ought to be to work together and march together toward a common goal.
I yield the floor.

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Illinois.

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, I ask to be given 10 minutes from the Democratic morning business and that I be notified when I have consumed 9 minutes of the 10.

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator will be notified.

HURRICANE KATRINA

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, last Friday, I joined 13 of my colleagues and went to view the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, LA, and Mississippi. It was a sight which I will never forget. This great bustling city of New Orleans is now a ghost town with hardly any activity other than a few people returning to their homes trying to salvage what they can from the evidence of debris but evidence of destruction, all gone, scavored from the Earth by these horrible hurricane winds and waves which consumed some of these communities.

A man in Pass Christian in Mississippi told us of the panic that set in when the remaining villagers went to see subdivisions that have been wiped away, to look down at what appeared to be 50 concrete slabs and to see no evidence of debris but evidence of destruction, all gone, scavored from the Earth by these horrible hurricane winds and waves which consumed some of these communities.

The President came to the American people last week at Jackson Square in New Orleans and made a speech which I think will be important for generations to come. I was asked to react to it, and I said I think the President has given us an agenda that we have to follow—rebuild the coast, to rebuild the lives and the communities. But I believed then, and I believe now, that the President’s call for this unity as a nation and this community of caring also has to be called for fiscal responsibility and accountability. We have to rebuild the coast and help Katrina victims rebuild their lives. It is in our national interest. It is part of our national character. We rally as Americans to help our fellow Americans.

But I have a real concern. Instead of the “Big Easy,” people are getting a big uneasy feeling about where Katrina reconstruction effort is headed and who is in charge. Several published reports say the person heading up the administration’s Katrina rebuilding project is none other than Karl Rove, the President’s long-time political director. That means that Karl Rove will have responsibility for the Katrina reconstruction effort, the No. 1 politician, the No. 1 political operative in the White House. Have we learned nothing?

Consider what happened when Katrina struck. FEMA was not there. Michael Brown is now gone. But how did he get in a position to be in charge of FEMA? It was because of political connections. He didn’t have the experience; he didn’t have the skills needed when he faced the greatest natural disaster in our history. What was his claim to this job to head FEMA? His claim was he was a college roommate of Joe Allbaugh who was the President’s Chief of Staff and campaign director in Texas when, who, when he left the FEMA agency to become a consultant, turned it over to Michael Brown, his college roommate, to take over—this little way politicians who played out with disastrous incompetence when Katrina struck.

Now this administration, instead of moving away from the politicians to the professionals when it comes to rebuilding, has decided that Karl Rove is going to be in charge—the same Karl Rove who, just a few weeks ago in a political speech, said the Democrats didn’t share the Republicans’ zeal for stopping the war on terrorism; the same Karl Rove who won’t give us straight answers when it comes to his role in revealing the identity of Valerie Plame, an undercover CIA operative, which disclosure of her identity not only cost her life but the lives of many other career employees; the same Karl Rove who intentionally will take his mind off of the Katrina reconstruction effort long enough to go to North Dakota on this Saturday’s night political rally.

Is this the person we want in charge of $60 billion or $100 billion in reconstruction funds? I hope not. I hope the President reconsider.

This is an admission—that this administration doesn’t have leadership to turn to in time of crisis, if the best the President can find is his political adviser, Karl Rove, to deal with the disaster of Katrina.

What have we learned? The Wall Street Journal said last week:

The Bush administration is importing many of the contract practices blamed for spending abuses in Iraq as it begins the largest and costliest rebuilding effort in United States history.

We know what happened in Iraq—no-bid contracts to Halliburton and the buddies of this administration, contracts that have never been investigated by this Congress. And here they go again with Katrina and with Karl Rove keeping his watchful eye on what is being done.

The Wall Street Journal article went on to say:

The first large-scale contracts awarded to Hurricane Katrina, as in Iraq, were awarded without competitive bidding, using so-called “cost-plus” provisions that guarantee contractors certain profits regardless of how much they spend.

It turns out that not only are there no-bid contracts, but coincidentally they happen to be going to the clients of Joe Allbaugh. Remember that name? Carl Rove kept his watchful eye on what was going to be in charge of reconstruction contracts in Texas who became the head of FEMA and who left to be a consultant, and is now making certain that his clients get $100 million no-bid contracts.

