This initiative gives all military retirees over 65 the same pharmacy benefit that one-third of them already have under the Base Realignment and Closure pharmacy program, a mail order and a retail pharmacy benefit. It makes sense, and is only fair that all military retirees over 65 have one consistent pharmacy benefit.

This pharmacy benefit is a significant and affordable first step in healing the growing rift with the military retiree community caused by the Government's failure to deliver on the promise of health care for life. The pharmacy benefit is the number one issue and priority of military retirees, since pharmacy needs are the biggest drain on the pensions of military retirees. Expanding the BRAC pharmacy benefit to all Medicare-eligible military retirees is the right thing to do for service members who have dedicated their lives to protect and serve our country.

Approximately 450,000 of the 1.3 million Medicare-eligible military retirees already have access to a retail and mail order pharmacy benefit. This was the result of DOD base closures. When the Base Realignment and Closure Commission recommended the closure of several military bases, part of what was lost was access to pharmaceutical benefits for many retired military personnel who were receiving their prescription drugs benefits at those facilities. To address their needs, Congress created the BRAC pharmacy benefit which was a mail order, as well as a retail benefit, for needed prescriptions.

Unfortunately, that benefit only covered about a third of all of those who have retired, so we had a dual system where, by accident of where you had retired and by the results of the Base Closure Commission, some retirees received the benefit and others did not. This legislation would treat military retirees across the country the same.

Basically this bill makes prescription drugs accessible and available to military retirees over the age of 65, at a very reasonable cost—a 20 percent copay when they acquire the prescription drugs in retail pharmacy and an $8 copay if they buy them through mail order. There is no deductible and no enrollment fee. This is recognition that there are incredibly important and significant health needs for our retirees. This pharmacy benefit is one that our military retirees richly deserve.

The BRAC pharmacy benefit was initiated by the Congress in the Fiscal Year 1994 Defense Authorization Act to ensure that Medicare-eligible retirees, who depended on the base's medical treatment facilities for their pharmacy needs, would be taken care of after the base was closed. This benefit includes the mail order pharmacy program for the co-payment of $8 for up to a 90-day supply and use of the Tricare retail network pharmacies for a 20-percent co-pay for up to a 30-day supply.

We ask our armed forces to leave their families, risk their lives, fight our wars, help countries ravaged by disasters, and enforce peace all over the world. Americans who devote their lives to serving our country deserve this benefit. It is wrong for pharmacy benefits to be taken away for the sole reason that a retiree has reached the age of 65.

That is what happens at the present time. Once they turn 65, they go under the Medicare system. Under the Medicare system, there are no prescription drug benefits, which they had otherwise been receiving, so they are left out in the cold. This initiative lets all military retirees know that we have not forgotten them. It lets all of the service members know that if they dedicate their lives to the service of our country, we will take care of their health care needs from the pharmaceutical point of view.

Again, I express great appreciation to Senator WARNER and the others—Senator THURMOND and a number of our colleagues on the committee—particularly Senator SNOWE, who has taken great interest in this prescription drug issue. I think all of us know that the issue of prescription drugs is something of enormous concern to the elderly in this country. It was a benefit that was basically excluded from the coverage of Medicare when Medicare was passed in 1965.

In 1965, the private companies were trying to make Medicare effectively the same kind of benefit package that existed in the private sector. At that time, very few in the private sector had a prescription drug benefit. Today, we see that progress has been made in the private sector. Now, more than 95 percent of the private sector plans provide prescription drug coverage, but Medicare doesn't. That is part of the great debate that, hopefully, we will have in this body before we adjourn; that is, are we going to provide prescription drug benefits for our senior citizens?

What the Armed Services Committee, under the leadership of Senator WARNER, has said is that eligible retirees are going to have those health care needs met, and they do it in a way that makes prescription drugs accessible to them through a mail order and a direct retail system through Tricare. This is basically a nationwide system with only a 20-percent co-payment, no enrollment fee, and no deductible, which will make these prescription drugs accessible and affordable for people who are living in retirement in the armed services community.

I think this is enormously important. I think it is a great step forward. It is in response to the health care needs of men and women who have served this country, and I think it bodes very well for Congress as we try to work together to try to find ways of meeting the needs of others who are retired and need these prescription drugs desperately.

