

AFFORDABLE CARE ACT

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I am going to spend a few minutes talking about the Affordable Care Act. I wonder how many people on the Republican side today are going to talk about ObamaCare. If they do, they should be in a very positive state. We know that as a result of this bill, the Affordable Care Act, people are getting or soon will get a rebate. One of the things we did—led by Senator FRANKEN and others—was make sure that 80 percent of the money paid for premiums goes to patient care and any amount that doesn't has to be refunded to the patients. That is in the process now. In the month of August, all those moneys will come back in a significant amount to Americans who, in effect, are part of programs that spend too much on salaries for bosses.

Also, we are going to talk a little bit today about what this Affordable Care Act does for women in America. As I said, I am going to speak very briefly, but we are going to have people come—as soon as I and the Republican leader finish—to talk about good things in this bill for women. I will touch on them very briefly.

There is no question this bill that was signed by President Obama is a landmark piece of legislation. It signaled an end to insurance company discrimination among many but especially against those who are ill, those with a preexisting condition, and especially against women.

As a result of this bill we passed, being a woman is no longer a preexisting disability in America. For many years, insurance companies charged American women higher premiums. Why? Because they are women. For years, American women have unfairly borne the burden of the high cost of contraception as well. Even women with private insurance often wind up spending hundreds of dollars more each year for birth control. Today, women of reproductive age spend two-thirds more out of their own pockets for health care costs than men, largely due to the high cost of birth control. But starting tomorrow—Wednesday of this week—new insurance plans must cover contraception and many other preventive health services for women. How much? No additional pay at all. Under health care reform, about 47 million women, including almost 400,000 women in Nevada, will have guaranteed access to those additional preventive services without cost sharing.

Many on the other side downplayed the importance of these benefits or fought to repeal them altogether. It is hard to comprehend but true. Forcing American women to continue struggling with the high price of contraception has very real consequences. Every year millions of women in the United States put off doctors' visits because they can't afford the copay and millions more skip pills or shots to save money.

It is no mystery why the United States has one of the highest rates of

unintended pregnancies of all industrialized nations. Half of all pregnancies in America are unplanned. Of those unintended pregnancies, about half wind up in abortion. Increasing access to contraception is the most effective way to reduce unintended pregnancies and reduce the number of abortions, but the high cost is often a barrier.

That is why, in 1997, OLYMPIA SNOWE and I began a bipartisan effort to prevent unintended pregnancies by expanding access to contraception. It has not been an easy path, but we did make a start. As part of this effort, we helped pass a law ensuring Federal employees access to contraception. It was a big issue. That was 15 years ago or more. It is an issue that is still important, but we started it, and I am very happy about that. OLYMPIA SNOWE was terrific to work with.

When this benefit took place in 1999, premiums did not go up one single dime because neither did health care costs—not one penny. It was rewarding to note that a pro-life Democrat and pro-choice Republican were able to confront the issue with a practical eye rather than a political eye. It is unfortunate that over the last 15 years an idea that started as a common-ground proposal has become so polarizing in Congress. The controversy is quite strange when we consider that almost 99 percent of women have relied on contraception at some point in their lives, and many have struggled to afford it. The Affordable Care Act will ensure that insurance companies treat women fairly and treat birth control as any other preventive service.

Prior to Senator SNOWE and me doing this, anything a man wanted they got. Viagra, fine; we will take care of that. Anything a man wanted they got—but not a woman. The law doesn't just guarantee women's access to contraception, it assures their access to many other lifesaving procedures as well.

Thanks to the health care bill—the Affordable Care Act—insurance companies are already required to cover preventive care such as mammograms. For a person who is able to have a mammogram, it is lifesaving. Most people in the Senate know my wife is battling breast cancer. She had a mammogram in December and in August discovered a lump in her breast. Think of what would have happened if she had waited 1 year because she couldn't afford that mammogram. Frankly, the thought of it is very hard for me to comprehend because even though she had that mammogram in December, she had found it and was in stage 3 of breast cancer. It has been very difficult. What if she waited an extra year? Many people wait a lot longer than an extra year.

