

forced to land. They had to find an airport and land and stop that airplane. But Amtrak kept moving across the country, hauling people back and forth across the country. Rail service is an important part of this country's transportation system. It is that simple.

To come up with a plan that says, by the way, what we will do is cut off the Northeast corridor, which is the most lucrative part of the system, and separate it from the rest of the country, is a way of saying, let's kill Amtrak in most of America.

Talk about a thoughtless public policy proposal. This is it.

This Congress has some work to do. This administration needs to address next week. Mr. Gunn says that Amtrak is going to shut down. The President of Amtrak says he is going to shut down midweek unless the Department of Transportation and others get their act together and provide the interim financing necessary. They have an application filed.

One of my colleagues asked the people when they will act on that application. Answer: Maybe next week.

It ought to be now. This is not exactly a surprise. This problem with Amtrak has been lingering for a long time, and this Congress seems incapable, unwilling, or unable to make decisions that will put this rail passenger system on a sound financial footing. Some of my colleagues believe we just should kill Amtrak; let it die. What they forget is that we subsidize every other form of transportation. You name it, we subsidize it.

They say: But we don't want to have a rail passenger service that is subsidized. Everyone has the right to their opinion. But I think this country is well served, strengthened, and we are improved by having a national system of rail passenger service. No, it does not go everywhere. It does not connect every city to every other city. But it is a national system that connects the Northeast corridor to routes throughout our country in a way that is advantageous to millions of Americans.

This Congress and this administration have to wake up, and they have to wake up now. If we don't, and if they don't, we could find mid next week a country in which all rail passenger service is gone. If we don't, and if they don't, we could find beyond that, if they find the interim financing for next week, we could find a rail passenger system in which we have this crazy scheme of cutting off the Northeast corridor, creating some sort of quasi-private or quasi-public system with that, and saying the most lucrative portion of Amtrak shall not be available to assist in offsetting other revenues from other parts of the system. And we will inevitably create an Amtrak system that dies everywhere in the country except for the Northeast corridor. That is not a vision that is good for our country.

This is not the kind of issue that ought to hang up the Congress. It is

not complicated. We deal with a lot of complicated issues. This is not one of them. It is very simply a question to this administration that has been sitting on its hands for a long time on this issue. It ought to stop. It ought to take some action. And this Congress ought to take action for the long term.

The question is this: Do you believe in rail passenger service or not? Do you believe this country is strengthened by having a national system of rail passenger service? If you believe it is not and you don't like rail passenger service and you want to kill Amtrak, just go ahead and do it, if you have the votes.

But what is happening is inaction, both by the administration and inaction by Congress, which is slowly but surely strangling the life out of this system called Amtrak.

It makes no sense to me. Let's make a decision.

I count myself on the "aye" side. I say aye when you call the roll to ask do we want to support Amtrak; do we want to have a national rail passenger system in our future. The answer is clearly yes. I hope my colleagues will agree. I hope we can all agree to stop all of the foot dragging going on on this important question.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Minnesota.

PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

Mr. WELLSTONE. Mr. President, there was an interesting piece in the Washington Post this morning, a senior aide to Republicans on the House side saying we want to—something to the effect of—write a prescription drug plan that basically is what the pharmaceutical industry wants.

I look at the House bill, and I report to the Senate that is exactly what we have: A bill that is made for the industry. The White House has no plan. They are talking about a discount comparable to going to the movie and you get a dollar or two off the ticket, but it has nothing to do with whether or not we will have prescription drugs that will be affordable.

The House Republicans have said low-income people earning roughly under \$11,000 are not going to have to pay anything. But when you look at the fine print, that's not true. If you have burial expenses worth \$1,500 or more, if you have a car that is worth more than \$4,500, then all of a sudden you might not be eligible for the protections for the low-income. That is stingy.

Then the thing that people are worried about is the catastrophic expenses. We must have a prescription drug plan that really responds to what we are hearing from all of our constituents: "Senator you must keep the premiums low; you have to keep the deductibles and the copays affordable; and you have to cover catastrophic expenses"—that is what people are terrified of, big expenses they can't afford.

What this Republican plan says is: We will provide a little coverage, up to \$2,000. But between \$2,000 and \$3,800 we won't cover anything.