Mr. President, again, I thank Senator WARNER and others for their leadership and for this extremely important and significant step. It bodes well for this institution, and it is an expression of great appreciation to the men and women who have served in the Armed Forces of our country. I hope that we can follow this precedent and come to grips with the challenges that exist for the elderly in our Nation, and that we are able to develop a prescription drug benefit for them, too, the way we have been able to do it for military retirees. I think that would be great work by this Congress, and there is very little reason that we cannot do it. We should do it. I look forward to working with my colleagues to make sure that it is done.

Mr. President, I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

IN HONOR OF STEPHEN S.F. CHEN

Mr. MURKOWSKI. Mr. President, I rise today to honor Stephen S.F. Chen, who serves as the head of the Taipei Cultural and Economic Representative Office in Washington, DC.

Ambassador Chen will be retiring from diplomatic service and returning to his home in Taiwan soon. I have come to know Ambassador Chen well since his appointment in October of 1997, as have many of my colleagues, and hold him in high regard for his unquestioned professionalism and personal integrity.

Ambassador Chen has, for forty years, ably represented his government in posts throughout the world. His experience in the United States is extensive. During the past twenty-five years Ambassador Chen has served in Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. Over the years, Ambassador Chen has become a friend to numerous Americans, myself included. It is fitting in many ways that he closes his diplomatic career here in Washington, among friends.

Mr. President, representing the people of Taiwan abroad is a challenge of great magnitude. The people of Taiwan live in an admirably democratic, free and dynamic community at home. They are significantly more constrained in the international community. Effectively communicating the interests of Taiwan abroad requires considerable diplomatic skill, patience and resolve. Stephen Chen embodies all these traits.

The people of Taiwan could not have had a better Ambassador in Washington, D.C., than Stephen Chen. I will certainly miss my good friend when he leaves and know my colleagues will join me in extending to him our best wishes and great appreciation.

Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. GRASSLEY. 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. GRASSLEY. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to speak as if in morning business for 7 minutes.

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

BUILDING CONSUMER CONFIDENCE

Mr. GRASSLEY. Mr. President, in 1968 the Congress of the United States passed the Wholesome Poultry Product Act of 1968.

A former Congressman from Iowa by the name of Neal Smith—Members of the present Congress will remember—was a person who served the people of Iowa very well and spent a considerable amount of time during his years in Congress trying to build consumer confidence in poultry and other meats American consumers buy.

In 1960, there were 1.8 billion chickens produced in the United States and consumed by the public. In 1998, it was up to 8 billion chickens. There has been a very dramatic rise in the consumption of chicken by the American consumer, all the more reason to make sure the Wholesome Poultry Products Act of 1968 is followed.

There is a dismal picture painted about the inspection of poultry slaughterhouses in the United States and some question about whether the meat consumed by the American public is as wholesome as the 1968 act intended. This question arises because of a proposal in the Department of Agriculture to shift some routine Federal inspection from Federal inspectors to inspectors hired by the poultry slaughtering companies. An article was in yesterday's Des Moines Register, by Register Washington reporter George Anthan, who has been reporting on the subject of wholesome inspection of meat by the Department of Agriculture for almost his entire journalistic career. George Anthan is very much an authority on both what was intended and the enforcement of that law.

Rather than summarizing, I will read what was reported yesterday in the Des Moines Register by George Anthan.

The Agriculture Department admits consumers may detest chicken or turkey that contains pus from a pneumonia-like disease called air sacculitis.

But the condition fails to threaten human health, federal officials say, and the issue of dealing with it can be left largely to the employees of meat processing companies, rather than to federal inspectors.

The poultry condition is at the center of a dispute between the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the union that represents federal inspectors over how best to safeguard America's meat.

A former Iowa Congressman, Neal Smith, says, ''I suppose you could sterilize pus and maybe it would not hurt you . . . but the fact is, we should not be eating that kind of stuff.''

Continuing the article:

The Department of Agriculture is implementing a new inspection system that assigns many of the more routine duties now handled by federal inspectors to the companies they regulate. The inspectors, in turn, are supposed to look for systemic problems to prevent disease outbreaks before they happen.

But the union maintains the change breaks a sacred trust with American consumers, who see the Department of Agriculture approval as proof that an independent inspector has signed off on the meat they put on their dining room tables.