Colonoscopies save lives. I was talking to one of my friends in the Senate who is going to have his done. They do it every 5 years. It takes at least 10 years for polyps to develop into cancer, and some polyps develop into cancer if they are not taken out. People need to have this done.

Blood pressure checks, childhood immunizations without cost sharing is part of what is in this bill. It used to be a bill; now it is the law.

Starting tomorrow—again, Wednesday of this week—women will no longer have to reach in their pockets to pay for wellness checkups. They can do screening for diabetes, HPV testing, sexually transmitted infection counseling, HIV screening and counseling, breastfeeding support, domestic violence screening and counseling. That is all in the law starting tomorrow. All women in new insurance plans will have access to all forms of FDA-approved contraception without having to shell out more money on top of their premiums. Ending insurance company discrimination will help millions more women afford the care they need when they need it. It will restore basic fairness to the health care system. Sometimes the practical thing to do is also the right thing to do, and that is what the legislation we worked so hard to pass is all about. It is about doing the right thing for everyone. Today we are going to focus on women.

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Republican leader is recognized.

REPEAL OF OBAMACARE

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, I might say to my friend the majority leader before he leaves the floor that I listened carefully to his speech about what most Americans refer to as ObamaCare. Given the fact that our friends on the other side are going to focus on that bill this particular week, I think it might be a good idea to have a vote on it, on the pending bill.

It would be my intent to offer an amendment that I know my friend does not support, but nevertheless many Americans would like to know. Since we have spent a good deal of time positioning over the last few months on various and assorted issues, I think it would be appropriate to have a vote on the repeal of ObamaCare, and I hope to be able to offer that amendment during the pendency of the bill on cyber security, which we believe will be open to amendments. I wonder if my friend thinks that might be something both sides might agree would be a good idea.

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I wonder if the official reporter could show the big smile on my face. Can my colleagues imagine how ridiculous my friend the Republican leader's statement is. Listen to what he said. We are doing cyber security. We have talked about the dangers of cyber security if we don't do something about it. He is now telling me he wants a vote to repeal all the stuff I just talked about on the cyber security bill? That is very difficult to comprehend.

I think we should understand that I don't think a woman getting contraception has a thing to do with shutting down the power grids in America or the financial services in America or our water systems or our sewer systems. That is what cyber security is all about, not whether a woman can have contraception or whether she can have a wellness check to find out if she has cancer from not having had a mammogram.

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, will the majority leader yield for a question?

Mr. REID. I would be happy to yield.

Mr. DURBIN. I would like to ask the majority leader, do I remember correctly that the very first amendment on the Transportation bill was offered by Senator BLUNT of Missouri on family planning? So is there a family planning amendment available on every bill now that will be offered by the Republican side?

I know the House Republicans have had 30 or 33 votes to repeal ObamaCare. Are we going to try to match them with similar efforts in the Senate?

Mr. REID. My response to my friend is this: I try to be very calm about things in life generally, especially things here on the floor, but I can't remain very calm about this. I have, as do a lot of people I know, 16 grandchildren. They are evenly divided between boys and girls. I want my granddaughters to be treated so that if they want to go get some contraception, have some contraceptive device while in school at New York University or Berkeley—I am bragging that they got into those schools—they should have the ability to do that.

I just can't imagine what we are talking about here on the Senate floor. Cyber security is one of the most important—it is the most important issue, as I have already said. If my colleagues want to talk to General Petraeus, he will tell us about what it is, or General Dempsey will tell us what the important issue is. The No. 1 issue today is whether we are going to have bad people attack our country and shut it down. Now we are here being asked if we are going to have a vote, on cyber security, as to when my grandchildren can have contraception.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Republican leader.

Mr. MCCONNELL. I guess the answer is no.

My friends are going to spend the week lauding the advantages as they see them of an immensely unpopular bill that was passed a couple of years ago on a straight party-line vote—ObamaCare. Yet, in a week in which, apparently, they are going to laud the various positions of it, they are not willing to have a vote in support of it. So I gather that is a vote we will not have. I will request the opportunity to do that again. After listening to my good friend the majority leader, I anticipate such a request would likely be blocked.

