

Last Thursday, the Senate passed an emergency spending bill that includes \$2.2 billion for levee reconstruction in southeast Louisiana, \$1.5 billion for Orleans Parish levee projects, and \$1.3 billion for the disaster loan program. Senator LANDRIEU and I offered—I cosponsored an amendment that she proposed—two amendments. One was to ensure the SBA sends up its disaster response plan to Congress before June 1, which is the start of the 2006 hurricane season; and second, to require the SBA to report to Congress monthly on the status of the disaster loan program now and after future disasters.

Senator LANDRIEU, Senator SNOWE, and I also cosponsored an amendment by Senator VITTER that declares areas hit by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita as historically underutilized business zones—HUBZones, as we call them. It makes sure, though, that small, local businesses will get first consideration for Federal contracts. This is something we have been trying to get done since last September. We put that on the floor of the Senate right after the hurricane, and still it has taken the Congress to this day to get this done.

But that is only part of the story. We passed bipartisan legislation which offers a more comprehensive approach to help get small businesses back on their feet. Let me tell you what we wanted to do. We wanted to give some small businesses grants—not loans, grants—because clearly those small businesses are going to need a tide-over period of time until you can get a population back that is going to begin to use them. If you are serious about keeping the integrity of this city and you are serious about rebuilding it and allowing those citizens who have been told they will have the opportunity to stay there, to stay there, you have to give them some money. They can't repay the loans if they can't do the business right now.

How much money have we spent in Iraq that is going to turn out to be a grant versus what is happening down in New Orleans, to our own citizens.

The Senate passed that legislation. I will tell you what, it has been blocked. It has been blocked since we passed it after Hurricane Katrina. There has not even been a serious effort, despite our efforts, Senator SNOWE and mine, to try to get some sort of negotiation on it—not even serious. It was dropped from the 2006 CJS conference, and now it is waiting for action as a free-standing bill. This legislation includes essential bridge loans and the grants that would help those suffering the most to be able to keep their doors open so you do maintain the integrity of New Orleans.

The Senate has yet to take action on a bill introduced by Senator LANDRIEU which I cosponsored to follow on this other bill which has additional provisions, recognizing the situation and the needs on the ground. There is no excuse for us not making every good-faith effort possible, in a bipartisan way, to do

what makes sense if we are going to keep faith with those folks and with all of our citizens, to whom this sends a message.

I don't want to just talk about the slow response. I think we have to find a way to get some urgency here. The businesses in the gulf coast cannot and should not have to face bureaucratic redtape and delays. They will not be able to last much longer. Many of the businesses that didn't have business interruption insurance are already gone. Many others are on the verge of closing unless they are able to secure financial assistance in an expedited manner. These companies cannot survive on empty promises. What Louisiana and Mississippi need, obviously, is a level of leadership that is prepared to break through the bureaucracy and come together and create the ingenuity and creativity to rebuild the region.

There are a lot of Americans who would be prepared to volunteer time if you want to organize them. That could be done. You could have a civilian assistance corps of experts who are willing to undergo some hardship for a period of time, live in tough circumstances—a tent city or whatever it is—to lend their expertise to helping to rebuild and do certain things. There are all kinds of ways you could do more cleanup and more rebuilding in an expedited fashion.

The fact is, we saw after Katrina, when the National Guard was there—I give them great credit. Under General Honore, a career soldier in the Army, he showed what strong leadership, what a hierarchal organization with clear lines of command, what a real structure could bring. In those areas where the National Guard did cleanup and did immediate work, a great deal happened. That is what should have continued. But guess what. They have gone. I thought we were going to stay as long as it takes. I thought we were going to do whatever it takes. Those are the words of the President. But they are gone. They could be there today still doing things if we had the will.

New Orleans is one of the great cities of our country. It has an amazing history, a diverse and ethnically rich population, and great culture. I think every American has a stake in its resurrection.

I thank Senator LANDRIEU again for inviting me there for a firsthand look. I really thought I was going to see something very different. I know there have been about 40 Senators or more who have gone down there at one point or another. They have seen a lot of this with their own eyes. It just defies my sense of what the possibilities are in our country. With all of the unbelievable equipment we have, with all of the skilled labor we have, with the volunteer spirit of our Nation, it is stunning to me that we are not proceeding more rapidly to do for New Orleans what New Orleans needs.

