

relevant to gun purchases between the States and the Federal Government. Deficiencies in the current NICS system, including a significant lack of funding, permitted the perpetrator of this terrible crime to obtain firearms and ammunition despite having a mental health history that made him ineligible to buy or possess a firearm under Federal law. He was able to pass a background check and purchase the weapons he used in his attacks because data was missing from the NICS system.

In response to this devastating tragedy, the Judiciary Committee worked hard to produce a comprehensive legislative proposal related to issues of school safety, and in August unanimously reported the School Safety and Law Enforcement Improvement Act of 2007, SSLEIA, to the full Senate. As part of this legislative package, we drafted title II of SSLEIA to include an amended version of the NICS Amendment Improvement Act of 2007, H.R. 2640, that passed the House in July. Today, the Senate passed a revision of title II from SSLEIA, as the Leahy-Schumer amendment to H.R. 2640, which closes the gaps in the NICS system that allowed the purchase of the firearms that were used in the Virginia Tech killings. I hope the House of Representatives will take up and pass H.R. 2640, as amended, as soon as possible.

The Leahy-Schumer amendment largely mirrors the language of H.R. 2640 as passed by the House. But it also makes modest but important changes to that bill in order to ensure this new law works effectively and fairly for all Americans. It creates a legal regime where the reporting of disqualifying mental health records, both at the State and Federal levels, will be improved. This bill will also require Federal agencies to report mental health and other disqualifying records into NICS and would create significant new incentives for States to report this same information. These basic features of the amendment are the same as in the House bill. Additionally, the bill contains provisions directing Federal agencies to establish relief from disabilities programs through which individuals who have overcome a disqualifying mental illness or disability may reclaim their rights, and urges the States to do the same.

As I reviewed this issue, however, I determined that additional changes were necessary both to improve the NICS system further and to better enable States like Vermont to implement these improvements. By tempering the penalties for insufficient participation by the States in meeting the bill's goals, and increasing incentives for full participation, I am hopeful that the bill will strengthen the partnership between Federal and State authorities in search of a common goal. The NICS system is only as good as the information that is reported into it, and to achieve success in improving NICS, we must recognize and adequately support

the States in this challenging undertaking.

I want to thank Paco Aumont, director of Criminal Justice Services at the Vermont Department of Public Safety, for working with me to identify those changes in the legislation to ensure that Vermont and the many similarly situated States will be more easily able to make the comprehensive improvements necessary for a more effective NICS system.

Nothing can bring back the lives tragically lost at Virginia Tech, and no legislation can be a panacea, but the bill we pass today will begin to repair and restore our faith in the NICS system and may help prevent similar tragedies in the future.

Mr. SCHUMER. I ask unanimous consent a Leahy-Schumer substitute amendment at the desk be agreed to, the bill as amended be read a third time and passed, the motions 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 PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The substitute amendment (No. 3887) was agreed to.

(The text of the amendment is printed in today's RECORD under "Text of Amendments.")

The bill (H.R. 2640), as amended, was read the third time and passed.

The amendment was ordered to be engrossed and the bill to be read a third time.

BLOCK BURMESE JADE (JUNTA'S ANTI-DEMOCRATIC EFFORTS) ACT OF 2007

Mr. SCHUMER. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the Committee on Foreign Relations be discharged from further consideration of H.R. 3890, and the Senate proceed to its immediate consideration.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered. The clerk will report the bill by title.

The assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (H.R. 3890) to amend the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act of 2003 to impose import sanctions on Burmese gemstones, expand the number of individuals against whom the visa ban is applicable, expand the blocking of assets and other prohibited activities, and for other purposes.

There being no objection, the Senate proceeded to consider the bill.

Mr. SCHUMER. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent the Biden-McConnell amendment at the desk be agreed to, the bill as amended be read a third time and passed, the amendment to the title be agreed to, the motion to reconsider be laid on the table, and any statements be printed in the RECORD.

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

The amendment (No. 3888) was agreed to.

(The text of the amendment is printed in today's RECORD under "Text of Amendments.")

The title amendment (No. 3889) was agreed to, as follows:

The title is amended to read as follows:

"An Act to impose sanctions on officials of the State Peace and Development Council in Burma, to amend the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act of 2003 to prohibit the importation of gemstones and hardwoods from Burma, to promote a coordinated international effort to restore civilian democratic rule to Burma, and for other purposes."

The amendments were ordered to be engrossed and the bill to be read a third time.

The bill (H.R. 3890), as amended, was read the third time and passed.

Mr. SCHUMER. Madam President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from New Jersey.

Mr. MENENDEZ. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that following my time on the floor, the Senator from Pennsylvania, Mr. CASEY, be the next Democratic speaker in line.

