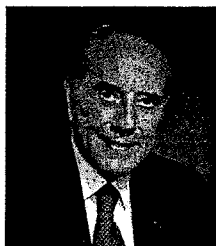


PROTECTING AMERICA'S WOUNDED WARRIORS

NOT A CHOICE, AN OBLIGATION

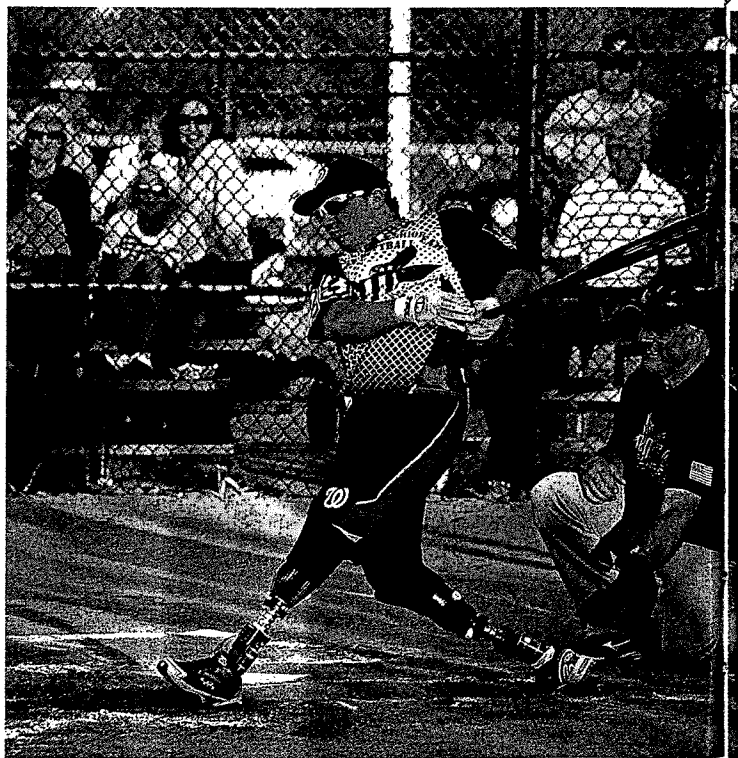
by Senator Robert J. Dole

Perspectives on the need to ratify the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities



For public servants, there are few opportunities to materially improve the lives of a broad cross section of people on both a national and global level. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)—an international treaty that would help advance the fundamental rights of individuals with disabilities from the United States and throughout the world—is such an opportunity. It would allow the U.S. to participate in formal conversations with over 100 ratified nations about how to effectively implement disability rights legislation. In essence, it would give us a seat at the table to influence disability policy on a global level. Right now, we are sitting this out.

This disability treaty is personal to me. I have been an advocate of the treaty for years, in large part because I believe it will improve conditions abroad for Americans with disabilities—including a group very close to my heart, wounded veterans. It is important to understand what this treaty does, and does not do. This treaty would:



Josh Wege, a Wounded Warrior Amputee Softball Team player, pops a ball into the Northwest Florida Military Softball Team's outfield at the Morgan Sports Center in Destin, FL., Nov. 3, 2012. The two teams played to raise awareness of the sacrifices and resilience of military members. (U.S. Air Force photo/Randy Gon)

- Provide veterans with disabilities, and all Americans, a greater opportunity to work, study, and travel abroad. That is why 21 veterans groups support the ratification of the CRPD.
- Enable the U.S. to maintain our leadership role in eliminating disability discrimination throughout the world.
- Create a level playing field for U.S. corporations by requiring businesses abroad to meet accessibility requirements similar to those we require in this country and by providing a broader market for accessible devices (many of which are manufactured in the U.S.).

Importantly, this treaty would not require a single change to U.S. law or relinquish any authority whatsoever over U.S. law.

Late last year, when the Senate first considered it, the CRPD failed to pass by just five votes. Protection and expansion of the rights of those with disabilities are typically not controversial items of debate on the Senate floor or elsewhere. At that time, however, treaty opponents in the Senate expressed concern that the CRPD would diminish American sovereignty—somehow allowing the United Nations to be able to supersede U.S. law, even by interfering with American parents' right to home-school their children.

This treaty contains reservations, understandings, and declarations (RUDs) that explicitly describe how the treaty will and will not apply to the U.S. Members of Congress are working now to improve the RUDs so that the concerns raised in the last round are finally put to rest. Soon, I believe senators will have a chance to vote on this treaty. I can only hope that political differences will be put aside in favor of bipartisan teamwork to benefit a greater good.

When Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, it was not only one of the proudest moments of my career, it was also a remarkable bipartisan achievement that made an impact on millions of Americans. The simple goal was to foster independence and dignity, and its reasonable accommodations enabled Americans with disabilities to contribute more readily to our great nation.

After passage of the ADA, America led the world in developing disability policy and equality. In ratifying the treaty, the knowledge and experience we have gained as a nation can be used on a global scale to bet-

ter the conditions for our own citizens who work and travel abroad, as well as the millions of individuals living with a disability in another country.

In 2006, President George W. Bush took U.S. leadership on this issue to a new level by negotiating and supporting approval of the CRPD. On the anniversary of the ADA in 2009, President Barack Obama signed the treaty—a landmark document that commits countries around the world to affirm what are essentially core American values of equality, justice, and dignity.

The CRPD, in a way that is both telling and unique, attracts the support of a rare variety of groups: Republicans and Democrats, veteran organizations, disability groups, businesses, and religious organizations. In this day and age, one could not hope for a more diverse array of supporters. I believe this treaty enjoys such wide appeal precisely because of its protection of human dignity—the basic principle that each life is special, that each mind has potential, and that each soul is divinely inspired.

The men and women who proudly wear our nation's uniform are owed a debt of gratitude from those of us who benefit on a daily basis from their tremendous sacrifices. When a service member is wounded and subsequently disabled, he or she deserves the same opportunities enjoyed by any other member of society. We are, and have always been, a grateful nation when it comes to our veterans. We live by an often unspoken rule of gratitude toward those who risk their lives for our freedom—able-bodied and disabled veterans alike.

Disability is a reality for many of us here in America. However, we live our lives in the same fashion as anyone else—that is, making the most of every day and living up to our potential. We, as Americans, have defined that word “potential” the same way for all our people, whether disabled or not. Our society rightly believes that physical or mental challenges should not stifle one's opportunities.

Expanding this same protection around the world is the right thing to do, for our own citizens and for those from other countries. I encourage all of you to call or write your Senators and urge them to support this very important treaty. This is not a Republican or a Democrat issue. It is one of civil rights.

Robert Joseph “Bob” Dole is an attorney and retired United States Senator from Kansas (1969-1996), who served part of that time as United States Senate Majority Leader, setting a record as the longest-serving Republican leader.

He was the Republican nominee in the 1996 U.S. Presidential election but lost the election to Bill Clinton. He was the Republican vice-presidential nominee in the 1976 U.S. Presidential election but lost the election to Walter Mondale.

Dole is special counsel at the Washington, DC, law firm of Altst and Bird.

In 2007, President George W. Bush appointed Dole as a co-chair of the commission to investigate problems at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, along with Donna Shalala. Dole is married to former cabinet member and former U.S. Senator Elizabeth Hanford Dole of North Carolina.