involves a trade. They are told they than a three-fold increase in the time individuals for 30 days. This is more and peek’’ searches, without notifying the Government may conduct ‘’sneak search, without notifying the Government may conduct ‘’sneak fense.

year, infringing on that individual’s containing the information. An individual requires that the recipient prove that the bill goes on to set a nearly insur-

result an attorney, most of the so-called disclose to the FBI whether they con-

is to protect those same freedoms that the Taliban took away from the people of Afghanistan living under their tyrannical rule. When Americans are free to speak our minds, while being free from the in-

in in the current divisive and partisan climate. On July 29, 2005, the Senate came together to protect the Constitu-

If there is any question about the se-

worse still, section 215 of the PATRIOT Act, which casts the net of surveillance so wide as to enmesh virtually any law-abiding citizen’s business or medical records, has remained untouched and unim-

This bill pays lip service to judicial review of gag orders placed on recipi-

First of all, the administration pen-

I agree that there have been unneces-

I personally opposed the PATRIOT Act, and I regret that the full Senate could not act on this legislation until late last year. Consideration in the House and Senate was delayed last year for two reasons.

I hope we have the opportunity as

PENSION CONFERENCE

Mr. REID. Thank you very much, Mr. President.
an overhaul not just of Social Security but ‘retirement security,’ grabbing the baton as President Bush handed them at his prime. ’ In fact, Mr. President, not only prime time but at a news conference he held promising to run with it.

’The prime is past.

The savvy legislative tactician who thrives on compromise, Thomas outlined a much broader legislative front than President Bush has proposed. Thomas suggested changes to private savings and pensions outside of Social Security as well as to the 70-year-old program, saying he would deliver a “retirement package for aging Americans.”

Chairman Thomas suggested this wide-ranging proposal could splinter the Democrats.

The Boston Globe reported months later in June:

Republicans in Congress want to turn aging baby boomers’ fears of pension defaults into something as complex as this. They want to move quickly. They are willing to work with a reasonable number of conferees. This is a bill, a very complex bill. While we work, I am asking is there be three people from our HELP Committee, whom are Democrats, and four from the Committee on Finance, a total of seven. This is a very important bill. The reason we are not going to conference is the majority is not willing to give the Democrats another member—that is, they refuse to go with the ratio which the Republicans get, the best of that deal. I hope we can continue our work so we speak, they say we have to do it with—I assume they want me to do ten from HELP and three from the Committee on Finance, that is unfair.

I need, the country needs, a pension reform bill. That can only be done by going to conference. I plead with the majority, let’s work this out. There is no reason we should not have a ratio of 8 to 6 that allows me to have three people from the HELP Committee who are experts in this field. They will move quickly. They are willing to work unending hours to resolve this matter.

A report in this morning’s Congressional Quarterly suggests that outside interests are urging for a very small conference. Meanwhile, the larger, the better, in order to prevent some Senators who have positions on this most important issue, Senators who have worked on it for many years, from participating in the conference, that is too bad.

This legislation has reached this point and has become a part of the political process because of strong bipartisan support for moving forward. It has not been a partisan process thus far and I hope it will not become a partisan process. I expect the conference to be conducted in a bipartisan manner, no matter who gets appointed on what side. I am afraid the Republican majority has decided they want to create a political issue instead of trying to find a way around the impasse. The way around it is easy, 7 to 5 or 8 to 6. I hope we can continue working in a bipartisan way in order to get this bill to conference and enacted into law. It is an important piece of legislation.

It does not seem to this president that he is asking for too much that the HELP Committee, which is so critically important to the moving of this legislation, have three Democrats on the HELP Committee.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Maine.

Mr. COCHRAN. Mr. President, I am pleased to be able to express my appreciation to my friend from Maine, Ms. COLLINS, for the passage of the Katrina Emergency Assistance Act of 2005. This important legislation passed the Senate by unanimous consent on Wednesday, February 16, after several months of negotiations. I commend her efforts and the efforts of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs to take the initiative to address the recovery issues still facing the Gulf Coast.

Senator Collins and Senate Lieberman have both visited Mississippi and Louisiana and have seen the devastation and the progress that has been made and the work itself left to be done. Hurricane Katrina was certainly one of the deadliest and costliest natural disasters in United States history.

On Monday, August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall in Louisiana as a Category 4 hurricane, with winds of 145 mph and with a storm surge over 20 feet high. At its peak, the storm stretched 125 miles across the Gulf Coast. Almost 6 months later, the Congress and numerous Federal departments and agencies are still working to help those affected by the hurricane.

The Katrina Emergency Assistance Act will help people in a variety of important ways.

This legislation provides an additional 13 weeks of Federal Disaster Unemployment Assistance for those who lost their jobs as a result of Hurricane Katrina, extending the duration of benefits from 26 weeks to 39 weeks.

Thousands of residents of the Gulf Coast lost their jobs as a result of Hurricane Katrina. It is important to continue to provide this assistance while businesses, both large and small, recover and expand.

The Katrina Emergency Assistance Act authorizes the Federal Government to reimburse local communities
and community organizations for purchasing and distributing essential supplies during a disaster situation. Mayors, state emergency managers, first responders, and others in the disaster area should be free to purchase necessities such as food, ice, clothing, toiletries, generators, and other essential items. These individuals are often the first to respond to a disaster, and they should be assured that their city, county, or organization will be reimbursed for these essential services.

