EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

Mr. DORGAN. Mr. President, I come to the floor to make a brief statement on some of the actions I believe the majority leader and also the Democratic leader, Senator Reid, have been speaking about in recent days, and that is the issue of the creation of an independent commission to evaluate exactly what kind of preparedness exists in this country and what is the country’s response to a natural disaster or to a terrorist attack.

It is important, it seems to me, in this case, to stare truth in the eye. We don’t do that with fiscal policy. We don’t do that with respect to trade policy. Both have the highest deficits in the history of the country at this point. There are many areas where we try to ignore what is going on, and we do so successfully, regardless, much to the detriment of the future of this country. The question of what we do with disaster relief and disaster preparedness, preparedness to try to deal with a terrorist attack, is a different issue.

I noticed today in the newspapers and on television, the folks in New Orleans are beginning to clean up. Even as there remains the search for bodies and survivors, and so on, there are folks out sweeping the sidewalks in front of businesses, those businesses that have not been inundated with water. There are folks hauling away trash. There is a resiliency, a spirit that is irrepressible. Already people are starting to talk about their future, to talking about their future, to getting their city back together and cleaning up and evaluating what went wrong and making it right, so must we clean up and begin to repair.

None of this discussion should ever be about Republicans or Democrats. It is about success or failure. All of us looking truth in the eye must understand that the response by this country to what happened in the Gulf was a failure. Whose failure? I don’t know. Perhaps the failure of all of us: Congress, the President, State and local officials—perhaps all of us. But I believe we ought to get to the bottom of it and evaluate what change that which failed so miserably.

When you wake up this morning to the news that 34 people were left to die in a nursing home—yes, in the United States of America 34 people were left to die in a nursing home at the advent of an oncoming hurricane and breached dikes and flood—you ask the question, Is this really the United States? What on Earth could have happened? We need to find out.

I know some of the Members of Congress have talked about creating a special committee in Congress to look at it. All right. It doesn’t substitute for an independent commission, in my judgment. The President talked about his investigation, and, that is fine. We need, most of all—what we did with respect to September 11 is an independent commission with the kind of authority and power to get to the bottom of what happened. Why? Because if we do not fix what went wrong and make it right, we will remain unprepared in the advent of a terrorist attack or another natural disaster.

This was, we think, the worst natural disaster in this country’s history. It can happen again. But we know terrorists will want to commit a terrorist attack in this country. We know there are thousands of nuclear weapons that exist in this world. We know there are people worried about terrorists acquiring a nuclear weapon, detonating it in a trunk in a rusty Yugo sitting on a dock in one of America’s major cities. What kind of response, what kind of disaster preparedness exists to deal with a terrorist attack?

I know why there are some who do not like independent commissions: you can’t control them. You can’t control information. You can’t control direction. You lose control with an independent commission.

But we need an independent commission to investigate exactly what has happened, what went wrong at all levels, and try to evaluate how we put together a process that really does work, that represents the best of this country.

We know this country works. It has great ingenuity, great capability, but something happened that went wrong in a very significant way. This was a mess. It is not about blame, it is about accountability. Who is accountable? How are they accountable? How do we make them accountable?

So I believe we have a desperate need at this point to move quickly to put together an independent commission that can begin putting the pieces together. Even as the folks in New Orleans begin putting the pieces back together and cleaning up, so, too, should the President and Congress begin putting this together and cleaning up and evaluating it through the best work of some of the best minds in our country, some of the best people we can call on to serve on an independent commission to evaluate and investigate what went wrong and how do we, as a country, fix it.

ENERGY COSTS

Mr. DORGAN. Mr. President, there is one additional policy I would like to make on legislation I have introduced. I notice the Energy Information Administration just released its short-term outlook. They forecast dramatic increases for residential energy costs this upcoming winter.

I come from North Dakota. We don’t exactly have balmy weather in February and January, the middle of winter. We can sometimes have some pretty tough winters. It is a great State, but we have some tough winters. The result for heating fuel for natural gas in the Midwest, according to the EIA, are 69 to 70 percent increases in the winter in the Midwest.

We have a lot of folks who are going to have a devil of a time trying to pay these costs. I made the point before, and I know there are people in this Chamber who chafe at this, that the major integrated oil companies have gotten larger through mergers. They are much more powerful. They have the capability, working with others, to determine what happens to energy and supply. We have OPEC people sitting around a table talking about pricing supplies. Then we have a futures market which is supposed to provide liquidity—which it does, but it provides much more than that nowadays. It is rampant speculation in spot markets.

