

from the office of

Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts

REMARKS OF SENATOR EDWARD M. KENNEDY

WORKSHOP ON HEALTH CARE

DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL COMMITTEE

MID-TERM CONVENTION

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I am proud to be here with all of you today. I am proud of our country, proud of the Democratic Party, and proud of the dream we have for America and our future.

Since the time of Jefferson and Jackson, the Democratic Party has always held its standard high. As a party, we have stood for action, hope and progress in meeting the people's basic needs. We are not a party of reaction or retreat. We are not the party of McKinley or Harding. We are not the party of Coolidge or Hoover.

At our best, we have had leaders with both the vision to see the path, and the skill to guide the nation forward, to bring us closer to our historic goals:

- Woodrow Wilson saw a world at peace.
- Franklin Roosevelt lit a candle in the darkness of the depression.
- Harry Truman raised Europe to its feet after the devastation of war.
- John Kennedy touched the hearts of youth and launched the longest period of economic growth and price stability in our history.
- Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey brought the dream of equality closer to reality.
- And Jimmy Carter has led us to the threshold of peace in the Middle East and given America world leadership in the cause of human rights.

We meet, however, at a time of caution and uncertainty in the land. The hopes and dreams of millions of citizens are riding on our leadership.

Sometimes a party must sail against the wind. We cannot afford to drift or lie at anchor. We cannot heed the call of those who say it is time to furl the sail.

We know that some things in America today are wrong. It is wrong that prices are rising as rapidly as they are.

But it is also wrong that millions of our fellow citizens are out of work. It is wrong that cities are struggling against decay. It is wrong that women and minorities are denied their equal rights. And it is wrong that millions who are sick cannot afford the care they need.

I support the fight against inflation. But no fight against inflation can be effective or successful unless the fight is fair. The party that tore

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itself apart over Vietnam in the 1960's cannot afford to tear itself apart today over budget cuts in basic social programs.

There could be few more divisive issues for America and for our party than a Democratic policy of drastic slashes in the federal budget at the expense of the elderly, the poor, the black, the sick, the cities and the unemployed.

There must be sacrifice if we are to bring the economy back to health. But the burden must be fairly shared by all. We cannot accept a policy that asks greater sacrifice from labor than from business. We cannot accept a policy that cuts spending to the bone in areas like jobs and health, but allows billions of dollars in wasteful spending for tax subsidies to continue, and adds even greater fat and waste through inflationary spending for defense.

Our workshop here on health care will clarify this crucial point about priorities in spending federal dollars. One of the most shameful things about modern America is that in our unbelievably rich land, the quality of health care available to many of our people is unbelievably poor, and the cost is unbelievably high.

That is why national health insurance is the great unfinished business on the agenda of the Democratic Party. Our party gave Social Security to the nation in the 1930's. We gave Medicare to the nation in the 1960's. And we can bring national health insurance to the nation in the 1970's.

One of the saddest ironies in the worldwide movement for social justice in the twentieth century is that America now stands virtually alone in the international community on national health insurance. It seems that every nation is out of step but Uncle Sam. With the sole exception of South Africa, no other industrial nation in the world leaves its citizens in fear of financial ruin because of illness.

A generation after Franklin Roosevelt set the noble goals of freedom from want and freedom from fear, large numbers of Americans are deprived of decent health care and are fearful of the bills they may be forced to pay.

For a very few, for whom the need is least, we have already made a start on national health insurance.

-- We've got national health insurance for the rich, who deduct the cost of major illness on their income tax returns. And the richer you are, the higher the percentage of your health bill you can charge to the IRS.

-- We've got national health insurance for members of the Senate and House of Representatives. They give their speeches and cast their votes in Congress. And then they go out to Walter Reed Army Hospital or Bethesda Naval Hospital for the free medical and dental care that Uncle Sam provides.

That isn't fair. If national health insurance is good enough for the wealthy and good enough for Congress, then it is good enough for every American citizen in every city, town and village and on every farm throughout this land.

There are some who say we cannot afford national health insurance. They say it has become an early casualty of the war against inflation. But the truth is, we cannot afford not to have national health insurance.

Health care in 1978 has become the fastest-growing failing business in America. Costs are out of control. If we do nothing, if all we do is drift with the present system, the cost of health care in America will climb from \$175 billion this year to \$250 billion in 1981.

The rising cost of health is not just a crisis that afflicts the poor and helpless. It has hit the suburbs, too. Millions of middle income citizens face the Hobson's choice of cutting back on health or other family needs.

The average worker is lucky if his paycheck barely holds its own against inflation. Yet the cost of health in recent years has been rising twice as rapidly as the Consumer Price Index. There is not enough money to go around. Something has to give. And it is often the family's budget for health that is the first to go.

Every day, parents are deciding whether they can afford the \$25 doctor office charge and the \$25 laboratory bill when their child is sick. Elderly citizens are deciding whether to spend for food or rent or health. Young Americans are gambling on their health, signing up for cut-rate, fly-by-night insurance schemes because their budgets cannot afford the price for a decent health insurance policy.

Only through national health insurance can we achieve the effective controls on costs that will bring inflation down and bring adequate health care within financial reach of every citizen.

More than most Americans, I know what it means to have serious illness in the family. My father was crippled by a stroke and required constant care for years. My son was stricken by cancer, and is well today because of the miracle of American medicine. A decade ago, I myself was hospitalized for several months, my back broken in many places.

Fortunately, our family could afford to pay for all the care we needed. And so the tragedy of serious illness for those we loved was not compounded by the additional tragedy of a heavy financial burden.

Together, we can lift that financial burden from all the families of America. Through national health insurance, we can provide a decent health care system for the benefit of the people of this land. We can make health care a basic right for all, not just an expensive privilege for the few.

But to achieve the reform we need, we must have genuine leadership by the Democratic Party. We are heirs of a great tradition in American public life. Our party took up the cause of jobs for the unemployed in the Great Depression. Our party took up the cause of civil rights for black and brown Americans, and the cause of equal rights for women in America and the people of the District of Columbia.

In that same tradition of leadership, it is time for the Democratic Party now to take up the cause of health.

If we care about our party, if we care about the future of our nation, let us honor the commitment of our platform. Let us pledge in Memphis, at this convention of our party, to make health care a right for all our people now.

(Attached is a summary of the proposal for national health insurance supported by Senator Kennedy and the Committee for National Health Insurance.)