Mr. STEVENS. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent the vote on S 237 be changed. I voted no and I intended to vote aye. I ask it be changed. It will not change the outcome of the vote.

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

Mr. KOHL. Madam President, I thank Senator BENNETT once again for his objection, it is so ordered.

The yeas and nays were ordered.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there a sufficient second? There is a sufficient second.

The yeas and nays were ordered.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is, Shall the bill pass? The amendments were ordered to be engrossed and the bill to be read a third time.

The result was announced—yeas 97, nays 2, as follows:

[Rollcall Vote No. 241 Leg.]

YEAS—97

Akaka  Alexander  Allard  Allen  Baucus  Bayh  Bennett  Bond  Boxer  Brownback  Bunning  Burns  Burr  Byrd  Cantwell  Carper  Chafee  Chambliss  Clinton  Coburn  Cochran

Hatch  Collins  Inhofe  Inouye  Isakson  Johnson  Kennedy  Kerry  Kyl  Landrieu  McCaskill  McCain  McConnell  McCain  Mikulski

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The bill (H.R. 2744), as amended, was passed.

AMERICAN RED CROSS AND HURRICANE RELIEF

Mr. DURBIN. Madam President, yesterday morning I made a trip to meet with the head of the American Red Cross. ADM Marty Evans is an extraordinary person. She was born in Springfield and served in the U.S. Navy for 29 years. She rose to the rank of rear admiral and, after her retirement from the Navy, spent several years as head of the Girl Scouts of America. Then a few years ago, she was chosen to be CEO of the American Red Cross.

The American Red Cross is an extraordinary agency. There are some 4,500 employees in Washington, 30,000 nationwide, millions of volunteers. Those of us who have had the good fortune of working with the Red Cross know that the people working in Washington are important, but the volunteers in the field are absolutely essential—men and women from communities across America who, at the first warning signal, are prepared to give up their personal lives and move to where they are needed. The help they bring and have brought has made a difference so many times in the lives of victims.

As Ms. Evans told me yesterday, this is not just a matter of hurricanes and floods. They respond to house fires to try to make certain that families and individual communities have a helping hand. I asked her what she did in preparation for Hurricane Katrina, how the American Red Cross positioned itself. I asked what they were doing in anticipation of Hurricane Rita, which we all are watching so closely. She said they didn’t wait for a Government signal. They knew what they had to do. They positioned their people, their resources in safe locations where they could move in as quickly as possible after the disaster. They gave a helping hand in the evacuation. But they were ready and prepared, if something terrible occurred. It was heart warming and reassuring to see the American Red Cross and other extremely important charitable organizations such as America’s Second Harvest based in Chicago,
the Salvation Army, and so many faith-based groups are prepared and ready to move.

We are now watching, because of satellite imagery, the course of Hurricane Rita, praying that it will not strike with the force of a category 5 hurricane on the coast of Texas and Louisiana, and that somehow, some way, at the last moment we will be spared. But whether we are spared or not, we must be prepared.

This administration has been haunted by Hurricane Katrina for the last 3 weeks. President Bush has made at least five different visits to New Orleans to be visibly present during the rescue and recovery. He made a historic speech from Jackson Square about the challenge which Hurricane Katrina places on Americans. I thought what the President said was the right thing. I am a loyal Democrat, but I listened to his words carefully, and I thought the President showed the kind of leadership America needs at this moment.

I will refer later in my remarks to the event that went wrong with Hurricane Katrina. But looking forward, as we must as a nation, we need to stand behind those victims, their families, the communities, and the States that were hit by Hurricane Katrina. It was a call to arms by the President for this Congress to join with him and the American people in standing up for the most vulnerable people in our country. That is as truly American as it gets.

I listen to the debate that has followed President Bush’s announcement in New Orleans. We have had Members of Congress saying we can’t afford to do it. We can’t afford to provide the disaster assistance for these people to rebuild their lives and their communities to rebuild their infrastructure and their homes. There have even been arguments from some that we can’t consider spending this money because we have to keep our word to the wealthiest people in America that we promised we would cut their taxes.

