

which we had to do from time to time. It has been a great pleasure to work with the gentlewoman from New York (Mrs. MALONEY) on this as well.

I would like to thank all the staff who worked on this legislation. It does seem like a relatively simple bill, but it is a little more complicated than one might think; and there was a lot of staff involvement. Obviously, Emily Pfeiffer on my staff I thank particularly, and Joe Pinder is truly an expert on coinage. I think he dreams about these coins and constantly he would come up with things I had not thought of, usually which we had to overcome in some way or another. But his institutional knowledge of coinage in the United States, which may not be exceeded in this country, is of extraordinary value to all of us as we deal with legislation such as that.

So we are pleased to be here. We think this is obviously very good legislation for a whole variety of reasons, every bit, hopefully, as good as the quarter legislation turned out to be.

Mr. OXLEY. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in strong support of H.R. 902, the "Presidential \$1 Coin Act of 2005," that the gentleman from Delaware, Mr. CASTLE, has written.

The dollar coin has the potential to save consumers and business billions of dollars if it is available for the niche population that has need of it. However, for number of reasons the so-called "golden" dollar coin never has achieved the success it should have when it was introduced in 2000. I think the Castle bill addresses all of those, creating a demand for the coin rather than trying to force it into circulation. I like the educational opportunities the coin presents, and I particularly like that the bill would put the Statue of Liberty on the reverse of the coin. Mr. CASTLE isn't going to say this, but I will: In 1997, when Congress approved the original Golden Dollar program, the legislation left the House with more than 400 votes to put the Statue of Liberty on the coin. Somehow, before it got to the President, that important symbol disappeared. Especially after 9/11, I think all of us believe that having Lady Liberty on our currency will be terrific.

Mr. Speaker, H.R. 902, introduced by Mr. CASTLE for himself and Mrs. MALONEY, seeks to improve demand for and thus circulation of the current one-dollar coin, with the intent of saving money for business and thus restraining price increases for consumers.

The legislation directs the Secretary of the Treasury to redesign the new "golden" one-dollar coin, beginning in 2007, issuing four different designs a year. Each design would depict the image and pertinent information about a President of the United States, in order of service, on the front. The reverse of the coin would depict an image of the Statue of Liberty.

Additionally, the legislation directs the Treasury Secretary to begin issuing, concurrently with the Presidential dollars, pure-gold "bullion" coins honoring and depicting the First Spouses. The bill also allows striking of an inexpensive bronze copy of the Spouse coin so that schoolchildren could collect affordable President-and-First Spouse sets, and proposes a number of methods to increase the circulation of the dollar coin.

Essentially similar legislation passed both subcommittee and full committee last year.

Changes to this version include moving the starting date back one year, to 2007, and explicit guarantees that the so-called "Sagagawea" design currently being minted and issued, will continue to be minted and issued during the life of the Presidential Dollar program, as well as becoming the sole design after the end of that program.

Finally the legislation incorporates as a separate title the text of H.R. 767, introduced by Mr. LAHOOD for himself and Mr. JACKSON, which calls for a temporary redesign of the reverse of the one-cent coin in 2009 honoring the bicentennial of the birth of President Abraham Lincoln.

With that, I urge unanimous support for H.R. 902.

Mr. CASTLE. Mr. Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. BOOZMAN). The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from Delaware (Mr. CASTLE) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 902, as amended.

The question was taken.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. In the opinion of the Chair, two-thirds of those present have voted in the affirmative.

Mr. CASTLE. Mr. Speaker, on that I demand the yeas and nays.

The yeas and nays were ordered.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to clause 8 of rule XX and the Chair's prior announcement, further proceedings on this motion will be postponed.

EXPANDED ACCESS TO FINANCIAL SERVICES ACT OF 2005

Mr. CASTLE. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 749) to amend the Federal Credit Union Act to provide expanded access for persons in the field of membership of a Federal credit union to money order, check cashing, and money transfer services, as amended.

The Clerk read as follows:

H.R. 749

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the "Expanded Access to Financial Services Act of 2005".

SEC. 2. CHECK CASHING AND MONEY TRANSFER SERVICES OFFERED WITHIN THE FIELD OF MEMBERSHIP.

