

I cannot possibly put into words my outrage for the extraordinary action that the House took early this morning. My amendment would have opened the runway that is in the heart of Malmstrom Air Force base, which is active, healthy, and vibrant. Malmstrom is located outside of Great Falls, MT, and is a highly secure missile facility, employing the largest number of security forces in the entire U.S. Air Force.

Currently, the roadways and the infrastructure of Great Falls are strained due to the frequent crosstown movement of heavy cargo and equipment during deployments of the 219th and the 819th Red Horse Squadrons of the U.S. Air Force and National Guard. They must travel from Malmstrom to the other side of town on a congested roadway in the middle of town to fly out of a municipal airport. The Montana Air National Guard conducts all of their missions out of the same municipal airport.

This amendment would have enabled those units to deploy from a runway within their secured perimeter. Despite the mischaracterization of the House, this provision would not overturn a BRAC decision, nor would it influence the current BRAC round. It could not. Malmstrom is not on the BRAC list. The amendment was drafted, discussed, and deliberated in the light of day, agreed to by the relevant committees and conferees.

I was also pleased to have worked with the chairman and ranking member of the Armed Services Committee, as well as the conferees of the highway bill, all of whom accepted this amendment. To now have the House of Representatives cut this provision in the dead of night is an outrage.

My amendment would have simply provided a commonsense solution to a local problem. Local elected officials, civic leaders, the U.S. Air Force, and the National Guard have all requested that I find a way to open the runway at Malmstrom. Senator BURNS and I are dedicated to making this commonsense solution happen. But I cannot allow the highway bill to be a victim of the House's actions after the countless hours I have spent making sure it is right for America and right for the State of Montana.

The House actions in the dead of night have put in jeopardy our national highway bill. This bill will pump more than \$2.3 billion into my State economy, and I am proud of this bill. It will help sustain and create more than 18,000 jobs and boost safety on Montana's roads. I dare say that very few in this Congress have worked harder to get this highway bill across the finish line than has this Senator. I will not give up the fight to reopen Malmstrom's runway. I have given it my best, but I cannot, in good faith, derail this important bill for the country at this late hour. My colleague from Montana, Senator BURNS, and I will continue to work to find another way to make this happen.

This action by the House shows how important was the Founders' genius in creating the Senate, where States with real needs but small populations, such as Montana, have their champions. I will never apologize for fighting for Montana.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the concurrent resolution is agreed to and the motion to reconsider is laid upon the table.

The concurrent resolution (H. Con. Res. 226) was agreed to.

Mr. DORGAN. I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,
ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED
AGENCIES APPROPRIATIONS
ACT, 2006—CONFERENCE RE-
PORT—Continued

Mr. BURNS. Mr. President, I would inquire of the Chair the order of business now is the Interior conference report; is that correct?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator is correct.

Mr. BURNS. Mr. President, I am pleased to bring before the Senate the conference report of Interior, Environment and Related Agencies for fiscal year 2006. This bill provides more than \$26 billion for the Department of Interior, the Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Forest Service, the Indian Health Service, and a number of other agencies that play vital roles in protecting our Nation's natural and cultural heritage.

Confereing this bill with the House was not an easy matter, to say the least. The bill, as a whole, is close to \$600 million below the fiscal year 2005 level. Our conference allocation was \$50 million below the Senate's original allocation, and we have had to shoehorn both House and Senate priorities into that reduced amount. To hit our number, we had to eliminate or reduce a number of items in the Senate bill that I would have preferred that we had kept. I suspect the House has similar feelings about some of their priorities, but we made these choices in as fair a manner as possible, both from the House and Senate perspective and the majority and minority perspective.

Lest I sound too negative, let me be clear that there are some good things and important things in this bill. We improved upon the budget request in a number of places, such as tribally controlled schools and Indian schools and hospitals and the community colleges that are located on our several reservations across the country. We have increased funding for our national parks.

We preserved funding for local park programs. As my colleagues know, that was zeroed out. We have boosted funding for a number of Forest Service programs that received pretty rough treatment from the White House in their budget request.

This bill also provides an additional \$1.5 billion for veterans health care, funding that is sorely needed to ensure that our veterans receive the kind of care they so richly deserve. Given the continued sacrifices being made by our men and women fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is an honor to have the Interior bill serve as the vehicle for this critically important funding.

Finally, I want to thank my ranking member, Senator DORGAN from North Dakota. Not only are we neighbors in our home States, but we are neighbors here also and work in cooperation. Without his leadership, we could not have completed this bill. He has been a tireless champion for the tribally controlled community colleges and Indian health care and a number of other programs in this bill. Throughout the conference report, there is ample evidence of his hard work and his advocacy.

