

State of Ohio has disappeared since President Bush took office. His answer always is more tax cuts for the wealthiest people in our society with the hope some will maybe trickle down and create jobs. That has not worked. His other answer is more trade agreements like NAFTA that shift jobs overseas.

Instead, Congress should extend unemployment benefits for the 1 million American workers whose benefits have expired, and Congress should pass the Crane-Rangel bill which gives incentives to those companies that manufacture in the United States, not continue to give big corporate tax breaks to the largest companies in the world who send jobs to China and send jobs to Mexico.

□ 1930

SPECIAL ORDERS

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. CHOCOLA). Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 7, 2003, and under a previous order of the House, the following Members will be recognized for 5 minutes each.

CALLING FOR RENEWAL OF ASSAULT WEAPONS BAN

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from New York (Mrs. MCCARTHY) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mrs. MCCARTHY of New York. Mr. Speaker, Sunday was Mother's Day. An awful lot of us were down here in Washington to kick off the next several months on going to so many different States to remind people that September 13, the assault weapons ban will expire. In many ways it was great seeing people I have met over the last several years, people from California, Oregon, Washington, New York, Jersey, Connecticut, people that gave up Mother's Day to come down and to be here today and tomorrow to lobby Members of Congress to remind their legislators they want the assault weapons ban kept in place. One of the saddest things was talking to so many friends that I have met over the years, those that have lost their children, their husbands, their wives, and yet they are still out there fighting.

We know that reducing gun violence in this country will always be a tough fight. But the one thing I heard constantly, Why are we letting the assault weapons ban expire? It is going to be up to the million moms across this country. I happen to think the dads and the grandfathers, the husbands and wives, should certainly be out there. We have every national police organization behind us. They do not want to see the assault weapons ban expire. Yet when the White House was asked about what they were going to do about the assault weapons ban, the answer came back, NO comment. That is a far cry from what was said during the last

campaign when President Bush said he would sign the bill if it came to his desk.

I know it is an inside Washington thing, but to get a bill on the desk, it actually has to be brought up here on the floor so we can vote on it. That is where the American people have to come into play. The American people have to start e-mailing, they have to start faxing their Representatives and say we want to keep the assault weapons ban in place. That is the only way that we can put pressure on this House to make sure it is coming up for a vote.

I happen to think that when our police officers start going to all their local legislators and their Senators, that we are going to see a change in the tide. I know we do things here at the last minute on the House floor. I accept that. But I have to tell you, when there is only 125 days left to make sure that the assault weapons ban stays in place and only 50 days before an election, I think the American people's voices should be heard.

I am a great believer in one person can make a difference. It was gratifying to see so many people from around the country down here in Washington. When you multiply that and multiply that throughout the Nation, we can make a difference. I always hear from the American people that it makes no difference what we do down in Washington, that they have no voice. I say that is wrong. Do you know how many votes pass in this House by one vote or fail by one vote? Over in the other body today, unemployment insurance failed by one vote. The assault weapons bill going back when it first passed, it passed by one vote. One vote does count. One vote means a lot.

Sixty-six percent of gun owners believe that the assault weapons ban should be renewed. Seventy-six percent of the American people believe the assault weapons ban should be kept in place. May I remind our people out there, the guns we are talking about are AK-47s, Uzis, the guns unfortunately that we see in the war every day. Do we actually want them back in our communities? Do we want them in our streets? In our schoolyards? Have we not seen enough gun violence in this country that we would want to put these weapons of mass destruction back out on the streets? I do not understand this. This is not taking away anyone's right to own a gun. Talk to hunters across the country; they do not hunt with these guns.

So what is the holdup here? They are back on their old rhetoric, saying the bill never worked. Talk to the police officers across this country and they will say the bill does work. May I remind everybody why we passed an assault weapons ban in the first place? Because too many of our police officers were being mowed down. Get out there and let your voices be heard. We can make a difference.

ANNOUNCEMENT BY THE SPEAKER PRO TEMPORE

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The Chair reminds Members that they are not to refer to actions of the other body.