Paragraph (12) of section 107 of the Federal Credit Union Act (12 U.S.C. 1757(12)) is amended to read as follows:

"(12) in accordance with regulations prescribed by the Board—

"(A) to sell, to persons in the field of membership, negotiable checks (including travelers checks), money orders, and other similar money transfer instruments (including international and domestic electronic fund transfers); and

"(B) to cash checks and money orders and receive international and domestic electronic fund transfers for persons in the field of membership for a fee;"

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentleman from Delaware (Mr. CASTLE) and the gentleman from California (Mr. SHERMAN) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Delaware (Mr. CASTLE).

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. CASTLE. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days within which to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous material on H.R. 749, as amended.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Delaware?

There was no objection.

Mr. CASTLE. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself 5 minutes.

Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of H.R. 749, the Expanded Access to Financial Services Act of 2005, introduced by the gentleman from Pennsylvania (Mr. GERLACH) and the gentleman from California (Mr. SHERMAN) and favorably reported to the House by the Committee on Financial Services.

This bill makes a simple change to the Federal Credit Union Act to allow Federal credit unions to offer check cashing and money transfer services to anyone within their field of membership. H.R. 749 will serve the dual purpose of lowering the cost to consumers of both check cashing and wire transfer products, while providing credit unions the opportunity to establish relationships with individuals who are currently unbanked.

Money transfers by individuals living and working in the U.S. to Latin America are currently estimated at \$10 billion annually, and should more than double by 2010.

□ 1600

As the remittance market continues to grow, there becomes a significant danger in depriving customers of low-cost remittance products, thereby driving them to underground service providers that evade regulatory oversight. H.R. 749 will allow credit unions to offer remittance products to individuals who qualify for membership while promoting greater transparency within the remittance market. This improved transparency will enhance the ability for regulators and law enforcement agencies to track wire transfers used for illegal activity. Increasing the ease with which regulators and law enforcement agencies can follow the money trail is consistent with the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission on Terrorist Financing.

Allowing Federal credit unions to offer products and services to all consumers within their field of membership would provide further benefits to our economy by allowing credit unions to establish relationships with individuals who are currently "unbanked." Many users of remittance services are recent immigrants and should be empowered with the knowledge and resources necessary to open personal accounts at mainstream financial institutions. Studies indicate that as many as 10 million American households do not have a bank account. Establishing and successfully managing a personal

account with an insured depository institution can lead to greater economic self-sufficiency and long-term financial security. Particularly for low- and moderate-income Americans, opening a checking or savings account can be an important first step in establishing a credit history, which can unlock doors to other financial opportunities.

I believe that this bill is a positive step toward ensuring that millions of unbanked Americans have access to secure, low-cost remittance products, while drawing these same customers into the regulated financial mainstream. I therefore encourage all of my colleagues to vote in favor of H.R. 749.

Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. SHERMAN. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, I think the gentleman from Delaware (Mr. CASTLE) summarized well the reasons for voting for this bill. If I had more forbearance, I would simply sit down, but I have a really nicely written speech here and will use a few minutes, hopefully abbreviating it, since so many of its points have already been covered.

Mr. Speaker, I will put into the RECORD at this point a letter in support of this bill from the National Association of Federal Credit Unions.

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION
OF FEDERAL CREDIT UNIONS,
Arlington, VA, April 26, 2005.

Hon. MIKE OXLEY,
Chairman, House Committee on Financial Services,
House of Representatives, Washington, DC.

Hon. BARNEY FRANK,
Ranking Member, House Committee on Financial Services,
House of Representatives,
Washington, DC.

DEAR CHAIRMAN OXLEY AND RANKING MEMBER FRANK: On behalf of the National Association of Federal Credit Unions (NAFCU), the only national trade association that exclusively represents the interests of our nation's federal credit unions, I want to reiterate our support for the Expanded Access to Financial Services Act of 2005 (H.R. 749) and urge the House to bring up and pass this key legislation.

NAFCU fully supports the merits of this bill, since abuses are rampant in communities where immigrants rely on money transfer companies to send remittances to family members and others in their country of origin. Unfortunately, money transfer companies oftentimes charge exorbitant fees on those sending remittances, while imposing poor exchange rates. For example, a \$1000 money transfer to Mexico via IRnet would cost \$10, while the same transaction via Western Union would cost between \$30 and \$50 depending on the Western Union location. Also, the credit union providing the transfer may be successful in converting an unbanked potential member into a member. In reality, and in far too many cases, the costs associated with sending such remittances is essentially nothing more than another form of predatory lending. Many people do not know that credit unions can provide a lower cost and better alternative to these predatory practices. As such, NAFCU is pleased that a number of our member credit unions currently offer remittance services to their members.

