

years and the years before that which were bipartisan; both parties were in the red prior to 1993, for over 30 years. We don't want to go back to those days.

To the degree we have these dollars to utilize, let's make sure we cover an array of needs we have: paying down further debt; protecting Medicare; investing in our schools, education, making us a more competitive society; doing some things for our families; and, yes, some tax relief as well. But let's do it all in that package rather than some sort of radical libertarian vision of America where the role of the Federal Government is to guard the border and deliver the mail. Many of our friends seem to think we shouldn't be delivering the mail anymore either.

I think most Americans have a more moderate, mainstream view. The American people are not ideologues. They are not far to the left. They are not far to the right. They don't want the Government to do everything, and they don't want a situation where the Government does nothing. They are commonsense about their vision of where we need to be. I think we should use caution in taking public opinion polls too seriously around this place.

Time after time, poll after poll taken reveals the American public is on the side of this more balanced, thoughtful, deliberative approach to how we are going to position ourselves to be in a situation of strength in the years to come. A lot of people's eyes glass over when we talk about budget issues, dollars and cents, talking about trillions of dollars. It is almost unfathomable. Yet at the heart of it all, where our real values and priorities lie is determined by those dollars-and-cents decisions we make in this body and on which we are about to begin this week.

The rhetoric is never lacking. The rhetoric is always in favor of almost everything. But when it comes time to see whether we are going to protect the environment, whether we are going to help our kids, whether we are going to rebuild schools, strengthen Medicare, whether we are going to do something about prescription drugs and health care, as Senator DORGAN from North Dakota has noted, whether we are going to do these kinds of things is, in large measure, dictated by the dollars-and-cents decisions we make on this floor.

This is going to be a very crucial week. We will be establishing a budget resolution. I am fearful from what I see headed our way that there is a likelihood that it will be another partisan political exercise at a time when the American public is rightfully frustrated by the lack of ability of the two parties to work together as well as they should. If that is the case, we will see, as we go through the 13 separate appropriations bills or omnibus bill in the end, as may wind up being the case, whether we come out in a way that is, in fact, balanced, which does, in fact, use the resources necessary.

It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Two generations have gone by waiting for this opportunity to have our Federal Government in the black and to make some policy decisions about how we can partner together to continue opportunity and prosperity for all of our citizens and not just a few. How tragic it would be if we were to lose this opportunity, if we would say, no, there is no role for the Federal Government to improve Medicare, to keep our rural hospitals open with a decent level of reimbursement, to rebuild our schools, to do the things that need to be done while at the same time providing some tax relief and paying down debt. What a loss that would be if we were to miss that opportunity.

There is no more fundamental decision to be made in this the 2nd session of the 106th Congress than these budget issues that are before us this week. We can be proud and we can take some satisfaction in the fact that taxes for middle-class families are now the lowest in 40 years, that we have had 3 years in a row of budget surpluses over and above that required for Social Security, and that our economy has had 8 years in a row of continuous GDP growth. But there is no automatic pilot on which to put our economy. It requires difficult decisions to be made each and every year by the Congress to set the stage for continued prosperity.

That is the challenge before us. I am hopeful that before we adjourn at the end of this year, we will be able to look back at this 2nd session of the 106th Congress as truly a watershed time, a fork in the road where we chose the right road to go down in terms of strengthening our society and creating a framework for continued growth and prosperity.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Minnesota.

Mr. GRAMS. Mr. President, I understand there has been time set aside this morning?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senator from Wyoming or his designee shall be in control of the next 45 minutes which has now begun.

ENERGY

Mr. GRAMS. Mr. President, I rise to discuss our long-term energy needs and the energy problems we are currently facing in this country and to express my dismay with the Clinton administration last week because of the neglect of the long-term energy needs of our Nation's economy and its energy consumers.

I spent a great deal of time outlining my concern with the administration's failure to develop a coherent plan for reducing our reliance on foreign oil and for increasing our nation's energy security. I outlined my disgust for how this administration has ignored our nuclear waste storage crisis, moved to breach hydropower dams in the northwest,

forced regulation upon regulation on other energy production technologies, and displayed a complete disregard for the men and women who find and produce domestic supplies of oil and natural gas.