This legislation also requires the Department of Homeland Security to establish new guidelines for inspectors determining the eligibility of individuals for Federal disaster assistance. This provision will help ensure the timely delivery of assistance, while providing critical funding interest. This legislation also expresses the sense of the Congress that the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement should refrain from initiating removal proceedings against international students due to their inability to complete education requirements as a result of a national disaster.

Numerous students from around the world are studying in this country at any given time. These students should not be punished as a result of disaster that interferes with their legitimate educational plans.

Senators COLLINS and LIEBERMAN and the members of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee have worked hard to provide assistance and respond to Hurricane Katrina.

The committee is close to completing its exhaustive investigation of the response of the entire Federal Government will soon begin the process of drafting legislation to improve future Federal response efforts.

I look forward to working with them to address the concerns of Missisippians and to improve the process of response and recovery.

I urge my colleagues in the House of Representatives to give every consideration to this important legislation. The Katrina Emergency Assistance Act is the result of months of drafting and negotiating by Senators COLLINS and LIEBERMAN and has the full backing of the United States Senate.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

Mr. FRIST. Mr. President, a few moments ago the minority leader was on the floor following up on a discussion that we had had earlier today. I would like to take a moment to respond to his request regarding the pension reform bill conference committee.

It looks as though we will have to continue to discuss this over the next 24 hours because we have not made very much progress on a bill that is critically important to the safety and security of the American people. It is being postponed for no good reason. That is what it boils down to.

These feeble attempts to explain why we keep putting the bill off are unacceptable at this point. We have to go back to the time line because the facts do speak for themselves.

The Senate passed the pension reform bill on November 16 of last year. So that is—November, December, January, February—almost 3 months ago, exactly, or close to it. It was passed by a vote of 97 to 2. Almost all of our colleagues voted for this bill. The House passed its bill about a month later, on December 15. They passed it overwhelmingly, 294 to 132. Shortly after the House passed the bill, we proposed going to conference with a ratio of 9 to 1. That was back in December. It took the other side of the aisle until yesterday to respond.

It looks as if it is, again, a pattern of delay and obstruction. They have had over 2 months to broach this concern and resolve the dispute within their caucus as to who would serve on this conference. Our side had to make tough choices, as we talked about this morning. My colleague from Mississippi and another colleague who wasn’t on the floor spoke to me thereafter and said: Why wasn’t I on that tax reconciliation bill conference?

Yesterday, we appointed conference—two from our side of the aisle and one from their side of the aisle, a total of three. To get to decisions, it takes leadership and calls for leadership just to say this is going to be the number, and let’s proceed ahead, and with both the Republican and Democratic caucuses we have to make tough choices and tell our colleagues that not everybody can serve on every conference committee.

It may be that there is a legitimate dispute on the other side of the aisle about who should get to serve. But, again, I question this pattern of obstruction and delay and postponement. This may well be another instance of election year delays to slow down the legislative process and try to attempt to keep us from governing in a responsible way.

If there is a legitimate disagreement about who they should get to serve on their side of the aisle, I have a proposal that might resolve that matter. We can talk about it tomorrow. I would propose appointing six Democratic conference, which would address their problem, and nine Republican conferences. This should more than accommodate the request of the Democratic leader, while allowing us to maintain equal representation of the two committees, the HELP Committee and the Finance Committee, which have jurisdiction of this bill.

In the meantime, as we discuss and debate this issue, the clock is ticking. We need to appoint conference right away because, as was explained earlier on the floor today, the first quarter of the fiscal year ends on March 31. Within 2 weeks of that happening, companies have to make contributions to their pension plans. If we don’t go ahead and pass comprehensive pension plan reform before then, those contributions may result in bankrupting those companies.

So I close with simply saying that time is of the essence. We cannot delay. We need to act now to once and for all get this done, to get to conference, to resolve the issues on this particular bill.

Mr. President, in direct response to a number of issues that have been raised on the bill on the floor right now, the PATRIOT Act, I have a few comments that I think will put this matter to rest.

First of all, the improved PATRIOT Act, which strengthens that ability to
In 2006, the USA PATRIOT Act, as written, once passed, will help us to combat terrorist financing and money laundering, to mass transformation systems and railways from attacks such as the one on the London subway last summer, and to secure our seaports. It will help us fight methamphetamine drug abuse, America's No. 1 drug problem today, by restricting access to the ingredients used to make that poisonous drug, methamphetamines.

So the question before us now is pretty straightforward. It is simple. Why delay all of these provisions any longer? Why wait to move forward to make America safer? Why wait to give law enforcement the same tools they already use against white-collar criminals and drug offenders? It doesn’t make sense to postpone, to delay, to delay all of these provisions any longer? Why wait to move forward to make America safer? Why wait to give law enforcement the same tools they already use against white-collar criminals and drug offenders? It doesn’t make sense to postpone, to delay, to wait.

Those who are delaying the bill claim they are taking a stand for stronger civil liberties protections. Yet they admit that the renewal of the PATRIOT Act is a vast improvement over current law. Again, why wait to enact the dozens of civil liberties protections in this bill that they have supported for so long. We have a duty and responsibility to protect our fellow Americans. Indeed, it is our highest duty as Senators.

I urge my colleagues to move forward to renew the PATRIOT Act. The time to act is now. It is the only, the best, and the right thing to do.

Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

Mr. FRIST. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum be suspended.

Mr. ALLEN. Without objection, it is so ordered.

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. FRIST. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that there now be a period of morning business with Senators permitted to speak for up to 10 minutes each.