The budget resolution we passed in the Senate and in the House this year promised that before we went home at the end of the year, we would give $70 billion more in tax cuts to the wealthiest people in America. We also promised in the budget resolution, which I opposed, that we would cut Medicaid, which is health insurance for poor and elderly people, and that we would cut student loan assistance. That was part of what I considered a poorly thought out budget resolution which passed with Republican majorities in the House and Senate.

Now, with the intervention of Hurricanes Katrina and Ophelia, and the possibility of Hurricane Rita and damage, many Republicans are arguing: We have a solemn responsibility to cut the taxes for the wealthy first, to cut Medicaid expenditures for the poor and elderly, and to cut student loans, and we don’t have the resources to help the victims.

That is unfortunate. It reflects a difference in values. It reflects a difference in priorities. This Senator from Illinois believes that our first obligation is to those most vulnerable in America. Our first obligation is to those helpless victims and those communities, to all of their own, are suffering today. It is time for us to be straightforward. It is time for the President to be straightforward to Republican leaders in the House and Senate, to say clear and unequivocally: We cannot afford with more tax cuts for wealthy people as we fight a war in Iraq and Afghanistan and as we come to the assistance of our neighbors who suffered because of these terrible natural disasters.

If the President will do that, I can guarantee him this: There is plenty of room on this side of the aisle for Democrats to join him in a bipartisan response to a national disaster which paid no attention to party affiliation. I can say with confidence because after 9/11/2001, that is exactly what happened. Democrats and Republicans alike joined hands in the face of that terrorist disaster and said we will stand behind the victims and their families and New York and that city that endured that great loss, as well as, of course, our friends in the Pentagon who were victims as well of 9/11.

We stood together on a bipartisan basis. We did some exceptional things, things to make our country stronger, things to respond to the attack that had taken place. The list is long, starting with resolutions condemning terrorism, appropriations bills, and special bills to put money after 9/11 where it was needed the most, the Airline Stabilization Act, Unitig and Strengthening America Act, the USA PATRIOT Act, the intelligence bills, the defense bills—the list goes on and on.

These were strong bipartisan measures taken in the wake of 9/11 by Democrats and Republicans. We need that same spirit today. We need that spirit to stand behind the victims of Hurricane Katrina and their families and, God forbid, if Hurricane Rita will wreak the same type of havoc, we need to stand behind those victims as well, making certain first we have the resources in FEMA to respond to national emergencies.

There was a feeling 4 years ago that America had received a wakeup call after 9/11, that we had to be ready and prepared as a nation to respond to whatever was thrown at us. Extraordinary measures were taken, extraordinary speeches were made, but when Hurricane Katrina struck, we were not ready.

There has been a lot of question about how to answer the question. What did we do wrong, what did we fail to do with Hurricane Katrina? We better get those answers and get them quickly, not just to point blame, which some say is what it is all about, but for accountability, to figure out what went wrong so it does not happen again. That is basic. It is not a blame game. There is no game involved. It is a matter of accountability.

Sadly, our friends on the other side of the aisle believe only accountability can come about if a majority of those who are asking the questions are members of the President’s party. We learned after 9/11 that it was much better to bring in an independent, nonpartisan commission to ask those hard questions.

The 9/11 Commission, cochaired by Gov. Thomas Kean, a former Republican Governor of New Jersey, and Congressman Lee Hamilton, a former Democratic Congressman from Indiana, did an exceptional job. The strong bipartisan commission came up with measures and recommendations which truly changed the way we govern intelligence. It truly changed the way we govern our responsibility in Congress, as well as in the executive branch.

We need exactly the same type of commission when it comes to Hurricane Katrina. But for reasons I cannot explain, the Republican majority in this Congress steadfastly refused to appoint an independent, nonpartisan commission to find out what went wrong several weeks ago with Hurricane Katrina.

That is the only way to come up with a credible analysis of that failing, whether it occurred at the Federal level, the State level, the local level, or right here in Congress. Let’s have an honest, independent, nonpartisan commission as we did after 9/11.

Instead, the Republican leadership says let’s press forward with our own internal investigation. That has no credibility—very little, I might say. I have been a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee where Senator Roberts, as the chairman, has promised he would investigate the misuse of intelligence information before the invasion of Iraq. That promise has been made for over a year. Nothing has happened.

