increase taxes. The Fair Flat Tax Act, as it relates to the tax gap issue, is a win for all Americans except for those who have been cheating the system.

I am obviously aware that the clock is ticking down on this session of Congress. Certainly, by early next year, in the thick of a Presidential election, something such as this is daunting. But it is time for Congress to get started now on what witness after witness after witness in the Finance Committee is saying; that is, the urgent need, after scores of tax changes, to get about draining the swamp.

To give you an idea of what the numbers are with respect to tax changes, the latest analysis shows we have had something akin to 15,000 tax changes. That comes to three for every working day. Even regional IRS offices, according to practitioners I talk to, cannot agree among themselves as to how to apply this increasingly complicated Tax Code.

It is time to get started. The Bush tax cuts expire in 2010. Certainly, that is going to cause additional confusion and chaos for taxpayers. With the problems the Congress is wrestling with now, such as the immediate crunch of the alternative minimum tax and with the hammer poised to come down in 2010 with all the other expiring tax laws, there is a strong incentive for members of both political parties to come to the table and get to work on tax reform.

I hope colleagues will look at the Fair Flat Tax Act as a way to start the debate. I don't consider it the last word on this extraordinarily important subject, but I hope we can begin the debate now.

I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. CARDIN). The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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 President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

Mr. LOTT. Mr. President, what is the order of business at this time?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. We are in morning business.

Mr. LOTT. Until what time?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. There is no time limit.

AMTRAK

Mr. LOTT. Mr. President, while we are in this morning business period and in anticipation of going to the next legislation, I wish to make some opening comments about what happened here and make a plea to my colleagues on both sides of the aisle, but particularly my own side of the aisle, that we not object to going to consideration of Amtrak legislation.

I have been working on this issue for several years now. I think it is an important issue. It is an important part of our transportation system in America. I believe that for the future development of our country, for the mobility of our country, for the creation of jobs, the maintaining of jobs, for safety, security, and access, we should pay attention to infrastructure in America, and lanes, planes, trains, ports, and harbors. This is critical to our future economic development and to our American lifestyle.

I have been working for years to upgrade and improve the Federal Aviation Administration, the air traffic control system so we can have less congestion in the airways and fewer delays, and modernization. We are still working on that. We did get FAA reauthorization a few years ago. Now it is back up but, unfortunately, stalled right now. We did pass a highway bill a few years ago that had many good things in it. But here is my point: You can only build so many lanes until you can't build any more. You can only have so many planes in the sky until you can't have any more. So what is the other alternative? Trains.

Now, I am not from a State that is hugely dependent on the rail passenger system. We get some of the benefits of it. But part of the problem is we don't have enough access, enough opportunities in that area, or we have delays and problems such as that. Why do we have delays? Because we haven't modernized the Amtrak system. Because we have not worked through the Transportation Department to put in some reforms, decide what is needed in terms of money, and how to get more capitalization. We haven't done the reforms.

I was pleased to be involved the last time we did some Amtrak legislation. That was several years ago. I stood right in this very spot and told my friend JOHN MCCAIN from Arizona if it didn't work and if Amtrak didn't do a better job, I would eat it without salt. Well, I guess I should have probably eaten it without salt later on. It didn't do everything I hoped it would. But what is the alternative? Do we want a national rail passenger system or not? I think we do. I don't mean only on the Northeast corridor, although I love the Northeast corridor. I have been delighted to work with my friend and colleague from New Jersey, Senator LAUTENBERG, on this legislation, because I want good Amtrak service between Washington and New York City. Frankly, I would rather ride the Acela to New York City than the shuttle, the airline shuttle. You go to the airport; you wait; you are delayed. You get on the train. You ride the Acela. You do your computer. You are not crowded. It is nice, clean. It works. You can get a little something to eat, and you arrive in New York City.

I realize Acela is one of the best in the country, but we need to do more. In fact, putting money in it—and by the way, not enough—year after year we are starving it to death and then we are saying, Why didn't it do better? It is because we haven't given them more opportunities, we haven't had more requirements, we haven't had reforms. I tried for the past 2 years to get this legislation up. We had some objections. We had some Senators who wanted to offer amendments. My attitude is: Fine. If you have amendments, let's go with them. Administration: If you have some reforms, fine, let's do it. But we need to get this thing done.

Now here we are, we have a different majority. Senator LAUTENBERG is the chairman of the committee. But basically, this is the bill he and I put together 3 years ago. It is time to do it. It is not perfect. It has some reforms in it. It has some requirements in it. By the way, more people are riding Amtrak, and they have more income. They are doing better. If we give them more incentives, if we get them to close some of the routes that are never going to be profitable, they are not going to work, it would be even better than that.

