

Even before the August recess, the House of Representatives passed that conference committee report. So now all eyes are on the floor of the Senate. That is where we must finish the job. That is why I urge Senator REID and others to put the WRDA bill on the floor of the Senate as soon as possible.

Recently, on September 6, I sent Senator REID a letter, following up on numerous discussions we have had with other Members, urging him to put the bill on the floor as soon as possible, certainly during September. Again, I come to the floor of the Senate to urge the Senate leadership to do that in light of the crucial nature of this bill for continued recovery, hurricane flood protection in Louisiana.

I am particularly disappointed this week that is not happening while we go to other business, including the DC voting rights bill. Now, there are folks very interested and focused and committed to that DC voting rights bill. That is their right. I have no particular quarrel with that. I am going to vote against it because I sincerely believe it is clearly contrary to the U.S. Constitution. But that is a legitimate disagreement, and we can debate about that and have that legitimate disagreement. I do not quarrel with their focus and their passion. I do, quite frankly, quarrel with putting that on the floor of the Senate before the WRDA bill, when that WRDA bill and significant provisions in it are life and death to south Louisiana, to our recovery in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Those events, 2 years ago last month and this month, make passage of the WRDA bill a true emergency priority for this body. The same cannot be said of the DC voting rights bill or other things that are being considered for Senate floor action. Again, those other measures—the DC voting rights bill, in particular—have their proponents, and that is their right. I do not quarrel with their passion for that. But that is not the sort of real emergency as we face in Louisiana with regard to the protection we need.

We are in the midst of a hurricane season. We are at the peak of a hurricane season. Yet we continue to be years and years overdue for this WRDA bill and all the very significant provisions it contains for our people, for our State, for our vanishing coastline.

So, in closing, I again urge the majority leader to put the WRDA bill on the floor of the Senate as soon as possible, and absolutely this month, and to establish the right priorities for this body and for this country, including that very important effort which I believe should be on the floor of the Senate, should gain action, should gain focus before other measures, including the DC voting rights bill.

With that, I yield the floor. I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

PRIVATE SECURITY CONTRACTORS IN IRAQ

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, there was an event that occurred yesterday in Iraq which is significant. A decision was made by the Iraqi Government to order a private security firm known as Blackwater USA to leave the country. It involved the fatal shooting of eight Iraqi civilians following a car bomb attack against the State Department convoy. I don't know the circumstances of that attack, nor do I know the circumstances that led to the killing of these innocent civilians. Only a thorough and fair investigation will bring us to any kind of closure on this particular matter.

What happened yesterday is going to dramatize to the American people something significant that has occurred in this war in Iraq. For the first time, we are seeing massive numbers of private security contractors who are at work for the U.S. Government in Iraq. They are in a security or quasi-military capacity. I have been to Iraq three times. They are often dispatched to provide security for visiting members of the Cabinet and Members of Congress. I will say at the outset that although I have serious misgivings about Blackwater as an organization, the individual men who have dedicated their lives to this service are risking their lives in the process, and their courage and bravery to step up is something that should be acknowledged and never diminished.

But what this matter will bring to light is the fact that this security contractor, Blackwater, has enjoyed a charmed existence with the Bush administration from the start. This is another example of a firm which has been given millions of taxpayers' dollars to do a job in Iraq without accountability, without the kind of disclosure—basic disclosure—which American taxpayers deserve and demand. The circumstances of these contracts, the particulars involved in them, and the standards that are applied to them are in a shadowy world that has been kept away from the public eye by the Bush administration from the start. That is not only unfortunate, it is unfair, and we need to do something about it as a government.

This operation, Blackwater USA, started by Mr. Erik Prince of Michigan, has been politically affiliated with this administration for a long time. Now that there have been questions raised about the conduct of their operations, they have brought in some of the biggest political heavy-hitters in Washington to keep their operations cloaked in secrecy and veiled so that the American people don't know what

they are all about. They do it in the name of security and classified information at a time when we need more transparency and more openness and more accountability.

