

incomes of less than 100 percent of the Federal poverty level. That is about \$21,500 for a family of four. These are truly families who cannot afford to see their heating bills double. In fact, the majority of households have at least one member who is elderly, disabled, or a child under 5 years of age. These are the most vulnerable.

Unfortunately, current Federal funding levels are only sufficient to meet the needs of about 16 percent of the eligible households. Many States are trying to meet the needs of more households by providing smaller benefits to each household. Meanwhile, rising energy prices are rapidly reducing the purchasing power of program grants. This is a bad combination. In other words, folks in need are receiving less assistance while the cost of heating increases. Again, this is simply an untenable situation.

Consider that home heating prices are projected to reach almost \$1,000 a year for a typical family, representing an increase of almost 80 percent from the average cost during the winter of 2001–2002. It is in just 5 years that we have seen this incredible 80-percent increase in cost. In fact, data show we are looking at heating costs rising 15.2 percent this year and record levels for heating oil, propane, and electricity. Experts predict that Minnesotans who use heating oil will probably see an increase in their bill of 47 percent higher than last year's level. Meanwhile, the cost of natural gas, which most Minnesotans rely on for their heating needs, is up 38 percent from the average cost during the winters of 2000 to 2005.

The heating oil crisis we are facing this year is certainly partially due to America's need to import more and more oil. I have always said there is a national security need to end our dependence on foreign oil. There is also a very focused need in terms of the impact it has on those who simply cannot afford to pay their heating bills. We need to end their dependence on foreign oil. At the same time, we have to make sure to take care of those families in need today.

We have the tools to produce clean and renewable energy here at home, and our heating crisis is only one of the many reasons we need to finish work on the bold energy package the Senate passed this summer and the strong farm bill we have before us now. Those are two important pieces of legislation. I hope we can overcome this partisan divide in Washington that kind of tears us apart and precludes us from getting things done.

I have sat with the Presiding Officer. We talked about renewables and energy and seeing if we can find common ground. We need it in Maryland, we need it in Minnesota, we need it in America. Unfortunately, as much as we would like to transform our energy production before this winter begins, we don't have that option. But we can make sure Americans having a tough

time getting by have the assistance they need to make it through a cold season. For many, it really is a matter of survival. The large percentage of increases in heating costs don't really hit home until you look at a utility bill. A lot of folks will see hundreds of additional dollars on their heating bills this winter. That is a huge expense for a family below the poverty level or for the elderly on fixed incomes.

I drive by a bus stop on Grand Avenue in St. Paul, about four blocks from my house. There is a bus that stops there that takes you to downtown St. Paul. On a cold winter day, I look as I drive by. There may be a senior, a working mom—and it is cold. I look at the cost of energy and realize we have an obligation to try to do the right thing. That is what LIHEAP is about.

In life, sometimes the unexpected happens. No matter how much we try, sometimes we just need a helping hand to get back on our feet.

During my hearings back home, I heard a story from a courageous woman from St. Paul, Lori Cooper, who, as a working professional, wife, and mother of a 21-month child, had to figure out how to make ends meet when her husband's health prevented him from working. With heating costs rising, LIHEAP was critical in helping her family make it through the winter.

Tragically, it is getting harder for States to help families like this one get through winters like this because the appropriation levels have not risen with the inflation since the 1980s. The Labor-HHS-Education bill that the Senate has produced includes a welcome increase, but it is still below the real amount provided 20 years ago. If you look at where we were 20 years ago and factor in inflation, we are below that today. This would be much less problematic if we were not dealing with skyrocketing heating costs, which is why this winter, as in the winter of 2005–2006, families need emergency LIHEAP assistance.

In 2006, I came to the floor with Senators COLLINS and SNOWE to make the case to this body that no one should have to make the choice between basic necessities and heat. Rising to that challenge, we delivered an increase of \$1 billion additional LIHEAP funding in 2006. Today, I proudly stand with my colleague from Vermont who, along with 17 Members, introduced the Keep Americans Warm Act to meet the heating crisis we will face this winter. This bill provides \$1 billion in emergency LIHEAP assistance in addition to the funding currently included in the Labor-HHS-Education appropriations bill.