On another matter—

Mr. REID. Mr. President, my friend asked me a question.

Mr. MCCONNELL. I believe I have the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Republican leader has the floor.

Mr. REID. OK. I won't answer the question then.

DEFENSE SEQUESTER

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, 4 years after the great recession began, millions of Americans are still looking for work, millions more have literally dropped out of the workforce altogether, and uncertainty about our Nation's future continues to spread. The stories of disappointment and of loss haven't diminished; they have, in fact, multiplied.

What is worse, a President who was elected on a pledge that he would turn all those things around is still pointing the finger at his predecessor. Three and a half years after he took office, he is acting as though he just showed up. I think most Americans are smart enough to know he has made things worse. He has hammered small businesses with a barrage of new regulations, with dozens more in the pipeline. He expects them to plan for the future without even knowing what their tax and health care liabilities will be. Last week he even spearheaded a legislative effort to take even more of what nearly 1 million of these small businesses earn, and then he told Republicans that if we don't go along with it, he will raise taxes on everybody else.

That was the message last week: Either give me what I want—raise taxes on 1 million of our most successful small businesses—or we will let everybody's taxes go up, is what he said at the end of the week. In other words, he used small businesses as little more than a bargaining chip. The week before that he told business owners that they are not really responsible for what they have built. Listen to that. To business owners, the President said: You are not really responsible for what you have built. No amount of White House spin or manufactured outrage can change what the President said in Roanoke, and no amount of finger-pointing can change the fact that his policies have actually made things worse.

But what is most upsetting to a lot of us is the fact that the administration pretends its policies would help the economy or create jobs when it knows they won't. It knows these policies are not going to create any jobs. What is most upsetting is the deception that lies at the heart of so many of the sales jobs, from health care to the stimulus.

Americans wanted the President to focus on jobs, and he focused on a health care bill that we now learn not only includes a tax on the middle class but will lead to hundreds of thousands of fewer jobs. Now the President claims he is fighting for the middle class, but

3½ years into his Presidency their wages are still stagnant while their dependency on government assistance actually continues to rise. Wages are stagnant, and dependence on government assistance continues to rise.

In some cases the President doesn't even bother with the sales jobs; he just keeps his plans a secret. That is what we are now seeing with the defense cuts he demanded during last year's budget negotiations. Literally for weeks, Republicans asked the President to tell the American people how he planned to carry out these cuts. He refused.

Mr. President, the Senate is not in order.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senate will be in order.

The Republican leader.

Mr. MCCONNELL. As I was saying, for weeks Republicans asked the President to tell the American people how he plans to carry out these cuts. He simply refused to do so. So last week Congress passed legislation requiring him to do so. In fact, it cleared the Senate, I believe, unanimously.

Then yesterday there was this: An Assistant Secretary down at the Department of Labor is now telling people they are under no legal obligation to let employees know if they will lose their jobs as a result of these cuts. Let me say that again. We have an Assistant Secretary of Labor who just yesterday said that employers are under no legal obligation to tell their employees they may lose their jobs as a result of these cuts. In other words, the President is trying to keep those folks in the dark about whether they can expect to lose their jobs. Why? Well, I think it is pretty obvious: to insulate himself from the political fallout that will result. The President doesn't want people reading about pink slips in the weeks before his election, so the White House is telling people to keep the effects of these cuts a secret—don't tell anybody, he says, keep it a secret—until, of course, after the election. Once again, a President who holds himself out as a great defender of the middle class and the goals of organized labor is putting his own political goals ahead of the hard-working Americans who will be affected by these policies. Rather than let those who will be affected by the cuts know about them, he will make everybody nervous.

For 3½ years—3½ long years—this President has pushed an ideological agenda without regard for the consequences it would have on the very middle-class Americans he purports to defend.

The President may not want to admit it, but the economic mess we are in is his legacy—his legacy. After 3½ years of finger-pointing—3½ years of finger-pointing—he owes it to the American people to be straight about it.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.