

Over the last year and a half, I have been working on an important problem affecting the safety of America's schoolchildren. Mr. President, tragically, since 1991, at least six children have died in accidents involving defective handrails on schoolbuses. Other children have been injured.

My interest in this issue, Mr. President, came about because of a horrible tragedy in my home county in Greene County, OH. A little girl by the name of Brandie Browder was killed. She was killed because of one of these defective handrails and because the drawstring from her clothing was caught on that handrail as she was trying to get off the bus. She was stuck there, and unfortunately the bus ultimately ran over her.

We have been working for the last year and a half on this particular problem. As I indicated, we have made some, I think, very, very important progress.

Mr. President, ever since I learned about these accidents, we have been trying to warn communities, schools, and parents in Ohio and across the country about this danger. We have publicized some methods for reducing the risk to children, such as a test we use in Ohio to determine whether a handrail is safe.

Mr. President, I have also chaired two Senate hearings—two Senate hearings—to investigate this problem. At the most recent of these hearings, this past April, we displayed this chart. I might say, Mr. President, to explain this for a moment, the question, does your State remove schoolbuses with dangerous handrails? This was the status as of April, the red being “no,” the States that did not deal with this problem; the yellow being states that were dealing with this problem. This was an interim report. If we would have gone back a year before that, we probably would have seen virtually every State in the Union in the red with a “no.” So this was the progress as of April. You can see, Mr. President and Members of the Senate, at that time there were still at least 15 States that had these dangerous buses on the road.

Since that time I have been working with both my colleagues in the Senate and directly with officials in these States to see what we can do to fix this problem. We have come a long way. I am glad to announce today, that as of today, as you can see in this new chart, all States except one—all States except one—are taking active measures to get schoolbuses with defective handrails off the road.

Mr. President, as we approach a new school year, it is my hope that the last remaining State, the State of Georgia, will follow suit and will do this by the beginning of the school year. I have been working with Senator COVERDELL to bring this issue to the attention of the relevant officials in Georgia. We certainly hope that Georgia will take action soon.

Mr. President, we are close to a solution on the issue of defective handrails.

I am encouraged by the cooperation I have received from my colleagues in this Chamber, and I want to help them for all the help they have given my office over the last year and a half. Let me stress that schoolbuses are already the very safest mode of transportation. They should be, because they carry the most precious asset that any of us have, and that is our children.

Mr. President, we do have to do everything we can to make them even safer. That is why I will continue to work on other areas of the schoolbus safety issue. But on this issue, Mr. President, we are very, very close to solving the problem. If we can continue working together in this effective, bipartisan manner, I expect to make a great deal more progress on school bus safety in the months ahead.

I thank the Chair and yield the floor.

Mr. THURMOND addressed the Chair.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from South Carolina.

Mr. THURMOND. I thank the Chair.

(The remarks of Mr. THURMOND pertaining to the introduction of S. 2022 are located in today's RECORD under “Statements on Introduced Bills and Joint Resolutions.”)

CONFERENCE REPORT TO ACCOMPANY H.R. 3230, THE NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT FOR FISCAL YEAR 1997

Mr. THURMOND. Mr. President, I want to urge the Senate to consider the conference report on the national defense authorization bill for fiscal year 1997 before we adjourn for the August Recess.

I need not remind my colleagues that the Constitution vests the power to raise and support armies, provide and maintain a navy and to make rules for the Government and regulation of land and naval forces in the Congress. We execute that power through the Defense authorization bill which is currently awaiting consideration by the Senate. The 1997 national defense authorization bill provides the funds and authorities for the Department of Defense to carry out its functions for the coming fiscal year. It is a good bill that provides critical funding for our forces deployed around the globe in support of our national security. It would be a travesty if the security and welfare of our forces is put at risk because of political squabbling in the Senate.

Throughout my 40 years on the Senate Armed Services Committee, it has been my philosophy that national defense is a bipartisan effort. The conference report that is pending before the Senate is a bipartisan effort. It passed the House last night by an overwhelming vote. It will pass the Senate in the same bipartisan vote if given a chance.

