

approximately \$135 million in FY 2000 to screen, test and care for veterans suffering from hepatitis C, and much more in the future. This special funding for hepatitis C would be in addition to the amount needed to maintain the *status quo* in VA health care that the President has otherwise proposed.

Frankly, Mr. President and colleagues, the most difficult challenge facing the Department into the foreseeable future is its ability to care for our aging veteran population. Many World War II and Korean War veterans are nearing the end of life. But hundreds of thousands of them need long term care services, and the numbers grow dramatically while the overall veteran population declines. VA maintains over 120 nursing homes now, and has thousands of contracts with private nursing facilities and other long term care providers. If the VA is going to do more than simply maintain these programs—which I argue may be exceedingly difficult to do, given other challenges—rather than expand them to fit the changing demographic face of VA's patient population, additional resources will be needed. There is no question about this fact, Mr. President, and no real choice but to do it, in my view.

Until yesterday, in response to all of these challenges, the Administration proposed to make one major move to address the crisis situation: cut health care off. As incredible as it may seem, VA is proposing employee "buyout" authority for the Veterans Health Administration. Based on my analysis of this request and its implications, I concluded that buyout legislation was really a sell out, offering a golden handshake to those whom really needed to stay. It is the wrong move, and I am most pleased to say so.

VA proposes to buy out—that means reduce—its current workforce by about 15,000 staff over a five-year period, by use of a voluntary separation incentive payment of up to \$25,000 to each such employee who leaves by retiring. I think most of you would agree that health care is an enterprise that needs, above all else, trained staff. So, as I mentioned earlier, VA says it strives to increase quality, access and the number of patients enrolled, but would do so without additional financial resources and with a greatly reduced work force. I cannot foresee how these kinds of results are at all possible. How could it be so? A retirement bonus is a fine gesture, but how does it help veterans?

The VA buyout proposal was accompanied by a weak "strategic plan." VA cannot say with any degree of confidence how it could continue to provide care to all of the veterans the Secretary has admitted to the system with his "open door" policies, if the staff were so severely reduced. In fact, it appeared to me that what VA intended to do in its "real" strategic plan—a plan that is yet to be revealed to us—was simply to increase waiting time which already is at unacceptably high levels in

many places across the country. As but one small example, Mr. President, let me review for you the most recent facts on VA waiting times from VA medical centers in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. These statistics deal only with primary care appointments, not specialty care: 34 days of waiting in Altoona; 31-60 days in Lebanon; up to 54 days in Pittsburgh; up to 64 days at the Sayre clinic; and up to 94 days of waiting in Wilkes-Barre. Looking at a medical specialty that is crucial for aging veterans, let me report to my colleagues waiting times for VA urology clinics in Pennsylvania: 85 days in Altoona; 90 days in Philadelphia; up to 95 days in Pittsburgh.

I know that the distinguished Ranking Member of my Committee, Senator ROCKEFELLER, has been very concerned about waiting times at VA hospitals in West Virginia; Senator CAMPBELL is alarmed about the situation at the Medical Center in Fort Lyon, Colorado and has said so; and Senator MURRAY has relayed her concerns about the status of VA facilities in the state of Washington. But these problems are everywhere, Mr. President. These kinds of delays in care are not acceptable for our veterans. In fact, I would argue that a waiting time of 60 days for an outpatient primary care appointment or an enrolled veteran constitutes nothing; such a patient is not really receiving care from VA.

I ask my colleagues: is this a situation that you are comfortable in defending? I am not, and I am not willing to remain silent while veterans receive nothing from a grateful nation. VA needs these funds, and this need is clear. Let the United States Senate not shrink from its duty. Let us do the right thing for America's veterans by providing an emergency supplement of \$1.7 billion in funding in Fiscal Year 2000 to help VA help our veterans.

RABBI SOLOMON SCHIFF

Mr. GRAHAM. Mr. President, it is a tremendous honor to welcome a distinguished religious leader and member of the South Florida community to the United States Senate: Rabbi Solomon Schiff of the Greater Miami Jewish Federation's Community Chaplaincy Service.

This morning, my colleagues and I were privileged to have Rabbi Schiff participate in a long-standing tradition by leading the Senate in prayer. His eloquence reminds us that while our legislative efforts to make the United States a better place to live, work, and raise our families is important, it pales in contrast with our responsibilities to the Almighty. On behalf of every member of the United States Senate, I want to thank Rabbi Schiff for his words of inspiration.