We have called time and time again for a congressional investigation of the contracts in Iraq, the no-bid contracts in Iraq to companies such as Halliburton. We know there is evidence of abuse, misuse of taxpayers’ funds, and yet this Republican Congress refuses to have a full-scale, honest investigation of Halliburton and the other contractors who are profiteering at the expense of our troops and at the expense of our taxpayers.

So it is time to concede the obvious. We cannot have a thorough, meaningful investigation of Hurricane Katrina without an independent commission. We cannot have an independent investigation of the wealthiest people in America. We have resources to address Katrina and the other natural disasters until the President makes it clear to the Republican leadership in Congress that we can no longer afford the promised tax cuts to the wealthiest people in America.

It is time for us to assess the reality of the challenges we face in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and right here at home. It is
time for us to dedicate the resources to rebuilding and strengthening America, rather than strengthening the coffers of a few corporations that happen to have political connections. That is our responsibility.

I hope my colleagues in the Senate and the House will gather together and understand that rebuilding our Nation is our first responsibility. We must understand that the least fortunate among us need our help today. They are more vulnerable than they have ever been.

We cannot change the past, but now with another hurricane moving across the Gulf of Mexico, we can work together in a bipartisan way to change the future. America can certainly do better.

Madam President, I yield the floor, and I suggest the absence of a quorum.

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

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

Mr. NELSON of Florida. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent the clerk will call the roll.

Mr. NELSON of Florida. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to address the Senate as in morning business.

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

HURRICANES AND THE PRICE OF OIL

Mr. NELSON of Florida. Mr. President, Hurricane Rita, bearing down on the gulf coast of Texas, perhaps Louisiana again, a category 5, with winds that have gotten up to 175 miles an hour, is very similar to Hurricane Katrina 3 or 4 weeks ago. It sprang up as a category 1, hitting south Florida first. Katrina did quite a bit of damage, as you would expect with winds in the range of 80 and 85 miles an hour. There was a lot of debris. There was the loss of electricity as it went over Miami, Dade County. Then, of course, when it got out to the gulf, fueled by those warm waters, about 87 degrees, providing the fuel for the hurricane, it surged in intensity on up to category 5, coming down to a category 4 before it hit the Louisiana coast.

It is eerily similar; Hurricane Rita sprung up and hitting Florida this time actually 50 miles south of Key West, of course, with those counter-clockwise winds, and a category 1 hitting Key West—that being the strongest of the storm—and then out over the warm waters of the gulf. This is what we have as it is approaching landfall Saturday morning.

Before Katrina, this Nation was finally waking up to how vulnerable we are, our dependence on energy sources. Specifically, the Nation was waking up to the fact that 58 percent of our daily consumption of oil comes from foreign shores. That is not a very good position to be in if you have to depend on foreign lands for that oil. The price of gasoline was spiking up prior to Katrina, in the range of $2.70 a gallon. This was during August. I was doing town hall meetings all over the State of Florida, and I can tell you at $2.70 a gallon, people are hurting. Senior citizens on fixed incomes cannot afford to drive to work.

Then along comes Katrina, and because of the hitting of the area of our refinery capacity, the scare goes into the market and the price of gasoline surges. In one station, overnight—one station on Interstate 10 near Tallahassee—it surged 40 cents to well over $3 a gallon.

I can tell you because I know what my people feel in Florida, they are hurting. They are having difficulty making ends meet, even without now having this additional cost. Here we go again. Here comes the next major hurricane, Hurricane Rita. It is now apparently bearing down on the Galveston-Houston area, one of the major shipping ports of the world. Also, that is where the Gulf of Mexico oil activity and the oil refinery capacity of this country is located. If it does knock out some of that refinery capacity, we are going to see those spikes in the price of gasoline to the point that it is starting to hurt our people.

Is it going to take another tragedy like this for us to finally wake up and, as a nation, get our heads out of the sand and address this energy-dependent condition in which we find ourselves? Mind you, this is with the backdrop of a few corporations that happen to have political connections. That is our responsibility.

Mr. NELSON of Florida. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to address the Senate as in morning business.

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

Mr. NELSON of Florida. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to address the Senate as in morning business.

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