

crimes are up significantly, and we have a situation where we are putting in this legislation—I have talked about these appropriations bills—\$1.5 billion to make up for what we took out of the COPS Program. We have 100,000 less police officers on the street than we did. That is a result of the cuts of the President. So we hope he will see the light and do the right thing in regard to the appropriations bills.

But I very much appreciate the cooperation we received from the Republicans with our appropriations bills to this point. We have not had great difficulty with those bills. We all know we should have gotten to them sooner, but we have had 48 filibusters we have had to deal with this year which have slowed things down significantly.

MEASURE PLACED ON THE CALENDAR—H.R. 2693

Mr. REID. Mr. President, H.R. 2693 is at the desk and due for its second reading.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will report the bill by title.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (H.R. 2693) to direct the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to issue a standard regulating worker exposure to diacetyl.

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I would object to any further proceedings at that time.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Objection is heard.

Without objection, the bill will be placed on the calendar.

Mr. REID. Mr. President, this bill deals with something that has developed. We would never dream we would be working on it, but it appears to be very important. We have had a lot of deaths and people getting sick, the popcorn workers in America, which is a huge industry. We are going to try to see if we can set some standards so people do not get sick by virtue of working around popcorn.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT FOR FISCAL YEAR 2008

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the Senate will resume consideration of H.R. 1585, which the clerk will report.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (H.R. 1585) to authorize appropriations for fiscal year 2008 for military activities of the Department of Defense, for military construction, and for defense activities of the Department of Energy, to prescribe military personnel strengths for such fiscal year, and for other purposes.

Pending:

Nelson (NE) (for Levin) amendment No. 2011, in the nature of a substitute.

Reid (for Kennedy) amendment No. 3058 (to amendment No. 2011), to provide for certain public-private competition requirements.

Reid (for Kennedy) amendment No. 3109 (to amendment No. 3958), to provide for certain public-private competition requirements.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Virginia.

Mr. WARNER. Mr. President, the distinguished chairman, Senator LEVIN, and I are prepared to go forward with any amendments. We are anxious to have Members bring those amendments to the floor.

At this time, I see one of my colleagues seeking recognition.

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Massachusetts.

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. President, the late Arthur Helton, perhaps our country's greatest advocate for the rights of refugees, wrote:

Refugees matter . . . for a wide variety of reasons. . . . Refugees are a product of humanity's worst instincts, the willingness of some persons to oppress others, as well as some of its best instincts, the willingness of many to assist and protect the helpless. . . .

A year after he wrote those words, Arthur Helton was killed in Baghdad in 2003 when a bomb destroyed the U.N. headquarters in Iraq. His words still resonate today, especially when we consider the immense human cost of the war in Iraq and its tragic effect on the millions of Iraqis—men, women, and children—who have fled their homes, their country, to escape the violence of a nation at war with itself.

These brave and heroic Iraqis work with the American military, staff our embassy, and work with American organizations to support our mission in Iraq. They are among the 4 million Iraqi refugees who have been forced from their homes. They are the people we have an obligation to help.

Instead of protection, we have offered them bureaucracy and doublespeak, false words and dubious hopes. Despite the overwhelming need, the U.S. has resettled less than 2,000 Iraqis this fiscal year. Last night, the Senate acted and stood up to help Iraqi refugees.

I thank Senator LEVIN and Senator MCCAIN for adopting our amendment, the Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act of 2007. I thank Senator WARNER as well. This was cosponsored by a bipartisan group of Senators: Senators SMITH, LEVIN, HAGEL, BIDEN, BROWNBACK, LIEBERMAN, LEAHY, SNOWE, DURBIN, VOINOVICH, FEINSTEIN, COLLINS, OBAMA, DOLE, MENENDEZ, MIKULSKI, and CLINTON.

The need is especially urgent for those whose work for the United States has put them in danger. Because they supported us, insurgents have repeatedly threatened to kill them. Many have lost their homes, their property, their livelihoods. They face ongoing threats every single day. Some have fled the country and are waiting in refugee camps, and others are in hiding. All of them hope the United States will not forget their sacrifices.

Still others have tried to flee, only to be stopped at the border, trapped in a

country that cannot protect them, abandoned by a country, our country, that they believed would set them free. Others continue their work, living in fear of the day that the insurgents punish them for working for Americans. They are women such as Sarah, whose husband worked as an interpreter for the coalition forces in a combat hospital. Although he kept his job secret, insurgents discovered his identity. They broke into his family home, kidnapped her and released her only after torturing and raping her.