The result of that is the highest prices we have seen in this country.

Last year, the price of oil was $34.50 a barrel—January 31, 2004. At that price the oil companies are making record profits. Now it is $30 above that. That is $7 billion a month in extra profit, $80 billion on a yearly basis of extra profit. That, in my judgment, is unfair. Flowing through it is a 70-percent increase in natural gas prices to those trying to heat homes, or flowing through the gas pump where you put in 15 gallons and pay $52. That is unfair. I think there ought to be a windfall profits tax recapturing that windfall and using it in rebates to consumers. I don’t begrudge anyone a fair profit, but this is not a fair market and I believe Congress should take some action. This issue existed long before Hurricane Katrina formed and hit this country, and I believe it behooves this Congress to address these issues as soon as possible before we go into the winter heating season and the folks, particularly in the northern Great Plains and other States, are going to pay 70 percent increases—in some cases a price they simply cannot afford to pay for something as basic as heating their homes.

This Congress needs to act. I hope one of the actions will be to consider the legislation I have introduced. I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.
Mr. MCCONNELL. I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. MARTINEZ). Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, it is difficult to find words adequate enough to express the emotions of so many Americans, all across the country, as we continue to learn more about the utter devastation of the Gulf Coast region from Hurricane Katrina.

Hundreds of lives have been lost. Thousands more have been ripped apart, as Gulf Coast residents have lost their homes, savings, or possessions. A great American city, New Orleans, has been reduced to a ghost town. In the months ahead we will have much rebuilding to do—although there is no doubt in my mind that the Gulf coast will be rebuilt, and rebuilt stronger than ever before.

We have already made great progress toward assisting the Gulf region here in the Senate. In the last several days we have passed over $52 billion in emergency relief. These funds are flowing to the people who most need help as we speak.

The majority leader is working to clear a measure that would accelerate billions of dollars of payments to states under the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, or TANF, program. The House passed it by voice vote last week, and we ought to do the same.

This kind of important action is by no means found only in the United States Congress. In this time of crisis, it has been inspiring to see so many millions of Americans moving quickly to help in their fellow Americans’ hour of need.

Individual citizens are making a difference. I would like to share with my colleagues an inspiring story about a group of officers from the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources. Twenty-three officers, most of whom did not know each other when they set out, took 12 boats to New Orleans and scoured the flooded neighborhoods to rescue over 200 people.

The men who volunteered for this mission came from all over Kentucky—towns like Somerset, Paris, Mount Vernon, and Pippa Passes. They spent 3 days in New Orleans, searching flooded houses, rescuing survivors, and bringing food to so many.

Led by Captain Clark Boggs of Philpot and Captain Frank Floy of Bedford, these men risked their health and safety for those they did not know. On the first day, they heard gunshots ring out near them. The toxic water they steered their boat through was a breeding ground for who knows how many diseases. Some of the men still bear scars and rashes from their mission.

But they returned to Kentucky with happier mementos as well—Mardi Gras beads, given as tokens of thanks by New Orleans residents grateful that they had been rescued. When they spent their nights at a local church, or took refuge in a school, appreciative locals brought them hot plates of Cajun food. Most importantly, they will never forget the looks of relief on the faces of the people they rescued, people who thought they had been forgotten.

Let me also speak about a group of Kentucky doctors and nurses who flew down to the vicinity of New Orleans to provide emergency medical services. The group had to find two large gymnasiums full of people requiring medical attention. They assisted in setting up an emergency shelter that has to date treated over 7,000 patients. One of the medical volunteers, Dr. Wuchner of Florence, KY, is also a state representative. She spent seven days helping the people of New Orleans and told my staff about her experiences there.

One of the hardest parts of her job was to tell people who had not been watching the news and had no idea of the devastation to New Orleans, that their homes were most likely flooded and unsalvageable. She also had the much more pleasant opportunity to reunite a grandfather and a granddaughter.

St. Elizabeth Medical Center in Edgewood, KY, donated the medical supplies that the team brought with them. And St. Elizabeth Medical Center is holding several fundraising drives and collecting employee donations, to continue to aid the people of the Gulf Coast region. The group’s airfare was paid for by a local Kentucky businessman named John McQuillen, who nervously stepped in when the medical team was unsure whether they would be able to afford to fly down to help.