It is no accident that Solomon Schiff was asked to lead us in our daily devotions. His long record of service to individuals in Florida, America, and around the world has distinguished him

as not only a prominent spiritual leader but also a leader in his community.

Since his graduation from Brooklyn College, the University of Miami, and the Hebrew Theological Seminary in Illinois, Rabbi Schiff has served as Chairman of the Board of License of the Central Agency for Jewish Education, President of both the South Florida and Florida Chaplains Association, Chairman of the Metropolitan Dade Community Relations Board, Chairman of the Chaplaincy Service Advisory Council for the Florida Department of Corrections, and Secretary, Vice President, and President of the Rabbinical Association of Greater Miami.

Rabbi Schiff's current leadership positions confirm his dedication to service. In addition to his duties as Director of the Greater Miami Jewish Federation's Community Chaplaincy Service, he serves as Chairman of the National Council of Executives of Boards of Rabbis, Chairman of the Community Hospice Council in South Florida, and as a member of the Executive Committee of the National Rabbinic Cabinet of United Jewish Appeal.

Mr. President, Rabbi Solomon Schiff is a shining example of the moral and community leadership that our communities need as we enter a new century. I will conclude today by asking that a November 27, 1998, article from the Sun-Sentinel of South Florida be included with my remarks. It discusses Awakening 2000, an interfaith initiative that encourages Floridians to engage the power of prayer and spiritual healing in their daily lives and interactions with others.

Rabbi Schiff, a leader in this faith-based effort, was quoted as saying that "a total commitment by responsible people to try and bring society to a level of decency is the only way . . . that our society will survive with a positive future." Mr. President, it gives me great reassurance that Solomon Schiff's wise counsel will help guide us into that future.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent the article I referred to be printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the article was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

[From the Sun-Sentinel—Ft. Lauderdale, November 27, 1998]

AWAKENING 2000 SEEKS STATE'S SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

(By Jackie Hallifax)

Gov. Lawton Chiles and Gov.-elect Jeb Bush may differ on politics, but the two have agreed to pray, forgive, smile and sacrifice to get ready for the next millennium.

It's all part of an interfaith initiative called Awakening 2000, a project organized by Jim Towey, a former top state official who picked Thanksgiving week to announce his campaign for a spiritual renewal in Florida.

"We feel we can build a better Florida one heart and soul at a time by focusing on our spiritual resources, our spiritual treasures," Towey said on Wednesday. "And by remembering God."

In getting ready for the future, Towey pointed to the past. When Abraham Lincoln issued his Thanksgiving proclamation 135 years ago, he said Americans had "forgotten God."

"What he said in 1863 is absolutely true today," Towey said.

Awakening 2000 will try to change that by getting Floridians to sign pledge cards reminding them to pray each day, reach out to people in need and perform several other spiritual exercises.

The project also will sponsor a "Summit of Faith" next fall and serve as an advocate for Florida's needy and neglected, especially those who are dying.

After leaving state government, Towey formed a nonprofit commission on Aging with Dignity that launched the popular "Five Wishes" living will last year. Awakening 2000 is sponsored by the same commission.

Several state leaders have agreed to participate in the project, starting with Chiles, a Democrat and Presbyterian who will be governor until Bush, a Republican and Catholic, takes over on Jan. 5.

Towey, a Democrat like Chiles and a Catholic like Bush, experienced a spiritual renewal in 1985 when he met Mother Teresa. He said he was inspired to launch an inter-faith project by the late nun, a devout Catholic who respected and cared for Hindus, Muslims and Jews.

Rabbi Solomon Schiff, director of chaplaincy at the Greater Miami Jewish Federation, said he had signed onto the project because the moral fiber of American society has been devastated.

"A total commitment by responsible people to try to . . . bring it to a level of decency is the only way really that our society will survive with positive future," Schiff said.

The list of people who have committed to take part in Awakening 2000 includes Chief Justice Major Harding, legislative leaders, Cabinet leaders, a federal judge and Christian and Jewish leaders.

Chiles and Bush plan to sign the commitment cards in early December.

But Towey said "the fundamental driving force" of the campaign is the focus on the needy.

"At Thanksgiving we remember the poor," he said. "But they need more than just a hot meal on a Thursday."

THE TAXPAYER REFUND ACT OF 1999

Mr. HATCH. Mr. President, we stand here today to celebrate good news. This country is now facing the longest peacetime expansion in its history; the economy is growing; and the federal government is predicted to be running a surplus of \$2.9 trillion over the next 10 years.

