

America. He made it very clear to me that there is a real threat of the spread of terrorism in Latin America. A major component of that threat that remains is this so-called Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, in short.

It is noteworthy that recently, when Colombian forces tracked down FARC rebels who happened to be across the border in Ecuador, they confiscated not only some computers, but they were able to confiscate 66 pounds of uranium in the hands of the FARC in Latin America. That is something that ought to cause all of us pause, and ask a lot of questions—for what purpose did they have 66 pounds of uranium in Latin America?

The FARC continues to carry out terrorist attacks throughout the region, which has caused the death of numerous innocent Colombians. They finance their terrorist activities through two of the most despicable forms of criminal activity imaginable—kidnapping and selling deadly drugs. Worst of all, the FARC continues to find sanctuary from Colombian prosecution inside neighboring countries such as Venezuela. If we do not stand firmly behind Colombia, we will see the advance of both terrorist organizations in Latin America and the smuggling of illegal drugs into the United States.

If drug smuggling were not enough to convince us of the need to support our friends and allies in Colombia, we should consider the potential boost to terrorist organizations throughout the world that might otherwise occur. Through lessons learned in the poppy fields of Afghanistan, we have been made painfully aware that the drug trade often finances global terrorism. Without a strong ally in Colombia to fight the expansion of drug cartels and terrorist-backed drug trade, global terrorism will find new financial roots from which to grow and carry out its murderous plans.

I have had the privilege of traveling to Colombia and meeting with President Uribe personally. He affirmed to me his commitment to fighting back against illegal drugs and terrorism in his own country, and he expressed a sincere desire to continue to work closely with the United States.

We have a chance now to further solidify that purpose with our best ally in Latin America. The Colombian people have heard the call to democracy and freedom and they are taking it seriously. We owe it to them and we owe it to ourselves to demonstrate that the United States is a nation they can depend on.

While there is no doubt that more can be done to fully cement the principles of equality and justice, their commitment to the very same principles and rights we hold dear in this country is undeniable. The Colombian people deserve our firm support and it is time for the United States to enter into a free trade agreement with them.

As I mentioned last year, Texas led the Nation in exports to Colombia.

Even with damaging Colombian tariffs, Texas manufacturers and farmers sold \$2.3 billion worth of products to that nation. This agreement will remove those tariffs and allow Texas manufacturers and producers to sell even more goods to this large and growing market. When this market is open, employers will be able to hire more Texans to work in good, high-paying jobs, right here at home.

I might add, at a time when we are concerned about immigration into the United States by people who cannot find work where they live, this is another way for us to deal with our border security issues and our broken immigration system, by creating trading partners who are able to create jobs in Latin America so people do not have to come to the United States to find hope and opportunity.

Already, Colombia has been granted one-way preferential access to our markets. That country has added jobs to keep pace with growing trade in the United States and now it is time to bring it full circle. This agreement will implement two-way trade and it will level the playing field for our own manufacturers and exporters and create jobs right here at home. At a time when our economy has suffered a bit of a downturn, it strikes me as something desirable, to look for ways to bolster, indeed increase, jobs right here at home. This free trade agreement would be one way to do that.

Open trade helps boost the economy and it is an essential ingredient to the growth of businesses, jobs, and our economy in general. But despite the numerous positive aspects to this agreement with Colombia, some of my colleagues continue to fight against it. In any other setting, it would be comical to lay side by side their complaints against this partnership with their vows to work with foreign governments, to supposedly improve our image in the world. While many of those on the left have vowed to work with enemies such as Hugo Chavez and sit down with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, they balk at the prospect of strengthening ties and working with our greater Latin American ally. How ironic indeed. It would seem their willingness to pander to some supersedes their desire to restore our image internationally. Shouldn't we be more willing to work with our friends and allies than our enemies?

Now, more than a year after the President first began working with Congress on this agreement, and 90 days away from our scheduled recess, the majority is outraged. Speaker PELOSI particularly is outraged that this agreement is on the fast track and the President actually asked they vote on the agreement. It is sometimes comically tragic to compare the work we do here in Washington with the jobs ordinary Americans do every day. Only in Congress would a 3-month deadline not be enough to finish a project that started about a year ago.

I hope the Speaker of the House will reconsider and not take the Colombian free trade agreement with all of its ramifications as merely a negotiating chip she can use against other projects in which she is interested. We have seen that happen already with the Foreign Intelligence Act modernization. The failure of the House to pass that bill has left us literally deaf to emerging terrorist activity that cannot be monitored because of the failure to pass the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act. Why the Speaker of the House would compound that mistake and add insult to injury now by sticking a thumb in the eye of one of our greatest trading partners and allies in Latin America frankly escapes me.

I hope she will reconsider. This free trade agreement is in the best interests of the United States. It will help create jobs here at home during a time of a softening economy. It will allow us to have a closer working partnership with one of our best allies in the region and to demonstrate to the likes of Hugo Chavez and Raoul Castro that being a friend to America produces some reward, which is closer economic ties and a better quality of life and security for all.

I yield the floor.