DROUGHT IS A NATURAL DISASTER

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Nebraska (Mr. OSBORNE) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. OSBORNE. Mr. Speaker, as many people know, we frequently talk on the floor here about the state of the economy. However, it seems to me that much of this criticism is unfounded. We currently have historically low interest rates. Inflation is at 1.9 percent which, again, is almost at an all-time low. Economic growth is exceptional, 12 percent in the fourth quarter. Productivity increase is the highest in the last 40 years. And recently we have heard that government revenues are increasing, which means that we may have \$100 billion less deficit than was originally forecast.

The majority of the criticism seems to focus on joblessness which currently stands at 5.6 percent of American workers and is decreasing. This is certainly a figure we would like to see better, like to see it improved. But I would like to point out, Mr. Speaker, that in the decade of the 1970s the average unemployment rate was 6.2 percent; during the 1980s, it was 7.3 percent; during the 1990s it was 5.8 percent. So for that 30-year stretch from 1970 to 2000, we averaged 6.4 percent unemployment. Today it is at 5.6 percent. In April we added 280,000 payroll jobs. We have added 867,000 since January, and 1.1 million since last August.

Those who decry the overall strength of the economy would appear to be in error. My thesis is that this is the strongest economy in the world and is generally doing quite well. However, Mr. Speaker, one segment of the economy is currently very troubled. I would like to point to the graphic here which I think illustrates this. Currently the dark areas, the red, the yellow, the brown and the deep brown are areas of drought in the country. This would be bad enough if it was just this year, but this is something that has been ongoing now for 5 years. Throughout that area, those who are raising dry land crops have had practically no crop at all. The reservoirs which are used for irrigation are now down to 25, 30 percent. Many of them will run dry within a year.

I think it is important that we look at what is happening to the farm economy. This is a natural disaster. We sometimes readily provide assistance for fires, for floods, for tornadoes or hurricanes but not for drought. I guess the argument is that somehow a drought comes on slowly so it is not a natural disaster. But as far as those

people living in this part of the world are concerned, it certainly is a natural disaster.

One reason sometimes we are reluctant to give assistance for the drought is because it is assumed that there is a lot of money in the farm bill, that farmers are being taken care of maybe too well. I would like to call attention again to another graphic here which illustrates that the farm bill has really been functioning in a way that many people have not anticipated. The projected costs in 2002 were \$14.3 billion. In actuality it cost \$13.2 billion. In 2003 the projected costs were \$18.6 billion. Instead it cost \$12.1 billion, a saving of roughly \$6.5 billion less than projected. In 2004 the projection was \$17.5 billion and now it looks like it is projected to come in at about \$10.1 billion. Out of a \$50 billion expenditure that was predicted, we are actually going to spend about \$35 billion.

The point is that we would hope that maybe out of that \$15 billion shortfall that we think is certainly good for the country and good for the taxpayer, that maybe at least some of that, a little bit of that could go back to those who have really labored under this drought.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to close by urging Congress not to ignore the largest ongoing natural disaster facing the United States today, which is the extended drought, and I would also like to hope that Congress would not fail to appreciate those who provide the world's best, the safest, and the cheapest food supply of any place on this planet.

NATIONAL COVER THE UNINSURED WEEK

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Texas (Mr. GREEN) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. GREEN of Texas. Mr. Speaker, this week marks National Cover the Uninsured Week where we focus our attention on the many health care problems confronting Americans without health insurance. This evening I returned to Washington from Houston after participating in a symposium, at St. Joseph's Christus Hospital, on the uninsured. St. Joseph's and Sisters of Charity have for decades served both the uninsured and the insured in the Houston area. Some of the most innovative and lifesaving research and treatment developments are being discovered in our backyard. The problem is that too many of our neighbors cannot access these lifesaving treatments because they lack health insurance.

Currently 31.2 percent of adult Texans are living without health insurance, more than any other State in this country. The growing number of uninsured in this country is truly a problem for all Americans. The uninsured often use the emergency room as their primary source of health care, which increases health care costs for

all Americans. Americans without health insurance are less likely to seek preventive health care and only get care once their health problems reach emergency proportions. In fact, nearly 40 percent of the uninsured adults skip a recommended medical test and half of those people have not received care for a serious health problem in the last year.

