# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20510

July 22, 2004

The Honorable Anthony J. Principi
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Principi:

As you will soon begin evaluating which categories of veterans may or may not be eligible for VA health care services per federal regulations, we urge you to rescind your ban on the enrollment of Priority 8 or "middle-income" veterans. The net effect of your ban is that by next year approximately 522,000 Priority 8 veterans will be shut out from receiving VA care.

We understand the demands that service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan will make on the VA health care system. For our part, we are committed to providing sufficient funding for VA health care so that all veterans have access to the system created to serve them. On February 26, 2003, you stated to the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs that the ban on Priority 8 enrollments would be temporary until you could better meet veterans' expectations. There are hundreds of thousands of veterans whose expectations are to be eligible for timely, quality VA health care. It is not an unreasonable expectation: they have fulfilled their service to this country, and it is time we met our obligation to them.

By your own account, VA has now officially tackled the backlog for health care appointments. At the Committee's FY 2005 budget hearing in February of this year, you testified that "...we have dramatically reduced the number of veterans on the waiting list for primary care." Following that statement, you pledged that the 6 months or longer wait list would be eliminated by April of this year. But with half a million veterans excluded from the system, this isn't progress; it's rationed health care.

Mr. Secretary, now is the time to reinstate access for Priority 8 veterans. With your own budget projecting a $571 million rollover into next year -- due in part to your exclusion of Priority 8 veterans this year -- conditions are ripe for you to reverse the decision.

Many Priority 8 veterans have health insurance coverage but choose to come to VA. According to the 2002 VHA Survey of Veteran Enrollees, 90% of Priority 8 veterans do in fact have their own private health insurance. We contend that patients who come to VA with health insurance should be welcomed, since they are essentially paying for their own care and consequently not placing any real financial burden on the system.

Additionally, the VA/HHS Advantage program, which would allow Medicare-eligible Priority 8 veterans to access the VA health care system, has yet to get off the ground. While this program was touted as an option for those "middle-income" veterans excluded from VA, the original target rollout date of September 2003 has come and gone. It is our understanding that no new date has been set for the commencement of this program, and that at the outset it will merely be a demonstration project in one small region of the Northeast. In the meantime, these veterans continue to be denied access to VA services, including needed prescription drug medications.

Mr. Secretary, we urge you to send the message to our troops that they will all be taken care of when they come home by again opening the VA health care system to all veterans.

