

the orders given. We offer our bodies and minds, but sacrifice our voices. Our voice is in our vote. Last November, we voted for a Congress that would halt the disastrous Iraq War....

Some of us are on our first tour, some our second or third, and for one of us, fifth. We have done our duty, and will continue to do so until our obligation is complete. Upon completion of our obligation, we hope to close this unhappy chapter in our lives and move forward....

Listening to the ongoing debate in the news, and the conflicting views of our lawmakers, we hear again and again accusations by one side of the other side's desire to undercut the troops. We see these accusations as moral blackmail. For it is overwhelmingly clear from all of our experiences that despite the unpopularity of this war, the American people have provided unfaltering moral support to the men and women of the military. We implore lawmakers to abandon these hollow accusations, and to focus on the national interest as a whole. We earnestly hope for the enactment of the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group, particularly those concerning the de-escalation of the war and direct diplomatic engagement of Syria and Iran. We encourage Congress to obstruct the escalation of this war by any means possible.

Continuing to read from the letter, these soldiers said:

Since the tragic events of September 11, 2001, we have become painfully aware of our own vulnerability. We have spent vast resources preparing for unknown disaster, fighting an enemy that is ubiquitous, but not clearly defined. We are fighting the specter of fear. This is an internal struggle that we must reconcile. Our vision of the future has grown clouded and ominous. We face a situation in Iraq that leaves us with little hope for a satisfying outcome. As a nation, we must recover from the trauma of 9/11 and abandon the misguided policies we have pursued in its wake. Using the military as our primary foreign policy tool has isolated us and fueled worldwide resentment of us, and has not increased our sense of security. Haltng the Iraq war is America's opportunity to change direction, to reengage the world, and discourage terrorism and extremism by showing the world the ingenuity of our people and our commitment to freedom and democracy.

These are the written words of soldiers now serving in Iraq.

The American people want our troops out of Iraq. The Congress has said very clearly that we want our military to refocus on Osama bin Laden and his terrorist bases in Afghanistan. The President has said he will veto this bill. His administration has asserted that adding funds for caring for our wounded veterans, for rebuilding the gulf coast, for securing the homeland, and for agricultural disaster assistance is playing politics. What nonsense. With approval of this bill, Congress will have appropriated \$448 billion for the war in Iraq, including \$38 billion for rebuilding Iraq. Certainly if we can spend \$38 billion on rebuilding Baghdad, we can spend money on rebuilding the gulf coast, taking care of our veterans and protecting our agricultural economy.

I hope that the President will drop his rhetoric and instead work with Congress to craft a responsible plan to

transition our forces from Iraq and refocus on bin Laden and his base of operations.

Instead of demonizing the Congress and engaging in rhetorical finger-pointing, the President ought to work with Congress on legislation that is in the best interests of the country. I want to thank Senator COCHRAN, Senator MURRAY, Senator REID, and Senator McCONNELL for their efforts this week in moving this bill through the Senate. I also want to thank the Appropriations Committee staff, including Terry Sauvain, Charles Kieffer, Peter Rogoff, B.G. Wright, Kate Fitzpatrick, Bruce Evans, Blake Thompson, and all of the Subcommittee staffs for their hard work on this bill.

Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. BROWNBACK. 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. BROWNBACK. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to speak in morning business for up to 15 minutes.

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

(The remarks of Mr. BROWNBACK pertaining to the introduction of S. 1036 are located in today's RECORD under "Statements on Introduced Bills and Joint Resolutions.")

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. COLEMAN. 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.

REINTEGRATION OF RETURNING TROOPS

Mr. COLEMAN. Madam President, I rise to speak about an issue that is very dear to me and my home State of Minnesota: the reintegration of our returning soldiers into their families and their communities.

I begin my remarks by citing a letter to the editor published in the St. Paul Pioneer Press last Saturday by Army National Guard Chaplain MAJ John Morris. The letter is titled, "It Takes Communities To Bring Soldiers All The Way Home." I ask unanimous consent to have the letter printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

IT TAKES COMMUNITIES TO BRING SOLDIERS ALL THE WAY HOME
(By John Morris)

[From the TwinCities.com—Pioneer Press, Mar. 17, 2007]

I am watching the growing furor over the shortcomings in the Veterans Administration system and the fallout from Walter Reed Army Hospital with growing alarm. I am concerned that we are going to fix the crisis and forget the problem.

The problem is how to help warriors, and their families, successfully reintegrate back into our communities, and their homes, after combat. A portion of that problem is health care related. For a majority of combat vets, however, only a small part of their re-integration challenge has to do with health care for physical injuries. Behavioral and mental health are bigger issues. And for most, the biggest challenge is relational: rebuilding marriages, reconnecting with children, rejoining friends, rejoining the global economy, getting back to the communities of faith we left, etc.