The family fled to a neighboring country where they have waited for almost a year in the hopes of qualifying for refugee status. Sarah's husband has been forced to return to Iraq. Each day that passes without assistance brings the rest of the family closer to an involuntary return to Iraq.

She wrote: Dear gentlemen: I put my suffering between your hands as my hope in you is great that you will hear our calling.

And there are men such as Sami who worked for USAID. He received several death threats, one in the form of a blood-soaked bullet sealed in an envelope. Sami pressed on, despite the threats, in order to help improve local governments and strengthen civil society.

In June 2006, a group of men armed with machine guns attempted to kidnap his pregnant wife and 2-year-old son outside their home. The attack was thwarted, but his wife nearly miscarried and his son suffered prolonged shock. Sami and his family fled to Jordan where they live day to day waiting for the labyrinthine process to rule on their refugee case. Our Government owes these Iraqis an immense debt of gratitude. Many American employees owe their lives to those Iraqis.

Despite the clear and present danger many Iraqis face based on their ties to the United States, their religious affiliation, or their work with media, nongovernmental and humanitarian organizations, the vast majority of Iraqi refugees must go through a long and complicated referral process of approximately 8 to 10 months, in which the United Nations serves as an intermediary. There are no provisions for conducting refugee screenings within Iraq as there should be.

In a recent cable, Ambassador Crocker asked the administration to reconsider its practices. He estimates that under the current practices it would take more than 2 years to process the over 10,000 referrals made by the United Nations. As Ambassador Crocker noted:

Clearly, this is too long. Refugees who have fled Iraq continue to be a vulnerable population while living in Jordan and Syria.

Ambassador Crocker asked for the authority to process refugees in Iraq. He asked for the authority to provide special immigrant visas for those who have worked in good faith with our Government in Iraq. He asked to expedite the processing of refugee claims to

save lives. Surely, we can all agree with Ambassador Crocker that delay is unacceptable. But we must clearly do better by these Iraqis who have sacrificed so much for the United States.

The amendment approved by the Senate last night will cut through the red-tape. It requires the Secretary of State to establish a refugee processing program in Iraq and in countries in the region for Iraqis threatened because of their association with the U.S. Government.

Those Iraqis who worked with our Government will be able to apply directly to the United States in Iraq, rather than going through the United Nations referral system outside Iraq. It authorizes 5,000 special immigrant visas yearly for 5 years for Iraqis who have worked for the U.S. Government in Iraq and are threatened as a result. It also allows Iraqis in the United States who have been denied asylum because conditions in Iraq changed after Saddam Hussein's government fell to have cases reheard.

Surely, we cannot resettle all of Iraq's refugees in the United States, but we need to do our part. America has a special obligation to keep faith with the Iraqis who now have a bull's eye on their back because of their association with our Government.

I had the honor of meeting SGT Joseph Seemiller, a young man who is haunted by the military motto: Leave no man behind. Sergeant Seemiller is dedicated to helping the translator he was forced to leave behind in Iraq. On countless occasions, his translator helped to avoid several American and Iraqi casualties. He braved innumerable death threats and the horrific murder of his brother, finally fleeing to Syria where he has waited for more than 2 years for a chance to be resettled in the United States.

Those words haunt us all. I am delighted the Senate has taken this important step to honor our commitment to the brave men and women whose lives are at risk.

Mr. LEVIN. Will the Senator yield?

Mr. KENNEDY. Yes.

Mr. LEVIN. I commend Senator KENNEDY on his leadership on the issue he has been talking about. We have a great responsibility, particularly to those people in Iraq who have helped us—translators, truck drivers, people who put their lives and the lives of their families on the line to help us. Whether you agree with American policy in Iraq—and I don't—whether you feel we ought to have gone there—I thought it was a mistake and so voted—we are there. People are putting their lives on the line to help our troops and us. We surely owe them an opportunity to become refugees if they otherwise qualify. Instead they run into the hurdles, barricades, and bureaucracy Senator KENNEDY talked about. He has taken a very important lead on that issue. There has been a lot of bipartisan support on this effort.

