

There was a time when this Congress cared enough about students in this country to create a program called the National Defense Education Act. It was a time when Sputnik had been launched. We were afraid of the Soviet Union and what it might do with its satellite capacity, and Congress, for the first time, said let's create a student loan program, the first time ever.

I know a little about this program because I happened to be one of the recipients, one of the borrowers. I borrowed money to go to college and law school from the National Defense Education Act and paid it back after graduation at 3 percent interest. I couldn't have asked for better treatment and better consideration from those who were lending money.

Those were the early days when we were just thinking about students and education and the future of America. Now we are talking about big business, fat profits, basically indefensible compensation for the CEOs who run these companies. I hope someone is able to uncover what other fees and payments Sallie Mae's executives may be receiving to help take the company private.

Will this deal be good for students? Sure, Sallie Mae and many other lenders have long touted that they have been able to offer better deals for students through loan fee and interest rate discounts. Of course, they can offer a discount. They are obviously still making enough money off student loans. Look at their profitability. Look at what has happened to their stock price. Look at how much they are being paid. Yet they made sure the Direct Loan Program, cheaper for the Federal Government, better for the students, could not compete.

Now we know why they have been able to make money off students. The Washington Post recently reported that some lending companies with access to the National Student Loan Data System, which includes confidential information on 60 million student loan borrowers, have repeatedly searched the database in ways that violate the Federal rules on privacy. It appears the lenders were giving unauthorized users, such as marketing firms, collection agencies, and loan brokerage firms, access to this database.

Lenders are allowed to access information contained in the database only if they have the permission of the student or have a financial relationship with the student, but the Department of Education recently decided to cut off outside access to the database. Were lenders using this information gathered from the database to sell other nonrelated loan products to students? We don't know for sure, but I intend to find out. I have sent letters to the largest student loan companies asking them to reveal how many times they have accessed the database in the last 4 years and explain what they subsequently did with the information.

I am concerned about the proposed sale of Sallie Mae. A private Sallie Mae

could lead to even less information being disclosed to the public. Sure, lenders are required to provide certain information in order to participate in the Federal loan program, but we should make sure all lenders are held to the same standard of disclosure, regardless of whether the lender is a school or a nonprofit, a private or a publicly traded company.

Let me conclude by saying that tuition at 4-year public institutions has risen by 42 percent in the last 5 years. Students and their families are struggling to pay off college debt. Students are leaving college, on average, with nearly \$20,000 in debt, and many much more. We must take serious steps to help these students achieve the American Dream.

On the Democratic side of the aisle we are proposing a \$1,090 increase in the maximum Pell grant over 5 years, a cap on loan repayments at 15 percent of an individual's income, and reducing the student loan interest rate. How will we pay for it? By cutting \$22.3 billion from the lenders' subsidies, which we give to those like Sallie Mae. Sure, it is more than President Bush's proposed cut, but only a little bit, \$2.3 billion. Of course, lenders are claiming that the proposed cut goes beyond what they think is sustainable and that lenders will decide to leave the student loan business. It is difficult to be moved by these claims when a company like Sallie Mae is worth \$25 billion and its buyers are willing to pay a 50-percent premium, knowing that the lenders' subsidies will likely be cut.

It is time we return to the day where the Federal Government makes a serious investment in one of its most valuable assets, its children. The future of our country depends on it. We need to be asking those who are involved in this business of student loans to keep in mind first these students and their families.

THE RETIREMENT OF JOHN C. HICKMAN, JR.

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, one of the ways Congress maintains its contact with the American people is by the official report of the business we do. Through its recent modern history, we have published a CONGRESSIONAL RECORD so that people across this country, online and in printed form, can read the words of Senators and can follow the debate on the floor of the Senate. None of this effort would be productive or even possible were it not for those in the Office of the Official Reporters of Debates who come here and follow every word that is spoken on the floor. They make these publications possible.

Today, Jack Hickman, the Morning Business Clerk for the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD, is marking the end of his service to the Senate. In the future he will be able to listen to Senators and not remember a word. But at this point in time he has dispatched his official duties.

