

known domestic abusers were denied access to dangerous firearms because of background checks required by the 1994 Brady Act.

Unfortunately, not all firearms transactions are subject to a background check. The law requires background checks only for those transactions that involve a federally licensed firearms dealer. According to the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence "two out of every five guns acquired in the United States; including guns bought at gun shows, through classified ads, and between individuals; change hands without a background check." The Coalition to Stop Gun Violence also estimates that "extending criminal background checks to all gun transactions in the United States could prevent nearly 120,000 additional illegal gun sales every year."

It is important that we do not infringe on the rights of law-abiding citizens. However, with those rights in mind and protected, we should not allow those with a violent or serious criminal record to acquire dangerous firearms. I urge my colleagues to join me in support of commonsense gun safety legislation, such as the 1994 Brady Act, that will make our nation safer.

AIR FORCE ACADEMY

Mr. ALLARD. Mr. President, in an era when college football players are almost universally derided as troublemakers, stories about football players who become leaders and role models off the field are indeed hard to find. One such leader currently exists at the U.S. Air Force Academy.

Earlier this week the Air Force Academy announced that Andy Gray, a senior cadet, has been selected to take over as the commander of the entire 4,000-strong cadet wing next semester. In this position, Andy will serve as the chief liaison between the academy's leadership and the cadet student body, akin to a student body president.

However, Andy is different than the average student body president. He has received extensive leadership training along with his fellow cadets. He has endured the rigorous cadet schedule of academics and military training. And, he has done it all while excelling as a member of the NCAA Division One Air Force Academy Falcon football team.

Andy is only the sixth football player to be chosen for this leadership role, and the first in 16 years. The last academy athlete to serve as the cadet wing commander was Delavane Diaz who played volleyball for the Falcons in 2003.

Andy Gray entered the academy in 2000 and played quarterback and defensive safety for much of his cadet career. In the fall of 2004, he was No. 1 on the depth chart as quarterback for the Falcons. This past season he played safety and had a big interception in the Air Force Academy's victory over UNLV.

Becoming a cadet wing commander is not easy and requires candidates to go through a rigorous screening process. Only the top two cadets from each of the academy's 35 squadrons are nominated to be considered. Then the pool is narrowed to 20. Each of the surviving candidates is closely interviewed by a board that includes members of the academy's leadership.

I commend Andy for his selection to be the academy's cadet wing commander. This selection is a real honor for him, and I know he will not take his new responsibilities lightly. I wish Andy the best as he takes up this important leadership position.

I also applaud the academy's football coach, Fisher DeBerry, for being such an outstanding role model for cadets like Andy. Coach DeBerry is a man of character who, for over 22 years, has turned hundreds of cadets into leaders while running a top-notch football program. I look forward to seeing in the future many more Academy football players become leaders in our Air Force.

THE SITUATION IN NEPAL

Mr. LEAHY. It may seem strange that on a day when the Congress is debating the budget resolution, I would be asking the Senate to turn its attention for a moment to the remote and tiny nation of Nepal.

I do so because for the past several years, a ruthless Maoist insurgency and a corrupt, repressive monarchy have brought that impoverished but breathtakingly beautiful country to the brink of disaster. It is important for the Nepalese people to know that while they may live half a world away, the difficulties they are facing have not gone unnoticed by the U.S. Congress.

It has been almost 9 months since Nepal's King Gyanendra dismissed the multiparty government, suspended civil liberties, and arrested the prime minister along with other opposition political leaders, human rights defenders, prodemocracy student activists, and journalists.

The king's explanation was that democracy had failed to solve the Maoist problem. He said that he would take care of it himself and then restore democracy after 3 years.

It is true that Nepal's nascent democracy had not solved the Maoist problem. Neither had the king. In the 4½ years since King Gyanendra assumed the throne and became commander in chief of the Nepalese army, the Maoists have grown from a minor irritant to a national menace. While the Maoists use threats and violence to extort money and property and they abduct children from poor Nepalese villagers, the army often brutalizes those same people for suspicion of supporting the Maoists. Like most armed conflicts, defenseless civilians are caught in the middle.