There is another group I have been particularly worried about; they are re-

ligious minorities in Iraq, including Chaldeans and Assyrians. These are Christians caught in the crossfire. That group is also given a special preference in this legislation which was adopted last night. It is a modest beginning toward carrying out our responsibility—and we bear some real responsibility as well as obligation—for some of these folks. It is a very small step. I wish to say Senator KENNEDY has been relentless on this refugee issue. It was off the radar. Millions of people displaced inside Iraq, 2 million people outside Iraq who are refugees, 4 million Iraqis left their homes, half to other places in Iraq, half, roughly, to other countries in the region. These groups are so vulnerable. We must take action on it. We did last night. I thank and commend Senator KENNEDY and Senator BROWNBACK, who has been working with me particularly on these religious refugees, these minorities, and, of course, Senator WARNER and the Republicans who worked to put this package together last night—all are entitled to our thanks but mainly Senator KENNEDY.

Mr. WARNER. Mr. President, if I might add, on our most recent trip visiting Iraq, you went out of your way—as a matter of fact, I joined you—in not only meeting with representatives of these Christian minorities who had been persecuted through the years, but then we included a trip into Jordan, where we also made some assessment of the refugee situation over there. I think some credit goes to our chairman for his personal initiatives.

Mr. LEVIN. I thank the Senator. Of course, as my partner on these trips, the Senator from Virginia was a very important part of that and added his prestige to the effort. I thank him for mentioning it but also for his participation.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Massachusetts.

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. President, I know we wouldn't be able to have made progress unless we had the strong support of both the chairman and ranking member of the Armed Services Committee. I am very grateful to them. This has been a strong bipartisan effort. It is important. We want to work with the Department and the agencies to make sure it is implemented correctly. I am appreciative of their continuing involvement in caring about these individuals. You could hear both of them speak about this measure and know they are involved, and they care very deeply about our responsibilities. We are enormously grateful to them for including this in the legislation.

AMENDMENT NO. 3058

I wanted to address the Senate for a few minutes on the underlying and pending amendment. At this critical time, when we face major challenges in our national security, America relies more than ever on the Department of Defense and its dedicated employees at home and abroad. More than 675,000 civilian workers serve our country every

day repairing planes, ships, tanks or overseeing the storage and distribution of vital weapons and supplies. These hard-working Americans are the backbone of our commitment to keep our troops safe and protect our Nation. But these vital civilian employees of the Department of Defense have been under sustained attack from the Bush administration. Instead of honoring and fairly rewarding their patriotic service, the administration has gone on a binge of outsourcing, forcing Federal workers to fight to keep their jobs in a competition where the deck is stacked against them.

The Department of Defense has been an aggressive accomplice to the administration's effort. More than 121,000 civilian Defense employees could lose their jobs in the next 3 years. In fact, these employees are more likely to lose their jobs than employees of any other Federal agencies. Ill-advised outsourcing has not only hurt the DOD employees who are deprived of their jobs and benefits; it also has a massive impact on our brave men and women in uniform. Our Armed Forces deserve the very best workers supporting them. They also deserve the opportunity to continue serving their country after they come home from the battlefield. Thirty-five percent of civilian Defense employees are veterans. These loyal Americans deserve to be commended and cheered for choosing to continue to serve their country when they return home. Yet the administration is bent on taking their opportunity away from them, and from Americans currently serving overseas as well, by outsourcing their jobs.

At the very least, we owe these patriotic Americans a fair chance to compete for important work. But the administration's irresponsible outsourcing rules are heavily biased against Federal employees. The point, it is insidious. The rules are different for contractors than for Federal workers. Private companies get advantages that dedicated Federal workers do not. The current system is designed to promote outsourcing, even when it doesn't save money. One of the most appalling roadblocks preventing fair competition is the unjust advantage contractors gain by shortchanging workers' health and retirement benefits. At a time when 47 million Americans don't have health insurance and only one in five Americans has a secure retirement plan, we should be doing all we can to encourage more companies to provide fair benefits to their employees. But current Federal contracting rules actually discourage private companies from providing health coverage or helping employees to save for retirement.

Firms that provide no benefits or inadequate benefits win bids to perform Government work, even when the cost savings from their bid are attributed solely to the fact that they are shortchanging workers. We understand that. These veterans have served in the Armed Forces. They come back, are

working in the Defense Department. More than a third of all workers have served, been in the military, served our country. Now they are working. Because they are working for the Defense Department, they get health insurance and some retirement benefits. Now a contractor comes in and says they want to bid for a particular job. In the bidding process, the Government has to add the cost of retirement and their health insurance, while the private contractor provides no health insurance and no security for these workers in terms of pensions. They have some obvious advantage in what is now a rush to the bottom, constantly outsourcing and winning contracts.

