

We will continue to keep a close eye on Kentucky and other States in the affected region, and make sure people have everything they need to clean up, rebuild, and reclaim their dignity from the wreckage of this tragedy.

I yield the floor.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, leadership time is reserved.

MOVING AHEAD FOR PROGRESS IN THE 21ST CENTURY ACT

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the Senate will resume consideration of S. 1813, which the clerk will report.

The assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (S. 1813) to reauthorize Federal aid highway and highway safety construction programs, and for other purposes.

Pending:

Reid amendment No. 1730, of a perfecting nature.

Reid (for Blunt) amendment No. 1520 (to amendment No. 1730), to amend the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act to protect rights of conscience with regard to requirements for coverage of specific items and services

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, there will now be 90 minutes equally divided and controlled between the two leaders or their designees.

The Senator from Louisiana is recognized.

Mr. VITTER. Mr. President, I rise in strong, passionate support of the Blunt amendment. It is a very important amendment which we will be voting on as an entire Senate at 11 a.m. this morning.

The Blunt amendment is an absolutely necessary measure to fix what is a very egregious overstepping of the bounds of government in terms of the newly articulated ObamaCare mandate on religion. As we all know through the debate and discussion of the last several weeks, the Obama administration has made it clear that everyone, including persons of faith, including religious institutions, are not only going to be forced to buy a product in the marketplace—and many of us think that itself is unprecedented and unconstitutional—but it gets worse because they will be forced to buy a product in the marketplace that violates their conscience, that violates their core beliefs.

Catholics and many other Christians, many people of faith, do not believe in certain activity and treatment that is mandated now to be covered by this mandatory insurance. That is crossing a line we have never before crossed in this country, in terms of government power, government mandates, and government intrusion into the conscience of others and to the free exercise of religion. We absolutely need to fix this.

This is a fundamental conscience issue. This is a freedom of religion issue. That is exactly why it is so important.

Let me also clarify, this is not merely about contraception. Folks on the other side of the debate and most of the media constantly put it merely in those terms. First of all, those measures in and of themselves violate the conscience of many Americans. But, second, it is not just about that, it is about abortion, it is about abortion-inducing drugs such as Plan B, it is about sterilization. Clearly, the government mandating Americans to buy, to pay for, to subsidize these measures violates the conscience of tens and tens of millions of Americans. That is why we must act, hopefully today, starting today, by passing the Blunt amendment.

The arguments made on the other side, when we look at them carefully, do not hold water. First of all, there is President Obama's so-called accommodation, so-called compromise, which is not an accommodation and is not a meaningful compromise at all. What did he say? He said: OK. We are not going to make Americans, persons of faith, religious institutions buy coverage they have moral qualms with. We are merely going to make the insurance provider provide that coverage whether the customer wants it or not. Well, that is a completely superficial and completely meaningless word game. The insurer is providing this how? What payment is supporting it? The only payment the insurer is getting is from a customer who objects to the coverage. So who is supporting it? Who is paying for it? Clearly this is a word game. If it weren't clear enough for the typical person or institution involved, what about institutions—and there are many of them—which are self-insured? What about the University of Notre Dame, Catholic University, or Catholic institutions? They don't go to an insurance company to buy insurance; they are self-insured. That word game doesn't even work on the surface there. Those cases number in the hundreds or thousands around the country, and that is a clear example of how that so-called compromise or accommodation is merely a sleight of hand and a word game.

Another argument which the other side has made in this debate is that somehow correcting this situation through the Blunt amendment or through similar measures will shut down access to these services. That is patently not true. These services, these medicines, and other treatments are widely available in every community across the country at little cost or no cost for folks who cannot afford it, and that is not going to change. It is absolutely not necessary to tear away religious liberty and violate conscience rights of millions of Americans with that argument in mind. It isn't true.

That is why respected religious leaders, such as Cardinal-designate Tim-

othy Dolan, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, has argued strenuously and passionately against this mandate. Cardinal-designate Dolan said:

Never before has the Federal Government forced individuals and organizations to go out into the marketplace and buy a product that violates their conscience. This shouldn't happen in a land where free exercise of religion ranks first in the Bill of Rights.

And so that is what it comes down to, free exercise of religion and fundamental conscience protection. The first amendment to the Constitution, the first item in the Bill of Rights, it doesn't get much headier or more significant than that, and that is what this is all about. Again, it is all about, yes, contraception, but abortion, abortion-inducing pills like Plan B, and sterilization.

Mr. President, please assure me that the free exercise of religion is not now a partisan issue. Please assure me that we are going to correct this situation and not allow this egregious overstepping of the bounds of the power of government. We must act to stop this grave injustice, and I hope we start that process in a very serious way today by voting positively and passing the Blunt amendment.

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from New Jersey.

Mr. LAUTENBERG. Mr. President, we are engaged in the business of the Senate, and it is not always discernible that it is the business of the people. What we see taking place these days is a principle mantra of Republicans on the campaign trail seeking more freedom for the American people. The Republicans like to say they "don't want government interfering in people's lives." Then I ask: Why the devil are we debating a Republican amendment that limits a woman's freedom to make her own health care choices? With women, the Republicans have a different idea about freedom. They want government to interfere in the most personal aspects of women's lives.

The amendment offered by the Senator from Missouri, the Blunt amendment, will allow a woman's employer to deny coverage for any medical service that they, the employer, have a moral problem with. Imagine that. Your boss is going to decide whether you are acting morally. The Republicans want to take us forward to the Dark Ages again when women were property that they could easily control and even trade if they wanted to. It is appalling that we are having this debate in the 21st century.

Yesterday we heard something astounding. It came from Rush Limbaugh, who is a prime voice of modern conservatism in this country. Yesterday he said—and I had it checked because I wanted to be sure that I am not misquoting anything—that a woman who wants affordable birth control is "a prostitute." Talking