That is nonsensical. It certainly is not a step forward for Minnesotans; it is a huge leap backwards.

I also want to mention to colleagues that the Republicans basically don't want to have a plan built into Medicare.

Now, I say to the Presiding Officer, the Senator from South Dakota, you can appreciate this with a smile. The Republicans don't want to have anything built into Medicare because they are scared that it might put restrictions on drug companies' price gouging. That is what Republicans are scared of. As a result, they say: We are going to farm it out to Medicare HMOs and to private insurance plans. But the private insurance plans are saying: We are not going to do this because the only people who will buy the prescription drug only plans are the ones who need it, and we need some people in the plan who don't need it; otherwise, we cannot make any money on it; it won't work.

Then they say the monthly premiums will be \$35 and the deductibles will be \$250. It turns out that this is not the case. Those numbers are merely suggestions. It could be that the deductible in one part of my state is \$250, and \$500 in another part of Minnesota, and \$750 in some other state.

I want to say on the floor of the Senate that you have these pharmaceutical companies pouring in all this money at the \$30 million fundraising extravaganza last night—\$250,000 a crack, or whatever, that I am reading about. Then you have some of the people saying we are going to basically write something that suits their interest. This is what we are dealing with.

I will keep pushing hard. I know you have to get 60 votes, and I know some people are going to be reluctant about this because we are going to have to take on the prerogatives of drug companies. But I think we ought to do the following: First of all, for low-income people, we ought to say, you are not going to pay anything, because they cannot afford it. Then we should set a 20 percent beneficiary copay. I would rather see us do that. Then we should set a catastrophic cap at \$2,000 a year; after that, you don't have to pay anymore of the cost of your prescription drugs. That is good catastrophic coverage. That makes sense.

How is it affordable? In two ways. First: Prescription drug reimportation from Canada, with strict FDA safety guidelines. There is no reason that Minnesotans, and people all over the United States, should not be able to reimport prescription drugs that were made in the U.S. back to the U.S. Pharmacists could do it, and families could too and get a 30-, 40-, 50-percent discount. There is no reason to vote no—except the pharmaceutical companies don't want it.

Second: and the Chair is interested in this as well—there is no reason the Federal Government's Department of Health and Human Services cannot represent senior citizens to become a bargaining agent and say: We represent 40 million Americans, and we want the best buy. We want a commitment from the industry to reduce the prices. Give us the best buy. Charge us what you charge other countries, charge us what you charge veterans, charge us what you charge Medicaid. We can get huge reductions in costs and huge savings.

Mr. President, I have been talking about a book and Tom Wicker wrote it—it's fictional, but based on the life of Senator Estes Kefauver and the way the pharmaceutical industry did him in. The companies have become too greedy, arrogant, and people in this country have had it, and it is time for us to make it crystal clear that this Capitol and this political process belong to the people of South Dakota and Minnesota, not these pharmaceutical companies.

The House plan is not a great step forward. It is a great leap backward. We are going to have a big debate on the floor in July. I cannot wait for it. I think a lot of these positions we take are going to be real clear in terms of whom exactly do we represent, the pharmaceutical industry or the people in our States.

I thank the Chair. 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.

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

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

MARRIAGE TAX PENALTY

Mrs. HUTCHISON. Mr. President, I want to talk about an amendment I am intending to propose to the armed services bill, although I understand there may be an agreement that everyone will oppose amendments that are not considered germane.

I want to talk about the amendment because I think it is very important. We now have the House making permanent the marriage tax penalty relief. We passed marriage tax penalty relief last year in our Tax Relief Act, and it was signed by the President. It would begin the process of giving marriage tax penalty relief to the 40 million couples in our country who now suffer from a marriage penalty. In fact, it is 21 million couples across the country—over 40 million people—who are taxed simply because they are married.

The Treasury Department estimates that 48 percent of married couples pay this additional tax. According to a study by the Congressional Budget Office, the average penalty paid is \$1,400. Fortunately, last year we took a step in the right direction. We are in the

process of a repeal of the marriage tax penalty, with a full repeal to occur in 2009. It does this by equalizing the size of the standard deduction. So if you are single and you have the standard deduction and you get married, that will just be double rather than about two-thirds of the total, as it is today.

