are living up to who we are as a Nation.

I thank my colleagues and yield the floor.

Mr. WYDEN addressed the Chair.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Oregon.

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, before he leaves the floor, I commend the Senator from Minnesota for an excellent statement. I happen to think those statements reflect his commitment to justice, both here at home and overseas. I commend him for an excellent statement.

I also, before I begin, thank my colleague, the distinguished whip from Nevada. I understand he had the time, and he was gracious enough to give me this opportunity to speak briefly. I thank my good friend from Nevada for the opportunity to speak this afternoon.

CUSTOMER SERVICE PROTECTIONS FOR AIRLINE TRAVELERS

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President and colleagues, for many months now the Nation's airlines have been doing their utmost to prevent the Congress from enacting meaningful customer service protections for airline travelers. The airline industry lobbyists have fanned out across the Nation's capital telling our colleagues that meaningful protections for consumers—such as the right to timely and accurate information—are going to increase the costs for airline passengers, reduce service, and to hear them tell it, it is practically going to bring about the end of Western civilization as we know it.

As part of their campaign to prevent the enactment of enforceable legislation to protect the consumer, the airline industry has made a host of voluntary pledges to improve passenger service.

Today, I am releasing two reports, one done by the General Accounting Office and the other done by the Congressional Research Service, that show the voluntary pledges made by the airline industry are worth little more than the paper on which they are written.

Let me be specific.

After evaluating the airline industry's proposals, it is clear the airline industry provides passengers rights in three categories:

First, rights that they already have; second, rights that the airline industry is reluctant to write into the legalese that constitute the contract between the airline and the customer; and finally, their rights that are ignored altogether.

For example, among the several rights airlines refuse to provide is disclosure about overbooking on flights. If you call an airline this afternoon and ask about a particular flight and it is overbooked, the airline is not required to tell you that before they take your money. When I and other advocates for the consumer have asked them to provide just this information—we are not calling for a constitutional right to a fluffy pillow on an airline flight but just the information about overbooking—the airline industry simply won't follow through. The fact is, the industry's voluntary pledges are gobbledygook.

To determine if there was any substance to them at all, I asked the General Accounting Office and the Congressional Research Service to compare the voluntary pledges made by the industry to the hidden but actually binding contractual rights the airline passengers have that are written into what are called contracts of carriage. The General Accounting Office found that of the 16 pledges the airline industry has made to consumers, only 4 are actually provided in the contracts of carriage. Three of them are mandated already by Federal regulation, and most of them are left out altogether, including informing the customers of the lowest fare, informing customers about delays, cancellations and diversions, returning checked bags within 24 hours, providing credit card refunds within 7 days, informing the passenger about restrictions on frequent flier rules, and assigning customer service representatives to handle complaints and other problems.

Moreover, the airlines are not exactly tripping over themselves to rewrite these contracts of carriage, the actual contract that protects the consumer. When General Accounting Office officials contacted the airlines to inquire about actually putting teeth into pledge language, the officials at 10 of the major airlines said they were ''considering revisions'' to their contracts of carriage to reflect at least some of the customer service plans. Even more importantly, if the passenger wants to know what their actual contractual rights are to these key services, the airlines have made it very difficult for the consumer to find out. The Congressional Research Service points out:

> Frontline airline staff seems uncertain as to just what contracts of carriage are.

The Service found:

> Even if the consumer knows that they have a right to the information, they must accurately identify the relevant provisions of the contract of carriage or take home the address or phone number, if available, of the airline's consumer affairs department, send for it, and then wait for the contract of carriage to arrive in the mail.

As the Congressional Research Service puts it, with their usual diplomacy and understatement:

> The airlines do not appear to go out of their way to provide easy access to these contracts of carriage.

I hope my colleagues will read the actual specifics included in the airlines so-called ''customer first'' pledge. What they will see is a lot of high sounding rhetoric about improving service to the passengers, but the harsh reality is, it is business as usual.

