Mr. REED. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that upon completion of my remarks, Senator ALEXANDER of Tennessee be recognized for 20 minutes.

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

SUPPLEMENTAL APPROPRIATIONS

Mr. REED. Madam President, the emergency appropriations bill passed by the Senate this morning is urgently needed for our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, for our wounded veterans, and for scores of Americans facing natural disasters on the homefront.

I commend Chairman BYRD and Senator COCHRAN for their hard work and close collaboration. As the acting chairman of the Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Subcommittee, I also wish to thank Senator HUTCHISON and her able staff, along with my committee staff, for the help they gave in crafting the portions of the supplemental which dealt with military construction and veterans affairs.

The total for military construction and veterans affairs in this supplemental is $6.548 billion. It includes in title I $1.644 billion for military construction. Also contained in this section is a proviso restricting the obligation of $280 million until the Secretary of Defense certifies that none of the funds will be used for the purpose of establishing permanent U.S. military bases in Iraq. I think that is an important point to clarify.

Title II of the recommendation includes a total of $4.9 billion for military construction and also for activities at the Department of Veterans Affairs. This includes $3.137 billion to restore funding for BRAC, which is very important to reset our forces as they are returned from overseas and to help reconfigure all of the services. This fully funds the request of the Department of Defense for fiscal year 2007 for this account and will keep the BRAC process on track.

Because the costs of the war are not associated strictly with activities on the battlefield, the recommendation includes $1.767 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs.

In crafting the VA portion of this bill, we targeted the funding specifically for purposes of building capacity to deal with the influx of OEF and OIF veterans, hiring claims adjudicators and leveraging technology to expedite benefit claims, and upgrading existing VA facilities.

The VA health care system is one of the best in the world. It has specialties in a number of areas, including spinal cord injury and blind rehabilitation. Because of these specialties, the VA has become a great resource for the treatment of troops wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, due to the nature of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan, coupled with the advances in battlefield medicine, both the DOD health care system and the VA health care system are treating more military personnel with complex and multiple wounds and particularly traumatic brain injuries.

In response to this, in 2005, the Congress provided funding to the Department of Veterans Affairs to establish polytrauma centers. The funding contained in this bill builds on the success of these centers by providing a total of over $163 million in polytrauma care for services ranging from establishing more level 1 comprehensive polytrauma centers to creating polytrauma residential transition rehabilitation programs, to upgrading the entire polytrauma network system.

The bill also adds $150 million for enhancements to readjustment counseling, substance abuse programs, and mental health treatment capacity. These are specialty areas that the VA will need to continue to expand to deal with readjustment issues facing veterans returning from the war zone. In order to begin making progress toward deficiencies identified by the VA's facilities condition assessment and to prevent a possible Walter Reed Building 18 situation, the recommendation includes $550 million in nonrecurring maintenance and $356 million in minor construction.

In addition to funding provided to the Department, the supplemental also includes a general provision directing the National Academy of Public Administration to conduct an independent analysis of the management, structure, and processes that are in place at the VA with regard to providing health care to active duty and veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as providing benefits to veterans of these conflicts. This study will assist the VA and Congress in identifying the cumbersome bureaucratic redtape that far too many of our soldiers go through in their transition to the VA.

The bill also includes a provision requiring the Congressional Budget Office to conduct a budget study of the current and future long-term budget impacts of OEF and OIF on the Department of Veterans Affairs. We know with a number of these young men and women who have been severely injured—many with brain injuries and likely lifespans of 50 or 60 more years—that we will have to provide long-term, consistent, robust funding. We should identify that number now and provide that continuing support for the next several decades.

This supplemental marks the continuing high priority the Senate places on ensuring that yesterday's, today's, and tomorrow's soldiers are cared for in the highest manner once they have done their duty and once they have come home to America.

Let me make one other point. I was somewhat disappointed in this bill because I was attempting to include an amendment to rehabilitate a levee system in Woonsocket, RI, to ensure it is up to Federal standards.

This amendment would have provided $3.25 million for the city of Woonsocket to rehabilitate the levee, including replacing important gate cables. The present cables are about 40 years old. According to the Army Corps of Engineers, failure of a cable during operation could result in an uncontrolled discharge downstream of the dam. Woonsocket is an old industrial city, densely populated, and these levees protect that city.