My hope is that we will pass those bills I talked about and that over these

next 8 months, over the next months, we can ramp up.

Everybody said never again. I will tell you what is happening in New Orleans today. The images people saw at the Superdome, of people who felt abandoned, who didn't have adequate shelter, while misjudgments were being made around them by those who were supposed to be responsible, is actually being repeated at this very moment.

There is a Superdome II taking place in New Orleans today, for those citizens who can't get back on their feet, who don't know what to do with their property, for the 70 percent of the city that has no basic services, for the people who cannot move because of the debris or the garbage, the people who don't have a prayer of getting their home going again or their business going again because of the lack of adequacy of the housing and a clear plan that says to them with certainty that there is a future. Right now, that future for a lot of folks is very difficult.

One of the problems I heard about from a number of responsible people—there were chamber folks there and other folks there—is the mental health issue. There are a lot of citizens who have been living under an extraordinary level of stress since Hurricane Katrina. Some of them have lost family members. Almost all are struggling to pay bills. It is hard to think about the future. That stress takes its toll.

I was told how crime is rising, about how the sense of despair is taking a greater toll, and how there is going to be a larger mental health problem within that region, as a consequence of the lack of adequacy of response and the plight in which people find themselves.

We can do better. I think everybody here knows we can do better.

We have strong leaders in this country. We have excellent generals and military personnel. They know how to manage. We have business leaders who run extraordinary companies, who understand the hierarchy and understand how to get things done. Clearly, FEMA doesn't, and clearly whatever the structure is that is there, it is inadequate to get the job done.

My hope and prayer is that we can deliver on the promises to New Orleans and turn this around.

I yield the floor.

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

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

HEALTH WEEK

Mr. FRIST. Mr. President, we will be closing shortly. I take the opportunity before doing so to comment on two issues. One is the event of the last

week in terms of our health care initiatives and, second, comment on the 125th anniversary of the Red Cross which is this year.

We have had a good week this week with a relative victory for the American people in terms of the issue of tax relief and the tax package which left here which will create jobs. The bottom line is, a good economy with 5 million jobs created in the last 30 or so months. Unemployment is down to 4.7 percent, which is lower than the average of the 1960s, the 1970s, the 1980s or the 1990s. Homeownership is doing well, with minority homeownership at an alltime high.

We have good, solid economic growth. That is, in large part, first and foremost, due to the hard work, entrepreneurial spirit of the American people, no doubt. But in terms of the policy standpoint, it is because of the progrowth tax policy put forward by President Bush that this Congress has followed. Indeed, we followed it again this week in addressing issues surrounding tax policy on capital gains and dividends and keeping the alternative minimum tax from reaching out and grabbing another 7 million people this year. The President will sign that bill next week which will give us another opportunity to celebrate the great victory for the American people.

Most of the time this week was spent on an issue that I feel passionately about, I think most people in this Senate do, the health care of Americans. Without health, one cannot do very much in life. We need that healthy body, that healthy mind for being able to be productive.

We have a system today that has too many gaps in it. The greatest health care system in the world, one that I have been a beneficiary of in my own field of heart and lung transplantation and the treatment of heart disease and lung disease, but there are huge gaps in our health care system today that lead to less quality, less access, higher costs, gaps that are so obvious that they do require action on our part.

This week we tried to take two of those, to keep focused on those two, and other Members want to grab all the other different challenges and challenging issues and pull them in. The only way to make progress in this Senate is to stay focused on an issue and move to the next issue and the next issue and pull together the very best.

The first issue was medical liability. We, on this side of the aisle, voted to lower the cost of medicine by controlling, in some manner, the out-of-control litigation costs, what has become a litigation lottery—a system today that because of medical liability premiums, because of frivolous lawsuits, because of the incentives given to the trial lawyers out there, the more predatory trial lawyers who are out there, punishes expectant mothers who are delivering children by driving obstetricians out of county and out-of-state, causes neurosurgeons to no longer take

trauma calls at night, closing down obstetrical wards. We have to get that under control. It is apparent from debate, this side of the aisle voted in favor of commonsense reform and the other side voted against it.

