

On September 11, 2001, our hearts were broken, but our spirits grew stronger. On September 11, 2007, I can think of no better memorial to those we lost on 9/11 than making their children and grandchildren's world a better place.

Some will say time has passed and it's time to move on with their lives. I have worked with many of those 9/11 families, and they have moved on with their lives. But again, through every great tragedy one never knows when you'll break down and cry because you remember something.

Every American remembers September 11, the year 2001. Every American knows where they were that day. Every American came together to make sure that those that needed help would have it.

Mr. Speaker, I thank the American people for standing together. I thank those that lost their lives to save other lives and, hopefully, we will never forget those that made the great sacrifices who still need our help. September 11 will be in everybody's minds forever in history. Let us not, here in this Congress, forget those that have survived but still need our help to get them through the illnesses they are facing.

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

(Mr. DEFAZIO addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

TRIBUTE TO ROBERT RICCIARDI

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

Mr. FOSSELLA. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to pay tribute and honor to Robert Ricciardi, a New York City firefighter who's retiring today after many years of service to the city of New York and to the people of New York.

Robert is an exemplary model of what makes the Fire Department of New York the best Fire Department in the world. Like many other firefighters, Robert spent a great deal of his free time volunteering throughout his community on Staten Island. He was an active member of his church and spent much time coaching youth sports. As a matter of fact, I bet tonight Robert will be at the St. Claire's gym for youth basketball tryouts.

Robert has served New York City with distinction as one of New York's bravest. Over the course of his career he's helped save the lives of countless people, risking his own safety to protect others. Like his fellow firefighters and so many throughout the country, Robert rushed into burning buildings as others ran in the opposite direction with a singular mission, to save the lives of the people whose names he did

not know, that he never met and might never see again. Robert understood that one of the most important contributions we can make is to help others in need. He's dedicated his life to this principle, and he leaves behind a great legacy of service.

Robert, like so many firefighters across Staten Island and the city also knew many who lost their lives on September 11, as the previous speaker just mentioned, and with that, he carries that with him throughout his life.

We also know that Staten Island and all of New York are better off because of Robert's dedication and decision to be one of New York City's bravest. His service will be clearly missed, but we are fortunate that Robert will continue to be a positive force in our local community. We wish Robert and his wife, Dorine, along with their four children, Robert, Christian, Nicole and Gregory, the best of luck in their future, wherever it may take them.

I'm honored to call Robert a friend, and I'm delighted to have this opportunity to say thank you for all that you've done for New York City.

Good luck, Robert. We wish you well.

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

(Mr. JONES of North Carolina addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

THE NEW DEMOCRATIC CONGRESS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 18, 2007, the gentleman from Minnesota (Mr. WALZ) is recognized for 60 minutes as the designee of the majority leader.

Mr. WALZ of Minnesota. Mr. Speaker, today marks the eighth month since my colleagues and I were given the privilege to enter this sacred institution to represent our respective districts across the country. The Democratic freshman class, one of the largest in recent history, also came at an historic time in changing control of both houses of Congress and leading America in a new direction.

Much has changed in eight months. Much has changed personally for each and every one of us. Eight months ago I stood in this very spot with my 2-month-old son, Gus, as we were sworn into this esteemed body. My 5-year-old was a kindergartner at the time.

Well, now, 8 months later, Gus is 10 months old, on the verge of walking; and that kindergartner is now an experienced first grader.

Much has changed for us professionally. I had the opportunity last week to go back and address the school where I taught. Many of us came to this institution from many different walks of life. We were teachers. We were newspapermen. We were law en-

forcement officers. We were physicians. We were farmers. We were many different things. But each and every one of us came to this institution with a very sacred duty: to change the direction that America was going; to listen to the American public; and to make sure that this institution was once again judged on effectiveness, not ideology. And this Congress has done just that.

This Congress has changed the priorities that have permeated Washington for the past 12 years. This new Congress has changed things from some of the most historic funding for veterans to the most sweeping ethics reform, described as some of the biggest changes since the Watergate era.

We have much to be proud of and much work yet to do. The Democratic freshman class was given an opportunity to change the course and to change the debate.

I had the opportunity to speak with some reporters asking what will the legacy be? What will this class have accomplished when all is said and done? And I think, in looking at this group of people and having the sense of pride that I have in serving with them, that the answer will not be known for many years. This class has thrown themselves into their work with such due diligence that I think the American people would be proud. We passed legislation not just on a Democratic agenda but on a bipartisan agenda.

We knew, each and every one of us that got here, that we did not come to this institution with an ideological mandate. We knew that the American people, when they were speaking last November, were not saying that they were enamored with just Democratic ideology. They were enamored with the speaking about changing the direction of the country, providing a new direction, providing ethics that actually work. Providing funding for our veterans, funding for our children, and taking this country in a new direction in the war on terror and what was happening in Iraq.

And I am proud to stand here today with my colleagues, and we are going to spend a little bit of time highlighting those achievements, and it is one that all American people should be proud of.

This Congress can do nothing with just one party. This Congress can do nothing with just ideology. When this Congress works together, things get done that would amaze the American people.

I, coming from Minnesota, have witnessed two of the biggest disasters that my State has ever witnessed. Back on August 1, the collapse of the I-35W bridge, to see a major interstate, eight-lane highway, crash into the Mississippi River. We lost seven people with a hundred injured. That tragedy and the response to it illustrates what can be the best in America.

Within 60 hours, the House of Representatives and the Senate had passed

legislation to rebuild that bridge. It went to the President's desk within 72 hours, was passed, and the money is already flowing to the State of Minnesota to correct that.

Last week on August 19, we saw some of the most massive flooding in my district that had ever been witnessed, 17-plus inches of rain in a 24-hour period. We had seven deaths and thousands of homes washed out. The response was quick. It was bipartisan. It was professional. And it is one that the American people should expect, not hope for.

While the rains were still falling, I toured the area in the first few hours with the Republican Governor of Minnesota. The following day I toured with the Republican Senator and a Democratic Senator, and we held a news conference together with the Republican Governor. On Tuesday, President Bush was in Minnesota saying he would do everything he could to support us. On Wednesday, the Governor asked for a declaration, a disaster declaration, and on Thursday the President approved it. By the weekend FEMA was on the ground and people were rebuilding their lives.

