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U.N. disabilities convention deserves action

By Ted Kennedy, Jr.



My father, the late Sen. Edward Kennedy, instilled in me a deep appreciation for life's rare moments. Total solar eclipses and meteor showers fascinated me, but weren't nearly as precious as the few times I saw my father elated by some hard-earned major bipartisan agreement. Those rare moments of political accord offer unique opportunities for America to shine brighter and brighter. Today, our fiercely partisan Senate has that rare opportunity to come together to promote values on which America has always led: protecting rights, promoting freedoms and ensuring equality and access. The Senate has the chance to secure and expand America's leadership status by ratifying the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

CRPD is a treaty that seeks to ensure that disabled people around the world have the same rights as everyone else. It affirms our American values of dignity, empowerment, economic self-sufficiency, self-determination and non-discrimination. Furthermore, it ensures that all Americans, including our disabled veterans, enjoy the same rights outside the U.S. as they do here at home.

Like the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the CRPD enjoys broad, bipartisan Senate support. Republicans like Sens. McCain, Moran, Barrasso, Blunt, and Lugar as well as

Democrats like Sens. Durbin, Harkin, Tom Udall, Coons and Kerry, are all vocal advocates. The CRPD recently was reported by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and is ready for a full vote of the Senate. Treaty ratification requires a two-thirds majority of the Senate. U.S. sovereignty would remain fully protected. No changes to U.S. law are required by ratification because our domestic laws are so strong, but failure to ratify undermines our effectiveness as an advocate for global accessibility through the CRPD.

But no Senate vote has occurred. Meanwhile, 119 countries have ratified the treaty. Why not the U.S.? Protecting human rights and promoting the welfare of global citizens is something for which we've long been known.

Ratification of the treaty would benefit the U.S. in a number of obvious ways: First, the CRPD will protect U.S. citizens when they are abroad. Americans with disabilities live, work, travel, study and retire outside the U.S. While our domestic disability discrimination laws and architectural accessibility requirements are strong, many of these protections are absent around the world. In addition, a large number of veterans with disabilities from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are choosing to seek opportunities abroad, which is why more than 20 leading veteran service organizations are supporting CRPD's passage, including Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Wounded Warrior Project, the American Legion and Disabled American Veterans.

Second, the CRPD will promote U.S. business interests in multiple ways. There are an estimated 650 million people with disabilities around the world. Ratifying the CRPD will create a level playing field for U.S. corporations because it will require businesses abroad to meet the same high standards that U.S. companies already need to comply with under the ADA. In addition, there will be a huge demand for wheelchairs and other medical equipment, accessible communications devices and other products that are designed, engineered, manufactured and sold by U.S. corporations. The U.S. will enjoy an active role in CRPD implementation and benefit financially from these new sources of revenue.

Finally, Senate adoption of this treaty will solidify and expand our global leadership on this important moral issue. Many people with mental and physical disabilities around the world live in extreme poverty and are treated with horrific injustice. Since the ADA was enacted in 1990, we have exported substantial policy and technical expertise.

But time is running out. There are very few days left in this session and we have a rare window of opportunity. Failure to act now will damage our reputation on the global stage and reinforce the perception that our political system is broken.

This is a human rights issue that affects the lives of millions of disabled Americans and their families. We need to protect the rights of Americans with disabilities not only at home, but abroad. And we need to set the standard to which other nations can aspire. The CRPD provides the U.S. with a powerful platform to demonstrate our stand on basic human rights and show the world that the U.S. can still lead by example.

Ted Kennedy Jr., is a health care lawyer and lifelong advocate for the civil rights of people with disabilities.