Then we moved to the issue of expanding health care coverage for millions of uninsured people in this country, focusing on the small businesses today that simply do not have the purchasing clout that larger organizations have, that the big companies have. It is sad because we have small businesses that are the engine of economic growth in this country that operate on very small margins, that simply cannot afford to offer health care today but allowing them to group together in larger and larger groups, we have that clout to bring the costs down.

In both of those instances, the Democrats chose to obstruct on motions to proceed so we could not fully debate those issues. To me, it is a disappointment. It means millions of people will have access to health care that is not as affordable as it might be or they have no access at all, especially those with small businesses.

Reforming our health care system, eliminating the gaps, getting rid of the waste, fraud, and abuse in our health care system today, the best health care system in the world, in terms of what we can do, has got to be a goal of this Senate. We as Republicans have led on that. We got a majority vote in the Senate, but we were unable to reach that 60-vote threshold.

The 46 million people who do not have health insurance in this country are a major concern to me because it is such a large gap. We have addressed it in the past in an incremental way with some success in health savings accounts, which I will come back to. The problem is we have so many tangled regulations, we have complicated bureaucracies out there with overlapping responsibility. We have an insurance market that is getting choked. A lot of it comes from excessive mandates. One mandate put on another, on another, on another, and if you put all the mandates in there, the cost of insurance for everyone goes up. Then it is out of reach of the small business person or the person who has a modest income.

We will keep pressing forward. We on this side of the aisle, Republicans, recognize that our health care system lacks some of the fundamental mechanisms that are required in order to get rid of the waste, fraud, and abuse to make it more transparent, to make it more efficient. We have to be able to harness the transparency, having the 21st century information out there in order for people to make good decisions so that individuals can make more choices. We have hundreds of millions of health care decisions being made, all of which drive toward better access and higher quality and lower cost.

If we look out to where we want to be going as we address medical liability, which is killing our system, as we ad-

dress the small business health reform, it is for a 21st century health care system that is driven by that information, that is out there that is available today, that is driven by choice, it is driven by that element of control.

Health care should not be a red State, blue State, Democratic, Republican, liberal, conservative matter. We have to come together. We did so with the health savings accounts, I mentioned few moments ago; accounts where an individual has a deductible plan where you can save for you only, you take it with you, you control it. The decisions you make have an impact, and they have been very successful. Three million people today have health savings accounts. None had health savings accounts 3 years ago. And most of the 3 million people had no health insurance in the past. So it begins to chip away at that large number of uninsured people in this country.

Another issue we have passed in this Senate in a bipartisan way is electronic medical records, information technology so that we can develop a platform on which we can make good choices, transparent choices, and can be held accountable. There is a communication among hospitals and doctors and consumers and patients which, with that communication, gets rid of all the waste. That has the obvious ability, through electronic medical records, to have seamless health care no matter where people are. If you are in an accident in Kentucky and you are from Tennessee, your doctor at that trauma hospital can immediately know something about you, what your blood type is, what your allergies are, what medicines you are on, by a push of a button. Now this is done through fax machines and phone calls or going to the basement for records of hospitals and clinics to retrieve information.

We passed that in the Senate. The House has not yet addressed that issue. But, again, it is another example of where this Senate can work together, as with the health savings accounts, that we can pass legislation that is to the benefit of all Americans. That is real progress. We can make progress.

I am disappointed in this week that we did not have the other side of the aisle participating in these very important issues. But we will continue to address them as we move ahead.

RED CROSS ANNIVERSARY

Mr. FRIST. Mr. President, I mentioned a second issue, and that is the 125th anniversary of the American Red Cross. This year is 125 years of voluntarism. We have seen it in our own lives, especially in the Katrina episode over the last year.

Yesterday, I had the opportunity of going in front of the Capitol. My office actually looks out over the Mall, and there is a big red tent with the big Red Cross on it. I have been watching that tent for the last several days. Yesterday, I had the opportunity to speak to