The Woonsocket project was built between December 1963 and April 1967 by the Army Corps of Engineers. The Corps estimates that cumulative flood control benefits for the Blackstone Valley project are more than $82 million. This project in place protects at least $82 million worth of property.

Given the importance of this flood protection to Woonsocket and communities on the Blackstone River, I believe Federal assistance is warranted to protect life and property.

These deficiencies were discovered as a direct result of Katrina. We learned in Katrina there were projects, levees that were unsatisfactory. They failed and they caused billions of dollars of damages. Being forewarned—I hope we are forewarned—that having studied these problems, I hope we can now come together in Congress to provide the resources and help these local communities, many of which do not have the resources to sustain this kind of immediate and rapid expenditure.

A recent assessment by the Corps found that the Woonsocket levee and dam is in need of repairs. The Corps has given the city until February 2008 to make these repairs, otherwise the project will no longer be eligible for Federal construction funding through the Army Corps of Engineers.

In addition, if these repairs are not made, the Federal Emergency Management Agency could, and likely will, determine the levee no longer offers adequate flood protection and could require residents to buy flood insurance, which is a very expensive proposition. The city of Woonsocket is economically distressed. It needs Federal assistance. There are other communities around the country that might be in a similar situation.

The devastation wrought by Katrina in New Orleans shows us what could happen. Now we have the knowledge—the foreknowledge—and now we have to act. I am disappointed we did not act in this situation to protect this complex of levees.

I will continue to bring this issue to the attention of my colleagues again and again because I believe that with this knowledge, action is required—prompt, appropriate action—to ensure this community is protected.

I wish to make a final point because my colleague has been very patient and very considerate in allowing me to go ahead.

We have included in this supplemental language with respect to our

policy in Iraq which I think is important, indeed, perhaps historical. It recognizes that we should begin a phased redeployment of our forces. It recognizes that we also must maintain certain missions in Iraq—counterterrorism operations, training Iraqi security forces, and protecting our forces. But it does emphasize we should begin on a date certain going forward to take out our forces at a pace and a level decided by operational commanders. There is a goal—not a fixed deadline—but a goal that our combat forces—those not performing these residual missions—should be out of Iraq by March 31, 2008.

This is a solution proposed essentially by the Iraq Study Group. It has been recommended, endorsed by the public sentiment of the American people by a wide margin. It allows us to continue missions that are critical to the safety and security of not only ourselves but of the region, but it does, we hope, disengage us from a potential and sometimes very real civil war in Iraq.

I hope that in the deliberations with the House, we can come up with a measure that combines the best elements of both versions of the spending bill. I hope we can bring this to the President and discuss it with him. It does represent, I think, the sentiment of the American people. It does represent not only the sentiment that we change course in Iraq, but, as this budget does, we fully fund our forces in Iraq.

I am hopeful we can make progress and that we can send to the President a bill, after discussing it with him, that could be signed rather than vetoed. That is my hope at this moment.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. TESTER). The Senator from Tennessee.

Mr. ALEXANDER. Mr. President, I believe I am to be recognized for 20 minutes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. That is correct.

THE GREAT AMERICAN OUTDOORS

Mr. ALEXANDER. Mr. President, I wish to make remarks about three matters of importance to the great American outdoors, all of which have been happening this week and which are important for our country.

First, I wish to comment on a provision the Senate struck from the Iraq supplemental appropriations bill this morning when we were considering it. We struck it in a procedural move based upon a point of order I raised. The provision was a billboard amnesty proposal that was inserted into the middle of legislation that was supposed to be in support of our troops.

I called it a billboard amnesty proposal because it suddenly would have treated as legal billboard sites that have been illegal for 40 years and effectively would have gutted the Highway Beautification Act of 1965, which is one of the legacies of a former First Lady, Lady Bird Johnson.

I think this deserves a little attention and a little explanation before we leave it because it was a full-scale assault on one of the most important pieces of legislation that helps keep our country beautiful at a time when we are growing and struggling to preserve open spaces.