Last year, in testimony before the House Financial Services Subcommittee on Finan-

cial Services and Consumer Credit during a hearing on the issue of regulatory relief for credit unions on July 20, 2004, NAFCU Board Secretary and Xerox FCU President & CEO Bill Cheney testified:

"... NAFCU supports efforts to allow federal credit unions to offer check-cashing and money-transfer services to anyone within the credit union's field of membership. We believe this new authority, which would be discretionary and not mandatory, will allow credit unions to help combat abuses by non-traditional financial institutions that prey on our nation's immigrants and others who live and work in underserved communities."

That statement remains true today. The credit union industry continues to work on the front line to combat financial illiteracy and to teach consumers about sound financial practices. NAFCU believes that H.R. 749 is a good step forward in creating an alternative to those who have no choices in traditional financial services.

Thank you for allowing us this opportunity to share our support for H.R. 749. We hope that the House is able to bring up and take action on this legislation in a timely manner. If you or your staff have any questions regarding remittances abuses and how credit unions can be used to help address these problems, please do not hesitate to call on me or NAFCU's Director of Legislative Affairs, Brad Thaler.

Sincerely,

FRED R. BECKER, Jr.,
President and CEO.

Mr. Speaker, H.R. 749 would allow credit unions to provide lifeline services; that is to say international remittances, wire transfers, and check-cashing services to nonmembers who are within the credit union's field of membership. Now, a credit union is restricted and serves a restricted number of people. Some credit unions are based on employment, and so you may have a credit union that serves the textile workers of Los Angeles. You might have another credit union geographically based that serves the northeast San Fernando Valley. This bill only allows a credit union to serve those who are within its field of membership, who are eligible to become members of a credit union. And it makes good sense to allow those who fit within the field of membership, but are not yet members of the credit union, to get these lifeline services. These lifeline services are often priced very high, whether it be check-cashing on the one hand, or international remittances on the other. And to instead provide additional competition so that credit unions can bring the price of these services down would be very helpful to those at the very bottom of our economic ladder.

As the gentleman from Delaware points out, it also brings people who do not have a relationship with a financial institution into a financial institution. It gives them a chance to move from nonmembers who are making use of the check cashing and remittance services, to members who have a checking account, and then gradually a savings account, a credit history, and a real piece of the American financial pie, if you will; a chance to participate with all of the services that the financial institutions of this country provide.

Now, consumers who are sending remittances now, sometimes they are

paying as much as 15 percent of the amount that they plan to send. So if you are sending \$300 back to your parents in Mexico, you may spend \$45, and this bill will provide additional competition in the international remittance area, where many credit unions providing services to those who are already members often provide these services for only \$14 or less per transaction. By bringing people into credit unions, credit unions can do what they do best, and that is serve those who are within their field of membership and begin the process of providing financial education, combating predatory lending, and bringing people into the financial system.

Today, more than 200 credit unions already provide to their members wire transfer services to almost 650 points of service in 40 countries. So the credit unions are well positioned to provide these wire transfer and international remittance services.

In 2003, the Credit Union National Association adopted a group of principles designed to guide their members when providing these international remittance services. They basically say that credit unions should disclose the cost of the transaction in their advertising and brochures and in dealings with the customer, that the credit unions will provide current exchange rate information before conducting the transaction; that they will tell the customer the exact amount of foreign currency to be received by the recipient; and they will tell the sender when the funds will be available to the recipient. These kinds of high principles are important for those in the international remittance business, and to have credit unions more involved in that business and subject to those principles is an important step forward.

As the gentleman from Delaware pointed out, the size of the international remittance business is quite large. In fact, it is estimated at least at \$10 billion annually. It is expected to double by the end of this decade, and there are some estimates that place it well above \$10 billion annually now.

I should also mention that nearly half of the Latinos in this country do not have an account with a mainstream financial institution, and that is why it is so important in dealing with that immigrant community, as well as other immigrant communities from elsewhere in the world, that we provide this opportunity for credit unions to provide international remittance services.

I should also take a moment to recognize the work of the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. GUTIERREZ) who has been the leader in dealing with all of the various aspects of the remittance, international remittance issues, and to recognize my friend, the gentleman from the Inland Empire (Mr. BACA) who provided a clarifying and perfecting amendment to this legislation. I believe that this legislation will help credit unions provide services to those

who need them, will drive down the price of those services, and will introduce people to our financial institutions. I urge an aye vote.

Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. CASTLE. Mr. Speaker, I yield such time as he may consume to the gentleman from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (Mr. GERLACH).

Mr. GERLACH. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman for yielding me this time, and I thank the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. OXLEY) for taking up this bill so quickly, and the gentleman from California (Mr. SHERMAN) for his work on behalf of this important legislation. I would also like to thank the gentleman from California (Mr. BACA), the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. GUTIERREZ), the gentleman from Pennsylvania (Mr. KANJORSKI), the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. LATOURETTE), and the gentleman from Texas (Mr. PAUL) for their efforts as well.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today to encourage my colleagues to support H.R. 749, the Expanded Access to Financial Services Act. This bipartisan legislation will amend the Federal Credit Union Act to allow credit unions to offer money order, check cashing, and wire transfer services to anyone who is eligible to be a credit union member, whether or not they have credit union membership. The bill is identical to section 307 of H.R. 1375, the Financial Services Regulatory Relief Act, which passed the House by a vote of 392 to 25 on March 18, 2004.

H.R. 748 reaches out to individuals who, for whatever reason, do not have established bank accounts. These unbanked Americans, estimated to be up to 10 million households, are frequently charged high fees for a variety of financial services. By bringing competition to the marketplace, we can provide our constituents access to lower-fee alternatives.

Many of those who would utilize these services are hardworking immigrants trying to wire money home to help provide for their families. According to the Pew Hispanic Center and Multilateral Investment Fund, \$10 million is sent back to Latin America each year, a figure that can more than double in the next 5 years.

It is my hope that the underserved persons who are reached by this bill will be able to use these services to establish a credit history that can then allow them to take advantage of other financial services. An initial positive experience with a depository institution may encourage the "unbanked" to explore other financial products.

Further, bringing immigrant workers into financial institutions is important for national security. Credit unions are required to follow the recordkeeping and reporting requirements of the Bank Secrecy Act. They must also determine that customers are in the field of membership, a process that would involve personal documentation review. Having international money

transfers go through regulated financial institutions makes it easier for law enforcement officials to learn of and follow suspicious activity.

This legislation has the support of the National Credit Union Administration, the Credit Union National Association, and National Association of Federal Credit Unions.

H.R. 749 is a good, bipartisan bill. It reaches out to communities that have historically been left out of the financial services arena and encourages hardworking Americans to develop relationships with financial institutions. I hope the Members will choose today to give their constituents access to affordable financial services.

Mr. BACA. Mr. Speaker, I rise in strong support of H.R. 749, the Expanded Financial Services Act of 2005.

This legislation will allow credit unions to offer services to individuals who are in their field of membership, not just those who are members.

This bill will open up the marketplace, and will provide lower-cost services to underserved individuals. The result will be that thousands of unbanked households will be able to enter the economic mainstream.

H.R. 749 includes a provision that I introduced in the Financial Services Committee that will allow these individuals to use credit unions to send international and domestic electronic fund transfers.

This provision will help underserved individuals to send and receive funds to and from their families.

Currently there are about 10 million households in the United States that do not have access to banking. This bill will help those individuals by giving them lower-cost financial alternatives to send funds to their families.

H.R. 749 will promote competition in the money transfer industry, resulting in lower fees to consumers.

By allowing credit unions to compete, we will bring huge savings to individuals transferring money and provide more money for those who need it most. The money people save by using credit unions can be reinvested in our economy, which helps all Americans.

I urge my colleagues to vote yes on H.R. 749, so that thousands of underserved Americans can join the financial mainstream and access the American dream.

Mr. CASE. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in strong support of H.R. 749, the Expanded Access to Financial Services Act of 2005. I do so as the proud representative of Hawai'i's Second District, in which our nation's credit unions have a long and rich history, and as one of my Hawai'i's 742,000 credit union members.

H.R. 749 will allow credit unions to provide expanded services to both members and non-members otherwise eligible for membership. These expanded services include the issuance of travelers' checks and money orders, and electronic funds transfers.

Most specifically, this bill, if signed into law, will in part enable many more of our citizens to transfer money overseas to family members and others with greater ease, thereby assisting our personal and financial interests. For it is a fact that our country is facing its highest level of immigration since the Depression era, with over 28.4 million foreign-born individuals residing in the United States.

My Hawai'i is no exception. According to the most recent Census Bureau's American Community Survey, Hawai'i, with 17.9 percent, has the fourth-largest percentage of foreign-born residents in the United States.

