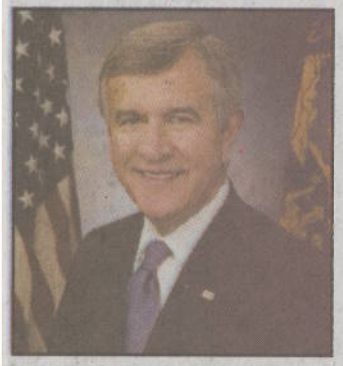
Senate Bill Last Line of Defense for Life



by Sen. Mike Johanns (R-NE)

Last January, few would have predicted President Obama's first major legislative initiative would be in serious jeopardy a year later. One of the primary reasons the Senate health care bill has stalled is because of its attempt to undermine a nearly thirty-five-year precedent of federal law that has kept federal tax dollars from funding elective abortions. This precedent comes in several forms, most notably as the Hyde Amendment, which has been included in every health care-related appropriations bill since 1976 and strictly bans the federal funding of abortions (except in the case of rape, incest, or endangerment of the mother's life). Yet over the past year, the Obama Administration has, on more than one occasion, begun to dangerously erode the bright line between your federal tax dollars and abortion. The Senate health care bill is a direct affront to the Hyde Amendment, eradicating decades of Senate bipartisan agreement.

The House of Representatives succeeded in preserving this long-standing policy. Language authored by Congressman Bart Stupak, a pro-life Democrat, extended Hyde-like provisions to the House health care bill, which prohibits federal funding for abortions. The Senate could have done the same, and continued to pursue health care solutions while recognizing the current law of the land. Instead, the Senate bill violates the clear intent of the Hyde amendment by allowing elective abortion coverage in the taxpayer-subsidized insurance exchanges. It would enable states to opt out of providing abortion coverage. However, if a state opts out, its taxpayers would still finance abortion in other states. It would also lead to a government agency, the Office of Personnel Management, administering insurance plans that for the first time offer abortion services—a clear deviation from the Hyde Amendment precedent.

I saw this reality coming months ago when the Senate was preparing for a vote to begin debate on health care reform. Without 60 pro-life votes in the Senate, it was imperative to get the Stupak language included before debate began. I went to the Senate floor multiple times to make it very clear that any pro-life Senator must vote against beginning debate until the Stupak language was included in the bill. Yet many pro-life Democrats ignored my warning; as a result, the Stupak language was voted down in the Senate. Now these pro-life Democrats find themselves in the sticky situation of supporting a bill that is resoundingly pro-abortion.

Advancement of a pro-abortion agenda should surprise no one. One of the President's first executive decisions last January was to reverse the Mexico City policy, which had effectively banned all American entities from using your tax dollars to perform or promote abortion services in foreign countries. They are now free to do so. Later in the year, the President issued another reversal, this time to enable the use of embryonic stem cells for scientific experiments. Congress finds itself at a historic crossroads: should the health care bill pass with the Senate abortion language, it will have handed another victory to what is now an increasingly active pro-abortion Obama Administration.

By attempting to essentially sneak abortion expansion into health care reform, Democrat leaders in the Senate have only served to stir up a hornets' nest where there has long been bipartisan agreement in health care policymaking. The Stupak Amendment has become a rallying cry for pro-life supporters across the country. Yet, Senate Democrats have chosen to ignore the House of Representatives, public opinion, and a thirty-five-year legislative precedent in their attempt to open the door to federally funded abortions.

Few moral obligations are as crystal clear as the preservation of innocent life and this stubborn defiance of precedent and the moral will of the American people is unacceptable. We must not relent on this issue. To fall silent now would be to abandon all that has been gained for innocent life since the Hyde Amendment was first passed. The message is simple, yet overwhelming: keep federal tax dollars away from elective abortion.