Sincerely,

Bob Graham

John F. Kerry

Patty Murray

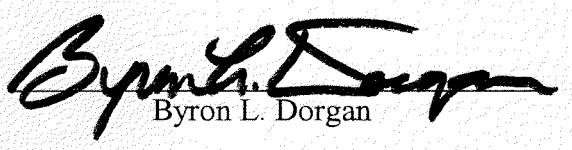
Tom Daschle

Carl Levin

Hillary Rodham Clinton

Patrick Leahy

Edward M. Kennedy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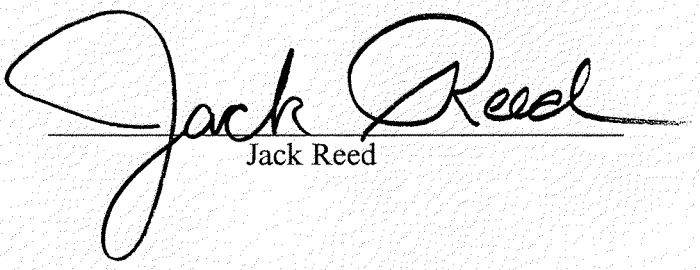
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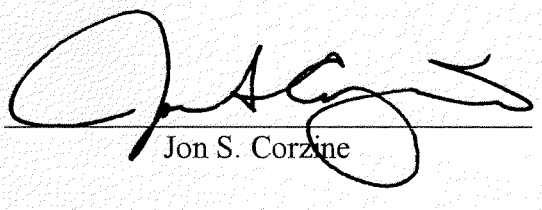
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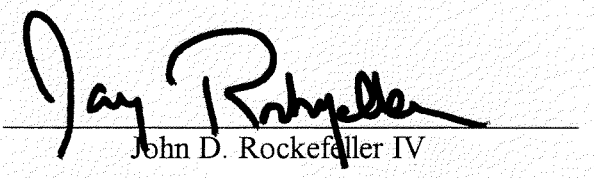
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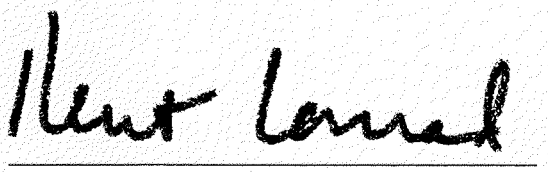
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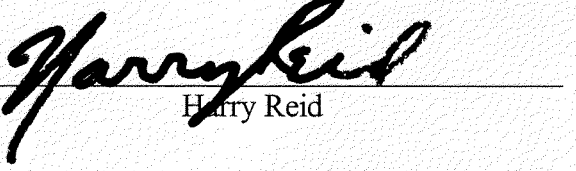
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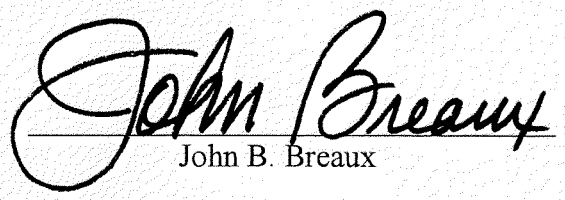
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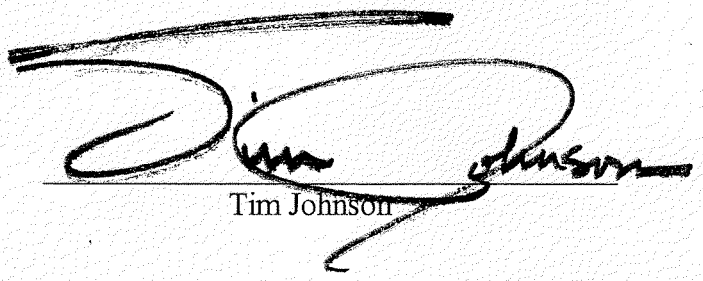
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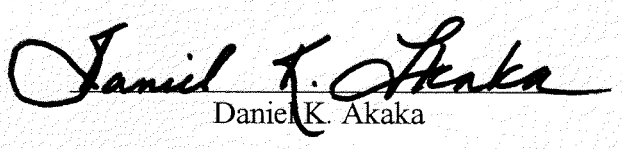
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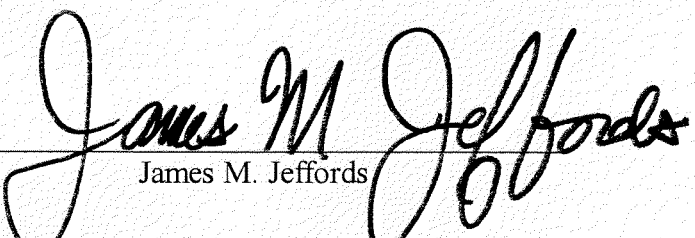
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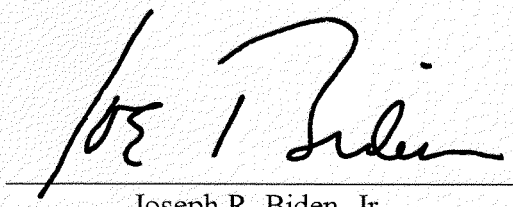