I urge my colleagues to join the 19 of us who are standing behind this bill, who are committed to meeting this urgent need. It took a lot of work to get emergency LIHEAP assistance passed in 2006. We worked very hard. It was difficult. I know it will take a lot of effort this time as well, but I am certain this Senate can come together to aid

those who are struggling to provide the bare necessity of heat. I have faith in the potential of this body to act for the greater good, and I look forward to working together to pass this important piece of legislation.

Mr. President, I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

IRAN

Mr. HAGEL. Mr. President, yesterday the Director of National Intelligence, Admiral Mike McConnell, released the National Intelligence Estimate on Iran's nuclear weapons program. This NIE, which represents the best collective judgment of all 16 U.S. intelligence agencies, told us:

Our intelligence community has concluded with high confidence that Iran halted its nuclear weapons program in 2003.

This is a major reversal of the intelligence community's previous intelligence assessment in 2005 that Iran was determined to develop nuclear weapons. The NIE states that the nuclear weapons program was halted primarily in response to international pressure, which suggests that Iran may be more vulnerable to influence.

Perhaps most significant is the DNI's conclusion that some combination of threats of intensified scrutiny and pressures, along with opportunities for Iran to achieve its security, prestige, and goals might prompt Tehran to extend the current halt to its nuclear weapons program.

I commend Admiral McConnell and his colleagues for their decision to release unclassified conclusions based on this current intelligence. I do not believe we can overstate the importance of this new information.

The effects of this NIE will be felt here, at the United Nations, throughout Europe, across the entire Middle East, the world, and in Iran.

The NIE closely parallels many of the conclusions of the Internal Atomic Energy Agency, the IAEA, the international organization, with the most direct on-the-ground access to Iran's nuclear facilities. Once again, the facts appear to be bearing out the conclusions of the IAEA. This NIE, as well as the IAEA's analysis, should help inform and shape U.S. strategy on Iran.

President Bush has a responsibility to carefully consider the policy implications concerning Iran with this new information, and I know he will. He said in his news conference this morning that this new information which he has confidence in would be factored into our policy regarding Iran.

The United States must pursue a clear and strategic policy toward Iran

based on this new intelligence and fact-based assessment to avoid the disastrous mistakes of Iraq. Yesterday's NIE does not invalidate the effectiveness of previous efforts to use an international consensus of pressure on Iran. We must be careful not to run from one end of the pendulum all the way to the other.

As President Bush noted again this morning, the United States must continue to work with our friends and our allies to sustain an international consensus on Iran. I believe the President is correct: alliances, common purpose, common interests, focus, discipline.

Iran's objectionable words and actions are real, and they must continue to be addressed. That means a very clear-eyed and realistic sense of Iran and its motives. As I said in my November 8 CSIS speech regarding U.S.-Iran policy, the United States must employ a comprehensive strategy regarding Iran: Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian issue, the Middle East, a regional comprehensive strategy.

Yesterday's NIE reinforces the need for directed, unconditional, and comprehensive engagement with Iran. The United States and the international community must use all—all—elements of our foreign policy arsenal in offering direct, unconditional, and comprehensive talks with Iran. The United States should be clear that all issues, our issues and Iran's issues, are on the table, including offering Iran a credible way back from the fringes of the international community, security guarantees, and other incentives.

We urgently need to adopt a comprehensive strategy on Iran that is focused on direct engagement and diplomacy backed, as diplomacy must always be backed, by the leverage of international pressure, isolation, containment, and military options.

The United States must employ wise statecraft to redirect deepening tensions with Iran toward a higher ground of resolution. That is what Annapolis was about last week. America is the great power here. Iran is not the great power. We must be the more mature country in testing the proposition that the United States and Iran can overcome decades of mutual mistrust, suspicion, and hostility.

That is diplomacy. Diplomacy is not talking to your friends; diplomacy is not giving another country bonus points for us talking to them. There is a reason for diplomacy. We should not squander this opportunity as we did in the spring of 2003 when we had an opportunity for an opening to explore talks with Iran.

