

Almost a half century later, at the end of World War II, Congress formerly recognized the pledge, but it was not yet a Senate staple, not until 10 years ago, when a New Hampshire schoolgirl wrote to Senator Bob Smith of New Hampshire and asked why the Senate did not recite the pledge every morning. She noted the House of Representatives recited it and her school did but not the Senate. Francis Bellamy would have been proud. The line he wrote to instill allegiance in schoolchildren ultimately became part of the Senate procedure at the behest of a student from New Hampshire.

We now recite the Pledge of Allegiance before any Senate business begins, and we are reminded of our common procedures and our shared loyalty, despite our often opposing outlooks politically.

The first day the pledge was recited in public schools across the country was Columbus Day in 1892. So ahead of this Columbus Day, which will fall this coming Monday, I take a brief moment to remind my fellow Senators and all those who are watching and listening to the Senate of one of our newest and proudest traditions, the salute to our flag.

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 proceed to a period of morning business for up to 1 hour, 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 the Republicans controlling the final half.

The Senator from Washington State is recognized.

HEALTH CARE

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, I have been troubled recently by some of the claims I have heard about health insurance reform legislation that we have been working on in the Senate. When I spoke on the floor earlier this July, I said all you had to do was look at a newspaper, turn on cable news to see that the rhetoric on health insurance reform was heating up.

Unfortunately, as is often the case, the debate has not gotten any better, but it certainly has gotten louder. I know there is a lot of concern out there, and there is a lot of bad information going around.

The latest outrageous claim about reform is it would hurt America's seniors. I am here to tell our seniors and their families: That claim is false. I

wish to make this perfectly clear: We are not proposing, here in the Senate, to cut Medicare benefits or to do anything to negatively affect the health of those who are receiving Medicare.

When you hear rumors about how reform will affect seniors, consider the source. Listen to some of the inflammatory quotes. A Republican Member of the House of Representatives said: "Let me tell you here and now, it is socialized medicine."

Another Republican Congressman said: "We cannot stand idly by now as the Nation is urged to embark on an ill-conceived adventure in government medicine, the end of which no one can see, and from which the patient is certain to be the ultimate sufferer."

Those are not quotes about the current health insurance reform effort. Those statements were made in 1965, when Republicans were opposing the establishment of Medicare. Their position has not changed. Republicans have voted against Medicare almost 60 times in the last 10 years. Now, all of a sudden, Republicans are claiming Democrats support cutting Medicare benefits.

That is why last Sunday the New York Times said Republicans are: "Obscuring and twisting the facts and spreading unwarranted fear." Scoring cheap political points does not do anything at all to help Americans get affordable health insurance. Our families, and especially our seniors, deserve better.

You do not have to go back too far to find a perfect example of this Senate's history on that subject. Just last year, Democrats overcame a Republican filibuster and a veto by then-President Bush to pass the Medicare Improvements for Patients and Providers Act. That bill prevented physicians from suffering cuts in the rate at which Medicare reimburses them for providing care to seniors.

If those cuts had happened, many doctors would have been forced to stop treating patients with Medicare, severely limiting seniors' access to health care. Democrats wanted to make sure there were enough doctors to go around, and we did.

That bill also made commonsense fixes to Medicare, including requiring that Medicare cover cardiac and pulmonary rehabilitation programs, lowering seniors' copayments for mental health services, and preventing cuts to vital oxygen equipment and wheelchairs.

That bill should not have been controversial. It was vetoed by President Bush. When the Senate had a chance to pass the bill over that veto, it was only the Republicans, almost 60 percent of those in the Senate, who sided with President Bush and said no to our seniors.

Actions speak louder than words. So do not be fooled when Republicans tell you Democrats do not want to protect Medicare or that health insurance reform will not be good for seniors.

The truth is, the Democratic proposal will help our seniors get the care and coverage they need and have earned. This should come as no surprise to anyone. After all, Democrats have had a long history of working to improve the health and general well-being of seniors. Democrats created Medicare over the objections of Republicans because we recognized that no American should go without health care, especially once they reach retirement age.

The American people know it has been Democrats who have been protecting Medicare for seniors since we created the program 44 years ago. Nothing has changed. Today, it is still Democrats who are fighting for better, more affordable health care for everyone, especially our seniors. Specifically, our plan moves toward closing that doughnut hole in prescription drug coverage and provides access to more affordable generic drugs. If you have Medicare, our plan makes recommended preventative services such as colonoscopies and mammograms free.

It will ensure that if you have Medicare you get a free physical every year, not just when you enroll in the program. Our plan will aggressively attack the fraud and abuse that raises Medicare costs for seniors and for all of us as taxpayers.

One thing that has been too often missing from this discussion is what will happen to Medicare if there is no reform. It is now projected that as early as 2017, if we do not make changes, the money Medicare spends on benefits and services will be greater than its income. At that point, seniors would have to pay a greater portion of their health care costs or receive fewer Medicare benefits. That is unacceptable.

Our current system is unsustainable. That is one of the reasons the non-partisan AARP supports reform this year. They know, like we do, that we must protect Medicare for our seniors over both the short term and the long term. Our plan will prevent cost increases and overpayments to insurance companies in order to keep Medicare out of the red. Now is the time to act on health care. Let me be clear. Under the Republican plan, insurance companies can dump you for preexisting conditions because you are a woman, because you are getting older, because you get sick, and Medicare will face bankruptcy.

Under our plan, if you like what you have, you keep it. If you don't we will provide affordable choices for you. We are going to protect Medicare. We will not raise taxes on the middle class, and we will not add a dime to the deficit.

Every day 14,000 more Americans lose their health insurance. That has to stop. This is not only about those who don't have coverage. The cost of treatment for the uninsured is passed on to every taxpayer. It is estimated that a family of four pays a hidden tax of