The controversy revolves around the Wholesome Poultry Products Act of 1968.

Smith said he ''carefully and deliberately'' included the word ''wholesome'' in the law's title because ''people don't want to eat pus, and scabs, sores and malignant tumors.''

Officials at the Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service said that even though inspecting birds for air sacculitis will be the responsibility of the poultry companies, federal inspectors will monitor the process.

Parenthetically, the question for the consumers in America is whether or not they can be satisfied that their food is safe because there is some Federal inspector monitoring it as opposed to Federal inspectors actually inspecting it.

Continuing the article:

They said if the inspectors determine birds with air sacculitis and other defects that don't affect human health are being passed for human consumption, they will notify companies, who are supposed to take corrective actions. ''The only thing an inspector could do under the new system is inform the plant that something is going wrong,'' said Felicia Nestor, a food safety specialist at the Government Accountability Project, a group that supports government whistle-blowers.

''They have no club, especially over the products that already have gone out the door,'' Nestor said. The Department of Agriculture's office of the Inspector General recently interviewed federal inspectors at a Gold Kist, Inc., chicken processing plant at Guntersville, Ala., where the inspection system is being tested.

According to the inspector general's March 3 report, federal inspectors at the plant said that before the system was installed ''the inspectors were removing bad products from the lines.''

After the new system was implemented, government food inspectors ''were told to stop removing products from the lines,'' according to the report.

Spot checks of the Guntersville plant found nine of 60 birds with air sacculitis on Feb. 5 and 20 of 70 birds on Feb. 7. The bad birds had not been removed by company employes ''who had taken the place of (Department of Agriculture) line inspectors,'' the report said.

Air sacculitis can fill a bird's respiratory system, body cavity and hollow avian bones with pus and bacteria.

While the controversy over air sacculitis involves mainly questions about the wholesomeness of pus-filled chickens and turkeys, the disease also was linked to human health problems at a recent meeting of a Department of Agriculture advisory committee on implementing the new inspection system.

Daniel Lafontaine of Columbia, S.C., a veterinarian representing the American Veterinary Medicine Association, said he told agriculture officials at the meeting that ''birds that have air sacculitis may be a wholesomeness issue today and a day or two later these birds may be septicemic.''

After the blood stream has been invaded by virulent microorganisms, a chicken or turkey ''is not safe for human consumption,'' said the South Carolina state meat and poultry inspection system.

Even if cooked properly, he said, ''pus can get pretty gross. You sure don't want to eat it.''

Kenneth Petersen, senior program manager in the Department of Agriculture's food inspection service, said birds with severe air sacculitis are supposed to be condemned by company employees.

If monitoring federal inspectors determine through twice daily checks that they aren't, the firms involved can be cited for failing to meet food safety standards, he said.

Under the new inspection system, as under traditional systems in which federal inspectors examine each carcass, birds with less serious cases of air sacculitis can be ''reworked'' by either cutting away pus-filled air sacs and other tissues or by using a vacuum device to remove the material, Petersen said.

''We recognize that wholesomeness issues are also important and we check for them,'' Petersen said. ''But our emphasis is on those things that may cause an ailment. So, we are seeking an appropriate balance.''

I ask the consumers of America to be aware, as they buy chicken and turkey, of whether or not the wholesomeness act of 1968 is being followed by the Congress of the United States.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Idaho.

Mr. CRAIG. Mr. President, I inquire where we are. Are we in morning business?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. We are in morning business.

THE REPUBLICAN AGENDA ON EDUCATION

Mr. CRAIG. Mr. President, I rise this morning to talk about education. It appears that we will spend most of our time this week talking about the importance of our public education system to America's children and to our Nation's future.

Long ago, the United States recognized the value of an educational system that is available and accessible to everyone. We knew the tremendous sophistication of a democracy or a representative republic, and that to sustain it we would have to have a well-educated populace—not only to understand it and to believe in it but to further it. That was part of the genesis of the public school system in our country, along with the tremendous value to our citizenry, to be able to say they were educated. That was our goal.

As we start a debate on the Educational Opportunities Act this week, that will continue to be the ultimate goal of the Republicans—the assurance of a strong, growing, reliable, and capable public school system to provide the very best education and the very best educational system to all of our citizens and to all of their children. Though it appears this is the number