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

THANKING SENATOR BYRD

Mr. MENENDEZ. Madam President, I came to the floor for a specific purpose, but I had the good benefit of listening to the distinguished senior Senator from West Virginia's holiday greeting. It was a very warm, loving greeting as well. I am glad I made it to the floor to listen. I thank him for his incredible service in this institution and for taking those moments to talk about our humanity collectively. This is a great time of the year in which that humanity gets to be recognized.

Mr. BYRD. Madam President, I thank the incredible Senator who now holds the floor and speaks with such aplomb and dignity, befitting a Roman Senator.

IRAQ

Mr. MENENDEZ. Madam President, as we celebrate this holiday season with our families, as we gather with those we love and give thanks for our tremendous blessings, we remember how incalculable the losses have been to the families of the 3,888 soldiers who have been killed in Iraq. Their losses cannot be tallied, not in the number of Christmas nights spent without the one they loved; not in the number of days since their wives, husbands, parents, and children left home forever. We cannot calculate the strain on the 28,661 wounded soldiers and their families, many of whom will be spending this precious time of the year in a military hospital, coping with their blindness, living with only one leg or arm, sleeping through nightmares of the battlefield instead of the beautiful dreams they used to know this time of year.

As we hold them in our hearts—as well as all of the men and women in

uniform across the globe who serve to protect the country and to promote its interests, for which we have eternal gratitude—as we hold them in our hearts and express that gratitude, we also watch our money slip away from us in Iraq. That is a casualty we can and must count.

I have come to the floor over the last 2 months to talk about the cost of Iraq to us at home. The lives lost in Iraq cannot have a price put to them. Their sacrifice and that of their families have no price. The human suffering of those who have been wounded also has no price.

But there is also a price that is calculable at home, and it is what the war is costing not just in dollars from our Treasury and debt cast upon on the next generation of Americans, but what it is costing in lost opportunities at home. There is a brutal holiday irony that is no cause for festive spirit in Washington.

The irony is this: President Bush and his Republican allies in Congress held hostage some key investments we need to make right here in our country, in order to extract a promise of more money for the war in Iraq.

They are asking for more than \$150 billion more for Iraq next year, but at one point they threatened to starve the entire Government of funding over a difference in the Federal budget that amounts to less than one-tenth of what the President wants to spend on the war next year. He was ready to shut the whole Government down over the difference of what amounts to less than one-tenth of what the President wants to spend on the war next year.

Mr. BYRD. Shame.

Mr. MENENDEZ. This holiday season we wondered if President Bush wanted to be Scrooge to America and Santa Claus to Iraq. Over the last several months I have spoken many times about what the American presence in Iraq is costing at home. The true cost of the \$455 billion we have spent on that war and the \$10 billion per month we continue to spend might never be more clear than it is right now, at a time when Congress debated the budget for almost the entire Federal Government.

While we have been here crunching numbers, American families are feeling the crunch of a few numbers themselves: the interest rate on their mortgage that is about to jump beyond what they can afford, the price on the gas pump when they fill their tank, the price of heating oil and natural gas, higher grocery bills, fare hikes or threats of hikes on public transportation, and the skyrocketing costs of providing medical care for themselves and their children.

The President's consistent threats to veto funding for Federal Government operations forced across-the-board cuts to programs and services that so many Americans are counting on. This winter, as snow and ice fall on roads across America, people are waiting for better

ways to travel. They are waiting for expanded, affordable public transportation, progress on efficiency, and new sources of fuel and power. They are waiting for our Nation to fill our energy portfolio with something other than the usual energy sources.

The omnibus spending bill the Senate approved this week would inject another \$1.7 billion in the development of renewable sources of energy, such as solar, wind, and geothermal. It is an important step—but it could have been much greater.

Republicans have consistently objected to bigger steps. They said weaning us off fossil fuels is too expensive. Meanwhile, they have insisted that oil companies need more multi-million-dollar tax cuts. Meanwhile, we spend enough money to pay for that entire renewable energy package in Iraq in just 5 days—in just 5 days.

Mr. BYRD. Five days.

Mr. MENENDEZ. Energy independence for our country, stopping giving foreign countries that wish us harm the ability to have the resources to make that harm happen, and that we could have funded for 5 days in Iraq. Those are the choices that we make.

Mr. BYRD. Hear that? Five days.

Mr. MENENDEZ. Five days, Senator BYRD.

Cancer patients going through the dark winter of their illness are waiting on lifesaving treatments that only intensive scientific research can discover. Congress has a bill before it to fund that research, but President Bush vetoed the funding once, and his allies in Congress have whittled it down as much as they could. The cost of the funding increase for that cancer research, to turn the winter of their illness into the spring of possibility? It is \$329 million, or less than 1 day in Iraq.