Let me also thank the majority and minority staffs of the subcommittees. I do not think we thank our staffs enough. They work long hours, crunching numbers, getting them to balance, and working to figure out where do we take what and put it where. They have been working for weeks producing this bill and then just several hours to produce this conference report. Conferencing with the other body is no easy matter, and I appreciate the staffs' work to get us to this point.

I urge my colleagues to support the conference report so we can devote our attention to other spending bills that await us. We have a great deal of work yet to do on appropriations bills, so I am quite happy to get this one out of the way.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from North Dakota is recognized.

Mr. DORGAN. Mr. President, I thank my colleague from Montana.

DRU'S LAW

Before I comment on this piece of legislation, let me mention that last evening we passed a piece of legislation called Dru's Law, that deals with sexual predators. I did not say, and I should have last evening, that Senator DAYTON, Senator COLEMAN, Senator CONRAD, and others were cosponsors. But especially, although I mentioned Senator SPECTER, I did not say that ARLEN SPECTER from Pennsylvania played a very significant role. I want to make sure the Senate and the American people understand that Senator SPECTER played a very significant role, not only being an original cosponsor with me of Dru's Law, but also allowing it to pass the Senate last evening. I thank him for his wonderful leadership.

This Interior appropriations bill was a hard bill to get done because we have

over one half billion dollars less in spending than the previous year. If anybody asks is anybody cutting any spending any place, you don't have to ask beyond this bill. This bill cuts one half billion dollars plus out of what we are spending in the current fiscal year. That means we will spend half a billion dollars less in the next fiscal year. It is not easy to put a bill together under those restraints, but we did it. It is not a perfect bill. Some things in it I feel good about, some I feel not so good about. I will talk about that in a moment. This bill carries the \$1.5 billion appropriation for veterans health care. That is very important. We need to keep our promise to America's veterans. This country cannot fight wars and ask young men and women to serve their country if we do not demonstrate we are going to keep our promises. One of those promises is providing veterans health care to those who served.

No one has been more tireless, no one, perhaps, has offered more amendments on the floor of the Senate on this subject—relentlessly, over time—than my colleague from Washington, Senator MURRAY.

I yield 4 minutes to Senator MURRAY. The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Washington is recognized.

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, I thank the Senator, the ranking member, and chairman of the Interior appropriations bill for their accommodation on this.

The Senate has done the right thing now for American veterans. I stand in support of this bill because it does represent a step in the right direction for our veterans. Today when we pass the Interior appropriations bill, it will include my amendment to fix the VA's funding shortfall by providing \$1.5 billion for fiscal year 2005. This victory is long overdue and I thank Senator CRAIG, Senator HUTCHISON, Senator AKAKA, Senator FEINSTEIN, Senator BURNS, and Senator DORGAN for their work on this critical issue within this bill.

I want to make sure, however, that the VA uses this money in the way Congress intended. As the author of this amendment, I can tell you these dollars have to go to helping our veterans. They cannot be used for budget shell games to make the VA look solvent and they should not be used for red tape or accounting tricks and they should not be used as a rainy day fund. The money we have put in this bill is there to help veterans get the medical care they need. It should be used to end the hiring freeze, to provide mental health services for our veterans, and expand the VA's outpatient clinic initiative.

I want my colleagues to know I am going to be watching to make sure this money is used in the way we have all voted for it to be used. Now that we have taken care of the shortfall for fiscal year 2005, we have to turn our attention to fiscal year 2006. I want to make sure we do not make the same

mistakes that left our veterans so vulnerable this year.

I have to say I am very troubled by what I hear coming out of the administration so far. With all of our new veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan every day, this problem is only going to get more severe. Veterans funding has not kept up with medical costs. When adjusted for inflation, the VA is spending 25 percent less per patient than it did in fiscal 2000. That is having a huge impact on our patients and on VA health care personnel. In my home State of Washington, at the VA's American Lake facility, you can only get an appointment now if you are 50 percent or more service-connected disabled. In Puget Sound, as of January there was an \$11 million deficit, forcing our VA hospital to leave positions vacant. The VA has dedicated, highly professional employees and they work very hard every day to help our veterans. We have to make sure the VA system helps them do that and not get in their way.

Now as we look toward fiscal year 2006, I want to be clear that veterans need real funding, not budget games. Congress cannot accept gimmicks such as forcing higher fees and copayments on our veterans and calling that new revenue. Any plan that increases the burden on our veterans is a nonstarter in my book.

What is needed now is for us to step up and meet our responsibility to our men and women in uniform and that requires an infusion of cash to stop the bleeding at the VA, and a real investment toward assisting our veterans. Now is the time we have to come together and provide the needed dollars so our veterans have the quality accessible care they need and they deserve.