Let me share another story. Once upon a time, before Katrina, Charity Hospital, in Hope, Louisiana, helped the Pikeville Medical Center, in Pikeville, KY, set up a drug detoxification program. So when New Orleans needed help, the Pikeville Medical Center responded. A nurse named Cheryl Hickman remembered wanting to travel down to the Gulf Coast area, and within hours a team of nurses and EMS personnel were on the road, driving ambulances stocked full of medical supplies.

Stories like these, stories of generosity and charity, are so numerous in Kentucky that I could tell you many more. Churches, rotary clubs, and charitable organizations throughout the state have donated hundreds of thousands of dollars. Even two little girls in my hometown of Louisville, KY, 12-year-old Briana O’Holleran and 11-year-old Amy Williams, raised $300 by setting up a lemonade stand.

Kentucky has also been making a difference. Humana Inc., a health care company based in Louisville, KY, has donated $1 million to relief efforts—half of that to the Red Cross, and half to local relief agencies in the Gulf Coast region. They have been able to use the money for food, clean water and other supplies and get it to the people who most need it.

UPS, a major employer in Louisville, has donated $1.25 million to several different agencies. Also, since they are of course a shipping company, they have provided transportation services for relief agencies, and have hauled bottled water into Mississippi for evacuees.

General Electric, which has its appliances division based in Louisville, has donated $6 million to the Red Cross, and their employees have raised another $1 million which will be matched by the company. The company is also working to donate $10 million worth of generators and equipment to aid relief workers.

And I am sure that all of my colleagues, if I sat down on my own, tell us of similar stories from their states. Kentucky is not unique when it comes to the outpouring of such goodwill. By sharing these stories, I hope I have reminded my colleagues that the compassion of ordinary, everyday Americans is a stronger force than the winds of any hurricane.

So, Mr. President, as we continue our vital work here in the Senate to get the Gulf Coast region back up on its feet again, I hope we are inspired by the giving spirit of the Kentuckians I have mentioned. Just as they, and so many others, are working tirelessly to restore hope and mend broken lives, so should we.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Oregon.

Mr. SMITH. Mr. President, I rise to express sympathy to all those impacted by the disaster of Hurricane Katrina.

Early on in the affected course a shipping company, they have

In each of our own ways, reaches out to Senator VITTER and Senator LANDRIEU, Senator LOTT, Senator COCHRAN, Senator SESSIONS and Senator SHELBY, whose States have been ravaged by a natural disaster, frankly, beyond calculation and beyond the plans and the very best intentions of those on the ground. It is a fact that sometimes nature is bigger than we are. Katrina is evidence of one of those occasions.

It has been disappointing that there has been a rush to play politics with a natural disaster. There has been an excess of finger-pointing and fault-finding. I note that President Bush yesterday bravely said that if you need to blame someone, blame him. I don’t believe the blame belongs with him, but he recognizes his role in leadership. I salute him for his courage in simply saying that if you need to blame someone, blame him. I don’t believe the blame belongs with him, but he recognizes his role in leadership. I salute him for his courage in simply trying to find the solutions and not spending wasted effort pointing fingers and placing blame.

I represent a State that has known its share of natural disasters—volcanos, wildfires, and a tsunami several decades ago. While Oregon is a long way from the Gulf Coast, we have been near in the relief effort and helping in recovery. I rise today to let the Senate know how proud I am of the response from my home State of Oregon. Oregonians have big hearts. With their trade-mark of selflessness and generosity, they have responded in a wide number of ways to help our friends in the South.
The Oregon Trail Chapter of the Red Cross has a national reputation for being one of the first chapters to call when experienced volunteers are needed to respond to disasters. Since the hurricane hit, the Oregon Red Cross volunteers have worked around the clock to help the relief effort. The chapter worked quickly to set up an emergency evacuation center in Oregon should one be needed to house evacuees. It was made available. It was ready in a matter of hours.

In recent years we have asked a great deal of our men and women in the military, and time and again they have responded heroically, patriotically, and with professionalism. In addition, the U.S. Forest Service has deployed more than 2,700 employees who are trained in rescue and response to this area. These teams have been putting their skills to use setting up logical, well-organized assistance, distributing food products, and removing debris.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has also been working to get food to the area and provide housing for displaced people. USDA has delivered more than 300 trucks containing over 12 million pounds of food and baby food and formula products.