That is what the American people should expect out of government: it is effectiveness; not its ideology; its bipartisanship, and it can be judged on what we do for the American public.

Those things have happened. They have happened across the board. They have happened in great numbers. And it is a message that I think the American people should be proud of.

As I said, much has changed. Much has changed for me personally. This is the first year I didn't start a school year teaching in a classroom. But I said many of those years, those 20 years in the classroom, taught me something about the next generation of Americans. They are optimistic. They believe that the best days are yet to come. They have a vision that can extend beyond the next election into the next generation. Our young people understand this. The American people understand this.

My colleagues are here not out of anything great that they personally did, but they are here and this change is happening because of the greatness of the American public. The American public and the system knew it needed to self-correct itself. It needed to bring change to this institution, and that change is happening.

So for the next few minutes, we are going to discuss some of those. I am privileged to be joined by my colleague from Kentucky, another one of the freshmen that came here that sprung up from this greatness of the American public and brought a message of change, of optimism, of prosperity that all of us can benefit from.

With that, I yield to my colleague from Kentucky (Mr. YARMUTH).

Mr. YARMUTH. Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Minnesota for yielding. And I want to join many of us in expressing my great empathy for him

and the residents of his State who have gone through so much recently. And we all, I think, not only empathize but sympathize with what the people of Minnesota have had to go through, and I know we all stand ready to help in any way that we can.

But my colleague is right, Mr. Speaker. When we all came to this body last year right after being elected and we all met for our orientation and, as freshmen, we met for the first time and started comparing notes, it was clear that we all came with pretty similar mandates. We were sent by our people to change what was going on in this country. We were sent by the people of this country to deal with energy problems. We were sent by the people of this country to deal with a dysfunctional health care system. We were sent by the people of this country to deal with the income and wealth inequality that has put such a strain on the great working families of this country and has seen the wealthiest people in America have their wealth increased by leaps and bounds while, as the census report just mentioned last week, 95 percent of the people in this country have not seen their standard of living improve over the last 6 years.

We were sent by the people of this country to do something about the education system, to make sure it not only leaves no child behind but moves every child forward; that we work with the most gifted kids and we work with the kids posing the greatest challenge; that each one of them will have the best that our teachers have to offer and have the greatest support system that we can provide for them.

And foremost of all these things, the people of America sent us to Congress with one overriding thought, and that was to change direction in Iraq.

And it is very interesting because I know that the people on the other side, our colleagues in the Republican Party, want to try to spin our activities by saying, well, we haven't really accomplished very much. Well, I think every one of us knows how hard we have worked over the last 8 months to accomplish the mission that the people of the United States sent us here for.

We have dealt with minimum wage, increasing the minimum wage for the first time in 10 years. We have dealt with the energy situation. We tried to eliminate the great and unnecessary tax cuts that were given to the oil companies when they were making record profits. We dealt with health care, not just recently by trying to expand the Children's Health Insurance Program to cover 5 million more American children, but also in trying to save money and make the system more efficient by forcing the pharmaceutical companies to negotiate with Medicare in the Medicare part D program.

In every area of our jurisdiction, we have tried to respond to the demands of the American people. We have listened to them. We are dealing right now with the revision of No Child Left Behind.

The changes we are making in that program stem directly from what we have heard from the American people. We are listening. We are acting. We are moving.

And so it is with not only a great deal of personal disgust but also with a sense of outrage that I listened to President Bush make a statement when he was halfway around the world in comparing this Congress, this body, with the Parliament in Iraq. And I know he likes to be cute and that is the way he is, but for him to stand halfway across the world before international cameras and international media and tout the fact that the Iraqi Parliament has passed 60 bills when, according to him, we haven't passed that many in this session of Congress to me is an outrage. It's not even factually correct. We have sent him 57 bills; he signed 55. We have passed several hundred bills in this House.

But the most important thing is look at what he has done. Look at the vetoes he has threatened, the vetoes he has actually made. He has already threatened to veto 10 out of 12 appropriations bills we passed in this body. After the committees in this body, both parties working hand in hand, have dealt with these issues and the budgeting for months and months and months, he says arbitrarily, they weren't my budgets, it wasn't what I asked for and, therefore, I'm going to veto them.

For him to criticize the United States Congress for not passing legislation is like the Vice President criticizing his lawyer friend for getting in the way when he shot him. I mean, if anyone is more responsible for retarding and obstructing the work of this body, it is the President of the United States and his party. And it happens day after day. It happens hour after hour. And the only reason it happens is because the Republican Party and the President of the United States have run out of initiatives. They have run out of ideas. They know the American people have rejected their agenda, and they are looking for a new direction, and they just simply don't want to see us succeed.

But that's not what we're here for. We're here to continue working. We're going to generate the type of grassroots support for what we've done. We know it's out there. We're listening to the people. They will be listening to what we're doing, and they will force this Republican Party and this President to move in our direction.

I am convinced that we are doing the right thing, that we are working, we are making progress for the American people. We will continue to do that under the great leadership we have in Speaker PELOSI and Majority Leader HOYER. And I know eventually the Republican Party will come to their senses and they will begin to realize that the American people want us to act to solve the very demanding, the very challenging problems that face

this country. We are about that task. That's why we came here. That's what we will continue to do as long as we are here.

Mr. WALZ of Minnesota. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman from Kentucky. And he sums it up well. One of the things that the American public is most frustrated with is the idea of nothing happening or obstructionism. And I think some know that there is a difference between legislation and politics. But most people in America don't want to deal with the political side of it. They want to see the effectiveness.

And I should note 8 months ago on this day a couple of major changes were made that we were able to make. We have three branches of government, but the business that happened in this House for both sides of the aisle can be changed with rule changes. And on that first day we made some major rule changes that affect the American public, to understand that rhetoric is not good enough, that action is what is demanded.