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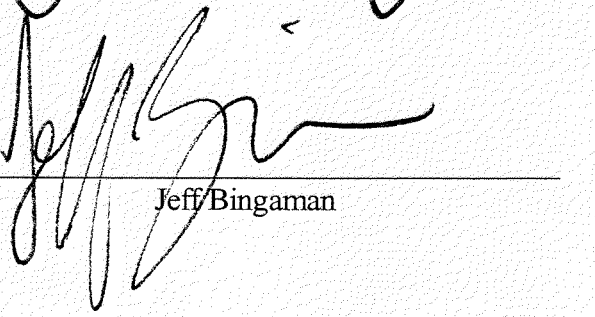
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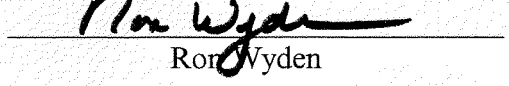
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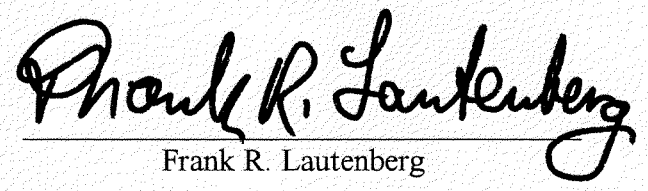
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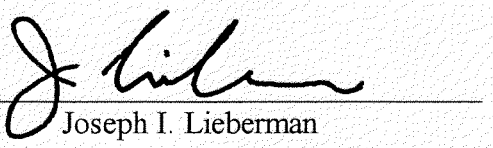
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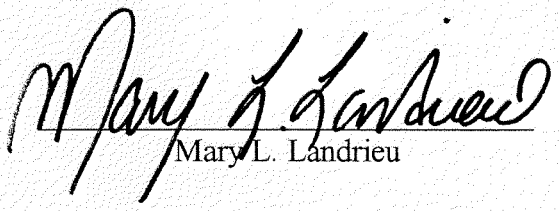
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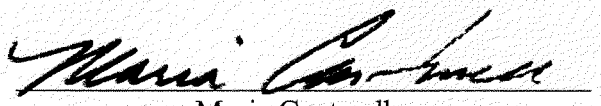
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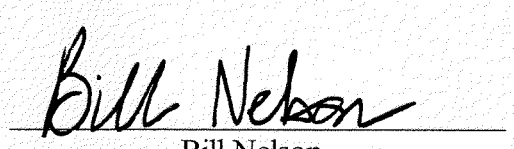
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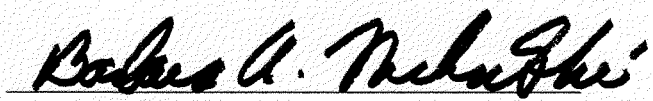
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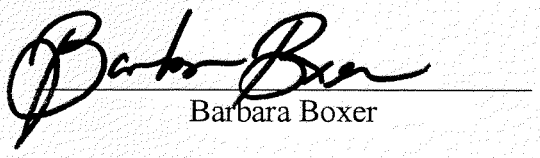
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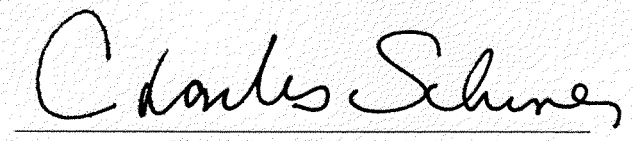
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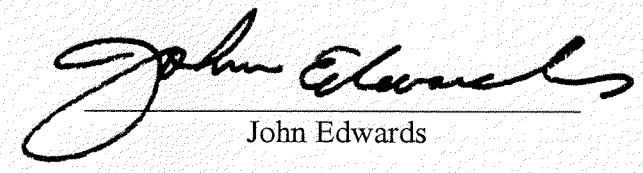
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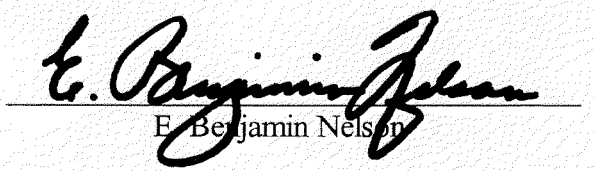
E. Benjamin Nelson

Paul S. Sarbanes

Blanche K. Lincoln