The USDA's Rural Development Service has established an expedited process to move people into safe and secure housing. Its property managers are assisting families by providing them with information on how to access additional Government programs and services to assist them, such as food stamp benefits.

As we work to recover and rebuild from Hurricane Katrina, there will certainly be many trying days ahead. However, I believe we can find comfort in the heartening response of the American people. In particular, I salute the people of Oregon. There are numerous examples of goodness, strength, and compassion as people have reached out to help friends, neighbors, and strangers in need.

I salute those of my state and those of other states who are going the extra mile to help their fellow Americans through this terrible disaster. I want to suggest again that our best efforts should go to supporting those on the ground who are working to restore the hurricane-ravaged areas, and we should keep in mind the partnership and the finger pointing that has broken out so unproductively and unproductively in recent days.

Mr. President, I thank you for the time and yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Texas.

Mrs. HUTCHISON. Mr. President, how much time is remaining on our side?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. There is 13½ minutes.

Mrs. HUTCHISON. Mr. President, I ask that I be notified when I have used 7 minutes so my colleague from Wyoming can have the remaining 6 minutes of time.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. It will be done.

Mrs. HUTCHISON. Thank you, Mr. President.

Mr. President, over the past few weekends I have visited several hurricane relief shelters in Texas. I started at the Astrodome in Houston, which was garing up for the people who were coming from Louisiana at the time. I was struck by the number of volunteers, the organization of the effort in Houston, as well as the response of the medical community.

There were medical facilities in place. Even complicated medical procedures were ongoing at places such as M.D. Anderson, where doctors would take patients who had been in the middle of chemotherapy and continue that chemotherapy so those patients would not lose any of the efforts that were being made on their behalf in Louisiana. Doctors at M.D. Anderson were even continuing bone marrow transplants that were in progress.

Baylor College of Medicine was setting up the facilities for the evacuees who were arriving. There were medical units that had the cooperation of all the hospitals in Houston. It was truly a remarkable sight.

The next weekend, I was able to go to the Convention Center in Dallas and see the medical operation there that was being run by the head of the emergency physicians at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School and Parkland Hospital. They had gotten all of the hospitals in Dallas together to provide mental health services, emergency care, and any kind of services for sick children. Also, they were dispensing medicine on an as-needed basis in the Dallas Convention Center.

Last weekend, I was able to go to Austin to see the emergency team that brought together the emergency personnel for the State of Texas—the Department of Public Safety, the Texas Guard and Reserve units—that were helping, including the Red Cross and the Salvation Army, two great volunteer organizations that have stepped right in to help. In some of these centers, they were the first people to start setting up the centers.

Then, I went to the Austin Convention Center, where they even had set up a beauty shop for the evacuees who wanted, of course, to try to look their best as they were trying to get their lives together and determine what they were going to do until they are able to return to New Orleans or other places in Louisiana.

We have seen many of the emergency facilities, even though, of course, Texas was not in this storm. But Texas has had an emergency crisis of its own; and that is in the education that is now being required for the children coming into the school systems, as well as trying to get help for the ongoing medical needs that will be required for approximately 250,000 evacuees from Louisiana, a few from Mississippi, and trying to make sure these costs are covered by the Federal Government.

While Texans have opened their hearts and their homes and their schools, we do not think they should have to fund all of this from State coffers or local coffers because, frankly,
the local schools are already very strapped for funds and they cannot afford this expense.

Likewise, the cities are not able to afford the overtime expenses of all the police who are being required and the firefighters who are now being required to provide medical services. So I am working on legislation right now that would try to get money into these entities that do not have the cash flow to accept all of these people on an emergency basis, and that is on an expedited basis here in Congress.

There are, at this time, between 30,000 and 40,000 new students coming into the Texas school systems. This is a huge increase in just a very short time. Trying to match the students with the kind of curriculum that has been ongoing in the Texas schools is a challenge. Texas is trying to meet that challenge in the best way for all concerned. I would like to see Congress act very quickly to alleviate some of these early problems in getting the funding where it needs to be. For instance, there is no FEMA money for education expenses. So the bill I hope we could pass this week, will allow Texas, through the Department of Education, to immediately start reimbursing the schools for the costs of opening these new schools and the temporary facilities that are being required, including the schoolbooks and school supplies that are being required to help these new students, who are already entering 2 weeks late because Texas schools start the last week of August, sometimes the third week in August.