The news is not all good. We are facing some pressing problems as well. The world is seeing a shift in demographics. The impending retirement of the baby boom generation affects the workplace, retirement policy, and entitlement spending. Most notably, both the Social Security system and Medicare are in financial trouble and need substantive reform. Public debt and the interest payments that go with it are continuing to grow. These issues cannot be ignored because of a strong economy and good times.

The bill before us today represents a balanced package that takes into ac-

count the problems as well as sharing in the good times. The bill will provide fiscally responsible tax relief over the next ten years while reducing the public debt \$200 billion more than the President's budget and still save the \$1.9 trillion Social Security surplus.

We all agree that the Social Security surplus should be reserved for the Social Security system. That is not the debate. The big debate here today is how do we best handle the non-Social Security surplus in the federal budget.

Many of my colleagues have argued that this bill is too large—that \$792 billion is too much. They argue that we should save this money for Medicare and other spending. I strongly disagree. It is important that we not forget those who are responsible for the surplus—hard-working, over-paying taxpayers. After all, what is a surplus—it is excess revenues over the amount needed to fund government operations.

Taxes in this country are at their highest levels since World War II. American families have seen the percentage of their personal income that goes to pay taxes grow from 23 percent in 1990 to 26%. The average taxpayer from Utah, or any other state in America, will pay nearly \$7,000 more in taxes over the next 10 years than the federal government needs, excluding the Social Security program. This is where the surplus is coming from—individual taxpayers who are turning over their hard-earned wages to pay taxes. It is only fair that we return this surplus to the rightful owners. After all, we would expect the electric or power company to rebate an overpayment, we should be able to expect the same from the federal government.

The \$2.9 trillion surplus is large enough to balance our priorities. The Taxpayer Refund Act shows that we can provide meaningful tax cuts, provide for Medicare reform, and reserve the Social Security surplus.

The Taxpayer Refund Act of 1999 provides a tax refund for everyone who pays taxes by cutting the 15% tax rate and putting more middle class taxpayers into lowest income bracket. 98 million taxpayers, 80 million with annual income under \$75,000 would get a tax cut.

In addition, 19 million two-earner families filing married returns will see their marriage penalty eliminated. It is sending the wrong signal to American taxpayers when a couple with two incomes in Utah faces a higher tax bill when they marry than they do as singles.

The bill also addresses the need for enhanced retirement security through enhanced employer plans and expanded IRAs. The demographics of the American workforce are changing and our pension laws must adapt to meet these new realities. By improving retirement systems to increase access, simplify the rules, increase portability and provide small business incentives, we help employers design and offer pension plans to meet the needs of today's employees.

Another important enhancement to our retirement security is making tax-preferred savings more widely available through expanded IRAs. This is particularly true for those without employer-provided pension and middle income taxpayers. In 1994, the median income of families owning an IRA was \$48,600—hardly wealthy by any measure. This bill would make it easier for people to increase their savings for retirement.

This tax bill helps our families struggling to finance a quality education for themselves and their children through tax-free treatment for participants in college savings or prepaid tuition plans and recipients of employer-provided educational assistance. The bill would also expand the student loan interest deduction. This is real relief that will help make education more affordable.

There are important provisions relating to school construction in this bill. The need for more resources and innovative ideas to address the issue of school construction and rehabilitation is reaching crisis proportions. My home state of Utah is expected to build 10-15 new schools a year. In the Jordan school district alone, 6 schools are currently under construction. In addition, Utah will spend \$350 million a year in new repairs. This bill would reduce the burden on small school bond issuers in complying with cumbersome arbitrage rebate rules and will allow school districts to engage in public-private partnerships. The reduction in the cost and time of school construction projects will result in more schools being built.

We have all heard about the challenge that providing adequate health care that is facing the American families. The Taxpayer Refund Act provides meaningful help for those who are struggling with the costs of insurance through tax benefits for the self-employed, employees not covered by employer plans, and consumers of long-term care insurance. There is also an additional personal exemption for caregivers.

The bill also contains provisions that would help keep the economy growth strong. There is a package of international tax relief that provides simplification and helps American companies which have operations overseas remain competitive and continue to grow.

The expiring tax credits are extended for five years and the research and experimentation tax credit is made permanent. This tax credit enhances and encourages the development of new technologies and products. This is the only way the U.S. can maintain its leadership in the high-tech world of today into the next millennium. This is very important to future economic growth. It has been said that innovation is the leading factor driving increased productivity and job creation. Innovation predominantly derives from the private sector research and development which are encouraged by the tax credit.