

health protection for our fellow citizens unless we show initiative and leadership in the area of health care.

Our vision differs from the President's that I described earlier, but the goal is important and affects every American. I welcome the President's interest in health care. Let's begin the debate.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

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

VETERANS HEALTH CARE

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, since this body recessed 10 days ago, I have been outraged to see report after report after report detailing this administration's complete failure to care for our troops and for our veterans. What is worse, since we returned on Monday, I have heard several of our Republican colleagues attempt to question our patriotism and our support for those troops. So I felt compelled this morning to come to the floor to speak up.

For more than 4 years, this administration has failed to plan for the true cost of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. They have demanded blind loyalty from Congress, asking us for rubberstamps for their emergency budgets, avoiding oversight, and pursuing their own strategy in the face of criticism from Members of Congress, from generals, and the American public. Yesterday Senator MARTINEZ, I thought, encapsulated the White House position better than I ever could. He said:

At a time of war, the Congress should do only one thing, which is to support our President, to try to unite behind our troops and unite behind our effort.

I couldn't disagree more. As elected Members of Congress, and even as mere citizens of this country, we can and we must question the policies implemented by our Government. That is our job. It is our responsibility. At no time is that more important than in a time of war when the lives of our bravest men and women are on the line.

But my colleagues don't have to take my word for it. General Pace, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told a congressional hearing recently:

Our troops understand the need for debate back home and are sophisticated enough to know that debate does not equate to lack of support.

But that important debate, that important discussion, and all oversight were stifled for years. Unfortunately for everyone, for the first years of this war Congress was under Republican control and that led to a stunning lack of oversight, an outrageous number of rubberstamps, and an impotence from this Congress that should shame us all.

Well, those days are over.

I don't have the time this morning to outline each and every failure I have seen by the administration. I don't have the time to detail the many ways the administration has failed our

troops, our men and women who are serving us. I don't have time to detail how many ways the administration has failed the men and women who serve us when they come home and go into the VA system.

So instead I want my colleagues to know I am going to be here on this floor speaking frequently and loudly, because I think it is so important to get this administration once and for all to pay the troops and our veterans the attention they deserve 4 years into this war in Iraq. My Democratic colleagues and I are committed to supporting our troops from the battlefield all the way back to their local VA and everywhere in between. We have worked very hard to ensure they get the care they deserve, the care they have earned.

My real worry is that this administration continues to be slow to react to these problems and rarely, if ever, takes proactive measures to stop the many problems before they even begin. From sending our troops to war without the critical armor they need to protect themselves, to housing them in squalor at Walter Reed as we heard about a week ago, to leaving them to fend for themselves when they need mental health care, this administration is utterly failing our servicemembers, our veterans, and all of their families.

Nowhere is that failure more apparent than in the handling of what will one day, I believe, become known as the signature wound of this war, and that is traumatic brain injury. Right now it is estimated that 10 percent of our Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have suffered from these traumatic brain injuries because of their service. One of the big problems with traumatic brain injury, or TBI, is it is an unseen wound and too often it is misdiagnosed. Many times, unless a servicemember is involved directly in an IED incident and is bleeding, he or she won't be documented as having been involved in that explosion. Even if they are two or three tanks behind where the IED exploded, they can get the impact and be a victim of TBI and not know it. As a result, I believe the actual number of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans with TBI will be even higher than the statistics we are now seeing.

We owe it to these men and women in uniform to come on this floor and say: We are going to do everything we can to help you. We should say: We will screen for TBI, we will document TBI, and we will not fail to treat veterans suffering from the signature wound of this war. It is clear our system today is not catching all of the TBI patients this war is producing.

I hope every one of my colleagues saw the special broadcast last evening. ABC News anchor Bob Woodruff detailed his own experience with a traumatic brain injury. I was personally moved by Bob Woodruff's struggle with his injury, by his family's unrelenting hope for recovery, and their ongoing work toward triumph over this horrible situation.