An overwhelming majority of Hawai'i's foreign-born population is from Asia. According to the Susannah Wesley Community Center, a private, nonprofit agency contracted by the State of Hawai'i to provide immigrant services, Hawai'i's largest immigrant population—fifty percent of all incoming immigrants—hails from the Philippines. It is crucial to these populations and others that our financial institutions provide quick, efficient, and economical means by which monies may be transferred to their countries of origin and elsewhere.

Unfortunately, our nation's financial infrastructure has been slow to offer such services, especially in the less urbanized and rural parts of our country such as my district where our credit unions have long filled an important community-based financial services function. As a result, there is a growing population of "unbanked" individuals, particularly immigrants, and a costly and inefficient money transfer process.

The World Council of Credit Unions, along with the Credit Union National Association, offer credit unions a remittance product called the International Remittance Network (IRnet). IRnet is an electronic funds transfer service providing credit union members a safe and inexpensive way to send money overseas and domestically, and provides service to over 40 countries in Latin America, Asia, Africa and Europe, including the Philippines, Mexico, and Australia.

IRnet significantly decreases the costs for individuals to transfer funds overseas. Over the past four years, the advent of IRnet and enhanced competition among our financial institutions offering money transfer services has driven down remittance costs for consumers. The average cost today of sending \$300 to Mexico is between \$13 and \$14, or 4–5 percent of the amount sent, compared to the average cost four years ago, which was between \$30 and \$32, or 10–11 percent.

This legislation will expand the range and number of people eligible for the use of IRnet and thereby lower the costs paid by the consumer for these services through increased competition within the marketplace. In the process, it will also encourage a larger number of our newly-arrived citizens and residents to utilize our credit unions and other financial services.

H.R. 749 will not harm or otherwise risk our country's financial or monetary security, as IRnet utilizes real-time monitoring of transactions against the Specially Designated Names, SDN, list from the Office of Foreign Asset Control. What this bill will do again is to help more people in our communities with more and better ways to provide for their personal and economic needs and obligations overseas while preserving basic homeland security protections.

Mr. Speaker, I commend my colleague from Pennsylvania, Mr. GERLACH, for introducing this bill. I look forward to working with him and our nation's invaluable credit unions to see this measure through into law.

Mr. SHERMAN. Mr. Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. CASTLE. Mr. Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. BOOZMAN). The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from Delaware (Mr. CASTLE) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 749, as amended.

The question was taken; and (two-thirds having voted in favor thereof) the rules were suspended and the bill, as amended, was passed.

A motion to reconsider was laid on the table.

EXPRESSING THE SENSE OF CONGRESS REGARDING THE TWO-YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS CRACKDOWN IN CUBA

Mr. SMITH of New Jersey. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and agree to the concurrent resolution (H. Con. Res. 81) expressing the sense of Congress regarding the two-year anniversary of the human rights crackdown in Cuba.

The Clerk read as follows:

H. CON. RES. 81

Whereas in March 2003, Cuban dictator Fidel Castro arrested more than 75 journalists, labor union organizers, civic leaders, librarians, and human rights activists as political prisoners;

Whereas the Cuban regime, after summary trials which were denounced by the international community, sentenced these innocent men and women to a total of more than 1,000 years in prison for trying to exercise their civil and political rights, many of whom are anticipated to die in prison before their sentence is completed;

Whereas the Charter of the United Nations reaffirms a commitment to fundamental human rights and to the dignity and worth of all people;

Whereas the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which establishes global human rights standards, asserts that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, and that no one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention;

Whereas these arrests and convictions were an atrocious attempt by the Cuban regime to crush the citizens' movements for a free and democratic Cuba;

Whereas Fidel Castro has tentatively released a limited number of prisoners from jail but these political activists are subject to arrest and imprisonment at any time pursuant to "extra penal licenses";

Whereas in 2004, the Cuban regime continued its suppression of democracy and repression of human rights activists, imprisoning a significant number of political dissidents during the year on such charges as disrespect for authority, public disorder, disobedience, and resisting arrest;

Whereas in April 2004, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights adopted a resolution deploring the sentencing of "political dissidents and journalists" in 2003 and calling for a visit to Cuba by a Personal Representative of the High Commissioner for Human Rights which was later denied by the Cuban regime;

Whereas Fidel Castro continues to hold hundreds of political prisoners in his jail cells;

Whereas Amnesty International has recognized all journalists and activists who were arrested in the crackdown in March 2003 as prisoners of conscience;

