

challenges to peace created by ethnic Albanian extremists. We must be resolute in opposition to any threats wherever they occur. But it is a grave mistake to forget that nearly all the violence and instability afflicting the Balkans over the last decade originated in the unspeakable inhumanity of Belgrade's aggressors.

The problems in the Balkans are, for the most part, attributable to the Serbian regime, led by an indicted war criminal who continues to hold onto power despite overwhelming public sentiment against him. At any time, he can be expected to foment conflict in Kosovo, Montenegro, or in Bosnia. That the domestic opposition to him has been divided and anemic does not detract from the legitimacy of those who seek his removal from power. In every respect, his is the rogue regime that constitutes the greatest threat to regional peace, just as Saddam Hussein does in the Persian Gulf and Kim Jong Il does in the Korean Peninsula.

The Senate's passage last November by unanimous consent of the Serbian Democratization Act was an illustration of the extent of Congress' commitment to democratic change in Serbia as the necessary condition to lasting stability in the region. We should never forget that, for all the long and sad history of conflict in the Balkans, it was only when dictatorial regimes sought to exploit ethnic divisions did conflict overwhelm peace. The recent election of a liberal government in Croatia has greatly benefited the situation in Bosnia. Only through similar change in Serbia will a lasting peace begin in Yugoslavia. United States policy in the Balkans, and in Yugoslavia in particular, must be focused on affecting the democratic transformation of Serbia that the Serbian people themselves desire.

Final passage of the Serbian Democratization Act will be an important step in the right direction. In the meantime, there must be no lifting of the sanctions on Serbia, and no repetition in Montenegro of what occurred in Kosovo—vague and unbelievably threats to prevent the kind of ethnic cleansing we are now spending billions of dollars to reverse.

In the days ahead, Mr. President, I hope to work again with my colleagues and with the administration to help focus United States policy on achieving the goals in the Balkans that are important to protecting both America's interests and values in Europe.

Finally, on a personal note, if I may, Mr. President, as has probably been noted occasionally, I have been absent from the Senate for some time. I will not burden my colleagues with a full discussion of how I spent my time away and what I learned from the experience. Nor do I think the floor of the U.S. Senate is the proper place to discuss in detail my personal feelings or political plans. However, Mr. President, I would like to say a few words about the great privilege we all share,

the privilege of serving the greatest nation in history.

I have enjoyed that privilege since I was 17 years old, and I consider myself fortunate beyond measure to have done so. This country and her causes are a blessing to mankind, and they honor all of us who work to make America an even better place, and America's example a greater influence on human history. I felt that way before I ran for President, and I feel that way today. And although I have lost my bid to be President, I will never lose my appreciation for the honor of serving America in any capacity, and for the good will and confidence of the people of Arizona who allow me to serve in the U.S. Senate, a body that has seen the honorable service of so many more distinguished Americans than the flawed man who addresses you now.

I have nothing but gratitude to the American people for the privilege of serving them and for their consideration of my candidacy for President. I have incurred a debt to them that I doubt I can ever fully repay. But I intend to do what I can, working with my congressional colleagues, Republicans and Democrats, to help bring about the changes to the practices and institutions of our democracy that they want and deserve.

These reforms, Mr. President, are not ends in themselves. They are means to a much more important end. They are intended to sustain America's pride in the way we govern ourselves, and in the end to remind us all, those of us lucky enough to serve and those who elect us, what a special thing it is to be an American. I was reminded of that every single day of this campaign by Americans, those who supported me and those who did not, who wanted little for themselves individually, but simply for our country to remain, what she's always been, "the last, best hope of earth." I will never forget it.

Mr. REID. Mr. President, 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. BROWNBACK. 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. BROWNBACK. Mr. President, what is the parliamentary situation? Are we in morning business?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senator from Kansas has up to 30 minutes.

THE MARRIAGE PENALTY TAX

Mr. BROWNBACK. Mr. President, what I want to spend some time on this morning is a very important matter that is coming up before the Senate shortly—a taxation issue the House has already passed. It is a tax a number of us have been working to get rid of for years. We are within sight of getting

that done now, but we do have to get it done. People in this body could still block it from happening. I want to make sure we get it through, and that is the elimination of the marriage penalty tax.

