

Bush and Big Tobacco: a CHIP off the old Block

By J.B. Harris

Since taking office in 2000, President Bush has vetoed only one piece of legislation relating to stem cell research. Another veto is looming, however, that targets one of the most unlikely programs: health insurance for low income, uninsured children. For a President who wants “no child left behind,” this should come as a shock.

On July 19, 2007, a bipartisan coalition of the Senate Finance Committee approved renewal of the Children’s Health Insurance Program, known as CHIP, or S-CHIP, for the \$5 billion Congress provides to states annually to fund CHIP programs.

The renewal, which Congress will vote on in its the upcoming session, would maintain health coverage for 6.6 million children covered by CHIP today -- including 800,000 who will lose their coverage without these additional funds -- and would bring dependable health coverage to an additional 3.2 million low-income, uninsured American children in the next five years.

By a vote of 17-4, the committee has called for an additional \$35 billion to expand CHIP, with a proposed a 61-cent tax increase on cigarettes to fund the expansion. If enacted, this measure would bring the federal excise taxes on cigarettes to a dollar a pack.

Rejecting the plan outright as a move toward “government run health care,” Bush proposes only a \$5 billion expansion over the same period, with no increase in cigarette taxes. *New York Times* reporter Robert Pear summarized the Bush argument this way: “The tax is highly regressive and falls more heavily on lower income people, among whom smoking is more prevalent.”

An incredible statement given that such a tax would have the salutary effect of reducing smoking among lower income people -- including minorities and underage smokers -- thereby alleviating many of the illnesses that CHIP funds are aimed at curing and preventing.

Indeed, according to a Surgeon General’s report, demand for cigarettes drops by 4 percent for every 10 percent increase in cigarette prices. Demand falls even more among teenage and underage smokers, who don’t have as much discretionary income to spend on cigarettes.

Insofar as the rates of smoking related illnesses in lower income communities are among the highest in the nation, the necessity for such legislation seems unassailable. Bowing to the interest of big tobacco, however, Bush has promised to oppose these goals -- approved by members of his own party -- with a veto.

To appreciate Bush’s level of cynicism directed toward children’s healthcare, one must understand the tobacco industry’s lock on the Republican Party. A September 2006 joint

report published by industry watchdogs, Tobacco-Free Kids Action Fund and Common Cause, exposed the tobacco industry's campaign contributions to Republican politicians.

The report states, "Since 1997, tobacco interests have given more than \$32.8 [to politicians]," with Republicans having received more than \$26 million, or 79% of the total. Even more obscene is the fact that tobacco lobbying expenditures from January 1, 1999 to December 31, 2005 totaled \$152,452,350. During the same period lobbyists lavished on lawmakers \$50 million worth of perks, like flights on corporate jets and all expense paid trips.

Also, Big Tobacco is married the Bush White House through a series of relationships, such as those with Karl Rove, Bush's longtime senior White House adviser, who worked as a political consultant for the Philip Morris from 1991 to 1996; Kirk Blalock, a Philip Morris public- relations official, who took a job in the White House as a liaison to the business community; Thomas Collamore (coincidentally the author's former college roommate), who not only handled inaugural donations for Philip Morris and was vice president for public affairs, he also worked for President Bush's father, both in the White House and the Commerce Department; and Charles Black, an informal adviser to Mr. Bush during his campaign, also a Philip Morris lobbyist in Washington.

Given Bush's lap-dog loyalty to the cigarette industry, the industry's seamless relationship with the Republican Party and their conjoined willingness to exploit underprivileged minorities -- especially African Americans -- it's easy to see why Bush would threaten to veto the expansion of CHIP based on a cigarette tax increase.

The irony is that the tobacco companies' blood money could be used to save the lives of millions of underprivileged, uninsured children, rather than line the pockets of Bush and his cronies. However, in light of Bush's threat to torpedo this bi-partisan initiative, what more should we expect from a calcified White House that cares so little for society's most vulnerable.

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