

Remarks on the Resignation of Michael O. Johanns as Secretary of
Agriculture
September 20, 2007

President Bush. Good morning. Mike Johanns has informed me that he plans to return home to Nebraska, which means that his service as Secretary of Agriculture must come to an end. Mike has been an outstanding member of my Cabinet. I knew he would be when I asked him to become the Secretary of Agriculture. I've known him for a long time. I've admired the fact that he is not only a decent person and an honest person, but he's a person who can get some things done.

So I accepted his resignation, and Laura and I bid Mike and Stephanie a warm farewell. And I thank him from the bottom of my heart for leaving a State he loves to come here to Washington, DC, to work in an—to work as the Secretary of Agriculture. You know, Mike brought with him a lot of practical farm experience. After all, he was the proud son of a dairy farmer. He understands the importance of the land. He worked tirelessly on behalf of farmers and ranchers.

And Mike Johanns did an outstanding job as the Secretary of Agriculture. He brought focus and energy to the Department. He was a champion of renewable fuels. He expanded the Department's commitment to conservation. He worked endlessly to open up foreign markets for American beef. He provided timely assistance to farmers and ranchers devastated by natural disasters. I couldn't have asked for a better Secretary of Agriculture.

He worked hard to put in motion a good farm bill. I remember when Mike came here to the Oval, he said to me, he said, "What I'm going to do is, I'm going to travel the country and reach out to the stakeholders to lay the foundation for farm legislation." And that's exactly what he did. And I got feedback from all around America that Mike Johanns listened. He wisely shepherded the process in such a way that

we've got a good farm bill in front of the Congress. He set the framework for success, and I'm confident we can get a good bill passed.

So I want to thank you for your good work getting this teed up.

Secretary Johanns. Thank you, Mr. President.

The President. He's got a good team over at the Secretary of—at the Department of Agriculture. In other words, Mike understands that you've got to surround yourself with good folks. And so I feel very comfortable asking Chuck Connor, the Deputy Secretary, to serve as the Acting Secretary. And I want to thank Chuck for his good work.

Mike came by the White House here a couple of days ago, and he asked for my advice. And I appreciate it; everybody likes to have their counsel sought. And during the discussion, he told me he was interested in continuing to serve America, but in a different role. And I asked him if this was something he was seriously considering. In other words, sometimes you get these rumors out there in the political process where somebody feels like they've got to say, yes, I'm interested. But no question in my mind that Mike loves Nebraska, and he's serious about going home and possibly serving in a—the Nation in a different capacity.

And my answer was—to Mike was, I support you, and I encourage you to follow your heart. If it's Mike's decision and Nebraska's choice, he would make an outstanding Member of the United States Senate. There is no doubt in my mind.

And so I want to thank you for your service, thank you for your friendship, thank you for your commitment to America's farmers and ranchers and our country. And Laura and I wish you all the very best.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:27 a.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. The transcript released by the Office of the Press

Secretary also included the remarks of Secretary Johanns.

The President's News Conference *September 20, 2007*

The President. Good morning. In just 10 days, the State Children's Health Insurance Program, known as SCHIP, is set to expire. This important program helps children whose families cannot afford private health insurance, but do not qualify for Medicaid to get coverage they need.

I have strongly supported SCHIP as a Governor, and I have done so as President. My 2008 budget proposed to increase SCHIP funding by \$5 billion over 5 years. It's a 20-percent increase over current levels of funding. Unfortunately, instead of working with the administration to enact this funding increase for children's health, Democrats in Congress have decided to pass a bill they know that will be vetoed. One of their leaders has even said such a veto would be, quote, "a political victory."

As if this weren't irresponsible enough, Congress is waiting until the SCHIP program is just about to expire before getting a final bill passed. In other words, Members of Congress are putting health coverage for poor children at risk so they can score political points in Washington. The legislation would raise taxes on working people and would raise spending by between \$35 to \$50 billion. Their proposal would result in taking a program meant to help poor children and turning it into one that covers children in households with incomes of up to \$83,000 a year.

The proposal would move millions of American children who now have private health insurance into Government-run health care. Our goals should be for children who have no health insurance to be able to get private coverage, not for chil-

dren who already have private health insurance to be able to get Government coverage.

What I'm describing here is a philosophical divide that exists in Washington over the best approach for health care. Democratic leaders in Congress want to put more power in the hands of Government by expanding Federal health care programs. Their SCHIP plan is an incremental step toward the goal of Government-run health care for every American.

I have a different view. I believe the best approach is to put more power in the hands of individuals by empowering people and their doctors to make health care decisions that are right for them. Instead of expanding SCHIP beyond its original purpose, we should return it to its original focus, and that is helping poor children, those who are most in need. And instead of encouraging people to drop private coverage in favor of Government plans, we should work to make basic private health insurance affordable and accessible for all Americans.

My administration will continue working with Congress to pass a responsible SCHIP bill. In the meantime, Congress has an obligation to make sure health insurance for poor children does not lapse. If they fail to do so, more than a million children could lose health coverage. Health coverage for these children should not be held hostage while political ads are being made and new polls are being taken. Congress must pass a clean, temporary extension of the current SCHIP program that I can sign