What the Nepalese people desire most is peace. Despite the king's autocratic

maneuvers on February 1, many would have given him the benefit of the doubt if he had a workable plan to quickly end the conflict. Nine months later, it is clear that he does not. One can only wonder why King Gyanendra thought that he could defeat the Maoists by dissolving the government, curtailing civil liberties, and surrounding himself with a clique of elderly advisers from the discredited, feudalistic Panchayat era.

The United States, Great Britain, and India criticized the king's actions and have urged him to negotiate with Nepal's political parties to restore democratic government. Unfortunately, although he has released most political prisoners and reinstated some civil liberties, the king has increasingly behaved like a despot who is determined to consolidate his own power.

In the meantime, the Maoists declared a ceasefire. The violence has reportedly decreased, although abductions and extortions have continued apace. Whether the ceasefire is a sinister ploy or a sincere overture for peace may never be known, however, because it is due to expire next month and neither the king nor the army has indicated a willingness to reciprocate.

Against this disheartening backdrop, the Congress, on November 10, 2005, approved my amendment to impose new restrictions on military aid for Nepal. On November 14, President Bush signed it into law. I want to briefly review what we did, and why.

The amendment says that before the Nepalese army can receive U.S. aid, the Secretary of State must certify that the Government of Nepal has "restored civil liberties, is protecting human rights, and has demonstrated, through dialogue with Nepal's political parties, a commitment to a clear timetable to restore multi-part democratic government consistent with the 1990 Nepalese Constitution."

This builds on an amendment that was adopted last year, which required the Secretary of State to certify that the Nepalese army was providing unimpeded access to places of detention and cooperating with the National Human Rights Commission, NHRC, to resolve security related cases of people in custody. Unfortunately, the Secretary was not able to make the certification. Not only were the NHRC's members replaced through a process that was contrary to Nepal's constitution, the International Committee of the Red Cross suspended its visits to military detention centers because it was denied the free access it requires.

The Nepalese Government objects to any conditions on U.S. aid, arguing that the army needs help to fight the Maoists. The army does need help, but it also needs to respect the law and the rights of the Nepalese people. The Congress took this action only after it could no longer ignore the pattern of arbitrary arrests, disappearances, torture and extrajudicial killings by the army. The army's abusive conduct,

coupled with the king's repressive actions since February 1, have contributed to a political crisis that threatens not only the future of democracy but the monarchy itself.

Economic aid to support health, agriculture, hydropower, and other programs through nongovernmental organizations is not affected by my amendment. If the situation changes and the Secretary of State certifies that the conditions in U.S. law have been met, military aid can resume. But that alone will not solve the Maoist problem. The Maoists are expert at intimidating the civilian population and carrying out surprise attacks and melting back into the mountains. While they do not have the strength to defeat the army, neither can they be defeated militarily.

The only feasible solution is through a democratic political process that has the broad support of the Nepalese people. Perhaps seeking to placate his critics, the king, without consulting the political opposition parties, announced municipal elections for February 8, 2006. Not surprisingly, the parties say they will not participate in an electoral process dictated by the palace and when the army and the king's handpicked representatives have taken control of local affairs and are unlikely to relinquish power.

The U.S. Embassy is skeptical of the Maoists' intentions and has publicly discouraged the political parties from forging an agreement with the Maoists. This is understandable, since the Maoists have used barbaric tactics that should be universally condemned. But this conflict cannot be won militarily and the king has rejected a political accommodation with the country's democratic forces. He is imposing new restrictions on the media and civil society, and he has spumed offers by the international community to mediate. Nepal's younger generation, who see no role for the monarchy in Nepal's future, are taking to the streets. It may not be long before the army is faced with a fateful choice. Will it continue to side with the palace even if it means turning its weapons on prodemocracy protesters and facing international censure, or will it cast its lot with the people?

It is a choice that we may also have to make. For the better part of a year, the United States and others friends of Nepal, as well as many brave Nepalese citizens, have tried to nudge the king back toward democracy. It has not worked. With the king increasingly imperious and isolated and the political parties already making overtures to the Maoists, what is to be lost by calling for the Maoists to extend the ceasefire, for the army to reciprocate, for international monitors to verify compliance, and for representatives of all sectors of society who support a democratic, peaceful Nepal to sit down at the negotiating table?