I hope that Cover the Uninsured Week will result in a renewed debate about the serious health care problems that we face in our country and the actions we must take to ensure Americans access to quality health care. But we are increasingly going in the wrong direction. Uninsured, particularly children, have taken such a huge cut in the children's health care initiative program, the CHIPs program. I know in my State of Texas alone we have lost at least 107,000 children from CHIPs because of State budget problems. I am sure that problem is around the country with all our States.

As we have learned in the past, a rush to enact flawed policy is arguably just as bad as enacting no policy at all. A prime example is the new Medicare discount drug cards that are giving our seniors too little benefits and too many frustrations. This card was created from a flawed Medicare prescription drug bill that does not provide prescription drug coverage until 2006 and creates a huge gap in coverage forcing seniors to pay all their drug costs between \$2,250 to \$3,600.

Therefore, it is no surprise that I had doubts about our seniors' ability to utilize this first step, the discount drug card. I worried about seniors' access to information about the various cards and their ability to get reliable data from which to make an informed decision. Yet with great fanfare, Medicare released a Web site to provide just this information and allow seniors to compare the drug prices offered by the cards. That is precisely where the confusion began. The Houston Chronicle recently published an article detailing just how confusing this drug card is for seniors. In fact, the author found that the drug card was more confusing than preparing your income taxes or dealing with an insurance company regarding a hospital bill. I think this article sheds important light on the frustrations seniors are facing right now. I submit this article for printing in the RECORD.

[From the Houston Chronicle, May 4, 2004]

MEDICARE DRUG DISCOUNT CARDS EXPLAINED, SORT OF

(By Jim Shea)

The first thing seniors need to find out about the new Medicare prescription drug discount cards is if they are eligible.

This will not be easy.

Doing your taxes is easy.

Trying to straighten out a hospital bill with the insurance company is easy.

Explaining the infield-fly rule is easy.

Figuring out if you qualify for a discount card is, well, let me try to put it in context.

Beginning this week, seniors who are thinking of applying for the card can call for information. To handle the anticipated vol-

ume, the government has hired 1,000 "benefit advisers."

This sounds pretty good until you do the math:

Problem: How many times does 1,000 (government bureaucrats) go into 12.5 million (confused Medicare recipients who may call)?

Answer: Enough times to boost "death by on-hold music" to the top of the mortality charts.

Next, let's explore the matter of choosing which of the 28 government-approved private companies you should get your discount card from.

To make this choice, the government suggests you compare such things as drug availability and price before signing with a provider.

Seems like reasonable advice, except for one little hitch.

The discount card company you join is under no restriction to maintain the price that enticed you to join in the first place. In fact, it doesn't even have to guarantee it will continue to carry the drugs you need.

In private business this practice is known as bait and switch. In Republican-controlled Washington these days, it is known as a benefit.

If this provision seems a little one-sided, a little too big-business friendly, consider this: Even if you are baited and switched and generally hosed all over, you are prohibited from moving to another discount card company until your mandatory one-year commitment is up.

I mean, you get better terms from the Gambinos.

In fairness, seniors at the low-income end of the spectrum who manage to escape the registration process without contracting a terminal case of phone ear will benefit from the program. They qualify for an annual subsidy of \$600, which if they are smart, they will use to purchase round-trip bus tickets to drug-stores in Canada.

Seniors at the high-income end of the spectrum, who own the right stocks, will also make out well.

To everyone else, let me just say that if you can't get your questions answered, give me a call and I will explain the following:

The first thing to know about the infield-fly rule is that it only applies if there are less than two outs and . . .

The first problem with the Medicare Web site is that a large number of senior citizens do not enjoy or are not proficient with the Internet. Frankly, I do not blame them for being skeptical about providing sensitive financial information such as their monthly income or other indicators of their financial situation. Yet even if our seniors are willing to go through all the steps on the Medicare Web site, the information generated is too confusing to help our seniors make a truly informed choice regarding their discount drug card. My staff and I attempted to put together a simple document to help seniors in our district easily understand the choices before them, yet it did not take long for us to realize there is nothing simple about this card.

□ 1945

One zip code in my district had 12 participating cards; yet a neighboring zip code under the Web site had zero participating cards. It is hard enough for a senior to determine what cards serviced their zip code. For example, a senior would also have to figure out if