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Remarks on Senator Arlen Specter's Decision to Join the Senate Democratic Caucus

April 29, 2009

The President. Good morning, everybody.

Vice President Joe Biden. Mr. President, as we used to say in the Senate, I hope you'll excuse a point of personal privilege here. Arlen Specter has been my friend and my confidant and my partner, and I his partner, in scores and scores of major, major pieces of legislation and issues for a long time. And beyond that, Mr. President, he's been there for me every time things have been tough for me, and I hope I have been there for him.

And it gives me great pleasure, great pleasure, Mr. President, to now officially be in the same caucus with Arlen Specter. We've ridden the train for so many years, we've visited each other's homes, our families, that it's just, as, again, a point of personal privilege, it's just a delight to have no separation.

[*At this point, Vice President Biden made brief remarks, concluding as follows.*]

So, Mr. President, I am pleased to introduce a man of immense personal courage and unmatched integrity, my friend, Arlen Specter.

Senator Arlen Specter. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Vice President, and thank you, Mr. President, for your support and encouragement.

I was unwilling to subject my 29-year record in the United States Senate to the Pennsylvania Republican primary electorate, but I am pleased to run in the primary on the Democratic ticket and am ready, willing, and anxious to take on all comers in a general election.

I have not represented the Republican Party; I have represented the people of Pennsylvania. And I will continue to do just that. As I said yesterday, I will not be an automatic 60th vote. There have been positions, which I talked about yesterday and will not reenumerate, where I stand in a different position from the traditional position of the Democrats, and I will continue that independence.

[*Senator Specter made brief remarks, concluding as follows.*]

When I talked to the President yesterday, I said, "I haven't seen you in the elevator lately." His office used to be right down the hall from mine on the 7th floor of the Hart Building, and he hadn't come back lately, so I said I was calling him up just to chit-chat. And I got to know the President to some extent in the Senate. I talked too long already, but that's—Joe taught me how to do that.

Just one personal comment: The President approached me when he was Senator Obama, before the Democratic primary. And he said, "Tell me, Arlen, if a Jewish kid from Kansas can carry Pennsylvania, how can a black kid from Kansas carry Pennsylvania?" And I gave him some advice, and he became—[*laughter*]—he became President of the United States of America.

The President. That's how it worked. Thank you so much, Arlen. Thank you.

Well, let me start off by just saying I'm thrilled to have Arlen in the Democratic Caucus. I have told him that he will have my full support in the Democratic primary. Joe Biden has said the same thing. We are confident that Arlen Specter is going to get a 6th term in the Senate, and the American people are going to be better off for it.

I'd like to say a few more things about Arlen, but before I do, I'd like to briefly address the ongoing challenge posed by the H1N1 flu virus.

We are closely and continuously monitoring the emerging cases of this virus throughout the United States. Overnight we also received confirmation that an infant in Texas has died as a result of this virus. And my thoughts and prayers and deepest condolences go out to the family, as well as those who are ill and recovering from this flu.

This is obviously a serious situation, serious enough to take the utmost precautions. Secretary Napolitano, Secretary Sebelius, and our entire team are in close contact with State and local authorities around the Nation. But I would also urge health agencies in local communities to be vigilant about identifying suspected cases of this virus in your areas and reporting them to the appropriate State and Federal authorities in a timely way. We need your assistance.

It's also the recommendation of our public health officials that schools with confirmed or suspected cases of H1N1 should strongly consider temporarily closing so that we can be as safe as possible. If the situation becomes more serious and we have to take more extensive steps, then parents should also think about contingencies if schools in their areas do temporarily shut down, figuring out and planning what their child care situation would be.

If we ended up having a school closure, a child was sick, just sending a child from the school to a day care center is not a good solution. So we would have to think through, and each parent, I think, would have to think through what options would be available to them in the event that this became more serious.

Yesterday, I also requested from Congress an immediate 1.5 billion in emergency funding. This funding will ensure that we have adequate supplies of vaccines and the equipment to handle a potential outbreak. It will ensure that these vaccines and equipment get to where they need to go around the country. And it will provide for sufficient planning and preparation at the State and local levels.

And every American should know that the Federal Government is prepared to do whatever is necessary to control the impact of this virus. But there are also steps that Americans can take individually. They're the same steps that you would take to prevent any other flu: Keep your hands washed, cover your mouth when you cough, stay home from work if you are sick, keep your children home from school if they are sick.

I'll continue to get constant updates on the situation from the responsible agencies, and we will continue to offer regular updates to the American people about the steps they need to take and the steps that we are taking. And I can assure you that we will be vigilant in monitoring the progress of this flu and I will make every judgment based on the best science available.

Now, part of the reason we have such an outstanding array of scientists and researchers is because of the tireless efforts of the gentleman standing to my right. Having courageously battled multiple life-threatening diseases of his own—and let me tell you, Arlen Specter is one tough *hombre*—he has become a champion for public health in this country. He's most

recently responsible for the increase in funding for the National Institutes of Health so that it can continue to discover the cures and treatments that will save countless lives.

And that brings me to why we're here today. Today I have the honor of standing next to the newest Democrat from the State of Pennsylvania. I know that the decision Senator Specter made yesterday wasn't easy. It required long and careful consideration, and it required courage. But I know that it also reflects an independence that has been the hallmark of Arlen Specter's career since the days he arrived in Washington. He has never been in the Senate to fight for any particular party, but rather for the men and women of Pennsylvania who sent him here.

And this is also why I don't expect that Senator Specter will agree with every decision I make and support every single one of those policies. I don't accept—I don't expect Arlen to be a rubber stamp; I don't expect any Member of Congress to be a rubber stamp. In fact, I'd like to think that Arlen's decision reflects a recognition that this administration is open to many different ideas and many different points of view, that we seek cooperation and common ground, and that in these 100 days we've begun to move this Nation in the right direction.

As I told Senator Specter yesterday, he has my full support, my full commitment to work with him on those areas where we do agree, areas like health care, education, expanding America's manufacturing base, and medical research. I look forward to working with the Senator on these and other issues in the coming weeks and months. I'm eager to receive his counsel and advice, especially when he disagrees. And I have great respect and admiration for the decision that he has made.

Senator Specter often tells the story about his father, Harry Specter, who came to this country from Russia nearly a century ago. He fought in World War I and was seriously wounded in action. Later, he became one of the thousands of veterans who never received the bonus that our Government promised in return for the brave service that they had rendered to our Nation. Many of these veterans would later march on Washington because of that broken promise, and some were shot at by their own Government because they were voicing dissent.

Arlen Specter has said that his career in public service has been one long journey to get his father's bonus. And until he does, he plans to keep on running. It's a metaphor that's particularly apt today as he begins the next chapter in his proud effort to fight for all those men and women who need and deserve a voice in Washington.

And so I'm grateful that he is here. And I'm also grateful that Joe Biden paid him a little attention on the train. [*Laughter*] Thank you much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8 a.m. in the Diplomatic Reception Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Secretary of Homeland Security Janet A. Napolitano; and Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Senator Arlen Specter, decision to join the Senate Democratic Caucus.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Biden, Joseph R., Jr.; Napolitano, Janet A.; Sebelius, Kathleen; Specter, Arlen.

Subjects: Congress : Senate :: Democratic Caucus; Diseases : Global influenza outbreak; Health and Human Services, Department of : National Institutes of Health; Health and

Human Services, Department of : Secretary; Health and medical care : Preventive care and public health programs; Homeland Security, Department of : Secretary.

DCPD Number: DCPD200900302.