The security and integrity of our Nation depends on our willingness to keep our promise to our veterans. We have all heard of the military reports that recruiting is not meeting its goal, and each day we limit veterans' access to care, we are sending the wrong message to the troops of tomorrow.

As I have done before, I want to quote President George Washington, who knew that helping veterans helps America's security when he said:

The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional as to how they perceive the Veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their country.

I call on my colleagues to support this bill and work with me to keep the full \$1.977 billion in emergency supplemental funding for the Veterans' Administration for fiscal year 2006. We have to do everything to assist the VA with this funding now so we do not face future shortfalls. I hope everyone will continue to support that funding in the coming year as well.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator yields.

Who seeks time? The Senator from Montana.

Mr. BURNS. Mr. President, I yield 5 minutes, and more if needed, to the Senator from Texas, who has been a real champion for veterans benefits.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Texas is recognized.

Mrs. HUTCHISON. Mr. President, I ask that I be notified in 5 minutes, in case the distinguished chairman of the Interior subcommittee needs any extra time.

First, let me thank the distinguished chairman and ranking member of the Interior subcommittee for assuring that their conference report came out in a timely way, not only for the Interior funding but especially for this veterans' funding which is fiscal year 2005 money, meaning it can be spent right away.

We know there is a deficit at the VA because Secretary Nicholson told us there is a deficit. So I do thank Senator BURNS and Senator DORGAN for coming forward and helping us with this extraordinary measure so the Veterans Administration will be able to have full flexibility to fill the coffers from which they have been borrowing, and also to go forward.

I also thank those who have worked so hard to get the Veterans Administration the money they need. That would certainly be Senator MURRAY, who has just spoken, Senator FEINSTEIN, my ranking member on the Veterans Affairs Appropriations Subcommittee, and Senator CRAIG, who is the chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee. We have all worked together in a bipartisan way because, frankly, Secretary Nicholson came forward in a most forthright manner to tell us of the problems we had at the Veterans Administration.

When we first started working on the supplemental appropriation, Secretary Nicholson thought there was not a deficit in the Veterans Administration, that with the model they had always used they had plenty to cover until October 1. But in June when Secretary Nicholson learned that in fact they did not have enough to fully treat the new veterans coming into the system, he stepped right up and said we have a deficit and we need to fix it. He came to Congress to ask for the help to do that. I think it is admirable that Secretary Nicholson didn't try to fudge, he didn't try to sweep it under the rug. He came out.

He took some heat for it. I saw some Members criticizing him, but I have to say I admire him. I think what he did was exactly the right thing to do. He is a veteran. He is a decorated veteran. And he is not ever going to sweep under the rug a deficit in the Veterans Administration. He also is going to spend the money wisely.

So I thank everyone who helped bring this to the forefront. I have to say that OMB Director Josh Bolton also tried to be very helpful, giving us an amendment that would raise the limit we could spend on veterans. The total for both fiscal years will be approximately \$3 billion. The total for

getting through this problem we have for the fiscal year we are in is going to cost about \$900 million, they estimate, to get to October 1 to finish this fiscal year—almost \$1 billion, which we are giving them when we vote on this bill today and send it to the President.

But in the 2006 budget, which we are now going to pass in the Senate, probably in September—this is the committee I chair—we have what will be another \$1.5 billion, depending on how much is left of what we are passing today that can go into 2006. We believe it will be about half a billion dollars, so that the total would be the \$1.977 that was mentioned earlier for fiscal year 2006. We will monitor this as we go into the new fiscal year to assure that the Veterans Administration for 2006 has the full amount they need.

I also thank the distinguished chairman and ranking member of the full Appropriations Committee. When Senator FEINSTEIN and I went to Chairman COCHRAN and asked him for more money in our original 2006 budget for the veterans part of the appropriations bill, he immediately agreed. He immediately agreed that we would get the money we need.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator has used 5 minutes.

Mrs. HUTCHISON. Thank you, Mr. President. I will take the rest of the time.

Senator COCHRAN and Senator BYRD stepped right up to the plate to assure that the veterans had their first boost of \$1.2 billion. Then working with Secretary Nicholson and OMB Director Bolton, we now have a total of almost \$3 billion more in additional funding for the veterans in both fiscal years.

We are going to do right by our veterans. We appreciate that we have people with boots on the ground, fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan today. They are fighting for our freedom. We will never let them down. The bill we are passing today, in addition to the Interior part of this appropriation, is going to fully fund Veterans for the fiscal year we are in and take us with a cushion into the next fiscal year so every veterans' clinic that is being built continues to be built, so that every veteran who walks in the door is going to get the care to which he or she is entitled, to assure that nothing falls through the cracks for our veterans. Our President would do nothing less. Our Secretary, Secretary Nicholson, will do nothing less. I assure you the Senate will do nothing less. We are going to do right by our veterans and the bill we are passing today is a start.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from North Dakota.