I have spoken about it on the floor a lot of times, perhaps too many. But we are so close to finally getting this done for the 21 million American couples who pay this tax that we really just have to see it through. What I am most fearful of is, once we get the bill out of the Finance Committee—they are working on it now, to eliminate this marriage penalty tax—it will come through the Finance Committee, it will be a good bill, it will do much to eliminate the marriage penalty tax—not all of it but much of it—but we will get it up on the floor and someone will say, "No, I don't want to get it through," or, "Yes, I agree with you, but it has to have this rider dealing with pharmaceuticals for Medicare patients," or dealing with minimum wage or dealing with some other issue that is extraneous to this important signal we send to America.

I want us to get this bill through this Congress. It has cleared the House. The House has done its job. It is now in the Finance Committee in the Senate. We will soon have it here on the floor. Let's take it up, let's pass it, let's give it to the President, and do it before April 15 so the President can have that, so we can give some notion of relief to working couples across this country.

Senator ASHCROFT and I and Senator HUTCHISON of Texas have been working on this issue for some time. This past week, while we were not in session, Senator ASHCROFT and I held a press conference in Kansas City. We had four couples from Kansas who are currently paying the marriage penalty tax. They think it is ridiculous. They think it is a bad signal we send. One gentleman there, one husband, stated he and his wife did not get married for 2 years because of the marriage penalty tax. They were in college at the time. They knew they wanted to get married, but they thought, they could not afford to do this because they would have to pay roughly, in their case, about \$600 more a year in taxes if they got married. They were in college and they said: We can't afford it; \$600 is important; we cannot afford to do this. So they didn't. But they were not happy they were forced by their Tax Code not to get married.

You would think, actually, we would be giving them \$600 to get married. This is a positive institution. It is something that is important for the country. It is a clear signal of support for family values, which we all say we are for. We ought to at least send that positive signal, but we don't. Those are four families, each of them who could use the average of \$1,400 a year that most couples pay in a marriage penalty.

Those are only four, though, in Kansas. I want to show with this chart, we

actually have 259,000 couples who are paying this marriage penalty tax. What we are talking about eliminating is this portion of it, the marriage penalty that actually exists about 66 different places in the Tax Code. So we are going to have a lot of other places we need to ferret this out.

At the end of the day, I hope we sunset this Tax Code, reform the whole thing, go to a flatter, simpler, fairer system. But that is for another time.

I want to point out, for Members or others who are watching, how pervasive this marriage penalty tax is in their States. You can go down any of the States here: In Wyoming, where the Presiding Officer is from, 45,336 couples pay a marriage penalty, a tax on being married. That is in Wyoming. You can go anyplace. In Connecticut, 347,306 couples pay that; in Washington DC, 27,117. Go to the big population States, there are more there: New York, 1.5 million; California, 2.752 million couples paying a marriage penalty tax. It is all across the board, all across the country, that couples, for the privilege of being married, pay this tax.

People know about it. Now we are seeing public opinion polls that show people know they are paying a tax for the privilege of being married. As my colleagues can see, this is not an issue that just affects a few people in a few States; it affects America's working families. It simply must be corrected this year.

I say to my colleagues, do not hook any riders to this bill that will kill it and then say you are for eliminating the marriage penalty tax. If you hook riders to this bill that will kill it, you are against eliminating the marriage penalty tax.

Further, I point out to people, the marriage penalty tax affects America's children. I have many letters from people which demonstrate that. In fact, Gary and Charla Gipson commented in a letter they wrote on this subject:

If we are really interested in "putting children first," then why would this country penalize the very situation (marriage) where kids do best? When parents are truly committed to each other, through their marriage vows, their children's outcomes are enhanced.

I do not want to take the full length of time to talk about this bill today because we have talked about it enough in the past. But I do want to make sure people understand that this does affect two-wage earner couples making between \$20,000 and \$75,000 a year.

