OPENNESS IS BEST POLICY

Mr. DAYTON. Mr. President, I echo some of the remarks the Democratic leader made. I am about to leave this Chamber to go to a behind-closed-doors hearing of the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs with the acting director of operations for FEMA and the Commandant of the Coast Guard. I am told that the chairman of the committee, the distinguished Senator from Maine, and the ranking member from Connecticut tried to get this hearing in public but that the administration officials would not appear in a public session. I think the public deserves to and would benefit from hearing these people with key roles in this recovery effort.

Similarly, on Tuesday evening, a majority of us in the Senate met with 10 members of the Cabinet, 10 Secretaries—all of them had important things to say—as well as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the head of the Coast Guard. That briefing should have been in a public setting. There was not a single remark made by anyone that was not unclassified and should not have been available to all of the people of this country, certainly those who are most beleaguered, who are looking for answers to the questions that the Democratic leader and others on both sides of the aisle have raised.

We had a brief time for questions. We were not able to ask those questions of the administration officials in a public setting before the American people. Yet the President is coming forth now with a second request for funding, $51.8 billion after Katrina. There is no question about that. So we should move that along and get it done as quickly as possible. In the meantime, have the committees of jurisdiction in the House and the Senate do what they are obligated to do by virtue of their role in history.

I want to raise that on this issue we can move forward on a bipartisan basis. If we use the model of the 9/11 Commission, the majority still gets the edge because with 9/11 what happened is the President picks the chair. As it turned out, the Republicans had one more vote on the commission than did the Democrats, but it worked out OK. While that may not be perfect, it is certainly more perfect than this very awkward presentation that has been made to us, 24 hours about this so-called bipartisan commission. That is Orwellian. That is not bipartisan.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Minnesota.

EMERGENCY FUNDING

Mr. GREGG. Mr. President, we will sometime later today be getting a supplemental request in the Senate to continue to fund the needs of the relief effort in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, which will be approximately $50 billion on top of the $10 billion that has already been spent. Obviously, it is essential that we get these dollars down there and put them to use aggressively in order to try to help the people who are in such dire straits, and to try to begin to bring some order and some relief to those who have suffered so much.

As we proceed in this effort, we should err on the side of making sure that we get the dollars there quickly in order to support these individuals who are in such dire straits, and to try to assist this part of the country that has been hit by this catastrophic event.

But in the process, I think it is important that we have some fiscal oversight that allows us to feel comfortable that the dollars that are being spent are going effectively, quickly, and aggressively to relief efforts which are legitimate and appropriate.

Thus, I congratulate the House of Representatives for putting in the supplemental and identifying within the supplemental $15 million which will be assigned to the Inspector General’s Office to start to put in place the auditing process and the oversight process on how the money is being spent, which I believe is critical.

We have seen some issues which obviously, if they are pursued logically, make sense. But if they are pursued in a way that is not logical, they are going to cost us a lot of money and probably not get us a lot of relief.

For example, there was a report in my State paper which said that all the dealerships who sell Winnebagos in New Hampshire have been contacted and told to get ready to transport their entire inventory over to the Federal Government because they are going to ship it all out. Maybe that is what we will end up doing, but we hope before we buy up all the Winnebagos in America, and see how much it will cost us, we would be thinking about the cost and how we are going to approach that and whether that is the best way to proceed.

There are a lot of ideas floating out there. I think it is important we have the structure in place that effectively monitors cost and how the money is being spent. So I congratulate the House.

In addition, I think the President’s decision, along with the Vice President, to have the Vice President physically going there and being on the ground in that region is a very positive step in our efforts to get order in the process of delivering relief.

Anybody who knows the Vice President—and I have had the good fortune to serve with him in the House and fortunate to serve with him here while he has been Vice President—will note that he is a no-nonsense individual. He is not an issue. And to get him to get the best results for resolving the problem, and moves forward. He did that as Defense Secretary. He has done it, obviously, as Vice President. He will bring immediate coherence, intelligence, and aggressive action in solving the problem and will move forward with the complexities of this reconstruction and relief effort. I think it is an excellent decision to have the Vice President step into the middle of this effort and basically try to calm the storm out and move us to try to make sure what is going on in the area of the Federal relief effort. However, it does lead to the point I made earlier—
and which I want to stress once again—which is that this is not an overnight, 2- or 3-month exercise. We all realize that rebuilding this region is going to take a significant amount of time and a tremendous amount of resources and a lot of thought and an intelligent process.

We need to set up. I believe as we move forward—obviously, not within the next few days but certainly within the next month—some type of structured commission along the lines I would suggest as was done after the horrific floods of 1926 when Herbert Hoover led the effort, where you basically have a central focal point with an individual of great ability and national recognition leading the effort, and basically manage the Federal dollars as they come in from all the various Federal agencies that will be impacted, and make sure those Federal dollars are effectively, efficiently, and quickly brought to bear on the problems in concert with the State and local governments.

I believe that is going to take a separate type of entity to be created. I think we should be thinking about how to structure that entity. I would certainly be looking to people such as Senator COCHRAN, Senator LOTT, Senator SHELBY, Senator SESSIONS, and the Senators from Louisiana, Ms. LANDRIEU and Mr. VITTER, for ideas about how we should set that up. We should be starting the process.

I wanted to come to the floor and say, as we move forward on this supplemental—obviously, it is totally outside of the budget. It is an emergency, and that is the way it should be done, but it is $50 billion—it is important that we retain this language—and I guess we will try to move this supplemental through the Senate without amendment—retain this language which makes sure that the Inspector General has the resources the office needs in order to effectively monitor how these funds are managed; to make sure we are getting the best return in the most prompt way for these tax dollars which are in such dire need down there in order to pursue the reconstruction and relief effort.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The call will come.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. COCHRAN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Morning business is closed.