We also increase the width of the 15-percent bracket, so that if two people in the 15-percent bracket get married or if two people in the 28-percent bracket get married, the 15-percent tax bracket will be doubled, so that you will at least have an equalization in the first tax bracket. Unfortunately, that will sunset in 2011.

Last week, the House passed a permanent repeal of the marriage tax penalty. Now it is the Senate's turn. Senator BROWNBACK, Senator GRAMM, and I would like to make the marriage tax penalty repeal permanent, just so that married couples will know what to expect not only from now until 2009 or 2011 but beyond, to eliminate forever this kind of penalty, with the standard deduction—at least in the 15-percent bracket.

Now I want to talk about how this affects military families. There are more than 725,000 members of the military who are married. That represents more than half of the Armed Forces. Of these, 79,000 are married to another member of the military. So these 40,000 "military couples" represent almost 6 percent of the Armed Forces.

Consider the effect of the marriage tax penalty on two people who risk their lives every day to protect us. I will show this chart because I think it is very important. A lance corporal and a private first class in the Marine Corps will pay \$218 more in taxes if they marry today. An important provision of the authorization bill we are debating is military pay raises. The same lance corporal and private first class will receive a 4-percent pay raise, according to the authorization bill we are debating today. But the marriage penalty would take back 16 percent of that increase. So of the \$218, 16 percent is going to go in marriage penalty taxes.

If a technical sergeant and a master sergeant in the Air Force get married, they will pay a penalty of \$604. That eats up 17 percent of the pay raise we are debating today. Two Army warrant officers would pay \$852 more to Uncle Sam, or 25 percent of their pay raise.

Two Navy lieutenants who marry would pay more than \$1,500 in additional taxes annually, giving up 34 percent of their pay raise.

We are trying to make life better for those in our military. To give them a pay raise with this hand and on the other hand penalize 79,000 of the people who are already sacrificing to be married to someone else in the military, possibly having to be in a separate part of the world from that spouse, to ask them to endure a marriage tax penalty that would take away as much as 34 percent of the pay raise we are giving them to make their lives better be-

cause they are out there in the field protecting our freedom, which does not make sense to me.

That is why I had hoped I would be able to offer this amendment. However, it is my understanding there are now talks about taking away any non-germane amendments from this bill. I do not disagree that we want to pass the armed services bill, that we want to make sure the bill goes through. I certainly applaud that. I do, however, think that eliminating the marriage tax penalty would be a huge help for our military, particularly since we are giving them the pay raises with this bill that we hope will make life better for them.

I know there are a lot of negotiations ongoing. I hope at some point we will be able to eliminate the marriage tax penalty not only for the 40 million people who are now paying, but for our military personnel especially. We are trying to give them this better quality of life to tell them how much we respect and appreciate the job they are doing for our country.

I would like to offer this amendment. I think I am going to be kept from doing that, but I want an up-or-down vote on making the marriage tax penalty permanent so that people will not have to wonder if the year 2011 is going to give them another big marriage tax penalty.

We have spoken in Congress; the President has signed the tax relief bill. It is essential we go forward and make these tax cuts permanent so people can make plans. Whether it is the death tax, whether it is the bracket tax cuts, whether it is the adoption tax credit, whether it is marriage tax penalty relief—we had a balanced package of tax relief for all the people who pay taxes in our country.

At a time such as this, with our economy teetering—and certainly if anyone is watching the stock market and corporations and the whole skittishness of our economy, they should see that we need some stability—we need the ability to free up consumer spending by taking the money out of the Government coffers, where hard-working people are putting it, and let them keep more of the money they earn in their pocketbooks.

I hope very much I can offer this amendment—if not on this bill, certainly on a bill we will be able to pass this year. There is no reason not to make the tax cuts we have already made permanent so people know how much they are going to have to pay the Government from their hard-earned dollars. So many people are losing their jobs; so many people are having a hard time making ends meet today. I certainly want to make sure our armed services bill passes. I do not want to load it with extraneous amendments. I do not think this is extraneous. I think being able to give them pay raises they can keep is certainly something we should do for our military, but to take away 34 percent of the pay raise we are