The problem with focusing on the VA is we may well fix the VA only to convince ourselves that the reintegration of our combat veterans is a government program, not a community process. If we expect the government to take care of everything, we will have failed our combat veterans and their families as well as ourselves.

We have sent our precious men and women to war. The VA can't bring them home. Only we can. We have a moral obligation to insure that all of our combat veterans come all the way home to their families, their jobs, their schools and their communities.

A government program can't do that. A community can.

That means each of us needs to roll up our sleeves and do more than castigate the VA. It means the following:

If you are a health care provider in Minnesota, do the right thing: Become a Tricare provider. Tricare is the insurance the government issues to mobilized reservists and guardsmen.

Two-thirds of Minnesota health care providers are not Tricare providers. The result: We do not have an in-patient chemical dependency treatment center in Minnesota that is a Tricare provider. We have a dire shortage of behavioral mental health providers who are Tricare providers. The VA can't fix this we can.

If you are an educator, sign up for an Operation Military Kids workshop and learn about the daunting challenges our 7,000 Minnesota military kids face when their parent marches off to war, and when they return. Help our children while we are at war. Parent educators, we need you to offer classes in every school district in Minnesota, for military families. We need your help in learning how to parent our children again.

If you are a member of the clergy, learn all you can about the toll combat takes on marriages, families, mothers and fathers of military personnel. You don't have to support the foreign policy to pray for us while we are in harm's way and to visit our parents, our spouses and our children while we are gone. When we come home, we need your help in putting our marriages, families and lives back together.

If you are an employer, please give my spouse some grace. She or he is juggling a job, a family, a home and a huge heartache. There are no laws to protect them while we are at war, as there are to protect my job when I come back. They struggle mightily and may need some special attention and some extra time off. Do the right thing—help them.

If you are a social service provider, learn all you can about combat operational stress,

the challenges of reintegration for combat veterans and the impact of war on the family system. You are our “first call for help;” don’t fail us because you choose not to invest in your professional development.

If you are a politician, don’t politicize the shortfalls in the VA or the military medical system. We aren’t pawns in an election cycle; we are your constituents, and we are counting on you to fix the problems. Energize the community on our behalf to do right by us. We’re not asking for showy programs. We are asking for tangible signs of support in terms of services offered.

If you are our neighbors, and you are, don’t “victimize” us. Most combat veterans come home without PTSD, mental disorders, physical wounds or destroyed lives. We generally readjust well and go on to live productive lives. Expect great contributions to society from us. We won’t disappoint you. Challenge us to greatness; we know how to serve.

Watch over our families while we are gone. Extend a warm welcome home when we return. Walk with us through the months of readjustment, and make a place for us in the community.

If we are among the tragic few who come home physically or mentally wounded, help us by connecting us to local, county, state and federal resources.

Certainly, address the problems with the VA, the military medical system and other systemic issues that face us.

But, above all bring us all the way home. A program can’t do that. You can.

Mr. COLEMAN. Major Morris is a member of the Minnesota Army National Guard. There are currently 2,600 members of the Minnesota National Guard serving in Iraq as members of the 134th Brigade Combat Team. They were deployed to Iraq last March after spending 6 months at Camp Shelby, MN. When I visited them in December in Fallujah, Taqqadum, and Tallil, Iraq they were all very excited to return home this month to see their families—some of them returning home for the first time since September of 2005.

But they didn’t get to come home this month. On January 10 of this year it was announced the 134th would be extended 125 days, hopefully returning home sometime later this summer. With this additional deployment time, the deployment of the 134th in Iraq will be 35 days longer than that of any other unit that has served in Iraq. That is a long time.

It is interesting to talk to our National Guard folks. They are not complaining. They are doing their duty. But I know it weighs heavily on my fellow Minnesotans, on their families, and those of us who get to represent them in the Congress.

When the extension was announced, I shared the great frustration over the fact that our young men and women would not be coming home as scheduled, and we had deep concerns about the way it was noticed. I think the families heard about it before the folks in Iraq heard about it, and heard about it watching a press conference. The Army apologized. Certainly we have to do better when issues such as this come up. I struggled to find the best way forward as the troops I had visited weeks earlier would not be coming home until much later than they had planned. I struggled to find ways to ease the hurt.

But now the initial shock and frustration of the extension has subsided, and it is time to address the challenges they and their families have faced since their deployment and the challenges they will face when they return home.

In the last few weeks, many of my colleagues have taken to the floor and to the airwaves to speak about the commitment we must make to our returning heroes. There aren’t many things we can agree on here in this body, but I think all 100 of us agree we need to support our troops when they come home just as much as we support them when they are defending our Nation and our freedom abroad. We need to support our troops and their families before, during, and after their deployments.

