

victory for Al Qaeda in Iraq into a humiliating defeat for them and thereby created an opportunity for further progress not only in Iraq, but also in the global struggle. In the past five months, terrorist operations in and around Baghdad have dropped by 59 percent. Car bomb deaths are down by 81 percent. Casualties from enemy attacks dropped 77 percent. And violence during the just-completed season of Ramadan—traditionally a peak of terrorist attacks—was the lowest in three years.

Winning a battle is not the same as winning a war. Our commanders and soldiers are continuing the fight to ensure that al Qaeda does not recover even as they turn their attention to the next battle: against Shia militias sponsored by Iran. Beyond Iraq, battles in Afghanistan and elsewhere demand our attention. But let us properly take stock of what has been accomplished.

At the end of 2006, the United States was headed for defeat in Iraq. Al Qaeda and Sunni insurgent leaders proclaimed their imminent triumph. Our own intelligence analysts and commanders agreed that our previous strategies had failed. The notion that a “surge” of a few brigades and a change of mission could transform the security situation in Iraq was ridiculed. Many experts and politicians proclaimed the futility of further military effort in Iraq. Imagine if they had been headed.

Had al Qaeda been allowed to drive us from Iraq in disgrace, it would control safe havens throughout Anbar, in Baghdad, up the Tigris River valley, in Baquba, and in the “triangle of death.” Al Qaeda in Iraq had already proclaimed a puppet state, the Islamic State of Iraq, and was sending money and fighters to the international al Qaeda movement even as it was supplied with foreign suicide bombers and leaders by that movement. The boasts of Osama bin Laden that his movement had defeated the Soviet Union were silly—al Qaeda did not exist when the Soviet Union fell—but they were still a powerful recruiting tool. How much more powerful a tool would have been the actual defeat of the United States, the last remaining superpower, at the hands of Al Qaeda in Iraq? How much more dangerous would have been a terrorist movement with bases in an oil-rich Arab country at the heart of al Qaeda’s mythical “Caliphate” than al Qaeda was when based in barren, poverty-stricken Afghanistan, a country where Arabs are seen as untrustworthy outsiders?

Instead, Al Qaeda in Iraq today is broken. Individual al Qaeda cells persist, in steadily shrinking areas of the country, but they can no longer mount the sort of coherent operations across Iraq that had become the norm in 2006. The elimination of key leaders and experts has led to a significant reduction in the effectiveness of the al Qaeda bombings that do occur, hence the steady and dramatic declines in overall casualty rates.

Al Qaeda leaders seem aware of their defeat. General Ray Odierno noted in a recent briefing that some of al Qaeda’s foreign leaders have begun to flee Iraq. Documents recovered from a senior Al Qaeda in Iraq leader, Abu Usama al-Tunisi, portray a movement that has lost the initiative and is steadily losing its last places to hide. According to Brigadier General Joseph Anderson, chief of staff for the multinational coalition in Iraq, al-Tunisi wrote that “he is surrounded, communications have been cut, and he is desperate for help.”

How did we achieve this success? Before the surge began, American forces in Iraq had attempted to fight al Qaeda primarily with the sort of intelligence-driven, targeted raids that many advocates of immediate withdrawal claim they want to continue. Those efforts failed. Our skilled soldiers captured

and killed many al Qaeda leaders, including Abu Musab al Zarqawi, but the terrorists were able to replace them faster than we could kill them. Success came with a new strategy.

Al Qaeda excesses in Anbar Province and elsewhere had already begun to generate local resentment, but those local movements could not advance without our help. The takfiris—as the Iraqis call the sectarian extremists of al Qaeda—brutally murdered and tortured any local Sunni leaders who dared to speak against them, until American troops began to work to clear the terrorist strongholds in Ramadi in late 2006. But there were not enough U.S. forces in Anbar to complete even that task, let alone to protect local populations throughout the province and in the Sunni areas of Iraq. The surge of forces into Anbar and the Baghdad belts allowed American troops to complete the clearing of Ramadi and to clear Falluja and other takfiri strongholds.

The additional troops also allowed American commanders to pursue defeated al Qaeda cells and prevent them from reestablishing safe-havens. The so-called “water balloon effect,” in which terrorists were simply squeezed from one area of the country to another, did not occur in 2007 because our commanders finally had the resources to go after the terrorists wherever they fled. After the clearing of the city of Baquba this year, al Qaeda fighters attempted to flee up the Diyala River valley and take refuge in the Hamrin Ridge. Spectacular bombings in small villages in that area, including the massive devastation in the Turkmen village of Amerli, roughly 100 miles north of Baghdad, that killed hundreds, were intended to provide al Qaeda with the terror wedge it needed to gain a foothold in the area. But with American troops in hot pursuit, the terrorists had to stay on the run, breaking their movement into smaller and more disaggregated cells. The addition of more forces, the change in strategy to focus on protecting the population, both Sunni and Shia, and the planning and execution of multiple simultaneous, and sequential operations across the entire theater combined with a shift in attitudes among the Sunni population to revolutionize the situation.