Mr. DORGAN. Mr. President, first let me say a special thank you to my colleagues from the State of Washington and the State of Texas. They have said it well. Again, I am enormously proud our bill has carried this \$1.5 billion for veterans health care. There is a verse that goes:

When the night is full of knives, and the lightning is seen, and the drums are heard, the patriots are always there, ready to fight and ready to die, if necessary, for freedom.

Our soldiers are our patriots and when they come back from duty, duty our country called them for, we must keep our promise for veterans health care and that is what this \$1.5 billion helps to do.

Let me for a moment talk about the underlying bill again. There are some good things and some things I wish were better in this bill. I compliment my colleague, Senator BURNS from Montana and his staff: Bruce Evans, Virginia James, Leif Fønnesbeck, Ryan Thomas, Rebecca Benn; and also on this side, Peter Kiefhaber and Rachel Taylor.

We worked very hard to put a bill together with over \$500 million less money than in the past year. That was not easy.

Indian Health Service—I regret to say, we are still underfunded. I am told we are funding about 60 percent of the need in Indian Health Service. We just must do better in the years ahead. We have responsibility for Federal prisoners' health care. We also have trust responsibility for the health of American Indians. We spend twice as much per person on Federal prisoners' health care than we do in per capita spending for American Indians for whom we have trust responsibility for health care.

My colleague described the tribal colleges, and we have together been able to increase that funding for tribal colleges. That is a good feature in this bill. The reason we have done this is that it is a priority to help people step out of poverty and toward opportunity, and that comes from the tribal colleges. There are so many stories of people whose lives have improved by the ability to access tribal colleges.

We have some other areas in the bill that I wish were better.

BIA school construction, we need funding increases, not funding cuts, and yet the President's budget proposed very significant cuts and we were not able to add all of that back. Also building for new hospitals and health clinics is down. My hope is that in the next year, we can find a way to add back some funding in these critical Indian health areas.

Having said all that, this is a big bill, dealing with so many other areas of the Government—EPA, the Forest Service, and so many other areas of Government. We have worked in a bipartisan way.

Let me also say that Senator BYRD wishes consent to speak for 5 minutes prior to vote on Interior at some point later this morning. I talked to the ranking member and also the chairman of the full committee.

Finally, let me say the chairman of the full committee should understand that this is the first time in 17 years that we have gotten to the Senate floor this early with an Interior appropria-

tions bill. The last time Congress passed an Interior appropriations bill this early, those pages who serve in the Chamber were not yet born. So I think that says something about the leadership of Senator COCHRAN and Senator BYRD, who are the two leaders on the Appropriations Committee, and I for one like the notion that we are going to make the trains run on time in the appropriations process. It is the right thing to do and the right way to do it, and I am very blessed that in the month of July, we are in the Chamber passing this conference report. So hats off to Senator COCHRAN and Senator BYRD as well.

Mr. President, with that, I yield the floor and yield back the remainder of my time.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Montana.

Mr. BURNS. Mr. President, I do not know whether we have any more time remaining. The time has been set aside for Senator BYRD. Seeing no one to speak on this bill, I will yield back the remainder of my time also.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Does the Senator want to make a formal unanimous consent request for the Senator from West Virginia?

Mr. DORGAN. Mr. President, I thought I had done that, but if I have not asked that consent, I so ask.

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

Mr. BURNS. I yield back my time and I suggest the absence of a quorum.

Mr. COCHRAN. Mr. President, will the Senator withhold?

Mr. BURNS. Yes.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT AGREEMENT—H.R. 2985

Mr. COCHRAN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order with respect to the Legislative Branch appropriations bill be reinstated with the time limited to 10 minutes equally divided between both sides.

Mr. ALEXANDER. Mr. President, I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Mr. ALEXANDER. Mr. President, reserving the right to object, may I ask the distinguished Senator if I could have 3 minutes in morning business to make a brief comment on another matter?

Mr. BURNS. I have no objection to that. I shall not object to it. We had about 30 seconds. I pulled the trigger a little too quickly. Senator CRAIG is in the Chamber and would like just about 30 seconds with regard to the Interior appropriations bill.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question before the Senate is the unanimous consent request of the Senator from Mississippi. Is there objection? The Chair hears none, and it is so ordered.

The Senator from Montana.

Mr. BURNS. I would ask unanimous consent that the Senator from Idaho be