The first thing that we did is we enacted PAYGO budgeting. No more blank checks. No more recklessly spending our children's rightful inheritance to this country by putting in fiscal policies that are short-term, feel-good tax breaks for very few Americans. PAYGO budgeting is exactly what the American people live by. It is how every middle-class American has to get by in their own life. And this House of Representatives finally put that in. By doing so, we will do something that the American people should expect to happen: We will balance the Federal budget by 2012.

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But that's not good enough. We have a \$9 trillion deficit. The idea that this Congress has been able to tell people you can have something for nothing, you can give tax cuts to the wealthiest and underfund programs, what's happened is this country is using the equity in our own country that belongs rightfully to our children and spending it now. Those days are over. PAYGO is a rule of this House and it will continue to be so as long as the Democratic Congress stays as it is.

The other major change was one that the American people simply don't understand. Many of us who came here didn't understand it, and many of us were incredibly frustrated by it, how this sacred institution, the most important, deliberative legislative body, democratic institution the world has ever seen has an image problem when it comes to ethics. Every single Member who walks through this door should be very, very cognizant of what this means to the American people.

So the ethics changes that were taken up 8 months ago, I think the American public would probably be hard-pressed to even believe that it didn't happen. The difference between 8 months ago and today is simply this: Lobbyists will no longer be able to pro-

vide one penny in food, not one penny in gifts, and not one penny in travel to any Member of this body. Now, that's a far sight from golf trips to Scotland and special interests that we had seen before. Those who think that the election of last November made no difference, look no further than K Street to understand the changes that happened here. Ethics changes have been sweeping.

Now, one of the things in standing here and talking about these things, I think there is a sense of frustration amongst many of us, the game seems to be coming from the other side of the aisle, is to delay and slow everything down and to drive the approval rating of this Congress as low as it can possibly go. None of us should be happy with the fact that when a Presidential approval rating is as low as this President's is and a congressional approval rating is as low as this body is right now, that's nothing to be proud of. And it's nothing to point one finger at each side of the aisle. What we're doing is we're undermining the basic tenet of this great democracy. And for those who think that this is someplace else, it's full of your neighbors, it's full of the people you work with, it's full of the teachers, the newspapermen, the law enforcement officers that you sent here. It is incumbent upon this institution to get the ethics changes right.

So we have passed some of the most sweeping ethics changes. And soon, maybe by the end of today, we will see the President sign in more of that; tightening up of not only the bans on gifts, but also making sure that bundled contributions to campaigns are being shown, that we know who's giving money, that we understand who is trying to look at and who is trying to influence decisions that are made in this House.

Now, one of the things I would like to say is that, speaking of your own accomplishments, there is a saying in Minnesota, "Act and let others do the speaking for you." I want to quote a few things that have come out of newspapers basically over the last 30 days of all things that are happening here. We have a couple of things here. "Democrats who control Congress headed into a summer recess having passed several high-profile bills, raising the minimum wage, bolstering U.S. security, expanding children's health care. Their top priority, ending the Iraq war, remains frustratingly unfulfilled. But the Democrats who took over in January were able to go home last month for a month-long break having won more support in the U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives for bringing combat troops home by next year than any time before, marking a significant turnaround from last year." Reuters of August 5 of this year.

"Some non-partisan observers agree, Democrats have reason to boast. Democrats have had a good run legislatively over the past few weeks, and that does help them going into the recess," said

Larry Sabato, Director of the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia.

"Congressional Democrat majority made major strides towards implementing its domestic agenda before going home. It will face hurdles when lawmakers return at summer's end, President Bush being the main one. Farm bills, lobbying reform, energy, education, children's health insurance, all advanced in the final 10 days, establishing House Speaker NANCY PELOSI as a major legislative player." Wall Street Journal.

"Besides their success on increasing the minimum wage, ethics and lobbying, September 11 Commission recommendations, Democrats have moved forward with initiatives to expand health insurance for all of America's children through the SCHIP program, a shift in U.S. energy policy away from reliance on foreign fossil fuels. They have helped focus the war debate on the question of when, not if, U.S. forces will be pulling out." The Los Angeles Times.

"I have long been and continue to be an advocate of congressional oversight as a fundamental element of our system of government. I also have publicly expressed my belief that congressional debate on Iraq has been constructive, appropriate and necessary." That last one coming from Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates.

This Congress is making changes. This Congress is listening to the American public. This Congress is taking what it can control in its own hands, like rules, and strengthening them, making sure that ethics reform is a top priority, making sure that people can once again walk in this building, see this American flag, understand the history that's been written here, and trust the Members that have been here to do the duty of the American public. And in doing so, we have passed some of the most sweeping legislation.

The first one I want to talk a little bit about is veterans issues. Now, in serving on the Veterans' Affairs Committee, it's something that, of course, is very near and dear to my heart, something that I can't say that it's a personal sense of pride, but it's one of a personal sense of responsibility. The House historian notified me, after a week or two here in Congress, that as a retired command sergeant major in the Army National Guard, that I was the top ranking enlisted soldier to ever serve in Congress. Now, those Members familiar with the military understand that being an enlisted soldier brings a sense of responsibility of making sure troops are taken care of.

So to sit on the Veterans' Affairs Committee and watch the historic progress that has been made on veterans issues, I think it's interesting to keep a couple of facts in mind. In the 77-year history that we've had a Veterans Administration or the Veterans Affairs, in that 77-year history there has never been the infusion of resources given to that administration as

we've seen in the last 8 months. There is a group of veteran service organizations led by the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Disabled American Veterans, the Paralyzed American Veterans, the American Legion, that each and every year for the last 22 years have put together what they call the independent budget. And this independent budget does something very simple. It takes a look at the needs of all American veterans. It determines how many veterans are going to need services, whether it be veterans health care, re-employment, educational benefits, and the gamut of resources that we provide our veterans for the service they do this country. They take that number and then they figure out the real dollar cost of providing exactly those services, services that were promised, services that were guaranteed to our veterans when they signed up or were drafted to serve this Nation at times of peace and times of war. They take those two numbers and they put it in a budget and they send it to Congress. They say, you have X number of veterans at X number of cost; therefore, you should budget X number of dollars. And for the past 21 years, Congress has failed to meet that.