Some now say that, although America’s soldiers were successful in this task, the next battle is hopeless. We cannot control the Shia militias, they say. The Iraqis will never “reconcile.” The government will not make the decisions it must make to sustain the current progress, and all will collapse. Perhaps. But those who now proclaim the hopelessness of future efforts also ridiculed the possibility of the success we have just achieved. If one predicts failure long enough, one may turn out to be right. But the credibility of the prophets of doom—those who questioned the veracity and integrity of General David Petraeus when he dared to report progress—is at a low ebb.

There is a long struggle ahead in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and elsewhere against al Qaeda and its allies in extremism. We can still lose. American forces and Afghan allies defeated al Qaeda in Afghanistan in 2001 as completely as we are defeating it in Iraq. But mistakes and a lack of commitment by both the United States and the NATO forces to whom we handed off responsibility have allowed a resurgence of terrorism in Afghanistan. We must not repeat that mistake in Iraq where the stakes are so much higher. America must not try to pocket the success we have achieved in Iraq and declare a premature and meaningless victory. Instead, let us be heartened by success. We have avoided for the moment a terrible danger and created a dramatic opportunity. Let’s seize it.

50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE MACKINAC BRIDGE

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. President, the State of Michigan today celebrates the 50th anniversary of the bridging of Michigan’s two peninsulas through the engineering feat known as the Mackinac Bridge. A suspension bridge spanning a 5 mile stretch of the Straits of Mackinac, the Mighty Mac or Big Mac has become an icon of Michigan.

Although dreams of connecting the Upper and Lower Peninsula by bridge began in the 1880s, it would take more than 70 years for that dream to become a reality. In the meantime, ideas for crossing the straits ranged from the improbable—a floating tunnel to the impractical—a series of bridges and causeways—to the doable—a ferry service.

In 1923, Michigan began car ferry service across the Straits of Mackinac between Mackinaw City and St. Ignace. Traffic on the car ferries became so heavy within just five years that another option—a bridge—needed to be seriously considered. The State Highway Department undertook a feasibility study that reported favorably on a bridge.

Although the need and the know-how were there, the money was not. The Mackinac Straits Bridge Authority of Michigan, established in 1934 by the State legislature, tried twice that decade to obtain Federal funds from the federal Public Works Administration but was refused. World War II stopped further progress on a bridge.

In January 1951, the Mackinac Straits Bridge Authority issued a favorable feasibility study. Legislation to finance and build the bridge passed in early 1952. The Authority was ready to offer bonds for sale by March 1953, but the money market had weakened. Later that spring, the Michigan Legislature passed a bill to pay for the annual operating and maintenance costs of the bridge from gasoline and license plate taxes. The market strengthened by the end of the year and almost \$1 billion worth of Mackinac Bridge bonds were sold.

Prentiss M. Brown, a former U.S. Senator and chairman of the board of Detroit Edison Company, served as the first chairman of the Mackinac Bridge Authority and shepherded the process of securing financing for the Mackinac Bridge. In the words of Jack Carlisle, an announcer for WWJ radio in Detroit, Brown “refused to accept defeat when it seemed inevitable. Prentiss M. Brown just wouldn’t stay licked.”

Construction of the bridge officially began on May 7 and 8, 1954, with ceremonies in St. Ignace and Mackinaw City. Designed by Dr. David B. Steinman, building the Mackinac Bridge required a complex choreography of engineering detail and construction skill as evidenced by the 4,000 engineering drawings and 85,000 blueprints. Over 11,000 people worked on the bridge including 350 engineers, 3,500 workers on site and 7,500 workers at quarries, mills, and shops elsewhere.

On November 1, 1957, the Mighty Mac opened to traffic with the formal dedication taking place the following June. The dream of bridging the Upper and Lower Peninsula had finally become a reality.

At 552 feet above the water, the main towers of Big Mac are almost exactly as high as the Washington Monument, which stands at 555 feet. When measured by its total length of 26,372 feet, the Mackinac Bridge qualifies as the longest suspension bridge in the United States, but falls to third place behind the Golden Gate Bridge and Verrazano Narrows Bridge if only the suspended portion of the bridge is counted.

Once a year, the Big Mac opens its span to the oldest form of transportation—walking. Begun in 1958, the annual Mackinac Bridge Walk has become a Labor Day tradition for Michigan families on both peninsulas. The bridge's beautiful silhouette beckons thousands with the promise of an exhilarating 5-mile walk and spectacular views of shoreline and water from 200 feet above the Straits of Mackinac.

Over the past 50 years, the Mackinac Bridge has become an elegant landmark for our State and a source of pride for all of us. Today Michigan commemorates the 50th anniversary of the Mackinac Bridge with a celebration at Bridge View Park in St. Ignace. My heart is with all the people who are there celebrating, and I wish the rest of me were there too. Congratulations, Big Mac.

ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE, EN BLOC HOTLINES

Mr. COBURN. Mr. President, I wish to share my concerns regarding the process currently being utilized by the Energy and Natural Resources Committee to pass legislation on the Senate floor. As many of my colleagues know, I am currently objecting to unanimous consent on two en bloc packages reported by the committee, containing more than 40 bills.

I want to make clear to my colleagues that I do not object to all of the bills contained in the two packages. In fact, I have offered to give consent to all those bills where I have no fiscal or policy concerns. Unfortunately, the committee is insisting on passing all of the legislation en bloc and will not allow the noncontroversial bills to be released for passage. These bills are in effect being held hostage by the committee.

As my colleagues know, I evaluate all unanimous consent requests, in part, on whether the proposed legislation increases authorizations for spending. If it does, I also look to see whether the new cost has been offset by a corresponding reduction in another program authorization. I also review each bill for specific policy concerns.

Of most concern to me, the two packages authorize over \$150 million in new spending, without a single offset. This

does not include the \$640 million reauthorization for the Geologic Mapping Program. I have offered to work with the committee to identify possible offsets that would allow the en bloc packages to move forward. Given the considerable program oversight performed by the committee, I am eager to hear where it believes other programs may not be working as intended or where they may have become of a lesser priority than the bills currently under consideration.

As stewards of the Federal tax dollar, I believe it is imperative we proceed with the hard but necessary work of prioritizing our spending. Every American taxpayer is forced to do this every day, and so should we. Prioritization begins with the authorization process, and so does long-term fiscal discipline.

I renew my pledge to work with any Member of this body to identify offsets, to ensure that our actions today never add to the already heavy financial burden we have placed on the next generation of Americans.

It is my hope the committee will abandon the practice of en bloc unanimous consent requests. Each bill should be considered on its merits, and if it is truly worthwhile, should be allowed to stand on its own. As an institution, this Senate is more than capable of this task.

To make the RECORD absolutely clear, I am including the list of non-controversial bills in these packages that should be cleared and allowed to pass under unanimous consent: S. 216, S. 266, S. 241, S. 202, S. 232, S. 262, S. 220, H.R. 386, S. 320, S. 553, H.R. 497, H.R. 658, S. 1139, H.R. 235, H.R. 482, H.R. 467.

VETERANS HOSPITALS COMBAT STAPH INFECTIONS

Mr. AKAKA. Mr. President, I find it disturbing and disheartening to know that efforts to heal through modern medicine end up creating new medical problems, in addition to those that are preexisting. Unfortunately, this is what is occurring with the rise of dangerous drug-resistant forms of staph that have become prevalent as of late. I want to talk about the potential dangers of these infections, especially in a medical environment where patients are most vulnerable, and also give much-deserved praise to the Department of Veterans Affairs for their work to combat staph infections in their hospitals.

There are many types of staph bacteria. While some forms of staph are harmless, others are fatal. A recent study conducted by the Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology suggests that as many as 1.2 million U.S. hospital patients are infected every year by a form of staph that is resistant to drugs.

Drug-resistant staph, often referred to as MRSA, Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, has adapted in response to common antibiotics which have been used to combat these and

other infections. Most staph infections arise from visits to the hospital and other health care settings.

The Department of Veterans Affairs is taking effective steps to reduce staph infections in their hospitals. Based on a successful pilot program at VA's Pittsburgh health care system, VA has instituted a staph prevention program in all 153 of their hospitals. Their prevention system is based on a strategy of enhanced hygiene and culture change among health care workers. Patients are monitored, proven precautions are followed for those affected, and close attention is paid to common sources of infection. The Pittsburgh pilot led to a 50-percent decline in staph infections, something Acting VA Secretary Gordon Mansfield referred to as "dramatic reductions" in staph infections, and I look forward to similarly positive outcomes across the veterans' health care system.

It is my hope that VA will continue to improve their prevention programs and share information with other health care providers. This will help VA safeguard our veterans and their families from staph infections, serve as a successful model for our country's hospitals and medical facilities, and improve the well-being of our Nation's citizens.

TAX RELIEF

Mr. ROBERTS. Mr. President, I rise today to discuss several important tax relief measures that expire this year.

As several of my colleagues have noted, these provisions are important to many of our folks back home and have a direct impact on their daily lives and pocketbook. This tax relief has put more money in taxpayers' pockets rather than the government coffers and needs to be extended.

I am pleased to introduce legislation to extend two expiring tax relief measures.

The first measure ensures that we continue to provide a 7-year depreciation schedule for motorsports complexes. This is an important tax relief provision to hundreds of race facilities across the country, both large and small.

In Kansas, more than 30 tracks can benefit from this depreciation schedule. It allows race facilities to make important safety and modernization investments under a depreciation schedule that reflects the ongoing need to maintain these facilities.

The largest track in Kansas, the Kansas Speedway, which was just completed in 2001, has been the economic driver in the revitalization of Kansas City, KS. What was once one of the most economically depressed areas in Kansas is now one of the fastest growing. The speedway alone contributed more than \$150 million to the local economy in its first year, creating 3,300 new jobs and generating \$10 million in property taxes and \$26 million in sales taxes.