

SEPTEMBER 4, 2003

**SCHAKOWSKY JOINS SENIORS TO FIGHT
REPUBLICAN PLANS TO DISMANTLE MEDICARE**

WASHINGTON, D.C. - U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) today delivered a speech to hundreds of seniors preparing to descend on Congress to lobby against a Republican bill that would eliminate Medicare. Schakowsky promised to continue to fight alongside seniors and members of organizations like the Alliance for Retired Americans against the Republican passed prescription drug bill and plans by the Bush Administration to dismantle Medicare.

Below is the full text of Schakowsky's speech:

I am honored to be here today and to be escorted by some of the most valiant fighters for senior citizens and consumers that I know. We have worked long and hard together for many years, when I was the executive director of the Illinois Council of Senior Citizens, when I served in the Illinois legislature, and now that I am in Congress.

I also want to thank George Kourpias, Ed Coyle, Rich Fiesta and the entire staff and membership of the Alliance for Retired Americans. Our nation has never needed you more than we need you today.

We know that the Republican Party has never liked Medicare. In 1995, Bob Dole even bragged about voting against Medicare -- before he was defeated in his presidential campaign. You had to fight them to get Medicare passed in 1965. And, ever since, they have tried to destroy this precious program.

Remember Newt Gingrich - the guy who wanted Medicare to wither on the vine? Well, he's back. As reported in yesterday's The Hill newspaper, Newt "one of the most controversial figures in Medicare's annals, is playing a surprisingly significant role in congressional discussions to revamp the system." He is advising the Administration and the Republican leadership.

Let me ask you - do you think that Newt Gingrich is advocating for your interests?

What about Bill Thomas - the chair of the Medicare conference committee? He's not hiding his agenda either. In June he said, "To those who say that (the bill) would end Medicare as we know it, our answer is: We certainly hope so." Do you want to rely on him?

Then we get to President Bush - who has been trying to privatize Social Security and Medicare since he became President. George Bush has been traveling the country building his campaign war chest, and the pharmaceutical industry CEOs are some of his

favorite contributors. Last year, they gave Republicans over \$20 million. When it comes time to decide which side he's on - who do you think George Bush is going to choose - drug companies or you?

My brothers and sisters, when I'm asked who to trust to do the right thing on Medicare and prescription drugs (or anything else) Newt Gingrich, Bill Thomas or President Bush don't come to mind. My answer is the Alliance for Retired Americans and all of you who have been fighting for working families, seniors and consumers all your lives.

I spoke on the House floor during the debate on H.R. 1. I talked about my experiences at the Illinois Council of Senior Citizens, when senior citizens around the country mobilized against the catastrophic bill. I talked about how senior citizens are too smart to be fooled by a bad bill. I didn't threaten but I gave them a friendly warning to either vote against the bill or get in shape and get their running shoes ready. I knew that you would hold members of Congress accountable for their votes and, if they chose to support drug companies' interests over seniors' interests, you'd show up to demand an explanation and an apology.

In Illinois, Speaker Hastert simply closed down his Batavia office when he knew that the Alliance for Retired Americans members were coming. But I know the Alliance members from my state - and I know that you will be back, forcing Speaker Hastert to justify his vote against seniors.

In Florida, Katherine Harris had security guards take your materials so that she could try to hide the truth. She may have helped George Bush steal the election, but I know you will not let her steal your message or destroy our Medicare.

In Pennsylvania, you confronted Senator Santorum, the man who said he believes "the standard benefit, the traditional Medicare program, has to be phased out." I know that you agree that it's Senator Santorum - not Medicare - that has got to go.

In Arizona, you faced down Senator Kyl - the senator who believes that it's not his job to talk with you on the phone, meet with you in person, or even take the time to schedule an appointment. Arizona Alliance members were willing to get arrested to stop Senator Kyl from destroying Medicare. We owe you a huge debt of gratitude.

All of you who phoned, called, wrote, picketed, demonstrated, faxed and emailed - you are making a tremendous difference.

Last month, the "experts" here in Washington were all predicting that George Bush and Bill Thomas and Newt Gingrich would get what they want - the elimination of Medicare as we know it. They predicted a Rose Garden signing ceremony in July. They forgot about you and all the seniors around the country. They underestimated the power of the Alliance. They ignored the organizing skills that you possess, your commitment and your passion. Now, even the most optimistic of those experts is questioning whether any bill will pass.