Mr. BYRD. Less than 1 day.

Mr. MENENDEZ. This winter, while President Bush asked for billions more for security for the streets of Baghdad, he says we cannot afford to bring security to the streets of our own hometowns. The Senate proposed spending \$55 million, in part to hire police officers specially trained to stop child sexual predators. We have seen the fantastic growth of the Internet—and that is great. It brings many good things with it. But it also brings challenges. The President did not just force funding to stop child sexual predators to be cut in half, he sliced it to less than a third of what it was. We could have made up the difference and fully funded the program to stop child sexual predators with what it costs to be in Iraq for just about 2½ hours.

Being able to successfully have the law enforcement capability to pursue child sex predators versus 2½ hours in Iraq. Where are all the family values we hear talked about so often? What ever happened to recognizing the importance of our children, who are truly our greatest asset, but also our most vulnerable asset? What are our values? What are our priorities?

There are too many provisions in this big funding bill that are absolutely essential, too many to name here. But the victims of the cuts that the President and his Republican allies have called for, the millions of Americans waiting for clean power that will not be produced, the cancer patients who are waiting for research that will not be allowed to happen, the communities trying to stop child sexual predators who are waiting for police officers who will not be hired: These people are also too many to name.

In that sense, even beyond the lives lost overseas, the cost of the war in Iraq has been incalculable. If there is one thing we must all acknowledge right now, it is this: The war in Iraq is not free, it is not without consequences here at home, and no one should be pretending that this war is free.

The Bush administration likes to parrot the line that we are fighting them over there so we do not have to fight them here. But Americans have figured out what they mean, and what they mean is: We are spending all our money over there so, by the way, we did not have it to spend here.

Above all, this is a question of values. Do we value our children, and value protecting them? Do we value our schools and the education we want our children to have so they can continue to make America the global competitive leader? Do we value the men and women who wear the uniform, not just by marching in a parade on Memorial Day or going to a Veterans Day service, which we should, but by taking care of their health care and their disabilities and taking care of their survivors, for those who commit the ultimate sacrifice, as a grateful nation truly does? Or will we neglect those and other priorities such as the health care of our children and of our families?

The Democratic budget bill set out for our values a clear and serious test. We cannot allow the budget to have a heart as cold as the ice on our front steps. We cannot let our financial stability melt away, and we cannot continue to let more of our money burn up in a war that has taken so much from so many for so long.

At year's end, we speak of renewal, we return to our families and witness a rebirth of hope. This season is about the best in each and every one of us. This season, decisions we make are going to test how we operate as a government and test what we stand for as a nation. There is no better time than now to let the best in American values guide our way: generosity, equality of opportunity, cooperation with one another, turning to each other instead of against each other.

We have the power to end unnecessary suffering and waste, and the chance to approach these tasks with a fresh sense of urgency that they require. As we rest and dream in the company of those we love, let us remember that December is the darkest

time of the year, but it is also the turning point when the sun begins to shine more and more each day.

Together we offer our wish, our hope, and our prayers that the dreams that have carried us so far of peace on Earth, good will toward all may yet still come true.

THANKING STAFF

Before I yield the floor, I would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge the individuals in my now second year here in the Senate whom I have seen work incredibly hard, but very rarely get acknowledged, all of those who help us as we preside: the clerks, who keep all of the documentation that comes before the Senate moving; the Parliamentarians, who try to keep us in some degree of order as we move along the way; the party secretaries and their staffs, who do such a great job on informing us as to what is happening and to try to keep somewhat of a schedule in terms of our lives here in the Senate; to those in the cloakroom who also produce that service; to the pages who have done a great job.

It was a privilege to have the opportunity to talk to so many of them. I think they are going to carry their experiences here with them a lifetime, and I am sure that maybe we will see some of them in this Chamber in the future.

To all of those who make this institution the greatest democratic institution in the world operate the way it successfully operates, my deepest thanks, my best for the holiday season.

With that, I yield the floor.

ORDER OF PROCEDURE

THE PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Alaska.

Mr. LEVIN. Would the Senator from Alaska yield for a unanimous consent request?

Ms. MURKOWSKI. Yes.

Mr. LEVIN. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that after the Senator from Alaska finishes, I understand the Senator from Pennsylvania would be recognized. I would then ask that I be the next Democrat to be recognized.

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

RECOGNIZING SENATE PAGES

Ms. MURKOWSKI. Madam President, I want to follow on the comments of my colleague from New Jersey in recognizing those who allow this body to function so efficiently and to also give special recognition to the pages.