Last year, there were an unprecedented number of complaints about airline service. Based on the figures I have just obtained for the first 6 months of this year, there has been another huge increase, in fact a doubling, in the number of consumer complaints about passenger service. It is easy to see why, when you examine how hedged and guarded the airline industry is with respect to actually giving consumers meaningful and timely information that will help them make their choices about travel.

For example, let us look briefly at the pledge to offer the lowest fare available on airline flights. What this means is if a consumer uses the telephone to call an airline and asks about a specific flight on a specific date in a specific class, the airline will tell them the lowest fare, as they are already required to do. But not only will they not provide you relevant information about lower fares on other flights on the same airline, they won't even tell you about lower fares that are probably available on their web page. The reason why is simple: They have got you when they have you on the telephone, and they will sell you the ticket when it is an opportunity to sell it and they can make money on it. But when it is a chance to help the consumer and the consumer can get a break by knowing about other fares available on the web page, there is no disclosure

The purchase of an airline ticket today in America is like virtually no other consumer choice. Unlike movie theaters that sell tickets to a movie or a sporting goods store that sells soccer balls, the airline industry provides no real assurance that you will be able to use their product as intended. Movie theaters can't cancel shows because they don't have enough people for a show, but airlines cancel flights when they don't have enough passengers. The sporting goods store can't lure you in with a pledge to give you that soccer ball at an attractive price and then give you a less desirable product at a greater cost after you get there. But the airline industry can do both of those things. They can make arbitrary cancellations. They can lure you in for a product and, after they have you, not make it available. The fact is, the airline industry is insisting they ought to be outside the basic laws that protect consumers in every other economic field from coast to coast.

I conclude by saying that over the next few weeks the Congress is going to have the chance to right the wrongs spelled out by the Congressional Research Service and the General Accounting Office studies that I release today. I look forward to working with my colleagues on a bipartisan basis to make sure airline passengers across this country get a fair shake.

Mr. President, I yield the floor and thank my colleague from Nevada.

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I say to my friend from Oregon, I have appreciated his presentation. It reminds me of the work he has done since he has been in Congress. We served together in the

House of Representatives, and the Senator from Oregon was known in the House as being someone who dealt with substance. The same tradition that he established in the House, is being carried over to the Senate, as indicated by his remarks dealing with airline travel.

COMMERCIALISM OF PUBLIC BROADCASTING

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I am a great fan of public broadcasting. I listen almost every day to public radio. I am tremendously impressed with programs such as ''Prairie Home Companion'' and all the news stories in the morning that are extremely in depth. With public television, we all recognize the contributions made by the series on the Civil War, which is a classic and will continue to be in American television. The ''MacNeil, Lehrer News Hour,'' which is now the ''Lehrer News Hour,'' is the most in-depth news coverage that we have any place in America. There are many other programs on radio and on public television which I haven't mentioned that are quite good as well.

I am struck by the amount of commercials I endure and we all have to endure when we listen to public radio and watch public television. In my estimation, it is out of hand. These commercials are technically called ''enhanced underwriting.'' You can call them whatever you want, but they are commercials.

An article appeared a short time ago in the Washington Post entitled ''Now a Word About Our Sponsor.'' Critics say public radio's on-air credits come too close to being commercials, and, as indicated in that article, they are absolutely right. People are getting more disturbed every day with commercialism of public broadcasting.

I point this out because I am not the only one who has noticed the increasing sponsored announcements. According to this article, one survey shows a 700-percent increase in corporate funding over the past 5 or 6 years. It is just not listeners who are noticing the change. If I were the owner of a private broadcasting station, I would be up in arms. And some private station owners are tremendously disturbed about the increasing commercialism of this so-called public broadcasting.

Private stations aren't tax exempt like public broadcasting stations are. The private stations are now voicing their concerns about the existing uneven playing field. I don't want to sound as though I am beating up on public broadcasting because, as I have indicated in my opening statement, I really do like public broadcasting. I enjoy the programs on National Public Radio and public television. I believe public broadcasting should remain just that—public. That means we have to do a better job with public funding.