Congress has so blatantly understated the need that the current administration stated 3 years ago, when they made their budget, that their determination was that we would see fewer veterans and the cost of veterans health care would go down. Most of us will take the bet that the sun will not rise tomorrow before that would happen. And guess what? It did not happen. So we were left, 2 years ago, with a nearly \$2 billion shortfall in taking care of our veterans. And the decision came then, who doesn't get care? Who do we turn away? And the answer was simply, turn away Priority 8 veterans. We will prioritize these veterans.

Now, Priority 8 veterans, to the American public, that may not seem like too much, but a Priority 8 veteran is this. It's someone in my district making \$27,701 or more can be thrown off as a Priority 8. That can be a combat veteran. That can be a veteran of our conflicts, our current conflicts, Vietnam, or World War II, determined mostly on the economic scale, not the need, the accessibility, not what was promised to them, not what the right thing to do was. But lo and behold, you knock off several million veterans, and look, we had a balanced budget. That's not the way this Congress is going to deal with it. That is not the way this Congress is going to keep their responsibilities. And in this budget, we increased \$3.6 million in veterans funding over the President's request.

When we passed that piece of legislation by, I believe, and I believe this is correct, I may be off by one or two, 409-2 was when this passed, and that piece of legislation was being threatened to be vetoed in that appropriations by this President. One of the 12 appropriations bills which, by the way, for the

first time in a decade, all 12 were done on time, all were done by the August recess. That, in addition to passing nine earlier this year that were not done from last year's work.

So for any American who listens to the rhetoric, who listens to people talk about nothing being done, the question would be, can they back that up with fact? We can back it up with fact.

We've made some major changes on dealing with the current situation in Iraq and Afghanistan. The signature injuries of this war is the traumatic brain injuries and the concussive injuries caused by improvised explosive devices. They have become more sophisticated over time in the damage that they're doing.

The care our soldiers are receiving on the battlefield is second to none. It is the best care that has ever been given in the history of warfare on this planet. One of the problems with that is we are sending soldiers home with horrible injuries, injuries that are going to be with them for a lifetime, that is going to take a lifetime of care. And what this Congress has done is we passed legislation introducing new research dollars, new research centers, five of them, to be placed around the country in conjunction with our VA hospitals that have our polytrauma centers, the ones that are dealing with these concussive injuries. And we're going to put the funding there, we're going to put the research there, and it's going to do something. It's going to provide care not only to the soldiers, but it's going to provide the necessary resources to the families that are going to have to adjust their entire lives to deal with the damage that has been done by these injuries. This is not something that these veterans and their families should feel lucky to have. It's not something that they should have to come here, even though that's exactly what happens, and lobby this Congress to do that. It's what is the morally right thing to do. It is also the best way to show future generations of our young people who want to serve this country, who want to defend this country, that if they do so, we will be there every step of the way.

What we're seeing coming out of this conflict is post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide prevention. We passed H.R. 327, Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act. That is starting to get centers up and running. It's starting to do more identification. We are now screening every single soldier who returns from this conflict for traumatic brain injury and for post-traumatic stress disorder.

We are changing the way that we welcome our soldiers home. We are changing the way that we treat them and we screen them and we bring them and their families into the process of making them whole again.

We have the Rural Veterans Healthcare Improvement Act. One of the things we have a problem with, and this is one the American people should

be incredibly frustrated with that I, as a veteran, was, our veterans who have to travel to VA centers to get health care are reimbursed at the 1978 rate of 11 cents a mile. And I have a veteran, a first sergeant no less, who saw combat duty in Korea. When he brought this up about a year ago to an official, he was simply told to get a more fuel-efficient automobile. Now, this Congress has found fit to reimburse itself at 48½ cents a mile. At some point, the American public should ask where is the hypocrisy in who we're treating and who should receive the benefit. But those have changed.

We also introduced legislation that changed the GI Bill. We have soldiers, in the units that I served with, in the 34th Division who served the longest tour of duty in the war of Iraq of any unit in the U.S. military, 22 months. These are the same soldiers that, 14 months previously, served a tour of duty in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, the war in Afghanistan. And the way the GI Bill is written, these soldiers have been gone for 4 years. Many of them signed up for a 6-year commitment. Their commitment is coming to an end, and at the same time, their benefits. They would have been able to use their GI Bill had they not been out fighting a war to defend America, had they not been doing what they were asked to do, and because of that they were losing their benefit. Previous Congresses took no action to correct that. This Congress did. That's taking care of our veterans. That's not only standing in front of them for photo opportunities, it's standing behind them.

I am proud to say this new Congress puts its money where its mouth is. It truly supports our veterans. It understands that it's bipartisan. And this is a great accomplishment.

At this point, I would like to yield a little time to my colleague from Kentucky to talk about a few more initiatives.

Mr. YARMUTH. I thank the gentleman.

I would like to follow up on something to which you alluded because I think it's really important. This Congress has not only taken on a lot of new initiatives and has tried to deal with substantial problems that face this country and our people, but it has also made up for a lot of lost ground and a lot of inactivity in prior Congresses. And we hate to sound partisan around here, and I know the American people don't want us to be partisan, they want us to work together, and I think we have tried to work together and to reach out, but the fact remains that over the last 6 years the Congress did not do a lot of the things that it was supposed to do. We've seen the impact in a lot of ways. We've seen the impact on our budget, where we have increased the Federal debt, the national debt by \$3 trillion, 50 percent over the last 6 years. That's because the previous Congresses were not doing their fiscal accounting the right way.

We've seen time after time, program after program, you mentioned veterans. We also had situations with education. We've had situations with health care where basic research that we were supposed to be funding has been cut. A lot of human services have been cut or zeroed out in past budgets. So we've not only had to take new initiatives, but we've had to make up for a lot of lost ground and programs that have affected a lot of Americans adversely. So we've had a lot to do.