Given the schedule they have, we are likely not going to be seeing much more of this particular group as they finish up for the holidays and their exams, and then move back to their respective States and their communities. But to all of you who have given so much to so many of us, to make our jobs a little bit easier, we thank you. Thank you very greatly. I believe this

is an episode in your life that you will long remember, and hopefully it will be a good and positive experience for all of you. Thank you for your contribution.

WELCOMING RETURNING TROOPS

Madam President, I note that in my hometown of Anchorage, AK, this afternoon, there is a wonderful celebration taking place. The 495th out of Fort Richardson has all come home. They have come home after 15 months being over in Iraq, doing incredible work under incredibly difficult situations.

We mourn the loss of those who are not home, who will not be home. But today in Anchorage, the community is coming together to say: Welcome back. Please let us know how we can support you and your families, not only at this holiday season, but throughout the year, and support you for all the support you have given us.

We take time during the holiday season to show our thanks, to show our appreciation to so many. But I wish to recognize the soldiers and the veterans from Alaska, from throughout the whole country, who have given so much and who continue to give so much. We want them to know their sacrifices in serving us, whether it be in Afghanistan or in Iraq, have not gone unnoticed. Their sacrifices have certainly not gone unnoticed by my fellow Alaskans.

When I was in Iraq earlier in the year, I had the pleasure of meeting with soldiers and guardsmen from Anchorage, Fairbanks, Seward, Soldotna, Eagle River, Slana, and Wasilla, all over the State. In hearing their stories and their commitment, you cannot help but feel proud as an American. I was certainly proud as an Alaskan. Every day I have Alaskans who write my office to praise the servicemen and the servicewomen who have returned and those who are still in combat. Sometimes it is a quick e-mail, saying: I support all of those who are serving, and other times they are very long, heartfelt letters praising our heroes and truly expressing a solidarity with them for the sacrifice they have made.

The fact that Alaska has the largest number of veterans per capita, I think says a lot about our State's character. Our Alaska veterans are some of the most exemplary in the Armed Forces. The 172nd Stryker Brigade out of Fairbanks was on tour in Iraq, and they were extended to 16 months. But when they were asked to give more, they remained strong, they remained proud. Last week, I received an e-mail from the former commander of the 172nd, and he sent along an article of an Iraqi, a young Iraqi girl who had been blind. Some of the soldiers in the 172nd had helped facilitate this young girl coming to the United States for eye surgery. This young child, this beautiful little Iraqi girl, is now able to see. She was given that gift of sight because of the caring and compassion of these soldiers.

Another story was shared with me by the former commander. He noted that on December 12, SGT Gregory Williams from the 172nd was presented with the Distinguished Service Cross, the second highest award for valor, for his actions while in combat in Baghdad. Despite being injured himself when their vehicle was struck by a bomb, Sergeant Williams was able to return fire and help a wounded comrade to safety. To date, there have only been eight Distinguished Service Crosses awarded since the war began in 2001. So we are very proud of SGT Gregory Williams.

We say that we do things a little bit differently in Alaska. We enjoy doing things a little differently. There was one Alaskan marine who was over in Iraq. He discovered that he had some hidden talents he did not imagine. His innovative approach to searching out insurgents earned him a Marine Corps Commendation Medal. SGT Aaron A. Henehan led his squad to search out and detain 18 black list or high-value insurgents while in his third tour in Iraq. He is an adventurous young man. Sergeant Henehan was barely out of high school and was anxious to see the world when he first thought of signing up to serve his country. September 11 and the outbreak of war did not cause his decision to waiver an inch.

Sergeant Henehan deployed in April of 2003 and spent his first tour in the town of Babylon. He served his country well. Like many who fought alongside him, he began to learn the undercurrents, the inner workings of Iraqi society. He returned for a second tour to Husaybah, near Iraq's border with Syria in August of 2004. At that time Husaybah was a dangerous town.

Sergeant Henehan served his second tour in Iraq with distinction, but still he felt he needed to do more. Before deploying for his third and final tour in February of 2006, he told his friends and his family back home that he wanted to make a difference in Iraq, a sentiment many American soldiers and guardsmen share. He spent a lot of time between his second and his third tours thinking about what he might be able to do differently, how he could learn from his experiences in the two deployments prior, and how he might be able to achieve a better result.

Combining his Marine training with information he learned from a retired Los Angeles police officer who was deployed to Iraq to teach the troops urban tactics, Sergeant Henehan approached his third tour with what he referred to as a beat cop mentality. He wanted to approach the problem of rounding up insurgents as if he were a native of the area. He spent his free time studying the tribal history and the geography of Husaybah for hours at a time. The ability to put his plan in motion, Sergeant Henehan says, was made possible in part by Operation Steel Curtain, which had cleared Husaybah block by block, and set up outposts called "firm bases" throughout the city.