We need to bring these children in and get them going in an expedited way. I am asking my colleagues to help me pass, on a quick basis, an ability for FEMA to fund education expenses and to work with that legislation to allow them to be placed where they can best be placed without regard to the McKinney Act, just for a temporary time.

This legislation will sunset at the end of this school year, so it will not be permanent, but we can pass it on an expedited basis to try to meet the needs of these students and my State, which has been so generous and has offered so much help to these people, which we want to continue to do and we will continue to do. But I want the Federal Government to make it easier on these governmental agencies regarding the expenses incurred by the communities that are doing so much.

We also need to be the model for response to future emergencies, not one where other States look at what has happened in our State and say: Well, if the Federal Government is not going to step up on education expenses and medical expenses, it will be difficult to take in future emergency victims. So that is what we are trying to do.

Our hearts go out to all of the people who are affected by this disaster. We are going to do our part. I am hoping Congress will act soon to help us do the right thing.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator has now used 7 minutes.

Mrs. HUTCHISON. Mr. President, I yield the floor to my colleague from Wyoming.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Wyoming is recognized.

Mr. THOMAS. Mr. President, I thank you for giving me the floor. I think that what Senator VITTER mentioned yesterday helped us understand a little better what the situation is there, what the difficulties are, and what our responsibilities are to do something about that as quickly as we possibly can.

We certainly first want to again offer our condolences to the families of those who perished. I support those who continue to live in the hurricane-affected areas.

What we have seen is, obviously, one of the most terrible natural disasters in our lifetime. We have also, fortunately, the generous spirit of our Nation thrive in a time of confusion and loss. The giving nature of the American people has been displayed and continues to be displayed. We should be very proud of that.

I am especially impressed with the people of Wyoming who have opened their hearts and their homes to help the hurricane victims. You never know when someone is going to be in the path of a similar disaster.

The objective now, of course, is to get the victims back on their feet, and to provide for their basic needs, to bring some semblance of normalcy to the situation there. This is going to be an ongoing effort. It is going to be ongoing, but it also demands immediate attention. Progress is being made hour by hour, day by day. I think it is a testament to the courage of the people throughout the Gulf Coast. It will take years to rebuild New Orleans and the other areas, but I am confident there will be a thriving economy again in that area.

Over the next few weeks, our Nation will show, once again, why we are the envy of the world. We will prove that no matter what the obstacles are that are before us, we can join together to overcome them, even if it is Mother Nature. The stories of heroism and fortitude will continue to trickle down, but soon, like the water that has destroyed so much, that trickle will evolve into a wave—a wave of construction, a wave of rebirth.

As we showed on that bright September morning 4 years ago, this Nation will rise out of the ashes and rebuild the Gulf Coast. I join my Wyomingites to say we are sorry for what happened, but we look forward to working with you to restore what you have lost.

I am particularly proud of Wyoming’s military. We have deployed 72 people. Wyomingites to say we are sorry for what happened, but we look forward to working with you to restore what you have lost.

I am particularly proud of Wyoming’s military. We have deployed 72 people. We have provided support of Hurricane Katrina relief efforts. We have sent four helicopters with 19 people, two C-130s delivering equipment. We have sent AirVac nurses and 13 security police from the naval air station. So we are very pleased to be able to help. We need to provide the help.

There are lots of things being talked about. We can talk about tax relief, Mr. President. I yield my time.

Mr. VITTER. Mr. President, I thank you for giving me the floor.

I join all of us in expressing our condolences and our concerns for what has happened in the New Orleans area. Certainly Senator VITTER’s discussions yesterday helped us understand a little better what the situation is there, what the difficulties are, and what our responsibilities are to do something about that as quickly as we possibly can.

We need to provide for their basic needs, to bring some semblance of normalcy to the situation there. This is going to be an ongoing effort. It is going to be ongoing, but it also demands immediate attention. Progress is being made hour by hour, day by day. I think it is a testament to the courage of the people throughout the Gulf Coast. It will take years to rebuild New Orleans and the other areas, but I am confident there will be a thriving economy again in that area.

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