Whereas the Cuban regime engages in torture and other cruel, inhumane, and degrad-

ing treatment and punishment against political prisoners to force them into submission, including intense beatings, extended periods of solitary confinement, and denial of nutritional and medical attention, according to the Department of State's Country Report on Human Rights 2004;

Whereas religious freedom in Cuba is severely circumscribed, and clergy and lay people suffer sustained persecution by the Cuban State Security apparatus;

Whereas the Cuban regime denies the people of Cuba equal protection under the law, disallows them recourse for remedying violations of human rights and civil liberties, and instead enforces a judicial system which infringes upon fundamental rights; and

Whereas the United States Congress has stood, consistently, on the side of the Cuban people and supported their right to be free: Now, therefore, be it

Resolved by the House of Representatives (the Senate concurring), That Congress—

(1) condemns in the strongest possible terms the arrest of more than 75 journalists, labor union organizers, civic leaders, librarians, and human rights activists as political prisoners in March 2003 and the Cuban regime's continuing repressive crackdown against the brave internal opposition and the independent press;

(2) expresses its profound admiration and firm solidarity with the internal opposition and independent press of Cuba;

(3) demands that the Cuban regime immediately release all political prisoners, legalize all political parties, labor unions, and the press, and hold free and fair elections;

(4) declares the acts of the Cuban regime, including its widespread and systematic violation of human rights, to be in violation of the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;

(5) declares that the rule of law should replace the rule of force so that the fundamental and inalienable rights of every individual in Cuba are protected;

(6) calls for the European Union, as well as other countries and international organizations, to continue to pressure the Cuban regime to improve its human rights record; and

(7) calls for United Nations member countries to vote against the Cuban regime's membership in the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and the passage of a resolution at the 61st session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights that holds the Cuban regime accountable for its gross violations of human rights and civil liberties.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH) and the gentleman from California (Mr. LANTOS) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH).

Mr. SMITH of New Jersey. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, 2 years ago, with the world's attention riveted on Iraq, Fidel Castro ordered his feared state security apparatus to round up at least 75 of Cuba's best and bravest and brightest, prominent and even lesser-known dissidents. Among these are 28 independent journalists and 40 Varela project workers. With sickening speed, these men and women were paraded before kangaroo courts and given prison sentences ranging from 6 to 28 years; 61 remain in prison.

When the Committee on International Relations met on April 16, 2003 to decry this vile abrogation of justice, I stated at that time that "Even some of the most outspoken leftists who once saw in Fidel Castro something to admire now admit that Castro's unbridled cruelty, his thirst for blood, and extreme paranoia are indefensible." I regret to report that Castro has not given me and, frankly, he has given no one else as well, any reason to reassess that statement or those sentiments.

What were the so-called crimes that these brave men and women committed? They were advocating democracy, writing as independent journalists, and being men and women of faith.

Their real offense was to dare to question the authority of a single man: Fidel Castro. The Cuban Revolution is really about Castro's vanity and pursuit of personal power. From the beginning, Castro has shot and jailed anyone, even close friends, who have dared to get in the way of his personal ambitions.

Dictatorships, reflecting the whims of a despot, always subject their people to deprivations and absurdities. The Castro regime recently let a handful of its political prisoners out on parole, citing health reasons. The regime's callousness toward ailing political prisoners is well documented.

Now, independent Cuban journalists are reporting that Cuba's prisons have been virtually emptied of medical personnel. Why? Mr. Castro decided to send them to Venezuela and other places to advance his personal expansionist agenda.

Mr. Speaker, writing in the Spanish newspaper, *El Pais*, Nobel Prize winner Jose Saramago, a Portuguese Communist and close friend of Castro, commented after 3 alleged Havana ferry hijackers were killed by a firing squad in Cuba in May of 2003, "Cuba has won no heroic victory by executing these three men, but it has lost my confidence, damaged my hopes, and robbed me of illusions."

□ 1615

Illusions, as Castro-lover Jose Saramago has only now begun to acknowledge, often persist despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Nowhere has this been more evident than in the case of Castro's Cuba.

Despite decades of credible reports of widespread egregious violations of human rights, including the pervasive use of torture and vicious beatings of political prisoners by the Cuban Government, some have clung to indefensibly foolish illusions of Castro's revolution.

Despite the fact that the Cuban Government systematically denies its people freedom of speech, press freedom, assembly and association, and severely restricts workers' rights, including the right to form independent trade unions, some have nevertheless clung to illusion.