pass to poison the air we breathe. We stayed true to our values and we didn't let them. We value our economic security, but Republicans tried to repeal the promise we made to taxpayers that they will never again be asked to bail out a big bank when the bank loses its risky bets. They tried to use the budget to reverse rules we put in place to hold Wall Street accountable. We stayed true to our values and we didn't let them.

Finally, we value our responsibility to create jobs, but Republicans also tried to use the budget to reverse the momentum we have seen in recent months. The policies they tried to jam through the budget would have cost us

700,000 jobs and slammed the breaks on our economic growth. We stayed true to our values and we didn't let them.

There are many more examples in this vast budget, examples of programs Republicans wanted to destroy but Democrats demanded we protect. There are many examples where they wanted to cut recklessly and we insisted on cutting responsibly. Throughout this debate, we stayed true to our values. The American people noticed, and they are glad we did. By clear majorities our constituents are glad we stood up for health reform, women's health, cleaner air, and on and on.

This budget battle has once again illustrated for the American people the fundamental differences between the two parties. In some cases our priorities are poles apart. That is obvious to the American people, as well it should be. They are the ones who will always decide whether the morals of their representatives more closely match their own.

As we work toward finalizing this year's budget, we start the conversation about next year's budget, and we engage in the many other debates before us, Democrats will continue to insist on policies that reflect and respect our values.

I ask unanimous consent that my time be charged against leader time and not morning business.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The Senator from Oregon is recognized.

FREE CHOICE VOUCHERS

Mr. WYDEN. Madam President, in one cruel swoop late last week, more than 300,000 Americans lost the opportunity to buy affordable health insurance for years to come. Specifically, I am talking about the removal behind closed doors by budget negotiators of the free choice voucher provision that would have been a lifeline to hundreds of thousands of low-income Americans.

One could say: Senator WYDEN, everybody has to give a little during tough times. Why is this different?

The difference is that hundreds of thousands of Americans without health care options, in a process that doesn't even have any direct cost to the Federal budget, are being asked to give up a guarantee of coverage just a year after passage of the Affordable Care Act. They are going to be forced to make a Hobson's choice between unaffordable insurance and going without health care, directly contradicting the theoretical underpinnings of the Affordable Care Act. Under that provision, those whose income falls below 400 percent of the poverty line and whose employer-sponsored health insurance premiums are between 8 and just under 10 percent would be exempt from having to purchase health coverage.

Unfortunately, now that they do not have access to the exchanges, they will

also not qualify for government assistance to insurance. The provision leaves hundreds of thousands of Americans who need health care as a lifeline out in the cold.

With free choice, however, folks who fell into this hole and couldn't afford the plan they were offered at work could use their employer's contribution. They could have gotten a voucher to choose a more appropriate affordable plan in the exchange. The amount of the voucher would be set at the same percentage that employers pay today: 70 percent of the cost of a typical plan. The amount would be fixed, giving employers certainty in the cost of doing business. For these families, it could mean the difference between being able to buy a health plan they could afford or going without coverage. If they found a plan in the exchange that's cheaper than was cheaper than the voucher amount, but gave them everything they needed, they could have pocketed the difference in cost. This gives that family an incentive to shop for lower cost coverage and helps hold down everyone's health care costs.

This kind of concept is not only good for the employee, it is good for our businesses, particularly the small businesses that so strongly back this provision. When the impact of free choice was proposed during the health reform debate, the Congressional Budget Office and the Joint Committee on Taxation estimated that more than 300,000 families could benefit from this new approach to choice and competition. That was then.

Since passage of the health care reform law, the need for free choice vouchers is greater than ever. The Kaiser Family Foundation, in their recent analysis, found that employers, even since the law, are shifting more of the health care cost on to the backs of the workers. In that analysis, The Kaiser Family Foundation reported that the typical increase for family coverage went up three percent on average last year, but the cost for the typical worker went up 14 percent. The employer was paying virtually none of that increase. The worker was eating almost all of it because costs were being shifted from employers on to the backs of the workers. So if anything, even more people would likely need free choice vouchers, and would have been eligible to use them, than was originally envisioned when we passed the law.

I am of the view that it is not that businesses don't want to provide affordable benefits to workers. It is just making less and less sense to do so given the way the current system operates. Incentives would not change in 2014, leaving an increasing number of families with a choice between the unaffordable and the unavailable. Up until late last week, in the dark of night, those families had a choice. They had a choice, a third path. The two that I mentioned, unaffordable and unavailable, were not very appealing, and free choice vouchers would have

created a third option that would have worked for those families. They would have had a chance to take their pretax dollars provided by their employer to the free market exchange and decide for themselves which plans they could afford that provide the benefits they need.

Free choice is good for workers, it is good for business, it is good for our country's bottom line; it offers a way to rein in higher health care costs by putting purchasing power back into the hands of the consumer. Once people know they are paying for their health coverage and can shop for a plan that answers their specific needs, costs will come down.

We hear often colleagues on both sides of the aisle talk about choice and competition and market forces. What this did was provide a chance for both sides to take principles they hold dear, expanding coverage with a market based approach for workers who are hurting, and say: Free choice vouchers can do that. The arguments against free choice didn't start with Democrats or Republicans. The arguments started with the interest groups, the lobbies, the special interests that have a vested stake in holding their employees captive and locking them into this incredibly inefficient status quo.

This provision has no budget impact in the fiscal year. Three hundred thousand low-income Americans are being hurt in this budget bill for something that spends no money in the upcoming year; 300,000 Americans with no acceptable alternative to make sure that when they go to bed at night with their families they can take care of an illness or a medical expense that comes up in the morning.

I don't think this had to be. Clearly, if we had had the opportunity in an open forum to address this, there would have been a different result because that is how it got into the law in the first place. I want to make sure colleagues know we will have to be back here to get some relief for the 300,000 Americans we put out in the cold as a result of that particular provision. I hope, once again, we can do it in a fashion that brings Democrats and Republicans together the way free choice vouchers and the principles it represents did in the first place.

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Minnesota.

Ms. KLOBUCHAR. Madam President, I first acknowledge my colleague from Oregon for his great leadership in this area. We look forward to working with him. He has taken an essential lead on this important matter. This has been a difficult time for all of us with some of the changes being made.

DAUNTING FISCAL CHALLENGES

Ms. KLOBUCHAR. Madam President, I rise to speak about the daunting fiscal challenges our country faces and the urgent need for comprehensive bipartisan action to address our crushing