There are no guarantees, but it would test the Maoists' intentions and it

might create an opening for agreement on a democratic process, with the support of international mediation, that can finally begin to address the poverty, corruption, discrimination and other social ills that have fueled the conflict. The people of Nepal, who for generations have suffered far more than their share of hardship and injustice, deserve no less.

MEDICARE PRESCRIPTION DRUG BENEFIT

Mrs. BOXER. Mr. President, last Tuesday the open enrollment period for the Medicare Part D prescription drug program began. This program has been praised by the administration as a great benefit for seniors, but I can tell you that seniors are not so sure. According to a survey conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, only 20 percent say they will sign up. Over one-third say they won't, and the rest don't know what they are going to do.

One thing we do know for sure is that seniors are confused and scared. I have received over 4,000 letters from them telling me so. And why wouldn't they be. They have a series of complicated decisions to make.

First, they have to decide whether they want drug coverage. Do they already have drug coverage that is better or just as good as what is offered under the plan? And if they don't, do the costs of the plan exceed the benefits? And what will happen in the future? Should they sign up now to avoid the penalty for signing up late?

Second, if they do decide to join the program, what plan do they choose? In California, 18 companies are providing 47 stand-alone prescription drug plans. These plans all have different premiums, copays, and lists of drugs they will cover. For those in managed care plans, if they choose one of the stand-alone drug plans instead of their managed care plan, they will lose their health coverage.

In addition, seniors must make sure that their neighborhood pharmacy accepts the plan. Otherwise, they will end up having to find a new pharmacy that is probably less convenient. And after all that, any plan can—on 60 days notice—change the list of drugs it covers. Seniors, however, can change their plans only once a year.

If seniors do choose to participate, the benefit itself is meager. There is a large coverage gap—the so-called donut hole—so seniors must pay 100 percent of drug costs once they spend \$2,250 and before they spend \$5,100. Moreover, there is nothing in the program that will actually lower the cost of prescription drugs, and, in fact, Medicare is expressly prohibited from negotiating for lower prices.

Mr. President, the seniors who are the sickest and poorest have the most to lose with this new program. Those 6.1 million seniors are eligible for both Medicaid and Medicare. They are known as dual eligibles. Currently,

State Medicaid programs cover their drug costs, but as of January 1, they will be switched to the less generous Medicare program, and the States will be prohibited from using Medicaid to provide better coverage.

We need to make changes to the program now so that our seniors do not suffer. That is why I am a proud cosponsor of several bills that will change the harshest parts of this program. We must allow Medicare to negotiate on behalf of seniors for lower drug prices. We must allow States to use Medicaid to improve the drug coverage of the sickest and poorest seniors. We must end the coverage gap for all seniors. We must allow seniors more time to understand the program before they are required to enroll.

Mr. President, these changes are needed—and needed now. Without them, the promise of a Medicare prescription drug benefit may turn out to be a hollow one.

THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES EDUCATION ACT.

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. Chairman, I was proud to serve on the Education Committee when it recommended the original Education for the All Handicapped Children Act in 1975, and I am proud to join Senator ENZI today as a sponsor of this resolution, which recognizes the major impact of the law on the lives of disabled children and their families across the Nation, by guaranteeing the right of every disabled child to a free public education.

We know that disabled does not mean unable. Children with disabilities have the same dreams as every other child in America to grow up and lead a happy and productive life. We know that IDEA helps them fulfill that dream.

It says children cannot be cast aside or locked away because they have a disability. Those days are gone in America—hopefully forever.

Children with disabilities have rights like every other child in America, including the right to learn with other children in public schools and prepare themselves for the future.

But even as we celebrate 30 years of continuing success in the education of disabled children, we continue to hear objections to the act's high cost, its paperwork, and the burden of litigation. Those are important considerations, but we can't let them overwhelm the vast benefit of IDEA.

The act is about disabled children and their rights. It is about their hopes and dreams of living independent and productive lives. It is about parents who love their children and struggle for them every day against a world that is too often inflexible and unwilling to meet their needs. It is about teachers who see the potential inside a disabled child, but don't have the support or training they need to fulfill it.

IDEA is our declaration as a nation that these children matter and that we