This initiative, by the way, in 2003, came from Iran. We are witnessing a confluence of events in the Middle East and around the world that presents the United States with new opportunities. There are hopeful and positive recent developments: Progress on North Korea's nuclear weapons program; the recent regional meeting in Istanbul on Iraq; the momentum generated by last

week's Annapolis Middle East meeting where all Arab countries, including Syria, sat at the same table with Israel; and yesterday's NIE assessment.

Now is the time for America to act and to lead, and to lead boldly, with confidence, with our allies, focusing on a common purpose.

One dimensional optics, policies, and blunt black-or-white rhetoric, such as "you are either with us or you are against us" will not work, haven't worked, and will fall short of what is expected from American leadership in the eyes of the world.

The world faces challenges and opportunities today that carry with it implications well beyond this moment in time. American leadership is once again being called on at yet another transformational time in history to help set a new course, a new framework for a rudderless world drifting in a sea of combustible dangers.

In engaging Iran, the Middle East, and the world, we must be wide in our scope, clear in our purpose, measured in our words, and strong in our actions. Yesterday's NIE should not be overstated, but it also must not be undervalued in shaping future policy with Iran and in the Middle East.

Make no mistake, the NIE sets in motion a series of ripple effects that will have serious consequences. This should be welcome news for the United States and the world.

Mr. President, I thank you, yield the floor, and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. WHITEHOUSE). The clerk will call the roll of the Senate.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

RESPONSIBILITY TO GOVERN

Mr. BYRD. Mr. President, as Congress reconvenes this week after our observance of the Thanksgiving holiday, we find a brisk wind blowing through the streets of the Nation's Capital. As cold temperatures begin to grip the country, Americans are turning up the heat in their homes, but the elected leaders of our country should seize the opportunity to turn down the heat in Washington.

Three days ago, in his weekly radio address, the President placed the blame at the feet of Congress for the delays in enacting 11 of the 12 annual appropriations bills. But finger pointing does nothing—nothing, zilch—to solve the impasse, which began with White House threats to veto 10 of those funding bills. With 3 short weeks left in this session of Congress, it is time to close down the political posturing and recognize we have a responsibility to govern.

As the chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, it is clear to

me that Congress is working with great diligence to find a way around our budget conundrum. Working hand in hand with Members of the minority, we are crafting an appropriations package that I expect will garner bipartisan support. This package contemplates a reduction of \$10.6 billion from the spending levels approved by Congress in this year's budget resolution. And \$10.6 billion is a lot of money. In addition, various controversial matters, some of which have been the subject of veto threats, are eliminated.

Both Democrats and Republicans in Congress are attempting, in good faith, to find a way around the veto threat demagoguery that has been emanating from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue for months. Now the White House needs to put aside politics and recognize it is time to govern in the responsible manner that is expected by the American people.

I urge the President—and he is my President, too, and I say it respectfully—to stop the stale veto threats that have been the albatross around the neck of responsible budgeting for months. The fact is the needs of this Nation have changed since the budget was submitted way back in February. That should come as no great surprise.

The Senate, on a bipartisan basis, has recognized these needs, and events have made them crystal clear.

The crumbling state of our infrastructure was punctuated by a deadly—and I mean deadly—bridge collapse in Minnesota. The Senate passed a bill containing funds for the bridge replacement and for repairing bridges across the Nation by a vote of 88 to 7. That was the responsible thing to do.

Soaring oil prices mean a cruel squeeze on low-income heating assistance. The Senate approved by a vote of 75 to 19 a bill providing increased heating assistance. That was the responsible thing to do.

Investigations into the treatment of soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have underlined greater demands on the VA health care system. Legislation to increase funding for our veterans passed the Senate by a vote of 92 to 1. That was the moral thing to do.

More money is needed to improve the security of our borders. An amendment to provide such funding passed the Senate 89 to 1. That was the smart thing to do.

In July, the administration released its latest National intelligence report that concluded al-Qaida has regrouped in Pakistan with the intention of attacking the United States again. The Senate passed a Homeland Security bill to increase funding for first responders by a vote of 89 to 4.

Rising crime rates in this country highlight the wisdom of additional funding for law enforcement. The Senate passed legislation providing such funding for cops on the street by a vote of 75 to 19.

The rising cost of food means that there must be more funding for the