And another area we've had a lot to do, and this is, again, something you alluded to, my colleague from Minnesota has alluded to, is that we've had to finally provide the accountability for many of the operations of government which have basically gone unsupervised for the last 6 years. We've seen it time after time after time. We've seen it in the reconstruction effort in Iraq. We've seen it in cases of fraud and abuse in the Medicare and Medicaid situations. We've seen it in the enforcement of coal mine safety rules. We've seen it in environmental regulations. Across the entire spectrum of government we have seen time after time where problems in the operation of government have basically gone unsupervised and unaccounted for.

□ 1745

We have taken steps to do that. I hope that the American people all have the occasion, for instance, to read the new Rolling Stone where there is an article about all of the subcontracting, the private contracting in Iraq, and the billions and billions of dollars which have been lost or essentially stolen by fraudulent activities by contractors in no-bid contracts and in sweetheart contracts given to friends of the administration. Nobody was looking at these deals until this Congress decided to take action and look at them. And now we have tried to implement new contracting laws and new supervision so that the taxpayers' dollars are accounted for. This is what the Congress is supposed to do. This is what we're doing.

Again, it comes to me as an incredible affront for the President of the United States to stand halfway around the world and say to the world that this Congress is not doing what it should be doing and that it is not functioning as effectively as the most dysfunctional parliament in the world, which is the Iraqi Parliament. I can't imagine what the American people would say if Speaker PELOSI or my colleague from Minnesota, or any one of our Members went to Australia or went to Iraq and compared President Bush unfavorably to Mr. Maliki. There would be an outcry unheard like anything in this country. And yet the President does it in Australia and criticizes this Congress. I hope the American people respond with the same degree of outrage which I think they would, and probably justifiably, if we were out there comparing him to Prime Minister Maliki.

I would like to expand on that a little bit, just for the sake of having fun, since the President likes to be cute and have fun when he makes these statements. Since he was so interested in the Iraqi Parliament, let's talk about what the Iraqi Parliament has done with regard to some of the benchmarks that they were supposed to make progress on. We're going to get a report from General Petraeus in a few days. But the Government Accountability Office has already given us a report on the progress of the Iraqi Parliament, the one that Mr. Bush seems to appreciate so much.

One of the benchmarks, enacting and implementing legislation on de-Baathification, nothing done. Laws were drafted, not passed. Enacting and implementing legislation to ensure the equitable distribution of hydrocarbon resources of the people of Iraq, none being considered by the Parliament. Enacting and implementing legislation on procedures to form semiautonomous regions, that one they did enact a law. Enacting and implementing legislation establishing an Independent High Electoral Commission, provincial elections law, provincial council authorities, and a date for provincial elections supporting laws, not enacted. Enacting and implementing legislation addressing amnesty, no law drafted. Enacting and implementing legislation establishing a strong militia disarmament program to ensure that such security forces are accountable only to the central government and loyal to the constitution of Iraq, no laws drafted. Nothing done.

So this is the great Iraqi Parliament that President Bush seems to appreciate when he is standing halfway across the world. The fact of the matter is, this Congress has acted. It has acted in so many areas that I am so proud to speak of and that my colleague has done such an excellent job of enumerating. But this Congress continues to work in education, in health care, in the environmental issues, and, yes, in Veterans Affairs, for the great heroes of our country to whom we made a critical promise when they decided to give their service. We had made a promise to them, and we haven't been keeping it. This Congress is going to make sure that we do keep it, even though prior Congresses and this administration is not.

So again, I am very proud of the record that this Congress has assembled over the last 8 months. I am, again, ashamed of the President of the United States for what he said in Australia. But I hope he will come back. I hope he will realize that his legacy is going to depend, to a certain extent, on how he reaches out to us and deals with us over the next 15 months.

The Constitution begins with article 1, which vests the legislative authority in this country in this body, not in him. Now, he doesn't seem to have read the Constitution. With 700 or so signing statements in which he said he is basi-

cally going to ignore what this Congress does with executive orders, vetoes, and virtually every other parliamentary procedure or technical procedure he can use to invalidate the work of this Congress, I think basically he has a lot to answer for, both to the American people and to us. The Constitution vests the legislative authority in this body. We are doing our job. We will continue to do our job.

I ask the President and the Republicans on the other side of the aisle and in the other body to recognize that this is our job. We are the ones mentioned by article 1. We are mentioned first in the establishment of this government, and I think we will continue to act first in the interests of the American people.

Mr. WALZ of Minnesota. The gentleman's point, one of the things that is very well taken is that the genius of our system lies in the system of checks and balances, the oversight that should have been provided. Now, those of us who were expressing grave misgivings about the President's plan to basically simply trust him that he had a plan for Iraq, to trust him that he had a plan on this, and any of us who spoke out and said, the responsibility for enacting foreign policy lies between the Congress and the President, carrying out the military side of it will always be done with great professionalism.

But as we ask the questions, what is the step beyond the military? What is the step for political gain in Iraq? What is the bigger picture, the geopolitical picture, of the Middle East? When we started asking those questions for 3 years prior to this Congress coming, we were told we were unpatriotic, that we were somehow undermining the troops. Forget that we funded them in terms of the VA and everything else at a historic level once we got here. We were told that. This oversight and this ability to check the executive branch is exactly what the American people are looking at.

I stress it and say it again. I do not believe that the American public were enamored strictly with Democratic ideology. But I can tell you what they were disgusted with; the belief of the sense of righteousness that was coming that there could be no room for debate, there was no room to compromise, there was no room to listen to the experts, and there was no reason to back off and say, "Perhaps we were wrong." That's what we heard. That's what we heard for 6 years from this administration. That's what we heard with a Congress that provided this President no reason to veto. None. Zero. Why should he? They were writing the legislation. The President has been using the word "veto" in almost every sentence since we came here. That tells me the system is working beautifully. That tells me that the system is providing those checks and balances.

In this idea of oversight, there are a couple of important pieces of legislation that I would like to bring up and

then talk about how bills are now being written here, how laws are being enacted, and how the rhetoric that gets to the American people is all based on spin and politics. It is not based on reality.