But, my brothers and sisters, we still have work to do and I know that when you go to Capitol Hill this afternoon and when you go home this week, you will continue to do everything you can to protect Medicare.[] []

You are going to hear three arguments when you meet with some members of the House and Senate who voted for these terrible bills.

First, they are going to tell you that they did the best they could with the money they have - that the bill you want is just too expensive.[] And you are going to hear that from people who voted not once, not twice, but three times for massive tax cuts that cost over \$3 trillion and give millionaires an average tax cut of \$96,634.[] Don't tell me that we can't afford to give you a good drug benefit.[] []

Two, they are going to tell you that they are just giving you what they've got as a member of Congress.[] Let me be perfectly clear[] - no member of the House or the Senate has a prescription drug benefit with a doughnut hole - a coverage gap so deep that you can fall into and never get out.[] We don't have a \$250 deductible - we have no drug deductible.[] Our family out-of-pocket costs for all medical costs are limited to \$4000.[] Yours as an individual would be \$3700 or more for drugs alone.[] Don't you believe it when they tell you that members of Congress and Medicare beneficiaries would be treated the same.[] It's just not true.

Three, they are going to tell you that something is better than nothing, that if you don't agree to a bill now, you will lose your chance at getting prescription drug coverage.

Again, don't believe it.

[] Is something better than nothing if it means that 1 out of 3 of you will lose retiree drug benefits - benefits that are significantly better than the lousy benefit you'd get in the Medicare bill?[] [] They will tell you it's voluntary - but how voluntary is it if your employer drops coverage and you have no where else to turn?[]

Is something better than nothing if it erases the social insurance nature of Medicare but leaving out low-income seniors altogether as the Senate bill does or introducing means-testing as in the House bill?[] Are we going to allow Medicare benefits to vary by income for the first time in its history?

Is something better than nothing if Medicare is actually prohibited from using its bargaining power to negotiate the lowest price?[] Those of you who are here from Maine achieved a great victory - passage of the Maine drug bill and winning a Supreme Court challenge.[] I am proud to say that Illinois also passed legislation creating a state negotiating mechanism to lower drug prices.[] []

We should have learned from you - 91% of all Americans believe that we should let Medicare bargain for lower drug prices.[] Instead, both the House and the Senate bills prevent that.[] Once again, drug companies profit at the expense of the rest of us.

Is something better than nothing if we let private drug companies, HMOs and insurers decide what the premium is, what cost-sharing will be required, what drugs are covered, and even whether you have to pay more to go to your local drugstore? For the first time in Medicare's history, two beneficiaries living next door to each other could pay different premiums, different copays, and be offered different coverage. Not just will your benefit vary from your neighbor's, private insurers could change your own benefit at will. You might sign up in January for a plan because it covers Lipitor, only to find that the plan has dropped it in February. No more guaranteed benefit.

Finally and most importantly, is something better than nothing if it means the end of Medicare? We are not just talking about turning the drug benefit over to private companies. Under the House bill, beginning in 2010, all of Medicare is turned into a voucher program. Even President Bush's own actuaries say that it will cost you 25% more to stay in traditional Medicare and keep your own doctors.

We all know the record of HMOs - pulling out of the market at will, increasing cost-sharing and cutting benefits. No one in their right mind would turn Medicare over to HMOs - unless, of course, they care more about HMOs than senior citizens.

Unfortunately, the President and the Republican Congressional leadership have demonstrated whose side they are on - and it's not ours.

We can defeat the Medicare bill. In a poll that was released yesterday by the Kaiser Family Foundation, 57% of Americans said that something is not better than nothing, that seniors deserve a better benefit and a better bill, even if we have to wait to get it. Only one in three thought that Congress should pass a bill that leaves seniors to pay high drug costs and that undermines Medicare.

We can win the Medicare fight because we have the people on our side. We can win because elected officials don't want you protesting in front of their offices, willing to get arrested to stop Medicare privatization.

But if we want to do more than stop a bad bill, if we want to pass a good one, we have to change the leadership in Washington.

We can do it.