In fact, this administration has virtually ensured that the oil price crisis we're now facing will pale in comparison to the electricity price and supply problems that are just around the corner for our nation's electricity consumers. I know both the energy producers and consumers of Minnesota are astutely aware of the generation and transmission problems that will grip our state in the not-too-distant future. Those problems are not confined to Minnesota. Many States in the upper Midwest face generation and transmission shortages, as do States across the country. Those problems are rooted in the failure of this administration to comprehend the generation needs of a growing economy and the transmission requirements of that growing demand.

While I strongly believe that, in the absence of a coherent administration energy policy, Congress needs to step in and forge its own path for meeting the long-term energy needs of our economy, I've come to the floor today to talk about the need for some short-term measures to address high oil prices.

In Minnesota, farmers are preparing to enter the fields for spring planting. They're trying to budget for the year and put in place a business plan that will put food on the table and put their children through school. As everyone knows, doing these most basic things is no easy task when commodity prices are low, the weather is uncooperative, and government regulations eat away at the ability to show a profit. This year, however, farmers have a new worry that threatens to make matters even worse—the growing price of diesel fuel and gasoline. Farming is an extremely energy intensive industry. Everything farmers do require energy; from plowing the field to milking the cows, energy is an essential part of a farm's bottom line.

Likewise, truckers throughout America are essential to delivering the products we use in our everyday lives to markets across the country. Without truckers, we wouldn't have access to most of the things we all take for granted on a daily basis. Even the internet becomes virtually worthless to consumers if truckers can't deliver to our doorsteps the products we buy. Like farmers, truckers rely heavily upon stable energy costs to make a living and run their businesses. When fuel prices go up, truckers feel the impact first. Too often, they have to absorb the increases in fuel prices, but it's not long before everything from fruits and vegetables to our children's school supplies begin to rise in price as a result of climbing fuel costs. We need look no further than the surcharges now being placed on delivery services to see the compounding negative impacts of increased transportation costs.

Many of us in the Senate have witnessed the stream of truckers from across the country who have descended upon Washington, DC, in recent weeks. They have come to their Nation's Capitol not because they want government to give them something, but because they cannot make a living when the Department of Energy is caught napping on the job. They expect, demand, and deserve an Energy Department that comprehends the importance of energy costs to our economy and has a long-term plan for meeting the needs of energy consumers.

Mr. President, I know I do not have to remind my colleagues of how the rising cost of oil threatens almost every aspect of our economy and communities. Senior citizens on fixed incomes cannot absorb wild fluctuations in their energy costs. Business travelers and airlines cannot afford dramatic increases in airline fuel costs. Families struggling to feed and educate their children cannot withstand higher heating bills, increasing gasoline costs, or the domino effect this crisis has on the costs of goods and services.

To begin addressing this problem, I have joined Majority Leader TRENT LOTT, Senator LARRY CRAIG, and a number of my colleagues in offering legislation to repeal the 4.3-cent gas tax while protecting the Highway Trust Fund and not spending any of the Social Security surplus. Our legislation is aimed at getting some short-term relief directly into the hands of energy consumers. Our bill will eliminate 4.3-cent tax on gasoline, diesel, and aviation fuel so the American consumer can see some relief at the pump when they fuel up for a day on the road, in the field, or traveling to and from school or work. Our bill will eliminate the 4.3-cent tax starting on April 16 through January 1, 2001. For farmers, truckers, airlines, and other large energy consumers, this action will have an even greater positive impact because of the large amounts of fuel they consume.

I have heard some of my colleagues argue that 4.3 cents a gallon has a negligible impact on consumers. To them, I say look at the amount of fuel a farmer or trucker consumes during an average week. Look at the thousands of gallons of diesel fuel required to operate a family farm or deliver products from California to Maine. Or look at the tight profit margins that can make the difference between going to work and being without a job. I'm convinced this action is going to help farmers, truckers, businesses, and families in Minnesota and that's why I strongly support it.

