Some people, all the time

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Caring for and protecting children is among the highest values of society and one of its most crucial obligations. On Wednesday, President George W. Bush vetoed a bill to renew and extend the reach of a program that provides health insurance to American children whose families can't afford it or can't get it at any price.

Last week, Democrats joined with Republicans in the House and Senate and passed the compromise bill by substantial margins. Among them were Republicans Sen. Christopher "Kit" Bond and Rep. Jo Ann Emerson of Missouri who bucked the leadership of their party to do so.

Just about everything the president and his surrogates have said about the bill is wrong. It does not cover illegal immigrants and upper-income children. It is not designed to get families to drop private insurance and, instead, get a free ride from a public program. Nor is it "socialized-type medicine," as presidential press secretary Dana Perino said last week.

Nevertheless, Bush and the Republican leadership used these demonstrably false assertions to justify vetoing a bill to continue and modestly expand the popular and remarkably successful State Children's Health Insurance Program or SCHIP. The program now covers 6.6 million children from low-income families. The bill he scorned would have removed another 3.4 children from the ranks of the uninsured.

Congress now must stand up for children's health and override the president's veto. The bill's margin of passage in the Senate was enough to do so, but its supporters in the House need to persuade about 15 opponents to switch their votes in order to make the bill law.

Those who voted against the bill will have about two weeks to reconsider before they are asked to change their minds and override the veto. In the meantime, they'd be well advised to be highly skeptical of the president's claims.

Bush said the bill "would result in taking a program meant for poor children and turning it into one that covers children in families with incomes of up to $83,000 a year." Not so.

SCHIP never was directed at "poor children" living below the poverty line; they are covered by Medicaid. SCHIP was created in 1997 to insure children in families whose incomes were too high to qualify for Medicaid, but too low to afford insurance on their own. Nor does the bill provide benefits to families earning $83,000 a year. The bill's maximum qualifying income is three times the poverty level, about $62,000 for a family of four.

Rep. Todd Akin, R-Mo., Wednesday spewed another of the Republicans' anti-SCHIP talking points. He claimed that "little hidden gizmos" in the bill are "going to provide health care to the children of illegal immigrants." In fact, the bill states that "Nothing in this act allows federal payments for individuals who are not legal residents."

Bush has said that the bill "would move millions of American children who now have private health insurance into government-run health care." In fact, the free market is doing that on its own: Last year, about 710,000 children who previously had private health insurance coverage lost it, mainly because the companies for which their parents work no longer offer health insurance to their employees.

In any case, the idea that families would suddenly flip into SCHIP plans from private insurance is ludicrous. States already require a child to be uninsured for at least six months before he can be eligible for SCHIP. Nor is SCHIP a free ride; families earning more than about $31,000 a year are required, appropriately, to pay affordable monthly premiums. Many are thrilled to do so, given that pre-existing conditions disqualify many of them from insurance coverage for their children at any price.

On Wednesday, Bush explained his veto this way: "I believe in private medicine, not the federal government running the health care system." Children with SCHIP coverage, just like participants in the Medicare program, are treated by private doctors in private medical centers. The government's role is financial, not medical.

On the other hand, when Bush, a government employee, received a colonoscopy in July, his care was provided by doctors employed by the government working in a government-owned hospital. As a former president, Bush - like his father, former president George H.W. Bush - will qualify for this same "socialized health care" for the rest of his life.

Bush's misleading rhetoric calls to mind the warning about gullibility made by a very different Republican president, Abraham Lincoln. As Congress prepares to override Bush's veto, those who voted against the SCHIP plan should take care to ensure that they're not fooled all the time.

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