We can trace very clearly what has happened to public broadcasting. Newt Gingrich, and others with whom he associated, came out with the bad idea that they wanted to eliminate public broadcasting. This group found that they could not do that. So, in effect, they cut back the funding and they are strangling public broadcasting to death.

Mr. President, we need to do the necessary things to make public broadcasting more public in nature. I believe it is time for us to decide whether we want to have a public broadcasting system or whether we don't want to have one. Either we fund the Corporation for Public Broadcasting so they can exist, or we end it. I prefer the former. Therefore, when the Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education marks up its bill—and I am a member of that subcommittee—I plan to offer an amendment to increase the Corporation for Public Broadcasting appropriation to $475 million. This is $125 million more than their request. However, I also plan to include report language that would encourage public radio and television to scale back their so-called enhanced underwriting practices and to become, once again, a public broadcasting system that is publicly funded.

As long as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting is leery of Congress cutting their funds or doing away with Federal funds altogether, they will begin to sound more and more like private broadcasting stations. The people who run those stations don't like it. You have people, as indicated in the Post article that I referred to earlier, who are continually talking about how difficult it is and how unfair it is. In this article, the author cites Bob Edwards from the NPR Morning Edition, which is a very fine program for news in the morning. He says:

> Underwriting has kept us alive, but there's also a downside. It has cut into our air time. If you have to read a 30-second underwriting credit [a commercial], that's less news you can do.

So as I stated, we have to either make public broadcasting public or do away with it. If we continue the road we are going on, we are going to wind up having public broadcasting in name only, and it is going to be unfair that they are competing with the private stations, in which we have people who have invested a lot of money, trying to make money on an uneven playing field because of the protections public broadcasting have.

A DEMOCRATIC PLAN WITH WHICH THE AMERICAN PEOPLE CAN AGREE

Mr. REID. Mr. President, we had some good news last week when the majority leader, Senator LOTT, indicated that if the President vetoed the $800 billion Republican tax plan, that would be the end of it.

That is good news for the American public on the $800 billion attempt to cut taxes in this country because, in fact, it really wasn't a tax cutting measure. It was something that would give no immediate relief to the American taxpayer. There was relief in the outyears. In fact, what it would have done is prevent us from directing moneys toward the debt, and the debt of $5 trillion is something we need to address.

If the national debt were lowered, it would be a tax cut for everyone, rich and poor. We pay hundreds of millions of dollars every year in interest on that debt. If we lower that, it will be good for everyone. We are not going to continue to live in this great economy where everything is looking good, forever. Hard times may lie ahead, and I think we will rue the day we didn't use these good times to pay down that debt.

This massive tax package that was passed on a very partisan basis, and then withheld from the American public during the August break so there could be a public relations effort to have the American people accept this tax cut, never materialized. The American people would not accept it because it was not acceptable on its face. They realized there was no meaningful tax relief in this package. It was more of a public relations ploy. The fact is that there should have been more attention focused on paying down the debt and protecting Social Security and Medicare. We must pay down the debt. That would be a tax cut for everyone.

We must protect Social Security. The majority touted the Social Security lockbox in conjunction with the tax cut. But the Republican lockbox fails to extend the solvency in the Social Security trust fund by a single day, and it includes, in this so-called lockbox, a trapdoor, a loophole, that would allow Republicans to label anything Social Security reform and to raid the Social Security trust fund. Finally, the Republican lockbox does nothing to protect Medicare.

So by proposing targeted tax cuts toward working families, the minority believes our Democratic plan is able to prioritize paying down the debt and protecting Social Security and Medicare while still providing almost $300 billion in targeted tax cuts.

What would those cuts do? They would increase the standard deduction for all individuals and married couples. They would provide marriage penalty relief for those taxpayers who pay more as married couples than they would if they were to file their taxes as two single individuals. They would provide for a long-term-care tax credit to make it easier to care for elderly family members. They would provide for a 100-percent deduction for health insurance costs of the self-employed and include tax incentives to build and modernize more than 6,000 schools. That is important.

Clark County, Las Vegas, NV, has the eighth-largest school district in America, with over 200,000 schoolchildren. We are having to build over a dozen new schools every year. In one year