I know I speak for the entire Senate family, thanking Jack Hickman for his service.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. WHITEHOUSE). The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. NELSON of Florida). Without objection, it is so ordered.

VOTE EXPLANATION

Mr. ROCKEFELLER. Mr. President. I want to explain why I missed two votes early during yesterday's session, Senator DEMINT's amendment No. 930 and Senator COBURN's amendment No. 918 on S. 761, America COMPETES Act, a bill that I cosponsored. I was confident that my vote would not change the outcome, and the DeMint amendment failed by a vote of 22 to 79 and the Coburn amendment failed by a vote of 27 to 67. If I had been able to come to the floor, I would have voted against both amendments, but the outcome would have been the same.

The reason I missed the votes was that I was attending a very special hearing in the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee on mental health issues for our returning soldiers. The first panel included a recent Iraq veteran with PTSD, parents of an Iraq veteran who committed suicide after returning home, and parents of an Iraq veteran soldier who died of an overdose of his own prescription drugs while in VA care. One of the families had come from Iowa and the other from California to talk about the tragedy of each son's death and to seek ways to ensure that other families might avoid such tragedies. The Iraq veteran, a combat medic, spoke eloquently on his own problems acknowledging and treating his PTSD and the similar problems of fellow soldiers in his platoon.

One father testified that after his son died of an overdose in VA care, he and his wife went to claim his son's personal effects, and the items were handed to them in a plastic garbage bag. I was shocked and outraged. I knew that it would seem heartless to cut their panel short and not let these parents and this veteran share their full story so I volunteered to stay and listen so that the full story could be given in committee. These families already feel that parts of our Government do not care, and that is sad. I needed to stay to chair the hearing and let these courageous witnesses continue their testimony.

I am very glad I did. Despite the tragedy and grief these individuals face, they are speaking out boldly in hopes of changing the current system so other veterans and other families do

not face the same ordeals they have faced. These are stories that must be told and, more importantly, must be heard in public by those who can and must make changes. These witnesses had good ideas and suggestions on how to change the delivery system for the mental health care of our returning veterans. They spoke passionately about how soldiers are trained to serve bravely and not show weaknesses. I could not walk away from this important hearing about issues crucial to our combat veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

I am very grateful to veteran Patrick Campbell, Mr. and Mrs. Randall Omvig, and Mr. Tony Bailey for their compelling personal testimonies. I am committed to push hard for action to change the VA system for future veterans and their families.

MATTHEW SHEPARD ACT OF 2007

Mr. SMITH. Mr. President, I rise today to speak about the need for hate crimes legislation. Each Congress, Senator KENNEDY and I introduce hate crimes legislation that would add new categories to current hate crimes law, sending a signal that violence of any kind is unacceptable in our society. Likewise, each Congress I have come to the floor to highlight a separate hate crime that has occurred in our country.

On January 5, 2006, in Fairfax County, VA, Leslie Carver was charged with murder for killing Marvin Greenwell. Greenwell was one of nine gay men murdered in what was known as the “pickup murders” of 1993 and 1994. The “pickup murders” were a series of attacks against gay men in the Washington, DC area. While most of these murders remain unsolved, DNA evidence was able to link Carver to the Greenwell murder.

I believe that the Government’s first duty is to defend its citizens, to defend them against the harms that come out of hate. The Matthew Shepard Act is a symbol that can become substance. I believe that by passing this legislation and changing current law, we can change hearts and minds as well.

THE DEATH PENALTY

Mr. FEINGOLD. Mr. President, I firmly believe that the death penalty should be abolished, at all levels of government. Just a few months ago, I introduced the Federal Death Penalty Abolition Act of 2007 toward that end. The bill would abolish the death penalty at the Federal level; it would put an immediate halt to executions and forbid the imposition of the death penalty as a sentence for violations of Federal law.

I first introduced my bill in 1999, and since then only a few Members of the Senate have been willing to join me in this cause. Not too long ago, some believed that opposition to or criticism of the death penalty was politically

dangerous. But times have changed. The American people are expressing greater and greater concerns about the death penalty. A May 2006 Gallup poll reported that for the first time, when given a choice between the two sentencing options, more Americans choose the sentence of life without parole than the death penalty. The American public understands that the death penalty raises serious and complex problems.

Leaders across the country are publicly expressing their opposition to the death penalty—leaders such as Governor Corzine of New Jersey, Governor O’Malley of Maryland, and Governor Kaine of Virginia. State legislatures in Maryland, Montana, Nebraska, and New Mexico have all given serious consideration to abolition bills in the past 3 months alone. In fact, each of these four measures failed to move to the next step of the process by only one vote. In Maryland, an abolition bill failed to pass out of a Senate committee by one vote. In Montana, a bill to repeal the State’s death penalty passed the senate and then failed by just one vote to move out of a house committee. In Nebraska, the unicameral legislature failed to move an abolition bill forward by just one vote. And in New Mexico, an abolition bill passed the house and then lost in a senate committee by just one vote.

Other States have taken important steps. Pennsylvania recently created a commission to study the administration of the State’s death penalty, joining many other States that have already done so. Moratoriums on executions remain in place in Illinois and New Jersey and are under consideration in other States. New York’s death penalty was overturned by a court decision in 2004 and has not been reinstated by the legislature. Along with New York, four other States that still have the death penalty technically on their books have not executed any individuals since 1976. In addition, there are 12 States, plus the District of Columbia, whose laws do not provide for capital punishment at all. And in 11 more States, executions have been halted while the courts grapple with the issue of whether the lethal injection process used by these States is unconstitutional.

At the same time, the number of executions, the number of death sentences imposed, and the size of the death row population have decreased for the second year in a row. In the prosecutors’ offices, jury boxes, and legislative chambers, it seems that consensus is growing that it is time for a change.

In this connection, I think it is significant that the editorial boards for two major newspapers in very geographically diverse locations, Chicago and Dallas, recently called for an end to the death penalty. The Chicago Tribune’s editorial page has been a leader for years in calling for reforms to the capital punishment system, yet it has never called for abolition—until

now. Explaining its decision to renounce the death penalty, the editorial board stated, “The system is arbitrary, and the system just plain gets it wrong.” And the Dallas Morning News reversed its century-old stance on the death penalty, which is particularly notable because Texas has long been a bedrock of support for the death penalty and is the State with the dubious distinction of leading the Nation in executions. Even in a jurisdiction where support for the death penalty runs deep—even there—this strong voice of dissent rose to proclaim, “we do not believe that any legal system devised by inherently flawed human beings can determine with moral certainty the guilt of every defendant convicted of murder.”

For these editorial boards, opposition to the death penalty sprang from concerns that mistakes might be made and innocent individuals executed. Since 1976, when the death penalty was reinstated by the Supreme Court, there have been 1,060 executions across the country, including three at the Federal level. During that same time period, 123 people on death row have been exonerated and released from death row. These people never should have been convicted in the first place.

Consider those numbers. One thousand and sixty executions and one hundred and twenty-three exonerations in the modern death penalty era. Had those exonerations not taken place, had those 123 people been executed, those executions would have represented an error rate of greater than 10 percent. That is more than an embarrassing statistic; it is a horrifying one, one that should have us all questioning the use of capital punishment in this country. In fact, since 1999 when I first introduced the Federal Death Penalty Abolition Act, 46 death row inmates have been exonerated throughout the country.

The continued use of the death penalty in the United States is beneath us. The death penalty is at odds with our best traditions. It is wrong and it is immoral. The adage “two wrongs do not make a right” applies here in the most fundamental way. Our Nation has long ago done away with other barbaric punishments like whipping and cutting off the ears of criminals. Just as we did away with these punishments as contrary to our humanity and ideals, it is time to abolish the death penalty. It is not just a matter of morality. The continued viability of our criminal justice system as a truly just system that deserves the respect of our own people requires that we do so, as does our Nation’s commitment to freedom, liberty, and equality.

I applaud those leaders, be they in State government or in the media, who are stepping forward to challenge a practice that has no place in this day and age. Abolishing the death penalty will not be an easy task. It will take patience, persistence, and courage. As each new voice joins us, we become