For those who are concerned that eliminating the 4.3-cent gas tax is going to deplete important highway and infrastructure funding, we've included language in this legislation that will ensure the Highway Trust Fund is completely protected. The Highway Trust Fund will be restored with on-budget surplus funds from the current

fiscal year as well as the fiscal year 2001.

If gas prices reach \$2 a gallon, on-budget surplus funds will allow additional reductions in the gas tax without impacting the Highway Trust Fund in any way. Depending on the size of the on-budget surplus, our legislation could provide a complete reduction of federal gas taxes until January 1, 2001 if prices rise to, and remain above, the \$2 mark. Let me make this very clear: we are not going to raid the Highway Trust Fund with this legislation. In fact, we've ensured that the on-budget surplus will absorb all of the costs of the gas tax reduction. I also want to assure my colleagues and my constituents that this legislation walls off the Social Security surplus. We will not spend any of the Social Security surplus to pay for the gas tax reduction.

Our legislation is quite simply a tax cut for the American consumer at a time when it's needed most. We're going to use surplus funds—funds that have been taken from the American consumer above and beyond the needs of government—and give them back to consumers every day at the gasoline pumps.

For me, this legislation boils down to a very simple equation. Are we going to sit by and do nothing as farmers prepare to enter the fields this spring, or are we going to take whatever short-term actions we can to support our farmers and provide them with a needed boost? Are we going to help those most impacted by high fuel costs, or are we going to ignore their needs and let them absorb thousands of more dollars in fuel costs this summer? There is overwhelming proof that the Clinton administration's complete rejection of a national energy policy has caused this mess, so I believe the Congress must step in and help get them out of it.

I joined my colleagues in the Senate earlier this year in requesting and receiving emergency releases of Low-Income Home Energy Assistance funding. We did so on at least three separate occasions, and I've supported the President's request for \$600 million in additional funding this year. This crucial funding for Minnesota and many other cold weather States was a vital short-term approach to mitigating the impact high fuel costs have had on senior citizens and low-income families. Our constituents were in need, and we responded exactly as we should have. Right now, even more of our constituents are in need, and by responding with a reduction in the Federal gasoline tax, Congress can again act in a way that is expected, even demanded, by our constituents.

As I started earlier, the gasoline crisis requires that Congress act now to stem rising energy costs in the near term. It also requires that elected officials and bureaucrats across Washington take a serious look at the direction in which our Nation is headed with its energy policy. I am prepared

to take a hard look at any options that might help my constituents right now, and I demand that this administration explore options to ensure that our nation reduces its reliance on foreign oil and establishes a much more sound energy policy for decades to come, to make this country energy independent and not so dependent on foreign sources of energy that when they turn them on or off, it can have dramatic impact on our economy. While those solutions will not happen overnight, I believe a reduction in the gas tax will help. It is going to help now, and it is going to help when that help is needed the most.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. KYL). Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. THOMAS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to speak for about 15 minutes in morning business.

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

Mr. THOMAS. Thank you.

TAXES

Mr. THOMAS. Mr. President, I wish to talk a little bit about oil prices. I guess most everyone wants to talk about oil prices and gas prices at the pump—those things that affect each of us. First of all, I have had the opportunity to meet in the Chamber this morning and hear a little discussion about taxes. So I will comment for a moment on that.

We are now dealing with the budget, which of course is one of the basic responsibilities of Congress, and the question of how much money we spend in the Federal Government. That has to do with the whole philosophical question of how large a Government we want and the things we want the Federal Government to be involved in, how much involvement we want in all of those things—what is the division between the responsibility of the Federal Government, local government, and State government. I think these are obviously some of the most important issues with which we deal. These are broad issues. These are philosophical issues. The budget has a great deal to do with it.

In fact, I suspect that the total amount of expenditures is probably the most important issue we deal with all year, depending on how you view the role of Government. Keep in mind this year we will spend about \$1.8 trillion. That is \$1,800 billion in the Federal budget. About a third of that will be so-called discretionary funding, which is determined by the Congress. The remainder, two-thirds of that, \$1,800 billion, will be mandatory spending—