

KIDS' HEALTH HOT TOPIC FOR CLINTON, HE FLAYS STATE EFFORTS — JUST BEFORE TALKING AT GOVERNORS MEETING

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ST. LOUIS, Mo. -- In hindsight, President Clinton might have chosen a better time to pop off about how states are not doing enough to make sure poor children have health insurance, and how he was going to send federal auditors to all 50 states to look into how federal dollars are spent on the program.

But there it was in the Sunday New York Times, riling the collective ire of the nation's governors just hours before Clinton was scheduled to address the governors, who were convened for their annual summer meetings of the National Governors Association. "The states' Children's Health Insurance Program has been a resounding success, and for the president to suggest otherwise is just not the case," said an irritated Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt, who on Tuesday will become National Governors Association chairman.

The association had already issued a press release by the time Clinton arrived noting that 1.3 million children have been added to health insurance rolls -- 10,000 in Utah alone -- under the program, and that is right on initial projections.

"It is unclear why the president would call for a current enrollment in CHIP that exceeds the total CHIP-eligible population," the National Governors Association statement said.

Clinton, perhaps realizing the poor timing of his criticism, used the meetings to praise the progress being made by the governors on children's health insurance, welfare reform and other state initiatives that have given the states greater flexibility in implementing federal policy.

"In so many areas we share a common vision," Clinton told the governors.

Clinton said it was "too soon to rush to judgment" about the successes or failures of the program, which is in its first full year of operation in all 50 states. However, there is money available to add three or four times as many children to health insurance rolls, and "there's an enormous amount of promise yet to be fulfilled."

Leavitt, who with Delaware Gov. Tom Carper escorted Clinton into the meeting at the Adams Mark Hotel in St. Louis, said governors were "appreciative" of Clinton's acknowledgment of the progress that has been made and the role of the governors in doing it.

However, "what we read in the New York Times and what we heard today were very different. He seems to have a written version and then a different spoken one."

That is something the governors are becoming accustomed to with Clinton, who spent a good share of his three terms as Arkansas governor railing against the federal government's inflexibility when it came to states' efforts to implement federal policy.

But when Clinton became president nothing changed, Leavitt said.

"It has happened more than once that he will receive the governors and listen to our views, we think we have agreement on some concern and then he comes out in opposition to it. Either he was suddenly captured by the ideology of those around him, or we misunderstood him," Leavitt said, deliberately avoiding the suggestion that Clinton wasn't being forthright in the first place.

"I don't want to go there," he said.

Despite the bipartisan frustration with Clinton, the president received a polite reception from the governors, and he spent more than 30 minutes after his speech shaking hands and visiting with them out of earshot of the media microphones.

About two-thirds of the nation's governors are Republicans, and many have endorsed another governor, Texas Gov. George W. Bush, for president.

However, Bush skipped the National Governors Association meetings to campaign in Iowa.

"I don't look on that as a snub," Leavitt said. "There is no one here who doesn't understand his competing demands right now."

Clinton devoted much of his speech to attacking the GOP tax cut plan and arguing for setting aside the budget surplus to extend the life of the Social Security Trust Fund and getting the nation out of debt for the first time since 1835. "It's an opportunity of a lifetime," he said.

If the Republican tax plan is implemented, interest rates will go higher and the economy will be weaker, "mark my words," he said. "This is not politics. It is arithmetic."