While Bob Woodruff has seen a tremendous recovery from his horrendous injury, I fear the care he received has not been duplicated for thousands of other troops when they return home. He detailed several cases of soldiers who were suffering from injuries not unlike his own, and the lack of care they received was clear when they left our flagship care centers for some of the smaller local hospitals. While so many of us know this injury has become the signature wound of this war, I fear last night's program once again showed us that this administration and the VA in particular has not stepped to the plate to handle the crush of troops with brain injuries who are returning from war each and every day.

What is worse, I am very concerned that we do not even know today the real number of troops who are suffering from traumatic brain injury. The Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center, the place that gathers all of this information on these injuries, has so far refused—refused—to release it publicly. That information is collected at taxpayer expense, and that information, I hope, could provide us with a baseline of how many of our troops have suffered from a traumatic brain injury. That is a critical and important starting point for dealing with these terrible injuries.

What we do know is that while the Department of Defense claims that less than 30,000 troops have been injured during this war, 205,000 troops have enrolled for care at the VA. Let me say that again. The Department of Defense claims that only 30,000 troops—only? That is a big number, 30,000 troops—have been injured, but 205,000 troops have enrolled for care at the VA. To me, those numbers don't add up. So yesterday I asked Defense Secretary Robert Gates to provide us with the data that has been compiled by the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center on the actual number of TBI victims. We don't have this information yet, but I see no reason why it shouldn't be shared with Congress and the American people.

In addition, I was heartened to hear, I have to say, yesterday that the Department of Veterans Affairs, in a long overdue step forward, finally announced they will begin screening every recent combat veteran for TBI. But we have to do a lot more. We can't simply take the Department of Veterans Affairs at their word. Their record of care and openness has left a lot to be desired. As every Member of the Senate knows, we went through that debate several years ago where they denied time and time again they were short-funded and then came and told us: Yes, they were indeed billions of dollars short, and we had to provide additional dollars in the supplemental to make sure our veterans were getting the most basic care. The lines are still long. Veterans are not getting care. We are now dealing with a high number of TBI victims of this war and we are not dealing with it realistically.

We have to develop a system to address traumatic brain injuries, from the battlefield all the way back to the VA hospitals and beyond. Screening is absolutely critical. Pre- and post-deployment screening has to be done. This signature wound has to be a top priority at each and every step along the path to recovery for these wounded members of the armed services.

The bottom line is we have not yet offered our brave men and women a real plan to take care of them when they come home. The Department of Defense and Veterans Affairs must come together to solve these problems plaguing the system. Too many of our men and women get lost in the transition between the Department of Defense and Veterans Affairs. I pledge to them and I pledge to our fighting men and women and to all of their families that this new Democratic Congress is going to hold them accountable for their inaction and finally ensure that we are going to give these men and women what they deserve when they come home.

We hear a lot in this body about who supports the troops. Well, I say to my colleagues that each and every one of us has a responsibility to support these troops, particularly those who are injured, particularly those who come home with TBI and other injuries, not just when they come home but far into the future, and we have not yet budgeted responsibly to do that. We have not provided the programs to do that. We have not done everything we can. This is one Senator who is going to keep talking until we get it done.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

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

IRAQ

Mr. ISAKSON. Mr. President, in approximately half an hour we begin proceeding to debate on the 9/11 bill. Saturday a week ago we concluded without resolution a debate on an Iraq resolution. I come to the floor of the Senate this morning to share with my colleagues my thoughts on Iraq and where we are, and to do so in the context of 9/11.

When I collected my thoughts about what I would say this morning, I thought back to a lot of lessons I learned from a great Georgian. In fact, on Saturday of last week, the day we had that debate, it was the 75th birthday of former Senator Zell Bryan Miller of Towns County, GA. I learned a lot from Zell Miller in my lifetime. I learned humility when he beat me for Governor of Georgia in 1990. I learned respect for class in 1996 when he came back and asked me to chair the State Board of Education after he taught me a lesson in humility 6 years earlier. When I read his book, "Corps Values: Everything You Need to Know I Learned in the Marines," I learned about commitment.

Also in the final debate I had with Zell Miller in 1990, I learned about how you snatch victory when somebody else thought they had it. In the closing debate, 48 hours before the general election when the cameras went on each of us for our last 60 seconds, Zell Miller's closing remarks were simply this. He said:

You know, ladies and gentlemen, we are going to have a race for governor in 2 days and it's all up to you. But I want you to remember something. Zell Miller knows one thing. If you ever walk down a country road and you see a turtle sitting on a fence post, there is one thing you know for sure. He did not get there by himself.