This is unfair. Our amendment, spoken to brilliantly last evening by Senator MIKULSKI, says, let's exclude those and have real competition. Let's take the fact that they have health insurance and have retirement benefits off. Let them compete and have real competition for this work. We know in circumstances where they have that real competition, these workers will win the jobs.

The unfair practice creates a dangerous race to the bottom in which the private sector companies compete against each other to see who can provide the fewest benefits to their workers. It penalizes companies that want to do the right thing. As a result, the bidding process is actually increasing the number of Americans whose health and future security are in jeopardy. That is irrational and unconscionable. It is patently unfair to the thousands of Federal employees who lose their jobs every year because of irresponsible contractors. Workers should not be unfairly disadvantaged and lose contracts simply because they receive decent benefits. Each and every Member of Congress has good health insurance. Each and every Member of Congress has a secure retirement. Americans who serve our country in the Defense Department deserve the same.

One of the key protections in the fair competition amendment corrects this injustice. It prevents contractors from winning bids to perform Government contracts solely because they provide inadequate benefits or no benefits at all. The Department is instructed not to consider health care and retirement costs in comparing contract bids. The winners of competition should be employers who operate more efficiently, not employers who provide the fewest benefits. The amendment does not dictate the benefits that employers must provide. It does not state the benefits employers have to provide or require contractors to modify their existing benefits. All it does is eliminate the perverse incentive that discourages contractors from providing fair benefits and give Federal employees a fair chance to prove they are the best workers for the job.

It is a realistic solution to improve the process of public-private competition, and it has bipartisan support. The

health care provisions have been a part of the appropriations legislation for years and a bipartisan Kennedy-Hatch amendment, providing the same treatment for retirement costs, was accepted on the Defense appropriations bill last year. Members on both sides of the aisle recognized it is not good policy for the Government to shift work from the public sector employees to private sector employees solely because it is cheaper to deny health and retirement benefits to employees. The fair competition amendment contains other important protections to level the playing field for civilian Defense employees in public-private competition. It allows Federal employees to appeal unfair privatization decisions, as contractors can do now. We are making sure those employees have the right to appeal. It allows managers to extend a contract when Federal employees perform well, as they can for private contractors under law. It prohibits the use of outsourcing quotas so agencies aren't forced to such privatization against their will. It ensures that outsourcing will occur only when it produces real savings to taxpayers. Shouldn't that be the criteria? Shouldn't that be the test, real savings, quality work for the taxpayers?

It calls on the Department of Defense to stop dragging its feet and issue long overdue guidelines so civilian employees have a fair opportunity to compete for new work or work that has been outsourced incorrectly or unfairly in the past. This amendment is about fairness. Americans understand fairness—fairness to the taxpayer, fairness to civilians, fairness to Government workers, fairness to our men and women in uniform who deserve the very best possible support for their missions at home and abroad.

I urge my colleagues to support the fair competition amendment.

I will take a moment to demonstrate what the challenge has been. Competition: in 2004, 10 percent of the jobs were lost; 29 percent in 2005. This is the projection for 2006 and 2007. It is a real crisis for many workers. This says thousands of veterans could lose their jobs under the Bush outsourcing rules. Thirty-four percent of civilian Defense employees are veterans. Our amendment ensures that these 226,000 dedicated Americans who have served our country will not lose their jobs because of unfair outsourcing. That is what this amendment is basically about. This is the issue. We are looking at fairness—fairness for the taxpayer, fairness to those who have served our country as men and women in uniform and now are serving in the Defense Department, fairness to them, fairness to the civilian employees, and, most of all, fairness to the men and women in the services who deserve to have the best trained, highly skilled, highly motivated workers working on the various products that are necessary to keep our Nation secure.

They deserve the best. We want the best. This decision ought to be based

upon the best and not about who can provide the least health benefits to workers in this country. That is the issue. The issue is fairness. Hopefully, this amendment will be accepted.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

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

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. WARNER. 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.

Mr. WARNER. Mr. President, Senator REED and I have talked with our colleague Senator SANDERS. He has two very laudable amendments. It is our hope we can work through these amendments, but they do relate to the responsibilities of other committees of the Senate, primarily the Veterans' Affairs Committee and the Appropriations Committee.