These security contractors are often paid three times what ordinary soldiers receive. The rules they operate under are much different than those our military faces every single day in Iraq. They are given mundane tasks in many instances and paid enormous sums of money to perform them—to transport kitchen equipment, for example—in Iraq at great expense to our Government.

Several years ago in Fallujah, there was a terrible incident involving several Blackwater contractors. These contractors were guarding kitchen equipment that was being transported across Fallujah when they were ambushed and killed. It is hard for anyone to forget the images that followed. Their bodies were dragged out of their vehicles, and they were beaten and burned and hanged on a local bridge. There were newscasts and videotape around the world of this heinous and barbaric act. As a result of it, our Government made an invasion of Fallujah and put at risk thousands of American troops to bring some order to that scene.

What is not well known is that the families of those Blackwater security forces—contractors—who were killed in Fallujah believe their loved ones were put in harm's way by this company, by Blackwater. Blackwater had promised to these contractors that if they would come to Iraq, they would be given armored vehicles, adequate protection, and adequate equipment. In fact, that was not the case. Many of the same contractors who were at risk were complaining about this. In fact, one who died that day had made a formal request of the leadership of Blackwater to make good on their promise to protect their employees who worked for Blackwater. They lost their lives.

Their families then went to court trying to make sure Blackwater was held accountable. As the mother of one of these contractors and former Navy SEAL said, it wasn't about the money, it was about accountability and to make sure Blackwater, a company that was very profitable through this administration and this war, actually protected its employees. Well, I need not tell you that they faced an uphill struggle with their lawsuit, which is still pending. Blackwater refused discovery, refused to disclose information, made every effort they could to keep material witnesses away from this trial and this proceeding, and unfortunately, the facts have never come forward as they should for all of us to understand.

Where the Blackwater security contractors were promised armored vehicles, in fact, they were given SUVs with little protection. Where they were promised to have groups to protect them, they were sent into harm's way with inadequate numbers of forces.

Time and again, this contractor, profiting from our Government, profiting from this administration, didn't provide the basic protection it promised to its own employees.

I believe it is time for this Congress to open this door, to lift this lid and look inside, about the security contractors who are at work in Iraq today at the expense of our Government. We need to know how many are working. We need to know what rules they operate by. We need to know what incidents they have been involved in. America is held accountable for their conduct. Even though they may be private sector employees, for every Iraqi, I am sure they look at them as symbolizing and representing the United States of America.

It is our responsibility to ask the hard questions about these security contractors, what they are doing, and whether anything improper has occurred. The Iraqi Government has reached this conclusion and asked them to leave. I will be surprised at the end of the day if they do leave. They are so closely connected to the highest levels of this administration, it is hard to imagine they will actually leave the country even after the Iraqi Government has called publicly for that to happen.

So I have asked the leadership on the Democratic side to look into the security contractor arrangements, as well as the Blackwater USA company in particular, to get down to the bottom line and the basic question as to whether these people who are involved in this conduct have done things that really don't advance the cause of peace and stability in Iraq. That is a legitimate question which should be asked of every contractor involved in business in Iraq.

We know for the last 5 years on Capitol Hill hard questions were not asked. There was little or no oversight by this Congress asking whether our taxpayers' dollars were being well spent, whether the right decisions were being made. Sadly, we find ourselves mired in a war that has cost us almost 3,800 American lives, with more than 30,000 injured, with no end in sight. It has been a colossal foreign policy mistake—one that we will pay for for generations.

Despite the heroism of our men and women in uniform day-in and day-out, policymakers in Washington have let them down. This President made an appeal to the American people the other night to allow him to stay the course until he can leave office. To think that 130,000 soldiers will still be in Iraq next year is really unacceptable. We have pushed our military to the absolute limit. I have been there. I have talked to them. I have met with their families. I have talked to the support groups back home. I have visited the veterans hospitals. I have seen these soldiers on the battlefield as well as back home, and they have paid a heavy price for this war. The President sug-

gests that we just keep 130,000 troops there indefinitely until he finds what he can define as success, but that isn't good enough. We have to make sure we are sensitive to these soldiers and the toll that is being taken on them personally.