Clearly, we need to make the elimination of the marriage penalty tax a priority to help all of these families, not just a few. The House bill does much of this. I think we can put forward an even better bill in the Senate that takes away more of the marriage penalty tax than even the House version does.

America's families deserve this break. I would like to be able to tell my families back in Kansas that, yes, this Congress does stand for family val-

ues. One of the things we are doing to help support these families is eliminating the marriage penalty tax. It is a good and positive and right signal that we can send at a time we are having so much trouble with families.

I just came from a Commerce Committee hearing where we were talking about and had testimony regarding the impact of interactive violent video games on children. There the concern was the increased level of overall violence in this society, and even the interactive nature of it in video games and its negative impact on children.

Constantly, people in that hearing were saying: I hope parents know what video games their children are playing. We hope the parents are working with their children and communicating on this issue. In each case, they were talking about the role and the need and the importance of parents and their active participation.

What better signal can we send than to say we believe that is true and we are not going to penalize you for being married parents. We are not going to penalize you for being in that situation. We are going to remove this marriage penalty tax and let you keep an average of \$1,400 per year. We have a chance to pass this legislation. We have the time to do it. This is the appointed hour for us.

I also want to send a signal to the President that I think we are going to get this bill through this Senate. We have gotten it through the House. I am calling on the President to sign this bill, sign the marriage penalty tax elimination bill, and not to obfuscate the issue or say that it is about something else or it is too expensive. If it is too expensive for Government, imagine how expensive it is for these 21 million American couples who are out there paying this extra tax.

Is it really too expensive for us to invest a little bit of money in these working families to encourage them, to support them, to say they have the most important task in America; that is, raising our next generation? We should be saying to them: You deserve a break today. You deserve to be able to have this support coming to you from this Government instead of being taxed. You should be supported.

If anything, we should subsidize the family situation rather than tax it.

Mr. President, please sign this bill when it gets to you so we can do away with this onerous burden.

There may be other colleagues who will come to the floor later to talk about this issue but at this time that is the extent of my comments on this particular topic.

I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

PRESCRIPTION DRUG COVERAGE FOR SENIOR CITIZENS

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, for the last 3 months I have come to the floor of the Senate on more than 20 occasions to talk about the need for this Congress to pass legislation that would cover senior citizens' prescription drug needs under Medicare. I have said again and again that this country can no longer afford not to cover prescription drugs.

Before we broke for the work period at home, I talked about a case, for example, from Hillsboro, OR, of a senior citizen who had to be placed in a hospital for more than 6 weeks because he could not afford his medicine on an outpatient basis. Just think about that wasted money. The older person could not get help on an outpatient basis for his medicine, and the doctor said we have no choice but to put that person with a leg infection in the hospital so he can get prescription drug coverage under Part A of the Medicare program.

Today, I brought with me a letter from an elderly woman in Phoenix, OR. She receives \$1,100 per month in Social Security. Her prescription drug bills run \$1,000 a month. She is 74 years old, and she wrote me: What can you do to help?

I think it would be a tragedy for this Congress to not go forward on a bipartisan basis and enact meaningful relief for the Nation's older people who are getting clobbered with these prescription drug bills. Again and again, we are hearing from seniors in these instances where they have been hospitalized because they could not afford their medicine on an outpatient basis, where when they are done paying for their prescription drugs for the month, they have only a couple hundred dollars left to pay for food, heat, and housing. In a country as strong and prosperous as ours, we can't allow this kind of tragedy to continue. I think it is absolutely critical that this be addressed on a bipartisan basis.

For many months now, I have teamed up with the Senator from Maine, Ms. SNOWE, on a bipartisan bill. We use marketplace forces to ensure that older people have bargaining power in the private sector to be in a better position to afford their medicine. Right now, these HMOs get big discounts; they have lots of clout in the marketplace—HMOs and the private sector plans. If you are an older person who walks into a local pharmacy, you in effect have to subsidize those big buyers. You get shellacked twice. Medicare doesn't cover prescription medicine and, in effect, in the marketplace you subsidize the people with clout.

The Snowe-Wyden legislation uses private sector bargaining power, along the lines of what we have in the Congress with the Federal Employees