I think we have agreed that our distinguished colleague from Vermont would have an opportunity this morning to discuss these amendments to make a case in the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD for use by many on Monday as we further assess the amendments should they actually be brought up before the body and acted upon. I would ask Senator REED if that is a fair appraisal of the situation?

Mr. REED. Yes, it is.

Mr. WARNER. Is that agreeable to the Senator from Vermont?

Mr. SANDERS. Yes, it is. I thank the Senator very much.

Mr. WARNER. So the status on the floor is the Defense bill is pending and there is an amendment at this time, and there is no request at this time to set aside that pending amendment.

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Vermont is recognized.

AMENDMENT NO. 3082

Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, let me thank Senator WARNER very much for his consideration, and Senator REED, Senator LEVIN, and Senator MCCAIN. I ask unanimous consent that the pending amendment be set aside, and that the Sanders-Byrd-Burr-Bond-Webb-Feingold amendment No. 3082 at the desk, and later the Sununu-Kerry-Brown amendment at the desk, No. 2905, be called up.

Mr. REED. Mr. President, could I make a parliamentary inquiry.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Rhode Island is recognized.

Mr. REED. I think the Senator from Virginia suggested that the amendment is pending, so that the Senator from Vermont would not be requesting to set it aside; he just wants to speak to his amendments.

Mr. SANDERS. That is correct.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Vermont is recognized.

Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, let me begin by discussing amendment No. 3082. I appreciate the opportunity, and I look forward to working with Senator WARNER and others early next week on this issue.

The amendment I am offering, along with my colleagues Senators BYRD, BOND, BURR, FEINGOLD, and WEBB, would authorize \$15 million in funding for gulf war illnesses within the Department of Defense's congressionally directed medical research programs. These funds would go to a peer-reviewed research program open to researchers inside and outside of Government, focusing on the chronic effects of neurotoxic exposures, body functions underlying the illnesses, and the identification of treatments. This funding level matches the funding level that is included in the Defense appropriations bill passed out of the committee a few weeks ago.

This research is done by the Congressionally Directed Medical Research Programs, which is a research organization focused on finding and funding the best research to eradicate diseases to protect the health of current, future, and former members of the Armed Forces, while also benefiting the overall health of the American public. Importantly, a few days ago, as a member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, I can tell my colleagues that we had a very interesting hearing where we heard from the colonel at the DOD who runs this program using the \$5 million appropriated by Congress last year to them, and the colonel described what has been happening. She reported to us that there was a great deal of interest in the initial solicitation for research proposals. They received 80 proposals. They recently granted \$4.4 million to nine researchers from prestigious academic institutions across the country to find treatments for gulf war illnesses.

The truth is, this is an issue that I and many others in Congress have been working on for many years. The reality is that in the first gulf war, as a result of service in the first gulf war, we have today well over 100,000 soldiers who are suffering—veterans who are suffering from a myriad of illnesses which we call gulf war illness. Some of these illnesses reflect themselves as fibromyalgia. Some people have headaches. Some people have short-term memory loss. Some people have gastrointestinal problems. We heard testimony from a young woman whose life, as a result of her service in the gulf, has been radically changed and her health has significantly deteriorated. There is a great deal of evidence that many of the children born to those men and women who served in the gulf, including this particular woman, were born with significant problems and disabilities.

I would be less than honest if I did not say that substantial sums of money went to the DOD and the VA—and believe me, as a member of the Govern-

ment Reform Committee in the House, I spent dozens of hours—dozens of hours—along with Representative CHRIS SHAYS of Connecticut listening to testimony. I have to tell my colleagues that from many people in the veterans organizations, there was extreme frustration with the actions of the VA and the DOD; that, in the very beginning of this process, refused to even recognize the problem, and then what they said is: Well, maybe it is a psychological problem. There was a widespread feeling that the VA and the DOD were not responding to the real problems impacting tens and tens of thousands of our soldiers who returned.

We have an obligation. Obviously, right now, all kinds of attention is being paid, appropriately enough, to our soldiers who come home from Iraq, who come home from Afghanistan. We are worried about TBI, traumatic brain injury; we are worried about post-traumatic stress disorder, and we should be. But we cannot in good conscience turn our backs on the tens and tens of thousands of soldiers who today are suffering from their service in the first gulf war. They are hurting.