I am not going to give my full opening speech now, even though I sound like it. I am saying to my colleagues, we should not object to the motion to proceed on every bill, and filibuster the motion to proceed. That is bad business. Do it judiciously? Yes. If you want to slow this place down time after time after time after time, yes, we can do that. But I stood here on the floor earlier today and last night and said: If the Senate will do the right thing on this judicial nomination, Leslie Southwick, that will be a step forward to show that this place can work together. We can be civil. We can be less partisan, and there will be some benefits. I am standing right here right now saying this is the next step. Let's not tangle this bill up because we are not ready, or because we may not like it. You don't like it? Vote against it. You want more? Bring your amendments. Let's get this done. I hope my colleagues will not try to block the motion to proceed. Senator REID is going to ask unanimous consent that we go to the bill, and I hope and pray that if it is objected to, he is going to file cloture and he is going to make us eat it, because we ought to take this up and deal with it. If we want to kill it, shoot it down, but doing nothing is unacceptable.

The Senate has become very proficient at doing nothing; not just this year, but last year and the year before. We paid a price, because we didn't get anything done in the previous 2 years. Are we going to do it again or can we do something for the American people? This is one way we can do it.

So I make that plea and I hope we can get something worked out when we get on this bill. I will not be a party to try to ram it through so quickly people can't get their amendments ready.

Mr. LAUTENBERG. Mr. President, will the Senator yield?

Mr. LOTT. I will be glad to yield to my distinguished colleague and leader on this effort now, and to my friend from New Jersey, and I look forward to working with him on this legislation.

Mr. LAUTENBERG. Mr. President, the obvious obstinacy at getting this on the floor seems to ignore the fact that you almost can't get anyplace from here or there without enormous delays, without enormous congestion, and with pollution problems, et cetera. Is it understood, I ask the distinguished Senator from Mississippi, how difficult it is for the country right now? You can't get an airplane that will leave on time or arrive on time with any degree of certainty. I, for instance, travel from here up to Newark or to LaGuardia Airport, both of which are convenient to my home in New Jersey, and a flight that takes 36 minutes of air time takes 2½ hours to get there, more often than not.

So do the Senator's friends understand that this is a crisis moment for this country of ours? We have seen incidents so many times where the absence of a rail system—for instance, we threw away billions of dollars some years ago because nuclear powerplants that were built, ready to operate, couldn't get a license to go because there weren't satisfactory evacuation routes and it had to be by rail because the highways were unable to provide for it.

If we look at Katrina and we see how much better we could have done if rail was sufficiently employed down there, and we didn't get it, and people were jammed and stuck in there.

There is no difference in what—when you cross the aisle, when you ask the question: Do we want to get things operating better? Do we want to facilitate our corporations to operate efficiently? Do we want to provide the jobs that go along when you have facilities for travel in place? Would people do better if they could travel by rail rather than have to get in a car and pay who knows what for gasoline? It is predicted that oil is going to go up to $200 a barrel one of these days. Well, Heaven forbid that does come. We are not going to close shop and say we will go home and rest.

Do the Senator's colleagues recognize that those who don't want to let us get this train of theirs started, do they realize that these problems are in front of us, I ask?

Mr. LOTT. Mr. President, let me say to the distinguished Senator from New Jersey, I am sorry I went ahead and spoke first, because you are chairman of the committee and you have been providing real leadership in trying to get this legislation brought up. I did it because I wanted to make a plea to my colleagues on this side of the aisle to let this move forward. Let me emphasize that I have no indication there will be objection. They want to take a look at it. They want to make sure they will have a chance to offer amendments or substitutes. I have assured them we will work with them. I believe we are going to be able to clear the hurdles, but I wanted to make a public plea so we could get on this legislation and guarantee the Members that their amendments will be considered and, in fact, in the past, when we worked together, we have accepted amendments and fought some of them, and we had votes. It is a novel idea in the Senate, to have a debate and have a vote.

But I want to say again I have enjoyed working with Senator LAUTENBERG. This is a lot bigger issue in New Jersey and along the eastern seaboard, I guess, but more and more it is important on the west coast, it is important to the Chicago area, it is important all over America. This is not about one region or the other region, or trying to accommodate business or labor; this is about American people. So I think my colleagues, hopefully, are going to realize that we ought to do something about Amtrak, and this is the way to get it done.

I thank the Senator for his question.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from New Jersey is recognized.

Mr. LAUTENBERG. Mr. President, I want to respond to what my friend from Mississippi has said. We have worked together in the past and we have gotten things done in the past. We know that Amtrak finally has come into its place. We have a lot of work yet to do when you think about what travel is like these days in all forms. The highways are too congested. The airways are getting even more congested. The expectation is that delays are going to become even longer. So I hope those who want to discuss it and those who want to amend it—the Senator is right, we should consider amendments. As a matter of fact, I think it is good if we do hear from people and see what problems they foresee. But we can't get it done unless we talk about it, unless we prepare for a vote.