There are three problems with this billboard amnesty proposal, as I saw it. First, the proposal would have done for the billboard industry something the law doesn't allow for churches, doesn't allow for schools, doesn't allow for businesses, doesn't allow for any other structures that since 1965 have been on illegal or nonconforming sites.

This is what was happening. In 1965, at the urging of President Johnson and Mrs. Johnson, the Nation decided it would restrict billboards, both in terms of their location and their size. As we often do with legislation, we looked ahead and said the billboards could not be located in some places and had to be within a certain size. As the interstate system grew across the country, much of it is relatively free of large billboards or has a limited number of billboards.

The question then arose about what do we do about the billboards and signs that were already up prior to 1965. The decision was made by the Congress at that time to say we will leave those signs up, we will grandfather them in. As long as they stay up, they are fine, but when they fall down, they will be gone. In other words, we have been waiting for 40 years for those sites to die a natural death. That was the compromise in 1965. Many of these billboards are large billboards and are in places we don't want—rural areas, scenic areas across the country—but that was the decision we made.

The problem with this legislation, as it came into the supplemental appropriations bill for troops, is it said suddenly all the billboards in 13 States that are on sites where it would be illegal to put a new billboard were suddenly legal. In other words, it was instant amnesty, overnight amnesty for illegal billboards.

There are a lot of billboards like this. For example, in the State of Tennessee, there are nearly 3,000 billboards on sites where they would not be permitted under current law, but when those billboards fall down, they can't ever put them back up. We have known that for 40 years. In North Carolina, there are probably 2,600 illegal sites, in the sense that when the billboards wear out, fall down, act of God knocks them out, they can't be put back up. In South Carolina, there are 2,200; in Florida, 6,000; in Oklahoma, 1,400; and in Alabama, 912. In a moment, I will put in the list of those in each State.

What the provision that we struck from the bill said was, because there were some hurricanes down South, in all these places where billboards on illegal sites were knocked down by a hurricane, they could be put back up. That raises a lot of questions. What is the difference between a billboard being destroyed by a hurricane and being destroyed by lightning, or it becoming water damaged, or it falling down because it is rotting, or some other act of God?

The whole idea in 1965 was when the billboards wore out, or an act of God destroyed them, they were gone. They were gone. We have been waiting for 40 years for that to happen. So in comes the billboard lobby and, suddenly, we have first a proposal to exempt all these billboards across the country—instant billboard amnesty for all the billboards in every State—even though the hurricanes were in the South.

Finally, that original proposal from the billboard industry got narrowed down to 13 States, which included Tennessee—we don't have a lot of hurricanes in Tennessee—and Kentucky. Hurricanes in Kentucky?

I think what is happening here is the billboard lobby is doing its best to reclaim all those billboards that have been illegal for 40 years by saying because of this hurricane or that drought or that lightning strike, suddenly we want them rebuilt in every State. That is a pretty good thing for all the billboard companies, because by and large they have bought them up from all the small farmers. They weren't worth very much because the owners knew when they fell down, the billboards could never be replaced. So what could be better for the big billboard lobby than to suddenly get instant amnesty for all these sites and instant riches overnight for those companies?

I don't blame them for trying, but I think the Senate was exactly right to say, wait a minute, we can't do this. Not only is it an affront to the troops to be cavalierly talking about a wet kiss to the billboard lobby in the middle a debate when we are supposed to be helping the troops in Iraq, I think it is an affront to Lady Bird Johnson and all those across America who, for 40 years, have tried to keep our country, about which we sing, beautiful. One of our greatest values is we sing and believe in America the beautiful.

This motion was put into the legislation by the Democratic leader. I want to make very clear I don't question his motives, and I respect what he does. I appreciate the courteous way in which he treated the discussion he and I had on this. I told him if there were some injustices that have to do with States in the South that have been somehow unevenly treated by the law or impacted by the hurricanes in a way nobody anticipated, I would be glad to work with him and other members of the Environment and Public Works Committee, on which I serve, to correct those injustices. But the Senator from Florida, Mr. MARTINEZ, was a cosponsor of my amendment to get rid of this provision. The Senator from Alabama, Mr. SHELBY, was a cosponsor of my amendment to stop this billboard amnesty. So who is the billboard lobby trying to protect here, when the Senators from those States—Tennessee,