So the question is not if we should maintain this strong commitment to our returning warriors but, rather, how. How do we provide the highest level of medical care to our soldiers, our veterans? How do we assist military families that are readjusting to their loved one returning home—a difficult readjustment. How do we streamline the bureaucratic challenges our soldiers face? How do we sustain our support over the long haul? As these young men and women are returning home, some of them are badly wounded. How do we sustain our support over the long haul? As Chaplain Morris states in his letter:

If you are a politician, don’t politicize the shortfalls in the VA or the military medical system. We aren’t pawns in an election cycle; we are your constituents and we are counting on you to fix the problems. Energize the community on our behalf to do right by us. We’re not asking for showy programs. We are asking for tangible signs of support in terms of services offered.

The challenges our returning heroes face are not going to be solved simply by throwing more money at the problem. They aren’t going to be solved by finger pointing and playing the blame game. They are going to be solved with thoughtful and concentrated efforts aimed at fixing the problems we face one at a time.

I have been seeking answers to these challenges and others by reaching out to leaders in my State on this issue and the leadership of those involved in the VA health care system. I have had long conversations with directors of VA hospitals in Minneapolis, St. Cloud, and Fargo, ND to see if there is anything we can do to help deliver the highest level of care. One of the good things that came out of the horrible stories we heard about what was happening in one of the outpatient buildings at Walter Reed is in my State and the Chair’s State, folks went back and they did a room-by-room review to find the failings and the things that needed to be fixed. How can we improve the quality of our care? I can tell you in Minnesota, folks have a high degree of confidence in the care at our VA facilities in Minneapolis and in St. Cloud, and we count Fargo as ours because it services so many Minnesotans.

I met with veterans organizations, including the VFW, the Minnesota American Legion, and the Minnesota Paralyzed Veterans, to hear their questions and concerns. Most importantly, I spent some time over the last few weeks touring my State to meet with military families, to talk to active-duty soldiers, National Guard members, and veterans. Many of them have a loved one stationed overseas, while others have a loved one who has just returned. There are tremendous support groups in our State for those who have a lot of pressures. Many families didn’t know each other beforehand and they have united now with a special bond. A lot of them were saying they and their husbands didn’t know each other before the deployment, but now we are friends. So they have now a new kind of almost extended family. I wish to say that the good Lord gave us all two ears and one mouth and it is amazing what can happen when we use them in that fashion.

I wish to take some time to talk about some of the many concerns I hear from folks across my State and how we can better address them. More than anything else, one thing has been made clear by our military families: Education benefits for our soldiers continue to be of paramount importance.

Unfortunately, the National Guard and Army Reserve are still operating under an antiquated system of education benefits that does not reflect the additional and critical role they are playing in the global war on terror. Under current policy, our National Guard and Reserve soldiers have to use their education benefits while they are actually in the National Guard and Reserve. I had the mother of a National Guard soldier visit my office in Washington and tell my staff about her son’s particular situation. Her son had been in the National Guard for almost 6 years. His 6-year investment ends in September of this year. In 6 years he has been deployed to Bosnia and now Iraq with substantial “uptraining” time spent away from home within the United States.

Because of his extension, he will not be able to finish school before his enlistment ends, and because National Guard troops cannot use their education benefits after separating from the service, we will leave him on his own to find a way to pay for the remainder of his studies and his graduate school, should he choose that path; all this after serving extended time on active duty defending our country.

There is a bill in the Senate to correct this discrepancy. It is my honor to join Senator LINCOLN on her Total Force Education Assistance Enhancement and Integration Act. That is a mouthful, but it is important. This bill would allow National Guard and Reserve troops to use their education benefits up to 10 years from the time they separate from their service. It also increases their benefits commensurate with their time on active duty. This is

a good start to adjusting education benefits in a changing environment.

Another concern I heard during this listening session was about the difficulty our troops are having applying for college when they are overseas. Many of our troops want to begin their education, but going through the college application process is hard enough if you are working on your home computer in your living room. It is even harder if you are stationed 7,000 miles away from home with limited access to phone, e-mail, or free time for that matter.

We need to find a way to help our deployed soldiers utilize their education benefits by helping them through the difficult application process. Not only will this improve participation in the program, it will improve our soldiers' morale and their ability to reintegrate when returning home. One of the good things I heard is that some of the colleges are getting this. Some in the State system and now even the private college system in Minnesota are understanding these challenges and are becoming more flexible on the public side, and I applaud this kind of public-private partnership.

A final note on education is the lack of benefit structure or program for spouses—for spouses of those who are now in the Armed Forces.

With over 2,600 Minnesotans currently stationed in Iraq, we have hundreds of military spouses working to keep their families together while their loved one is overseas. Many of them, by the way, were going to school, but now their husband or wife is overseas and they have to take a job and give up their education. They have less income, but they have to take care of their families. One spouse told me at one of our listening sessions she had been both a single mom and a military wife while trying to go to school, and being a single mom was much easier.