The good news is there is now a line of research being developed through the DOD organization that I mentioned before, and that is the Congressionally Directed Medical Research Program that is beginning to have some results. Without going into great medical and scientific analysis, what they are beginning to find is that as a result of the extremely toxic theater that existed in the gulf war, including burning oil wells, bromide given as an anti-nerve gas agent, DEET being used to protect soldiers from mosquitoes, and of course the sarin released into the air, what researchers are now beginning to find is that there appears to be brain damage that is the cause of some of the symptoms our soldiers are seeing, and we are beginning to see more, very promising research in this area.

My concern is if you talk to the veterans of the gulf war, they will tell you that there is a very high level of frustration about the huge amounts of money being spent by people who didn't even acknowledge or appreciate the pain our soldiers were experiencing. So what this amendment does is focuses research into those areas where we are already seeing some significant progress. That is what this amendment is about. I look forward to discussing this issue further with the members of the relevant committees when we return next week. That is one of the amendments we are working on.

AMENDMENT NO. 2905

The other amendment is amendment No. 2905, which deals with a very immediate crisis. The former amendment deals with what happened 16 years ago. This is an amendment dealing with the problem we are seeing today. I don't have to tell anyone in this body that the studies are very clear that we are likely to see a record-breaking level of post-traumatic stress disorder coming

from service in the theater in Iraq. It appears at this point, based on several studies I have read, that the numbers will be a lot higher than Vietnam, and God only knows that Vietnam was high enough. I think the evidence is pretty clear that we did not do a good job in addressing the post-traumatic stress disorder of those soldiers who came home from Vietnam.

Now, what this amendment does is it would create a \$30 million pilot project—and I should indicate this amendment is supported by Mr. SUNUNU of New Hampshire, Mr. KERRY of Massachusetts, and Mr. BROWN of Ohio, the sitting Presiding Officer. It builds on a program, a small program we developed in the State of Vermont. Here is what the issue is.

We can put zillions of dollars into research and into treatment for PTSD, but it will only do a limited amount of good if we don't bring those soldiers who are hurting into the facilities and into the counseling for them and their families that could provide help. I can tell you that in a rural State such as Vermont, where you have people from the National Guard who do not have the active-duty military infrastructure, a lot of these men and women will come home from Iraq, they will return to their small towns, and they will be hurting, their kids will be hurting, their wives will be hurting, and they are not going to stand up and say: You know what. I am having nightmares or when I go through a tunnel, I am having a panic attack.

That is not what they are going to do. They are going to sit home and suffer and not know how to reach out for counseling. Some of them will be embarrassed; that is part of the problem.

The history of the VA and the DOD is not good in knocking on doors and reaching out. What we have done in Vermont, working with the National Guard, in cooperation with the VA, is we established what we call a door-knocking program where we have men and women who have served in Iraq who are going into our communities and knocking on doors, sitting down and having a cup of coffee, talking to the families, asking them how things are going. The conversation might be: My husband hasn't been able to sleep. Oh, really. And they have that discussion. It is reaching out. The problem they may be having is a problem that may be experienced by tens of thousands of other people who went to Iraq. That is what this program is about.

Some people say the VA has done a good job historically in outreach, but I don't believe that. I offered an amendment when I was in the House to counteract a rule that said the VA cannot do any outreach at all. So we have a major problem called post-traumatic stress disorder. Part of the problem is people are not going to stand up and say: I am hurting, how can I get help? I think the answer, to some degree, is to have people who served in Iraq knock on doors, and maybe they are

dressed in blue jeans, maybe they are not, but to come in an unofficial and informal way, sit down, have a cup of coffee, and try to assess what is going on.

I appreciate the support of the Presiding Officer for this amendment, as well as others in the Senate. It is a very important amendment. I believe we owe it to our soldiers. I look forward to continuing this discussion early next week with my colleagues.

With that, I yield the floor.

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. President, let me just, first, thank the Senator from Vermont for his willingness to work over the next couple of days to see if we can figure out a way to address the issues, which are very important issues, that his amendments incorporate. I commend him also on his extraordinary commitment to the veterans of both wars—the ones we don't reach, as well as the ones we know about.

We are going to work with him over the next couple days to see if there is a way to work these amendments out. I appreciate his willingness to hold off offering them.

Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, I thank the Senator from Michigan. I know his heart is in the right place. He will agree that we can spend zillions of dollars, but it doesn't do any good if it doesn't reach the people we want to reach. And we cannot turn our backs on people who fought in another war which is not in the newspaper today.