When is this going to end? When are we going to have true accountability? Once again, we see the same names coming out of Hurricane Katrina—Halliburton, Kellogg, Brown & Root—the names of Joe Allbaugh’s clients who are, once again, coming up with these contracts.

If it wasn’t bad enough, this morning’s Washington Post, on the front page, tells the story of a Bush official arrested in a corruption probe. It says:

The Bush administration’s top Federal procurement official resigned Friday and was arrested yesterday, accused of lying and obstructing a criminal investigation into Republican lobbyist Jack Abramoff’s dealings with the Federal Government. It was the first criminal complaint filed against a government official in the ongoing corruption probe related to Abramoff’s activities in Washington.

The complaint, filed by the FBI, alleges that David H. Safavian, 38, a White House procurement official involved until last week in Hurricane Katrina relief efforts, made repeated false statements to government officials and investigators about a golf trip with Abramoff to Scotland in 2002.

The top official in the White House that was in charge of procurement is the same Karl Rove who, just a few weeks ago, was in charge. When the White House official in the ongoing corruption probe related to Abramoff’s activities in Washington resigned but was arrested for misusing taxpayers’ money, the White House official in charge became the head of FEMA.

This is a troubling admission. It is in the White House that was in charge of procurement investigations. Is this the person we want in charge of deciding what we’re going to spend in Texas? What happened in Texas history.

Now the administration comes out and says they found just the person to look into the mistakes of Hurricane Katrina. It is a woman by the name of Frances Townsend. I do not know her. She may be a very competent individual. But how in the world can we get to the truth of the question as to what went wrong with Hurricane Katrina? How can we really hope to discover the incompetence that led to all of this human suffering and devastation if the administration is going to investigate itself?

We know from 9/11 that the only way we got to the heart of the matter, the critical questions about what went wrong on 9/11, was with an independent, nonpartisan commission. Yet this administration resisted the efforts of that 9/11 commission being created and to resist the efforts of an independent, nonpartisan commission to look into what went wrong with Hurricane Katrina.
The PRESIDING OFFICER. Mr. VITTER. The Senator has 1 minute remaining.

Mr. DURBIN. Thank you, Mr. President.

I will conclude by saying this: We owe it to the victims and to the American people and the American taxpayers to get honest answers about what went wrong with Katrina, and to put people in charge to make certain that we don’t waste the billions of dollars that are going to be spent in this reconstruction effort. Putting Karl Rove in charge makes no sense whatsoever. He has no resume and no skills other than running political campaigns. If he is being put in place to protect the President politically, that decision does not serve the best interests of the American people nor the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

It is time to get to the bottom of this. If Congress will not have an honest investigation of what happened with Katrina, we will have this nonpartisan, independent commission like the 9/11 Commission to answer the questions about what went wrong and to make certain that we don’t replicate those mistakes in the expenditure of these funds in the future.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Delaware is recognized.

Mr. CARPER. Mr. President, before Senator DURBIN leaves the floor, he has mentioned the 9/11 Commission. When he and I were first elected in the Congress in 1982—to the House—we arrived at a time when Social Security was not just rumored to be in dire straits but was in very dire straits. And an earlier commission was created similar to the 9/11 Commission but different as well. The Republican Members were appointed by President Reagan. As I recall, the Democratic Members were appointed by Democratic Speaker, Tip O’Neill, and I think by Senator ROBERT BYRD. The Blue Ribbon Commission was chaired by Alan Greenspan, with Members Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Robert Dole, and Claude Pepper, with whom we served in the House. They worked for a whole year trying to couple a combination of benefit cuts and revenue increases to enable us to put Social Security on a sound footing for another quarter of a century. I think that served as a good role model as well as the 9/11 Commission, which Senator DURBIN mentioned.

While he was on the floor, I wanted to remind him and us of that. But I think our first response to the catastrophe is to make sure that people who need help get help.