I am sorry to report that the divorce rates among American enlisted personnel now are twice what they are normally, and among officers three times. The suicide rate is the highest it has been since Vietnam and, unfortunately, those who are subject to multiple deployments come back and face many needs for health care and counseling. That is the reality. We are now paying the highest cash incentives ever in our history for people to enlist and to reenlist. Mr. President, \$10,000 is common. If a 19-year-old soldier will agree to show up in 6 weeks or so, they double it to \$20,000 in cash—to someone fresh out of high school. We have changed a lot of rules of eligibility for service in our military. Unfortunately, we are pushing them to the absolute limit. That is part of the reality of where we are today in Iraq. It is a reality which the President did not address when he spoke to the American people last week.

This event yesterday, where Blackwater was expelled by Iraq's Government, should be a wake-up call to this administration and this Congress to provide the kind of meaningful oversight of these private security operations, to ask whether these men and women who were under our employ, as employees of our Government through private contractors, have stood up and done the right thing for our Nation. Many have, but those who have not have to be held accountable.

Mr. President, SPC Darryl Dent died in Iraq on August 26, 2003, when an IED exploded under his humvee. Specialist Dent—21 years old—had hoped to go to medical school one day. He was the first National Guard member from his hometown to die in combat since Vietnam.

LCpl Greg MacDonald died in Iraq on June 25, 2003, when his humvee rolled as he and six other marines raced to rescue American soldiers caught in an ambush. Lance Corporal MacDonald—29 years old—had a master's degree and hoped to make a career in foreign affairs and help create peace in the Middle East.

MAJ Kevin Shea, a veteran of the first gulf war, was killed by rocket fire in Al Anbar province on September 14, 2004—his 38th birthday. He was promoted posthumously to lieutenant colonel, making him the highest-ranking marine killed in the war in Iraq at that time.

Army Reserve LTC Paul Kimbrough was a lawyer who once worked for a Member of the House of Representatives and even ran unsuccessfully for a House seat himself. He was in Afghanistan, overseeing improvements to living conditions for our soldiers at Bagram Air Base, when he suffered a

fatal heart attack on October 3, 2003. He was 44 years old.

CAPT Darrell Lewis grew up in a tough housing project, earned a scholarship to a private high school and another scholarship to college. He graduated, joined the Army and rose quickly through the ranks. Three months ago, on June 23, he died in Vashir City, Afghanistan, when his unit was attacked by insurgents using RPGs, mortars and small arms fire. Captain Lewis was 31 years old.

What did these five fallen warriors all have in common, besides their devotion to duty and to our Nation? A hometown. At the time of their deaths, all five were residents of the District of Columbia. They died trying to bring democracy to Afghanistan and Iraq, but they did not have the legal right to participate fully in our American democracy. That is wrong. This week, we have an opportunity to right this wrong.

This week, for the first time in nearly 30 years, the U.S. Senate will take up a bill to grant the citizens of the District of Columbia, our Nation's Capital, a voting member—one voting representative—in the U.S. House of Representatives. I am one of the cosponsors of the bipartisan District of Columbia House Voting Rights Act of 2007.

Our aim is to not to strengthen the hand of either political party, but to strengthen American democracy. For that reason, the DC House Voting Rights Act would also create an additional House seat for the State of Utah.

DC VOTING RIGHTS

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, a little later this morning, we are going to face an important debate on the DC House Voting Rights Act. It is one that I support. It is a cause that I have supported for a long time. It is unimaginable that nearly 600,000 Americans have no voice and no vote in Congress today. But it is a fact. It reflects decisions made long ago about whether the District of Columbia and its residents would be represented in Congress. There is good reason why they should be.

I was saddened to learn this morning that President Bush has threatened to veto this bill. He will ask men and women in the District of Columbia to fight and risk their lives so the people of Iraq and Afghanistan have a right to vote, but he has threatened to veto the bill which gives those same soldiers the right to vote for congressional representation of their own. That is unacceptable.

The President says he has constitutional concerns. He and other opponents of the DC House Voting Rights Act point to language in the Constitution that says that the House of Representatives will be composed of members chosen by "the people of the several states." They argue that the District of Columbia is a district, not a State.