The first of these is the Rail Safety Act. We had a sense in this country over time, and it was fought for by our grandparents and by our great-grandparents, it was fought for by every generation, to provide safe working conditions for our workers, to provide child labor laws, to provide good, safe ability of our people to make a living and return home to their families at the end of a hard day. The Rail Safety Act was to be authorized by Congress to oversee the operations of our railroads. Well, for the last 12 years, Congress has basically said, "We should just let the rail industry determine their own safety". That is pretty much how we did it with airlines prior to September 11. "They'll provide it." No thought that maybe the purpose of business is to provide returns to their investors. No thought that maybe they would try and save a little money by cutting off safety at the expense of what might happen. So for 12 years, we have sat around and we have done nothing to reenact the Rail Safety Act.

This year we have already held three hearings. There will be a reauthorization of this. I have sat in those hearings in the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee and watched rail workers come up and talk about how many long hours they are being forced to work, how their grievance process is held up and never listened to, how we are simply running on borrowed time before we are going to see a major accident, and how we have seen the data that has shown we are no safer. I have listened to people from the railroads testify in front of our committee and tell me how safe it was and how the numbers are comparable to previous years. And I have to note, "but your numbers only went to October of last year. We had 3 more months that you didn't include."

"Oh, yeah, sorry about that."

That's the type of thing that went on. The American public doesn't expect us to take one side or another. They expect us to stand here, look at data, be fair, work with our colleagues across the aisle, hold firm to our convictions, disagree on issues, but do it agreeably, and come to a consensus that works. Don't try to figure out what the talking point is. Don't try and figure out how you can make the other side look bad. I spend a lot of time down here watching how much time goes in watching my colleagues make sure they say "Democrat" instead of "Democratic." If it weren't so sad, it would be funny. But the problem is that's one small area that is a much bigger problem, that it's about the message, not about the effectiveness.

The second one I want to talk about is a very important one. Maybe many Americans don't know about it, but we

have been waiting 8 years to get a reauthorization of the Water Resources Development Act, the WRDA bill. The WRDA bill deals with everything from transportation, clean water, everything in this country dealing with how we work with one of our most precious natural resources, our lakes and rivers. In my State of Minnesota, one of the most important assets economically, environmentally and culturally is the Mississippi River. It is something that is so inherently ingrained in who we are as Americans and those States that are on that river that how we treat it and how we deal with it is critically important. Well, the locks and dams that make Minnesota a major shipper of our grain in the breadbasket of America are over 70 years old. They're in decay. We need to invest in the upkeep of these. That can only be done, the locks and dams on the upper Mississippi, through the Water Resources Development Act. We need to pass that. We need to move it forward so that our economic vision will extend to our children.

For 8 years, nothing was done. Nothing was invested in. And now, today, taking it one step further, I sat in a hearing in the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee dealing with the state of the bridges in our country. Now, it's obviously very timely. It has obviously been driven by the catastrophic and horrific collapse of the I-35W bridge in Minnesota. But when you see a map highlighting the thousands of structurally deficient bridges across this country, and I watch the administration's representatives say, "We've got plenty of money to take care of this. We don't need to find a new revenue source," the aversion to speaking together and taking something off the table before we've had a chance to debate it is absolutely something the American people will no longer tolerate. This Congress has said, "We need to figure out how to get these bridges funded." If it is through a Federal gas tax, then let's talk about it. And if it is through public-private partnerships, let's talk about them. If it is through reprioritizing how we use the resources we have, let's talk about them.

But we don't get that. What we get is slogans and radio ads talking about Democrats want to tax. Democrats don't want to tax. Democrats just want a country that works. This new Congress wants to have that discussion. We have sat here and watched bill after bill after bill go through subcommittees, committees, the full House, and minutes before we are to vote on it, the other side brings up a motion to recommit, which means a new piece of legislation. Most of the time, I have already got it down pretty well, is this one immigration or is this one felons? Which one are they going to bring up? They bring these up so they can go to the American people and tell them, "They didn't vote against giving benefits to illegal immigrants." Well, one of the reasons we didn't do that was because

they're not telling you the whole story. First is, it's already illegal and it doesn't happen. Secondly, the little part of the line that they don't say is, it would totally gut the funding of the piece of legislation we put out there.

That type of politics has the American public frustrated beyond all belief. Those two pieces of legislation, Rail Safety Act and the WRDA bill, should be absolutely nonpartisan. They should have maybe some philosophical differences on how you administer that or possibly how you pay for it. But here was the solution we had: "Let's not regulate it. Let's not provide oversight. Let's let the corporations themselves do so. That's the best way to do that."

Well, the American public has rejected that. The American public has said, no. The American public says, We're not against regulation. We're against excessive regulation.

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We are against regulation that doesn't make sense in terms of safety and the ability of our railroads to profit. But somehow because we are asking for these pieces of legislation to go through, that we are not supportive of economic growth, is ludicrous, especially on the WRDA bill.

Everybody agrees that the WRDA bill will be a major economic driver. It will put billions of dollars into the economy in terms of rebuilding and rehabilitating the locks and dams and other resources, as well as speeding up the transportation time. The Mississippi River has such a bottleneck near St. Louis that we can barely move cargo through that. We have an aging infrastructure, bridges that are unsafe, roads that are clogged.

The solution from the administration, they are talking about congestion pricing. That means we will charge a higher toll on roads that are busy in order to force people off them. I guess they assume that some of us are just driving around in the mornings, not taking our kids to school, not going to work; that we just like driving and clogging the roads. So the best thing is those of us who can't afford us, get us off the roads so those lanes will be nice and wide open for the people who can afford to pay to go down them.

The American public said that is not a solution. Get something else and debate it. That is what we are trying to do.

Now I would like to take a minute to explain to you how I believe and what I have seen and what I was hoping when I left that high school classroom, when I came to this building, when I came to this sacred floor, how I was hoping legislation would work. I live in southern Minnesota. It is one of the most productive agricultural lands in the Nation; in the world, I should say.

The county I live in is called Blue Earth County. People on the prairie are pretty literal. When they call towns Plainview, that is because that is what you see. When they called that

county Blue Earth, that is because the soil there is so black and so rich that when the sun shines on it on the summer days, it literally looks blue. This is land that can produce 200 bushels an acre of corn. This is land that feeds the world.

The farm bill is an important piece of legislation to that district but also across the country. The farm bill is a big piece of legislation that has historically been very, very bipartisan. That is because 66 or so percent of the farm bill deals with nutrition programs; how we feed our children in schools, how we feed our seniors, how we feed those who are not fortunate enough or need to use food stamps or other programs. That is 66 percent of it.

About 12 percent deals with the safety net that keeps our farmers in business, that provides this country the cheapest, most abundant, safest form of food at the least expensive disposable income of any nation in the world. That farm bill does that. It also provides things like rural development. It also provides conservation measures.

Well, here is how the farm bill was written. When I got here to Congress and was placed on that committee, we were given the instructions by the chairman of that committee in January to spend the next 2 months going out and listening to everybody, holding sessions, holding hearings, soliciting information, doing whatever you could to let people start writing that farm bill, because here was the directive. The farm bill would be written by the people through the subcommittee, to the full committee, to the House of Representatives, and then we would get a piece of legislation that we could be truly proud of.

So we did it. I went out and held 14 listening sessions throughout my district. It varied in attendance from maybe 50 to 150 people. It varied from teachers to social workers, of course farmers, agribusiness people. And as they came there, they came with a lifetime of ideas. They came with a vision of what agriculture should look like in America, and they wanted to be part of the process.

So they came and told me this: Congressman WALZ, the average farmer in the first district is 58 years old. We are getting old and our children are leaving. It is very difficult to get into farming.

So groups as diverse as the American Farm Bureau and the Land Stewardship Project and the Farmer's Union got together, and each of them had proposed different ideas on beginning farmer and rancher legislation. Their members came to these meetings and explained the need for this.

We, myself, my staff, the ag committee staff, got together and helped write legislation. That legislation was taken into and offered up in the subcommittees as amendments to the farm bill. My colleagues on both sides of the aisle debated both for and

against this piece of legislation and offered secondary amendments to change it, which we debated, accepted some, rejected some. When we were done, we had a piece of legislation that was heralded by most farm groups as a major step forward in making agriculture accessible to future generations.

That piece of legislation got added in. It was not written by special interest; it was written by people who care about this. Did special interest have their say? Of course they did. Our job was to sort that out.

Well, that piece of legislation in the farm bill happened in all the subcommittees, and that piece of legislation was debated in the full committee and that piece of legislation passed out of the full committee and came to the House floor. My colleagues on both sides of the aisle, I can guarantee you this, many of them, especially those in farm country, said this is a good piece of legislation.

Bipartisan groups, groups that were on the spectrum of politics about as far apart as you could get from one another, from environmental groups to production ag groups, were saying: You know what, I think they got it right. And then as we brought it to the floor, one of the things that we had to do was figure out how this thing is going to be paid through the whole process. Because commodity processes have been high in past years, we did not pay about \$60 billion in subsidy payments, whether it be direct payments, contractual payments.

So what happened was when we budgeted under PAYGO, our budget for this year's farm bill was \$60 billion less. So when we got to the end it became apparent, because Democrats wanted to make sure we did something as simple as this, we let the Food Stamp Program, senior feeding programs and some of our nutrition programs that had been underfunded for years, we wanted to do something as simple as boost them up to a level that people could get the caloric intake they needed to have a healthy diet, and then we wanted to peg it to inflation to make sure that what we put in the bill this year isn't eaten up by inflation next year. Doing any budgeting without considering inflation, to me, seems disingenuous.

So we did that. The way we came up paying for it was a suggestion given to us by President Bush and his budget director. They had identified several years ago approximately \$7½ billion in uncollected taxes from companies, in the President's own words, that were inappropriately using the U.S. Tax Code to shift their tax burden by shifting profits to offshore entities, mainly in the Caribbean, Bermuda being the one, meaning foreign corporations doing business in America, making a profit here, shifting that profit to Bermuda and reporting zero in tax liability.

The President said it was inappropriate, as did his budget director. We

agreed with him. We closed that loophole, asking them to do the thing that is most American of all, pay your fair share and take that money, put it in to enhance our nutrition programs.

Well, that was unacceptable because now that is considered a tax. That was the rhetoric that was coming. So now a decision has to be made. Are the American public, when they listen to this farm bill that needs to pass, and, by the way, we told them in January that we would have it done by the end of July, and there wasn't a single person that thought that was possible. Well, it was done. It was done by the end of July. We took it home.

I went to Farmfest, Redwood Falls, Minnesota to wide acclaim for this piece of legislation. It is not perfect. Nothing here is. It is a compromise. But it is a good one. It is good for rural America. It is good for our nutrition programs. It is good for our economy.

Well, that thing is now under a veto threat by the President. So the President has a decision. He can stand in front of the American public and say "I am going to veto a really nice piece of legislation that was worked on from the grassroots level," exactly how you would hope the American democratic system works, "and I am going to veto that because I believe that those foreign corporations have the right to avoid paying their taxes," or he can tell the American public, "You know what? This was worked on bipartisanly, this was done correctly, and we should vote together on this."

We should tell the American public, this isn't about politics. This isn't about trying to get a campaign ad that says the Democrats are trying to raise taxes. This is about doing the right thing that we can all take credit for. That needs to happen. Now I would say the ball is in the President's court. The ball is in his court when it comes from the Senate to do exactly that. This Congress will continue to do that.

The last thing I would like to talk a little bit about is this new direction. One of the things that I think Democrats are rightfully proud of, it is the first piece of legislation many of us got to cosponsor, that was the small business tax relief and the raising of the minimum wage.

This piece of legislation, we know it has been over a decade since we saw a raising of the minimum wage. Some of my colleagues say, what's the big deal? I have got many names and many stories I could tell them why it is a big deal to raise the minimum wage, why the 3 million children living in families with parents with minimum wage, it is probably a pretty big deal to them.

But part of the story is focusing on the small business tax relief. The rhetoric that will come out is always one or the other, either/or, the false dichotomies. "Well, Democrats are for raising the minimum wage, but they are not for helping business." Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, we passed this and it was signed into law.

Here are a couple things that it did, just to let you know. It was endorsed, by the way, by the Chamber of Commerce and the National Federation of Independent Businesses. I don't hear my colleagues on the other side talking a whole lot about this. I think they should. It would be a good one for them to talk to their constituents about.

It extends a tax provision that lets small business owners write off more equipment each year for use in their trade or business, understanding that small businesses have a need for the infusion of capital purchases and things that they need to get started with their business, making sure they are able to write those off. Absolutely appropriate, absolutely the right use of the Tax Code, and absolutely a sense of investment in the future.

If we give these tax cuts, and some of them are pretty substantive, about \$4.84 billion total, it ensures married couples who jointly own a small business both receive credit for paying Social Security and medicare taxes.

I am at a loss to understand why over the last 12 years of Republican control that was never fixed. This is a pretty important fix, and it is one that small businesses understand is important. It includes enhanced tip credit to ensure employers don't lose current tax benefits when the minimum wage goes up; S Corp provisions to keep tax benefits of being a small business even as they grow and expand; and extends the Work Opportunity Tax Credit through August of 2011.

These are things that are going to impact positively on small businesses. Seventy percent of our jobs are created in small businesses, employers with 50 or less employees. Those are the things that we have taken to do.

So those who would say nothing positive is being done, this Congress is not moving anything forward, would be remiss to look at the facts, what the facts have been. The most significant increase in veterans care that we have seen in the 77-year history, probably I think it is safe to say in this Nation's history; an ending of a 10-year period without a raise to the minimum wage for millions of American workers; a small business tax package that is going to enhance their ability to compete in the world; an ethics reform package that independently has been hailed as one of the most significant since Watergate, to bring back the dignity, to bring back the trust of the American people in this institution.

You heard some of the things about energy, focusing on energy independence. We have got a farm bill that is going to be one of the best we have seen. And when the President decides he is going to choose our farmers over foreign companies that avoid paying taxes, we are going to get a great farm bill.

We have got a Water Resources Development Act that is going to enhance our ability to compete in the world while adding billions of dollars in investments to our infrastructure.

We are going to clean up the Rail Safety Act. We have seen packages to education to make college more affordable, the most significant increase to Pell Grants. We have cleaned up what has been an absolute debacle in private lending, moving away from government-subsidized, low-interest loans to get our children through college by saying, gee, we have this vast pool of American kids who need to go to college to compete. Why shouldn't we profit from that? Why shouldn't we let private lenders make a whole bunch of money of them? That would be a good thing to do.

Now, that is quite a difference from what she said when I went to school, when future generations invested in me and said we are going to keep college as affordable as possible. We are going to make sure we use grants as much as we can, and we are going to make sure that the GI Bill can be used by these young people who are willing to sign up and they are able to get their education. That was wisdom. That was vision. That was nonpartisan.

Many of those accomplishments can be attributed to ideas coming from the Republican side of the aisle. Unfortunately, for the last few years, that hasn't been the case. But we have got a new direction. We have got a new optimism.

As I started speaking today, I talked about the changes each one of us have seen. We have been here for 8 months. In my home State of Minnesota, I am happy to tell you that I think I have witnessed change that all us want to know.

On August 19, as we talked a little bit about it, my district saw some of the worst flooding that they have ever seen; 17 inches of rain in a 24-hour period. We had entire towns wiped out, towns of 2,500 to 3,000 people. I went into that town riding on a boat as people were leaving their second story windows as people were picking them up. We have seen catastrophic displacement of large numbers of people.

As I said, on Sunday, the rains were falling, and I was there with a Republican Governor. On Monday, a Republican Senator and a Democratic Senator, a Republican Governor and a Democratic Congressman toured together and promised to do everything that was possible. On Tuesday, a Republican President was in Minnesota pledging to the help of the U.S. Government. On Wednesday, a Republican Governor requested that help. And on Thursday, the administration delivered on that. By Sunday, FEMA was in the district caring for our people, taking care of the needs, and showing that, you know what? When we work together, there is nothing this Nation can't accomplish.

I am proud to be a member of this new class. It has been 8 months of change. The new direction we are going in is one that the American public wants.

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SITUATION IN IRAQ

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. SIRE). Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 18, 2007, the gentleman from Tennessee (Mr. WAMP) is recognized for 60 minutes as the designee of the minority leader.

Mr. WAMP. Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the tone and the statement of our colleague who just completed his hour and was talking about what our country can do when we pull together. Over the next hour, I believe that several Members of the Republican Conference here in the House of Representatives will come down and share their perspectives gained, many of them from physically going to Iraq or Afghanistan, or both, during the recent August district work period when Members were back in their district and allowed to travel to give firsthand accounts of what they learned and their meetings with General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker and others, and a real up-to-date report on the situation in Iraq.

But I do agree with the gentleman in his closing comments that we must as a Nation take ownership again of certain things not even in a bipartisan way but in a nonpartisan way because these are America's problems. They are not Republican or Democratic problems. And frankly, as much as some people would like to say it or believe it or use it for political purposes, this is not President Bush's war; this is America's fight. President Bush and Vice President CHENEY will be gone in just a little over a year. The problems will not go away. The threats will still be here. The challenges of this generation to answer our patriotic call to this Nation, to answer our responsibility in sacrifice and service will continue, I believe, for some time.

I did not go to Iraq in August, but my nephew did. Specialist Jeffrey Watts is now serving his country as a soldier in Iraq for the next 15 months as part of the 1-181st Field Artillery Brigade. I heard the gentleman from Minnesota talk about the deployments. What I was fascinated by when I was with the 1-181st earlier this summer as they shipped out to Fort Bliss to train to go to Iraq, is how many members of the 1-181st, and this is a National Guard unit, also deployed with the 278th from our Tennessee National Guard a year and a half ago and came back and redeployed with the 1-181st. They didn't have to but did; and how many vice versa went before, many of them because they are volunteering to serve their country in harm's way. In harm's way, big harm's way, because they love the opportunity to serve their country. They are incredibly selfless patriots of the highest order, and I do think this House comes together in praise of these valiant Americans who understand that freedom is not free and that somebody has to stand between a real threat and our civilian population, and that is what they are doing.