Mr. President, I urge my colleagues to work with the leadership to resolve the deadlock that is holding up consideration of the Defense authorization

bill by the Senate. We owe it to the Nation, but more importantly we owe it to the men and women in uniform who are deployed to the trouble spots throughout the world.

Mr. President, I would also like to request that before the Senate recesses, it approve the military nominations that are pending. The nominations are not political and we must not allow these nominations, some of which are for critical positions, to be delayed any longer.

Thank you Mr. President. I yield the floor.

Mr. HEFLIN addressed the Chair.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Alabama.

THE HEALTH INSURANCE REFORM ACT CONFERENCE REPORT

Mr. HEFLIN. Mr. President, I am pleased to rise in support of the conference report to S. 1028, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996. The road leading to this compromise has been long and tortuous, but I'm happy that the leaders in this effort have finally come to an agreement.

Over the past 5 years, the issue of health care reform has been at the top of our national agenda. The need for an overhaul in our health care delivery system was a centerpiece of the last Presidential campaign, and our inability to enact comprehensive reform legislation 2 years ago was a profound disappointment. At the same time, there remains a firm national consensus that something must be done to reform the health care system.

The Department of Health and Human Services estimates that between 32 and 37 million Americans have no health insurance, and an additional 50 to 60 million are underinsured. As stated by the Office of Management and Budget, a total of 13 percent of all Americans are completely uninsured, with as many as 28 percent without insurance for 1 month or more. The Labor Department reports that each year, 1 million people lose their health insurance.

As currently structured, the private health insurance market provides an insufficient level of coverage for individuals and families with major health problems and makes it difficult for employers to obtain adequate coverage for their employees. This is especially true of small businesses.

The Health Insurance Reform Act will reduce many of the existing barriers to obtaining insurance coverage by making it easier for people who change jobs or lose their jobs to maintain adequate coverage. As many as 25 million Americans will be helped by this legislation, since it protects portability and against losing insurance due to preexisting medical conditions.

This measure builds upon innovative and successful state reforms and enhances the private market by requiring health plans to compete based on quality, price, and service instead of refusing to offer coverage to those who are

in poor health and need it the most. It would also provide much-needed momentum for the more comprehensive reform that is still needed. Equally important, it would not increase Federal spending—because of offsets—impose new or expensive requirements on individuals, employers, or States, or create new Federal layers of bureaucracy.

This measure enjoys wide bipartisan support in Congress and from a host of organizations, including the National Association of Manufacturers, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Governors Association, the American Medical Association, the American Hospital Association, Independent Insurance Agents of America, and the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities. Virtually every medical group in the country has endorsed the bill and the House passed it by an overwhelming vote of 421 to 2.

I want to commend Senators KENNEDY and KASSEBAUM for their outstanding leadership in bringing us this conference report. They have been tenacious and steadfast when it would have been understandable if they had just called it a day and moved on. It is a sound, targeted, market-based reform measure that will make it easier for millions of Americans to change jobs without the fear of losing their health coverage.

I must say that I share the disappointment of Senators DOMENICI, WELLSTONE, SIMPSON and others that their amendment guaranteeing parity of coverage for mental and physical conditions was dropped by the conference committee. I sincerely hope that the next Congress will again take a close look at mental health coverage and reconsider giving it parity. Too many citizens have mental health conditions that not only affect their personal lives, but also lower their productivity and lead to serious physical problems. This results in higher costs to the health care system and to employers.

While this bill does not make all the necessary changes we need in the health care system, it does make a series of valuable reforms that will make a discernible difference in the lives of millions of our citizens. It does so without interfering with those parts of the system which work and without taking away the ability of States to implement their own reforms. If we learned anything from the health care debate in 1994, it is that our system must be reformed gradually and incrementally. The Health Insurance Reform Act before us is an example of the kind of incremental changes that can be enacted step-by-step in a bipartisan, collegial manner. Hopefully, this will serve as a model for future legislative reforms to our health care system and prompt the two sides of the aisle to seek more ways of working together for the betterment of the Nation.

Again, I congratulate the managers of this bill and am proud to lend my support.

I thank the Chair and yield the floor. Mr. PRESSLER addressed the Chair. The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from South Dakota.

THE 104TH CONGRESS

Mr. PRESSLER. Mr. President, I was pleased to participate in an event this morning which summarized the events of the 104th Congress up to this date. It has been a very productive Congress.