Mr. LEVIN. The American people are divided on the war, but they are not divided on supporting our troops and our veterans who fought in former wars. This unites the American people. I commend the Senator for that feeling and the strong identity he has with the men and women who have represented this country and put their lives on the line and are now hurting.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

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

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. LEVIN. 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.

Mr. WARNER. Mr. President, can we determine from the Presiding Officer the pending matters? Are we in morning business?

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. No. The Senate is debating the bill, H.R. 1585. Pending is the Kennedy amendment.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT AGREEMENT—H.R. 2640

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. President, on behalf of Senators LEAHY and SCHUMER, I ask unanimous consent that the Judiciary Committee be discharged from further consideration of H.R. 2640 and that the Senate proceed to its immediate consideration; further, I ask that a Leahy-Schumer substitute amendment at the desk be agreed to, the bill, as amended,

be read the third time and passed, the motion to reconsider be laid upon the table, with no intervening action or debate, and that any statements related to the bill be printed in the RECORD.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Is there objection?

Mr. WARNER. Mr. President, I object on behalf of Senator COBURN, who was unable to be here today. I understand he has spoken to the colleagues enumerated in this request and they are aware of the basis for his objection. So, for the moment, I object.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Objection is heard.

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

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

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. LEVIN. 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.

Mr. AKAKA. Mr. President, I rise today to express my support for the fair competition amendment proposed by my colleague from Massachusetts, Senator KENNEDY, to H.R. 1585, the Defense Department authorization bill.

This amendment would minimize the harmful effects that the current A-76 process for outsourcing federal functions to private contractors has on Federal workers. It will do this by leveling the playing field between Federal workers and private contractors by removing several unfair advantages that contractors currently have in the process. I want to highlight just two of the important improvements that the amendment would make to the A-76 process.

First, this amendment would take away the competitive advantage that contractors currently have if they deny their employees health and retirement benefits. I have fought to improve and protect federal workers' benefits as the chairman of the Federal Workforce Subcommittee. At a time when more and more Americans have no health insurance, it is simply wrong to give private contractors an advantage in winning work done by DOD employees by denying their workers the health benefits that Congress has guaranteed to Federal employees.

Also, this amendment would give employees the same right to protest unfair contract awards under the A-76 process that private contractors already have. The current situation makes no sense. Private contractors were given the right to protest contracting decisions in the Competition in Contracting Act of 1984, a law that was written for competitions between private contractors. The same protest right was never extended to Federal workers who compete against private contractors under the A-76 process. Basic fairness dictates that if one party can protest the results of a contest, both sides should be able to.

I believe this amendment introduces a more appropriate level of caution into the process for outsourcing Federal jobs. Caution is especially important for jobs related to national defense and security. The recent events involving Blackwater as a contract security provider in Iraq remind us how difficult it can be to hold outside contractors accountable. The Federal Government over time has been a model for fair and equal employment practices, and in turn Federal workers have shown strong loyalty, courage, and dedication to serving their country. When we award jobs that are currently done by Federal workers to private contractors, we limit our ability to demand a high level of accountability and fairness from the private companies that win the contracts, nor can we expect the same level of dedication from their employees.

When used properly on a limited basis, the A-76 process can improve Government efficiency by injecting competition into certain Federal functions that mirror activities performed by the private sector. However, the results of A-76 competitions suggest that there is limited economic value to the process. Federal employees do their jobs more efficiently than private contractors in most cases. Federal employees win 80 percent of the competitions under the A-76 process despite advantages given to private contractors. These positive results do not justify keeping the advantages granted to the private sector. Leveling the playing field will do more than make A-76 competitions objectively fairer. It can undo the harm to Federal employee morale that is caused by forcing them to compete for their jobs within a system that is rigged against them.

At a time when the Federal Government faces tremendous challenges in hiring and retaining talented workers, it is important that we act to address the harmful effects that the current A-76 process has on the Federal workforce. That is what the fair competition amendment would do, and I urge my colleagues to support it.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate now proceed to executive session to consider Executive Calendar nominations Nos. 317 through 330 and all nominations on the Secretary's desk; that the nominations be confirmed, the motions to reconsider be laid upon the table, the President be immediately notified of the Senate's action, and that the Senate then return to legislative session.

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

The nominations considered and confirmed are as follows: