

the payroll tax. Senator Moynihan was willing to do that. Let's talk about eliminating the present system of income tax and replacing it with a flat tax. Instead of saying we want to use the tax system to make economic decisions, using the tax system as the tiller to steer the economy, let's adopt the radical notion that the purpose of taxes is to raise money to run the Government, and then ask ourselves, how can we raise it in as simple a manner as possible, as efficient a manner as possible, as competitive a manner as possible, so that we recognize the reality in which we live—a tax system that is geared to an expanding economy rather than shrinking one, a tax system that is geared to the information age rather than the industrial age, and a tax system that is geared to a worldwide economy rather than one centered within our borders.

I am already having conversations with some of my Democratic friends on this issue. I think tax day is the day to talk about it. We disagree as to whether the President's tax cuts should be extended. I voted for them. I think they probably should be. But I am willing to scrap the whole thing, if my friends across the aisle will make a deal with us whereby we say: Let's start with a clean sheet of paper and produce a tax system that is geared to the realities of the economic circumstances we face. I hope in this Congress we can move in that direction.

I yield the floor.

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

#### WORKING TOGETHER

Mr. THOMAS. Mr. President, I rise to talk about a couple of topics. Certainly we have a lot of issues facing us. We have a lot of things to do. Quite frankly, we have been moving rather slowly over the last several months. We have had one bill signed by the President. We need to decide how we are going to move forward. The leader was talking about the Republicans holding up bills, and so on. We need to understand that we are close enough in this Senate on numbers and voting that we are going to have to have some agreements on things before we lay them out. Neither side is going to be able to say, Here is the way we are going, because it is close. We do have different views. When there is legislation pending, the minority side has amendments they wish to offer.

On the other hand, I admit that sometimes the minority side wants to hold things up, and we can't do that either. So I hope we will look for a little more. I don't expect us to come together with everything, but we need to come together with a system which allows us to talk about our differences and to reach some agreements.

I wish to comment on a couple of issues. The first one, of course, is the one that almost everyone has on their

mind today, as the Senator from Utah indicated. This is tax day. Americans have reached deep into their pockets today to pay their Federal income tax. At the same time, we are straining to understand the Tax Code that governs how much we owe. It is very complicated. All of us understand that, particularly today, or as we ask for an extension, because it is so complicated and so difficult to actually arrive at a conclusion with respect to taxes.

I am not sure it has to be that way. The Senator from Utah has described some changes that ought to be made. We talk about that always at tax time, and then we seem to get away from it when tax time is over. We ought to stay in there and ask: How can we do this job? There have to be taxes paid. Obviously, there has to be some fairness among the taxpayers. But does it need to be this complicated? Does it need to be this technical? We find ourselves with a tax program that is designed by literally hundreds of programs that are more put in place to affect behavior and to affect how things are going to happen than they are for taxes. We will give tax relief for this, if you will do this. If you do this, we will give you tax relief over here. The next thing you know, we have such a complicated plan.

The average American has a great deal of trouble understanding and complying with the Tax Code. The vast majority of the taxpayers use tax preparers, even in the simplest of tax situations. We in Congress get frustrated with the lack of compliance with the Code; i.e., the tax gap that we hear so much about. It is apparently substantial in terms of the amount of money involved. But the average American is as frustrated by sincerely trying to comply with the system in most cases. I understand the tax gap. Maybe there are some people who are actually trying to avoid taxes. But often the tax gap is simply because of the complexity.

The good news, of course, is the economy is strong. That is good news. The economic policies of the last 6 years are working and have continued to contribute to the growth of the economy, to encourage investment, and to encourage job creation. Our economy has added jobs for 43 straight months; 7.8 million since August 2003. This is good, particularly when we look at the changes in the world economy. Again, the Senator from Utah was talking about that. As we continue to grow jobs, that is a very good thing.

The economy has added jobs to the extent of 7.8 million over this period of time. The national employment rate has fallen to 4.4 percent last month. Average earnings grew 4 percent last year. The elements of the economy are good. Interestingly enough, largely because of the Iraq situation, we don't hear much about the good economy or about the good things going on in the country. That is too bad. The strong economy has resulted in stronger tax revenues in 2006.

It is important, as we talk about taxes, that we maintain progrowth taxes in economic policy, the idea of extending those tax benefits which have helped to bring about this growth is important. We are at a point where some of them will expire within the next couple of years. They are the kinds of benefits that one needs to know about before tax time so investments can and will be made because of the benefits. The policies in place are working. I don't think we ought to mess with success. At the same time, we have already passed as part of the budget an almost \$1 trillion tax increase. Additionally, the budget that was passed by the other side of the aisle increased spending and the size of Government. I am concerned about that. These policies will undo all the good that has been done over the last several years. It is kind of a game: What taxes are you going to have to beat to offset spending now and saying it doesn't need to be. But the fact is, it does. From 2008 to 2011, the budget will increase the deficit by \$440 billion and increase the gross debt by \$2.2 trillion, if we go on as is now suggested. The budget ignores the impending Medicare and Social Security crises. In fact, it would make it even worse by spending more than a trillion of the Social Security surplus.

When we talk about taxes, we also have to talk about the size, scope, and role of the Federal Government. It is time we look at some of the things we are doing and wonder why they need to be done by the Federal Government and whether, in fact, they should be done by State and local governments or, in fact, the private sector. We should not be using tax policy as a substitute for direct appropriations and encouraging behavior. That is what we have gotten into. We have talked a lot in recent years about tax reform. It is high time we put it into action, whether it is a flat tax, which is difficult to understand but is used in some places around the world—it seems to be workable—or whether it is a tax that is put on the items that people purchase which would be a little difficult to sell. An acquisition tax is one that is being talked about. But we ought to get away from the behavior tax and get back down to a simplified tax.

We need taxes. The Government has to be funded and should be funded in a fair way. But it needs to be done in a different way.

Let me move to Medicare and the noninterference issue that may be coming up very soon. That is the competition on the Part D program by having the Government do the sort of work that needs to be done in the private sector and having a change in the way this thing is operating. I think Part D, which is rather new and still being incorporated but is pretty deeply involved in participation at this point—90 percent of Medicare beneficiaries have drug coverage—is very good. Folks are saving a considerable

amount of money under the program. On average seniors are saving \$1,200 yearly on drug costs. A survey reported 80 percent of seniors are happy with the Part D benefits that went into effect recently. Folks in Wyoming are certainly telling me they like the plans that are available there. There are fewer plans available in a smaller population State than there are in some others. Nevertheless, there are plans available. They are available at the local drugstore, and they have an option of several plans from which to choose which is very important for us to maintain in the Part D program.

The costs are 30 percent lower than the original estimates, and it has caused competition. It has caused the private sector to come about with reduced estimates. That is very good. Even the expert the Democratic majority put in place to head up the Congressional Budget Office says this legislation that is proposed to have the Government do the negotiations with drug companies would not save money, according to the CBO. In an April 10 letter to Chairman BAUCUS, the CBO writes:

We anticipate that under the bill the Secretary would lack the leverage to negotiate prices under the broad range of covered Part D drugs that are more favorable than those obtained by Prescription Drug Plans under current law. Without the authority to establish a formulary or other tools to reduce drug prices, we believe that the Secretary would not obtain significant discounts from drug manufacturers across a broad range of drugs.

CBO also testified that negotiating Medicare drug prices could make costs go up for everyone else. We have to understand we need a drug program, a Medicare program for everyone. There are certain ways it would have to be done for the elderly, for the underfinanced, and so on. But the plan needs to be there for everyone.

The Government Accountability Office has said price fixing may result in limited access. You can imagine if there is negotiation on prices, some of the pharmaceutical companies are going to say: OK, we are not going to offer this drug; we won't offer that drug. Under this plan, you have alternatives and alternative programs from which you can choose to take on different ideas.

Why do we want to take away a plan that has been moving toward success and still has an opportunity for more success and change it before that opportunity has been worked through? Last week the Finance Committee, of which I am a member, held a markup to consider the pending legislation. We asked the proponents of that to come up with their plans. Frankly, they didn't have any specifics as to how this would be handled.

With just the idea we would have the Government negotiate, it sounds like, wow, we would come up with some real good stuff. The fact is—the bottom line is—I think most of us want to see the market work. When there is competi-

tion, when there are these kinds of things, it does cause the market to work.

So I think before we pass any bill, we should know and consider, find out, as clearly as we can, what impact it has on the folks. We do not want to talk too much, it seems, on the Senate floor about how that will work. I think we should talk about how it works.

I have great respect for my colleagues on the other side of the aisle, but they believe expanding the Government is the way to solve health problems. I do not agree. I do not believe Government price fixing is the answer to the question.

Current law has increased choices, has lowered prices through market competition, and that is the system we have in this country. Market competition is where we need to go. So we should let the market continue to work and say, as the saying goes, "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." So I think that is how we are challenged.

I am hopeful we can move forward. I think we have a lot of things to do. We need to get on with immigration. I do not think there is anything more important to the country than to have an immigration law that works, that we have a closed border, that we have people coming to work legitimately and legally who return after their period of work or go through the process for becoming citizens. The system we have now is not working, and we need to change that.

I think energy continues to be a factor in the future, very clearly. There is no doubt there is going to be more demand. There is no doubt there is going to be a more difficult time in acquiring energy sources from around the world. We have to depend more on our own, including alternatives. I think alternatives are a very good solution over time as we find out ways to use them and use them in the volumes that are necessary to fill our needs.

In the meantime, I think we need to be very careful to assist in developing those things we know how to do now that will make us have supplies in the interim as we wait for these alternatives to develop—coal, for example. Coal is our largest fossil resource. We know ways to have plants develop electricity from coal, where we can extract carbon, reinject the carbon, help with the climate change, and at the same time have a supply of energy we need.

So these are some of the things I guess I am a little frustrated we cannot move toward. We spend too much time hassling over some of these problems that should not take that long. We should get on with dealing with health care, get on with dealing with energy, get on with dealing with immigration, get on with dealing with spending, get on with dealing with the size of the budget. These are the real issues out there that I think the American people—and I am sure Wyoming people—are concerned about.

So I urge we move as quickly as we can, working together, so we can find

ways to move forward and solve some of the problems that are before us.

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

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

#### TRAGEDY AT VIRGINIA TECH

Mr. DURBIN. First, Mr. President, let me say that every parent remembers when their kids left the nest. There is that moment when they finally reach that age where they are off to college. I can recall when Loretta and I took our three kids off to their colleges of choice. It was kind of an emotional moment, with mixed feelings: proud they had reached this point in their lives when they were off on their own, sad that now they are leaving their little family setting that had been so familiar and so happy for so many years. But you knew if you were lucky enough as a parent to have attended college that they were facing an extraordinary personal opportunity to go to college and meet so many other students and expand their horizons and learn what it means to live on your own resources.

So that is why the tragedy of Virginia Tech is so sad, that the happy setting of college, where parents have entrusted their students to the university campus, can turn into a scene of horror as we found yesterday in Blacksburg, VA. We are all stunned and heartsick over the staggering and incomprehensible loss of life yesterday. We offer our deepest condolences to the families who lost precious sons and daughters in that shooting rampage, and to the victims who survived it.

As police search for clues, I hope those of us in Congress will come together to also search honestly for answers about what can be done to prevent another tragedy. This has been billed as the worst massacre in American history on a school or college campus. I can still recall 8 years ago in the room behind me, the cloakroom, when we heard of the Columbine shooting when 15 students lost their lives. In Blacksburg, the estimate is somewhere between 32 or 33 who have lost their lives. It is unspeakable to think about the placid setting of that college campus turning into a bloody scene yesterday morning. Now we will go about the grim task of identifying those who were injured and burying the remains of the ones who were killed as the Nation grieves with Virginia Tech University.