This Congress is near the end of passing a major health reform bill which will provide for portability of insurance. It will also provide that a person with a preexisting condition gets certain considerations.

This Congress passed the first major welfare reform legislation since 1963 to initiate "workfare" and to help both the taxpayers and truly deserving welfare recipients.

This Congress also passed a major telecommunications reform bill—a sweeping bill that will create jobs and moves us into the wireless age.

In addition, this Congress passed the freedom to farm bill which will end some of the bureaucracy and costliness of the farm program, helping both taxpayers and farmers, and will usher us into a new age of deregulated agriculture.

The 104th Congress also passed several other bills of great note making the last 18 or 19 months probably the most productive of any 18 or 19 months that I have seen in the recent history of Congress.

I think that this fiscally responsible approach this Congress has taken has resulted in a prosperity and a confidence in the business community across the country. The business community knows that there is an effort to balance the budget, and we are moving closer to it. The business community knows that we have a Congress that is deregulatory in its intentions in legislation and that it wants to have a balanced budget and a sound fiscal policy.

But there is one more step that this Congress must take, and that is to pass legislation that will fully achieve a balanced budget.

I have been very proud to be associated with the Domenici budget here in the Senate. I proudly voted for it last year. It is a fair budget. It saves Medicare and Medicaid for our senior citizens. It move us to a real balanced budget with real numbers by the year 2002.

Mr. President, the national debt has spiraled upward to more than \$5 trillion. Twenty years ago it was \$524 billion—only about one-tenth of what it is today. The annual interest on the debt now exceeds \$340 billion. It is unfair to us and especially to the future generations of taxpayers to allow the debt to continue on this course.

While the Congressional Budget Office recently revised its deficit estimate for fiscal year 1996 downward to \$130 billion, one needs to be careful to note the true sources of this deficit re-

duction. As pointed out by the distinguished chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, Senator DOMENICI, a large part of the decline was a result of greater fiscal restraint by Congress, which blocked a number of White House spending proposals. Further, the deficit is expected to be lower due to revised technical assumptions and revisions in economic forecasts.

Though this represents progress, let us not kid ourselves. We certainly do not have a settled fiscal policy that will bring an era of unceasing deficits to an end. As the Congressional Budget Office has warned,

... the retirement of the baby-boom population starting about 2010 will put severe pressure on the budget. CBO projects that, if spending and revenue policies are not changed, deficits and debt will soar to unprecedented levels in the following 20 years.

In response to this situation, Mr. President, I have supported and voted for measures that slow the growth of Government across the board. I also voted for the constitutional amendment to balance the budget and line-item veto authority for the President. I am pleased the line-item veto is now law. Yet the most important vote I cast in this Congress was for the Balanced Budget Act of 1995. This bill would achieve a balanced budget in 7 years, reform the costly welfare program, preserve Medicare for seniors, and reduce the tax burden on American families and small businesses. Regrettably, President Clinton vetoed the Balanced Budget Act. This is unfortunate. Each day we fail to pass a balanced budget, we add the cost of doing so on the next generation.

Mr. President, despite last year's veto, I am proud that the Senate continues to move forward in our efforts to achieve a balanced budget. Just a few months ago, we adopted a budget resolution for fiscal year 1997 that maintains our commitment to balance the budget by 2002. If we stick to this plan, we will achieve a \$5 billion budget surplus in the year 2002 and, for the first time in decades, bring about a reduction in the national debt.

In addition, this resolution calls for much-needed reforms in the areas of welfare and Medicaid while continuing to allow the programs to grow at a fiscally responsible pace. This budget plan would maintain our commitment to low-income families, seniors, college students, and small businesses.

I am especially concerned with preserving and strengthening the Medicare Program. My mother is a senior citizen. I will be a senior citizen as well in the not-too-distant future. Under the Senate plan, Medicare would increase at an annual rate of about 6.2 percent—nearly twice the rate of inflation. Spending for each Medicare beneficiary would increase from \$5,200 per person today to \$7,000 per person in 2002. Just as important, we would preserve Medicare for years to come, and quality health care would continue to be provided to those seniors who need it.