Are we about to say to the American people: No, continue to suffer? Stay stuck in traffic? Stay stuck at the airports? Time will take care of it? All you have to do is spend more time away from home, away from your job and away from things you might enjoy.

American people, get used to spending more time away from home in useless activities, such as listening to an idling engine or listening to the car radio or something like that. We cannot function this way.

Now the time is upon us where we have to do something about this. I believe this is an opportune time. I know a lot of colleagues on that side of the aisle want to see this happen. After all, we touch 40 States across the country. Wherever you look and see where there has been new or upgraded rail service, people are responding to it: On the west coast, and some of the routes out of Chicago—people are responding to it, and they are getting on trains.

I use the trains frequently. The other day I got on an Amtrak train here, and it was a full train with barely a seat left. So people are demanding it. If we look at the example that exists, let's say in Europe or in Japan, and see what happens. When I wanted to take a plane one time from Brussels, where a NATO meeting was ongoing, to go to Paris, I tried to get a flight. They said: You cannot get an airplane from here because we go by train—200 miles in 1 hour and 20 minutes. Imagine what it would do for travel in this country and business progress.

So I am ready whenever my colleague and our friends on that side of the aisle are ready. I am told we are all set here and ready to go.

Mr. LOTT. If the Senator will yield, since I have worked with the Senator on this issue, some of my colleagues have taken to calling me Senator ''Lott-enberg.'' I know there is a bit of a regional difference. It is not quite as crowded in our neck of the woods, so you might come on down South and it would be a lot less crowded. However, I would like for them to be able to get there on Amtrak, to be able to catch that train in Washington or in Newark and run on down and come through Atlanta down to Jackson, MS. I think they would enjoy it once they got there. I invite the Senator from New Jersey to take the ride to Jackson, and we will show him around down there.

Mr. LAUTENBERG. In response, A, I would like to do it; and, B, I wonder if people realize how many new lines are being dreamt up—I say ''dreamt'' up because unless we get the base going, nothing else is going to happen.

I hear from colleagues in other States besides mine who say, you know, we could use train service here or there. We have seen something in New Jersey that exemplifies the value of rail service. We had a line open from the southernmost tip of our State to Trenton, our State capital. The ridership, at first, was very low. Before you knew it, we began to see buildings, factories, warehouses, et cetera, being built along the transit way. And now the area is beginning to prosper where it was just dead and nothing was going on. That is what we have seen.

There is a lot of talk about something called transit villages. In New Jersey, the most crowded State in the country, we don't think about villages really, but we have transit villages centered around a rail hub. People know they can get back and forth, and companies know employees can get back and forth to work and they can run an efficient operation.

So this is a point in time when opportunity presents itself, and we ought not to miss it. If we cannot see it, we ought to let the public see that. Certainly, at this point in time, we ought to be able to discuss it. We should not have any obstruction to bringing the issue to the floor of the Senate. Let's get out in this public forum and have a discussion and see what we can do or whether there are problems that can be dealt with or maybe we can go to some other kinds of travel—I don't know what kind, but we at least ought to take the one nearest to us that is the best option.

With that, I yield the floor.

Mr. LOTT. Mr. President, we are working on when we are going to be

able to get this up. I have a couple of points. One, we have a catch-22. Our Members want to make sure they have a chance to offer amendments, and we want to do that. At the same time, our leadership on both sides has to pay attention to when and how we get it to a conclusion. I think it is incumbent upon our leadership from the committee to work with Members to get amendments but also not to let this become a punching bag and have Members throwing everything out but the kitchen sink.

I believe we can move this through in a reasonable time. My attitude is, when Senators have amendments, come over and offer them. We will debate them and then have a vote. We will not shove it over until 9 or 10 o'clock tomorrow night. I think there is hesitation on both sides of the aisle, and we have to work through that. But we have done this before. We did this bill 2 years ago, or so, and we got 90-something votes. So we can do that.

Mr. President, one other observation: As I have worked on this, another part of the equation of having a good national rail passage system is encouraging our States to be able to do more on their own and build lines like we have in San Francisco to the L.A. area—there is incentive to do more—and at the same time, not telling poorer States that they have to do way more than they are capable of doing.

Also, a couple of weeks ago, I thought about this bill. I was at Big D's Barbeque at Pocahontas, MS. The City of New Orleans, a sleeper Amtrak train, came whizzing by Big D's Tee Pee. They were ballin' the jack headed to New Orleans. It had about six or eight cars, which is relatively short. But the important thing was that they were going lickity-split.