We need to look at ways to extend benefits to military spouses who are working at home to keep their families together while they try to continue their education. We all know the importance of investment in education. Why should we deny benefits to military spouses who have sacrificed so much?

Another critical issue I continue to hear about is health care for our returning soldiers and veterans. Again, we were all shocked to see the conditions revealed at Walter Reed Hospital at the end of February, and I am pleased those who are responsible are being held to account. While the conditions at the outpatient facility at Walter Reed are being fixed, it is a good time to revisit the overall structure of health care for our troops and our veterans. I share the concern Chaplain Morris states in his letter to the Pioneer Press that we will: "Fix the crisis and forget the problems" in regard to health care and what I hope can be done to fix them.

I continue to hear about the difficulties associated with Tricare. On my visits around the State, I learned that

only 40 percent of healthcare providers in Minnesota are Tricare providers. Though this is an improvement from the past, it is still unacceptable. From our healthcare providers, we hear that the program is painful and cumbersome to work with, and it costs them significant amounts in staff time and energy to navigate the paperwork. For our military families, especially those in rural areas, traveling to a provider that will take Tricare is often a lengthy process that is simply not possible.

We need to look at ways to streamline the Tricare system, and, if necessary, further incentivize providers to accept Tricare.

Another problem I heard from my visits around the State is the inability of returning troops to have marriage counseling covered by their benefit plans. Under current regulations, Tricare does not cover the counseling that is often necessary when our warriors return to their homes and families. Many of our troops have been deployed for extended periods of time, and when they return home, it is difficult to readjust into life with their families.

If a returning soldier wanted to receive marriage counseling, for instance, they must go to their family doctor and get a referral for mental health issues caused by marriage. Then, after substantial effort and delay, it becomes possible for a soldier to act on the referral for stress and mental health concerns and see a marriage and family therapist. We have to do better than this for our returning warriors.

Another major issue we confront with Tricare is the lack of Tricare-certified Chemical Dependency Treatment Centers. Because of the burdensome certification process for these centers, we have 257 Chemical Dependency Treatment Centers that are certified by the State of Minnesota but not a single one of them is certified by Tricare. So if any of our returning heroes comes home and develops a problem with substance abuse, there is not a single place in Minnesota they can go for help. This is a critical oversight which needs to be corrected.

Another issue we need to be prepared to handle is post traumatic stress disorder, PTSD. We all know PTSD is going to be an issue we will face for years to come as more of our soldiers return from abroad. And if we are committed to dealing with it, we need to be committed to the facilities and the people who will be working to cure the disorder on a daily basis.

One way we can do this is to incentivize mental health care professionals to join our veterans and military hospital system. I have learned in my outreach across the State that it is difficult to recruit these professionals, especially qualified psychiatrists, to VA and military hospitals in rural areas. I have always said that the quality of your healthcare should not depend on your ZIP Code, and this is especially true for our veterans and military families.

We also need to make sure we have adequate facilities for the influx of participation in veterans' programs for the next few years. While most of the veterans I have spoken with over the past months have told me that the care they receive at the facilities in Minnesota is nothing short of excellent, we need to plan for the strain an increasing number of veterans will have on our facilities that are operating near capacity.

Finally, I would like to address the importance of a comprehensive strategy for reintegrating our returning heroes into society. Quite frankly, this is bigger than any one single issue confronting our veterans and military families, but it encompasses everything I have talked about so far today.

In my home State of Minnesota, the National Guard has developed an innovative program known as Beyond the Yellow Ribbon to conduct reintegration academies for the families and their loved ones who are returning from Iraq. We have watched with great pleasure as this program has helped countless families deal with the everyday challenges that are not touched by Washington rhetoric. Through this program, we have been able to engage our families, our communities, and most importantly, our returning heroes, to ensure that they are comfortably shifting back to life out of the combat zone.

I will continue to work with our Minnesota National Guard and the families, communities, and veterans across our State so that we can continue this program and use the experience we gain from it to benefit our Nation as a whole.

Inscribed on the base of the Korean War Memorial is the following: "Our nation honors her sons and daughters who answered the call to defend a country they never knew and a people they never met." These words ring true today as so many of our service men and women are fighting overseas in the war on terror.

We need to make sure the sacrifice they make is met by a commitment here to do all we can to ease their reentry and take care of their concerns as they return.

We need to provide support for these soldiers. We need to provide support for their families. And we need to do it before, during, and after they return from abroad. It is not about rhetoric, and it is not about politics. It is about a commitment to listen and a commitment to get things done. I look forward to working with my colleagues to this end during the coming months and years.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Ohio is recognized.

TRADE AGREEMENTS

Mr. BROWN. Madam President, last month, at a Senate Agriculture Committee hearing, Rhonda Stewart, a single mother from Hamilton, OH, Butler