In taking that remark, I would remind my colleagues we didn't get to where we are by ourselves. We got here together at least in terms of Iraq. After 9/11 happened, within days, the United States of America changed and the President announced to the Congress we would no longer as a nation have a defense policy based on reaction. We would have a defense policy based on preemption. We learned on 9/11 you can't wait to find the smoking gun in terrorism to react, because if you do, it is too late. In the case of 9/11, there were 3,000 dead citizens of this world because we didn't preempt. The United Nations, 171 countries, voted unanimously in favor of resolution 1441 which authorized or threatened military action against Saddam Hussein if he didn't cooperate with the disclosures and the inspectors that the U.N. was prompting. When the U.N. failed to act and this President, George W. Bush, wanted to act, he came to this Congress and we voted overwhelmingly to support using force to hold Saddam Hussein accountable and to go after weapons of mass destruction and to go after those sanctuaries of terrorism.

One would think, in listening to the debate in the Senate in the last few weeks, that some people have bad memories. They forgot about those votes. They forgot about the fact that George Bush didn't get there by himself. He got there with us. Now, are we disappointed in some of the things that have happened? Yes. Do we want to change some things? Yes. Do we differ? Yes, and the Senate is the place we differ. But while we differ, we should not discourage our troops. We should not discourage the people who are deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan and around the world in terms of our resolve.

So I would suggest as we go to the debate on the 9/11 bill, we consider it as a wonderful opportunity to make a simple statement, a statement that while we may differ, there is one thing we don't differ on: We don't differ on the fact that we will give our troops the support and the finances and everything they need to carry out the mission to which they are assigned. That is precisely what Senator JUDD GREGG of New Hampshire wanted to do in his resolution that never could come to the floor in that 2 weeks of debate on the Iraq resolution that failed to get

enough votes to get a final vote. It is time, with a bill as relevant as this 9/11, which is the genesis of all we deal with today, that we send that clear message. While we may differ on some policies, we do not differ on the financial support and the absolute commitment to our men and women in harm's way.

I wish to put one other thing into perspective. As much bad news as we always talk about, a lot of good things happen. While some people may differ with the President's commitment to a surge in Iraq, even in the anticipation of that surge, there are some good things that have happened. Moqtada al-Sadr left Sadr City. He saw what was coming. Prime Minister al-Maliki already called for—and there are now talks about it—a regional conference on Iraq, including all the neighbors in the region—something many in here have called for, and I support, including getting the Iranians and Syrians into dialog.

Last week, the Iraqi council approved the foundation of a hydrocarbon bill, oil revenue sharing with the people and provinces of Iraq. That is soon to go to that assembly. Think of something; the people of Iraq are on the doorstep of having equity for the very first time in their history.

There are also disappointing things that have happened. Yes, we wish we were home with a victory already. But we have accomplished a lot, and we are this close to accomplishing the ultimate goal, which is a peaceful democracy in Iraq, terrorism without a sanctuary, and a statement that people are more important than power and dictators and terror.

The United States is the country that has, in history, led and today needs to lead as well. I encourage our colleagues, as we get into this 9/11 debate, let's not forget about the debate we had on Iraq. We ought to send a clear message of support to our troops, understanding that we may differ on the policy. It should be clear and precise that this Congress and this country will see to it that our men and women have the finances and resources to carry out the orders to which they are responsible and they take on without any reservation.

I began my remarks by acknowledging my friend, Zell Miller, and his 75th birthday and all of the lessons I have learned from him. He preceded me in this Senate, and I extend to him a belated birthday wish today in this speech. I also want us to be reminded of Zell Miller's many speeches on the U.S. Marine Corps, service to our country, patriotism, and commitment. Zell Miller knew as a soldier, he knew as the Governor of a State commanding the National Guard, and as a member of the Senate that while there may be political differences on the end result, there should be no difference in the support for the men and women who defend us and fight for freedom every day.