If we are going to be able to get these trains, in a reasonable way, where they want to go, part of the problem is a problem the freight lines have. If they are going to get off on a side track and let the Amtrak go through, they have to build side tracks. We need more lines all across America. Union Pacific, Burlington Northern, Santa Fe—they need to build more lines across this country. We need to encourage the freight lines to build more capacity, more lines, and more side tracks, so they can work with Amtrak, so that Amtrak is not adding to the cost of doing business of the freight lines. So I am looking at that equation too. We don't want a conflict between Amtrak and freight lines. We want them both to be able to make a profit and deliver the goods and services to the American people.

So we are working on that side of the equation too, to make sure that Amtrak has a way to be on time.

Mr. LAUTENBERG. The Senator from Mississippi remembers that yesterday we had a hearing on freight railroads, and that traffic is going to be up some 44 percent by 2020. They are concerned about how to get it done. At the same time, we have to provide for passenger rail service. This is a good time for all sides to get together and start moving.

Does the Senator remember this bill was processed on the Senate floor last year? We had a vote that was 93 to 6. I lost a year. It was actually in 2005.

Mr. LOTT. Yes, I think that is right.

Mr. LAUTENBERG. The vote was 93 to 6, I remind everybody. This was popularly supported, totally understood. We were on our way to the next station, and it just didn't work out. Things were a little tumultuous, to put it mildly. Now there is a cooler moment to think about it and present it. We have time available on the floor, and I think to waste it would be a terrible loss when we can discuss this important problem with a solution for the country.

Mr. LOTT. Mr. President, I thank my colleague. The occupant of the chair, the Senator from Maryland, I suspect, supports this too. I am ready to do business when we get the go-ahead to take up this legislation.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mrs. MCCASKILL). Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. MARTINEZ. Parliamentary inquiry, Madam President: Is the Senate in morning business?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senate is in morning business, with 10-minute grants.

Mr. MARTINEZ. I wish to speak for a period of 10 minutes.

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

CUBA

Mr. MARTINEZ. Madam President, in the last couple of hours, the President took the opportunity to speak at the State Department on the condition of relations between the United States and Cuba. For me, as an immigrant from Cuba, born on that island and an immigrant to this country, it was a very moving and transcending kind of moment. The President, for the first time, I think, in many years that any American President might do this, detailed the problems in Cuba and the cruelty of that regime toward its own people.

The President put a human face on the suffering of the Cuban people by inviting to the stage with him three families of Cuban political prisoners. These families, each with their own tale of hardship and suffering, were representatives of what I think is the now almost half century long suffering of the Cuban people. He spoke about their plight, the unjust nature of their relatives' incarceration, which is nothing more than a representative sampling of what the Cuban people have suffered over so many years of brutal repression.

He also detailed the many failed promises of the Cuban revolution toward its own people. He spoke of the failed promises; that the revolution would bring a better life and so many other things that have simply not occurred. He detailed frankly, the economic misery the Cuban people suffer from today, the fact that housing is deplorable and difficult and that many families have to, obviously, live together. He spoke about the irony that while the Cuban system touts the greatness of their medical prowess; in fact the Cuban people do not have access to the kind of quality medical care that medical tourists can obtain.

Just as an anecdote, sitting next to me was a foreign diplomat who mentioned to me that she had been to Cuba for eye surgery some years earlier. I mentioned to her that at about that same time—I think she said that was in 1992—I had a relative, an uncle of mine, whom we had brought to this country so he could have eye surgery here because he couldn't get it in Cuba. So foreign visitors, for dollar amounts, can get first-rate medical care in Cuba, but it is not always available to the Cuban people.

He spoke about the oppression of those who seek to be a voice for change and the fact that many of those in prison, these patriots, are in prison for nothing more than having a fax machine in their home or a willingness to speak and talk about the human rights conditions on the island. The fact is that each of these brave souls takes great risk in order to facilitate the opportunity for Cubans to speak to one another, for the opportunity to speak in freedom, the opportunity to freely express an idea. These are things which are abhorrent to the Cuban regime.

The President made an offer. He made an offer that the United States, through non-governmental organizations and religious entities, would send computers and provide Internet access to the Cuban people, if only the Cuban Government would allow the average, everyday Cuban—what today is part of international trade, commerce, and communications—Internet access. Internet access in Cuba today is only allowed under the strictest of Government authority, and it is a way in which the Cuban people are held back from achieving the promise that the 21st century has for so many people, in so many other places.

He also spoke about the opportunity for Cuban children to be a part of a scholarship program and all they would have to do is to be freely allowed to participate.

He spoke to the international community using the example of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland, which have, with such determination, stood clearly on the side of freedom, stood clearly on the side of those in Cuba