First of all, get help in getting out of dangerous places to safe places, get help in reuniting families, get help in making certain their medical needs are met, having something to eat and drinking water, and getting the kids from 12th grade getting to the schools they need to get into, making sure students who have been displaced in college have a chance to get back in a college or a university to continue their studies without losing a quarter or a semester or a year, helping to create jobs and getting the economy moving in places that have been destroyed or badly damaged. Those are the kinds of things that need to be done and are being done.

While our startup was slow and disappointing, I believe, as time goes by, we are doing better. I commend all—not just the first responders, but all those in the second responders, not just the Guard, not just FEMA, which is doing a better job today, but also a lot of folks who are giving of themselves—volunteers from my State, and all other States, who have gone to the region, giving blood, and raising money in our home States, receiving folks who have been displaced, to give them a home, a place to live, and a job for a while. Those efforts are to be commended. Those are the first responders. Maybe I should say we have a lot of volunteers who the first responders were not even responding.

Second, last week, Senator COBURN, Senator OBAMA, and I spoke about the introduction of legislation which is supported by Senator FRIST, by Senator BURR, by Senator MURkowski, by Senator LEVIN, and by Senator DURBIN, to create a CFO—chief financial officer—to serve as a watchdog so we don’t find ourselves 6 months or 12 months from now looking back to see that we spent X billions so foolishly in response to Katrina that to make sure we get ahead of this expenditure as best we can rather than looking at it after the money has already been spent, in some cases inappropriately.

The amount of money that is going to be spent in Katrina relief over the next couple of months will dwarf the annual appropriations that go to most of our Federal departments. Every one of our Federal departments has a chief financial officer. We need to make sure we are spending this much money this quickly to try to help a lot of people in a hurry, that we spend it wisely.

It is a bipartisan issue. We believe one of the ways to make sure we do that is to have a chief financial officer who is well qualified and can get on the job and do the work quickly.

The third thing I mention is oversight. I serve on the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. We have a good deal of what is going on, including the Homeland Security Department, FEMA, the Coast Guard, and any number of responder agencies. We have a responsibility to do our oversight. We have begun that oversight with hearings last week and informal hearings the week before that. We will continue this week and next week and on and on.

Our interest is in finding out what we did wrong, what we did right, what we did not do well. Then, if this happens again—and we have another hurricane that is trying to round the corner in Key West today—to make sure if this comes north and revisits again, whether New Orleans, God forbid, or Mississippi— that we are better prepared to do more on the right thing this time.

The last thing is the point Senator DURBIN raised, the notion of an independent commission. I was skeptical as to whether or not the 9/11 Commission would enable Congress to do much good with respect to re-structuring of our intelligence operations in this country. The intelligence operation in place had not been changed much for 50 years. I don’t know if there was any reason to believe five Republicans and five Democrats could somehow find common ground and entice the rest of Congress to do the same thing, to work with the President to change in substantial, far-reaching ways the way our intelligence community works in this country. They did, and the 9/11 Commission provides an excellent template, role model, if you will, for how we should, once the first surge of oversight activity and the successive waves of help and aid are out the door, to put in place a commission that might have the kind of success not for us, and not just for them, but for our country.

Success would be measured by better ensuring that a lot of the good things that happened this time in response to Katrina happen the next time—and we know there will be a next time—and we reduce the likelihood that some of the same mistakes and foolish choices will be made.

The American people would approve of that. It is great the President has asked the Cabinet Secretaries to look at what they did within their departments to make sure what they did was right. It made sense appropriate. It is all well and good to have oversight here, but it would be helpful to have an independent commission that could stand back, not distracted by other issues we are dealing with each day, and impartially—led by people such as Governor Tom Kean and former Congressman Lee Hamilton—with good staff and only with this issue to focus on, and figure out what went well, what went badly, and how we can do better next time.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The call will come.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.
The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator has that right.

Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. ALEXANDER. Please indicate when 2 minutes are remaining.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Chair is happy to do so.

KATRINA’S DISPLACED SCHOOLCHILDREN

Mr. ALEXANDER. Mr. President, I will talk this morning about helping all of Katrina’s displaced schoolchildren. Each weekend when I go home to Tennessee, the people who elected me teach me about how we should be doing our jobs in Washington, DC. This is not a lesson they shout from the rooftops. It is a lesson they live by their own example, and we would be wise to follow.

Two weeks ago in Maryville, my hometown, it was Al Gore flying a plane from New Orleans to Mississippi. He was greeted by a Presbyterian Church in Nashchuck where I am an elder, Westminister Presbyterian Church. I pitched in to help.

According to the newspaper:

A growing number of private schools in Middle Tennessee [in the Nashville area] . . . have volunteered to help students displaced by Katrina. Many of them are also waiving or drastically discounting tuition and fees for these students and some also accept evacuees from public schools.

Mr. President, in Time magazine this week, there is a story on this subject. Food stamps are vouchers, and they are helping in this exceptional case. No one is suggesting a displaced mother cannot take her Federal daycare voucher to a Catholic daycare center in these exceptional cases. No one is suggesting we cannot pay Boston College or Harvard University $1,000 for enrolling a displaced student who was set to attend Loyola or Xavier in New Orleans.

Scholars agree there is no constitutional issue here. So are we going to stand here and argue about old ideologies and leave these displaced children standing on the levee because the only doors that are open to them for this 1 year happen to be to a private school?

At the end of World War II, a grateful Nation enacted the GI bill, giving veterans scholarships for college. A lot of veterans had these vouchers for college but no high school degree. So thousands of veterans took their GI vouchers to Catholic high schools to earn their high school diploma. That did not create a big, new voucher program for high schools. This will not either. This is a one year exceptional disaster relief program for kids from the gulf coast who desperately need help.

The public schools are brimming over with students who need help. Public schools, by law, have to accept all children. And Tennessee’s public schools have made room for more than 3,000 of Katrina’s displaced school children.

Our public schools have been greatly helped by these private schools, who do not discriminate anybody. In Tennessee, private schools have accepted at least 400 students, and probably many more.

“The Presiding Officer. The Senator has that right.

Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. ALEXANDER. Please indicate when 2 minutes are remaining.

The Presiding Officer. The Chair is happy to do so.

KATRINA’S DISPLACED SCHOOLCHILDREN

Mr. ALEXANDER. Mr. President, I will talk this morning about helping all of Katrina’s displaced schoolchildren. Each weekend when I go home to Tennessee, the people who elected me teach me about how we should be doing our jobs in Washington, DC. This is not a lesson they shout from the rooftops. It is a lesson they live by their own example, and we would be wise to follow.

Two weeks ago in Maryville, my hometown, it was Al Gore flying a plane from New Orleans to Mississippi. He was greeted by a Presbyterian Church in Nashchuck where I am an elder, Westminister Presbyterian Church. I pitched in to help.

According to the newspaper:

A growing number of private schools in Middle Tennessee [in the Nashville area] . . . have volunteered to help students displaced by Katrina. Many of them are also waiving or drastically discounting tuition and fees for these students and some also accept evacuees from public schools.

Mr. President, in Time magazine this week, there is a story on this subject. Food stamps are vouchers, and they are helping in this exceptional case. No one is suggesting a displaced mother cannot take her Federal daycare voucher to a Catholic daycare center in these exceptional cases. No one is suggesting we cannot pay Boston College or Harvard University $1,000 for enrolling a displaced student who was set to attend Loyola or Xavier in New Orleans.

Scholars agree there is no constitutional issue here. So are we going to stand here and argue about old ideologies and leave these displaced children standing on the levee because the only doors that are open to them for this 1 year happen to be to a private school?

At the end of World War II, a grateful Nation enacted the GI bill, giving veterans scholarships for college. A lot of veterans had these vouchers for college but no high school degree. So thousands of veterans took their GI vouchers to Catholic high schools to earn their high school diploma. That did not create a big, new voucher program for high schools. This will not either. This is a one year exceptional disaster relief program for kids from the gulf coast who desperately need help.

The public schools are brimming over with students who need help. Public schools, by law, have to accept all children. And Tennessee’s public schools have made room for more than 3,000 of Katrina’s displaced school children.

Our public schools have been greatly helped by these private schools, who do not discriminate anybody. In Tennessee, private schools have accepted at least 400 students, and probably many more.