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

FLAT TAX

Mr. ALEXANDER. Mr. President, today most Americans are struggling with filling out their tax returns which are due tomorrow. This week I am introducing legislation that will make it possible for an American taxpayer to file his or her tax return on one page, a one-page optional flat tax on individuals and businesses at the rate of 19 percent for the first two years and 17 percent thereafter. Think what a change that would be. Taxpayers spend an average of over 26 hours to complete tax returns; and 13.6 hours just to complete form 1040.

Think how different it would be to simply fill out one page and turn that in. In 2005, taxpayers spent 6 billion hours and approximately \$265 billion to comply with the Tax Code. Think how much extra leisure time or productive work time we could have if every American had the option of a one-page simplified tax return.

Mr. President, \$705 was the estimated compliance cost for a Tennessean in 2005. And operating costs for the Internal Revenue Service almost tripled between 1970 and 2004. Think how much money we would save if every American had the option of filing a one-page, 17-percent flat tax and if every American business had the option of doing the same.

Here is what the optional flat tax legislation I will be introducing this week will do. As I mentioned earlier, it will simplify the Tax Code by providing an optional flat tax on individuals and

businesses. It will be a 19-percent flat tax for the first 2 years, 17 percent flat tax after the first 2 years, and it would create the option to file, as I mentioned, a simple one-page return.

The legislation I am introducing is almost identical to H.R. 1040 introduced by Congressman MICHAEL BURGESS, a Republican from Texas, in the House of Representatives. Congressman BURGESS introduced his legislation on February 2007 and it has six cosponsors.

My legislation is very straightforward. If an individual selects the option to pay a flat tax in lieu of the current income tax, the option is irrevocable. Under the flat tax, taxable income has a very simple definition. It will consist simply of wages and pensions. You do not start paying taxes on your income—wages and pensions—until you reach a certain exemption level. For a married couple filing jointly, the exemption level is \$25,580, indexed to inflation. For the single head of a household, you wouldn't start paying taxes until you reached \$16,330, indexed for inflation; for a single person, \$12,790, indexed for inflation; and \$5,510 for each dependent.

For example, a family of four would not pay the flat tax until the family's combined income reached \$36,600. That is \$25,580 for joint filers plus \$5,510 times two for the two dependents. No other deductions would exist.

This optional flat tax would eliminate the marriage penalty, so it is pro-family. This optional flat tax would eliminate the millionaires tax, which was put in place in the late 1960s to catch a few millionaires and today is catching millions of middle-class Americans. It is called the alternative minimum tax or AMT.

The optional flat tax for businesses is equally straightforward. It gives the business the option to pay a flat tax in lieu of the current corporate tax structure. Once a business selects this option, it is irrevocable. As it is on the individual income tax form, there is a 19-percent tax rate for the first 2 years and then a 17-percent tax rate for all other years. Businesses would be taxed on the difference of total revenue minus expenses—again, a very simple definition of income. Expenses would include wages, pensions, and the costs of new business equipment. This would provide for the immediate expensing of business capital equipment. This immediate expensing should be a very pro-growth provision in our Tax Code—rather than the current Code which requires spreading it out over a number of years. No other deductions would exist.

The current tax system is overly complicated and lengthy. The Tax Code and corresponding regulations are over 67,000 pages and include 7 million words. It was only 400 pages in 1913 when the Federal income tax was first introduced, and it has now grown to over 67,000 pages.

Taxpayers are expected to understand and comply with this com-

plicated Tax Code and it gets increasingly impossible to do. That is why I, and a great many Americans and American businesses, will welcome the opportunity to file a one-page, simplified flat tax in lieu of the current system.

The optional flat tax that I propose is intended to be revenue neutral. It is intended, in other words, neither to raise more revenues than the current tax system or less revenues than the current tax system. Arguably, a simpler tax will raise more revenues because a great many people pay less in taxes because they simply do not understand the forms. But the intention of my legislation is that the taxes collected, the revenue level, will be the same.

Finally, I urge that our nation's revenue level is not about to stay the same. Already the largest share of the average American's budget goes to pay taxes. Taxes are high. Americans currently spend 113 days of every year working to pay their Federal, State, and local taxes—almost twice the number of days they work to pay for housing and more than three times the number of days they work to pay for food.

Beginning in 2010, the amount of time Americans currently spend working to satisfy their tax bills will increase as millions of lower- and middle-income Americans and small businesses face significant tax hikes. Democratic leaders in Congress have already allowed the state and local sales tax exemption, which affects Tennesseans, to expire. That is \$400 a year for 600,000 Tennesseans, and the Democrats appear to be ready to let tax relief for millions of lower and middle-income Americans meet the same fate when those tax levels expire in 2010.

Failure of Congress to act to stop these tax hikes will result in the largest tax increase in United States history, and that is one of the worst things we could do to the family budget. Taxes are too high today and we are about to face the largest tax increase in United States history.

But while we are debating tax issues in the Senate, we can do something much simpler so that next year, when Americans go about completing their tax returns, they do not spend an average of 26 hours. Instead, they fill out one page. They do not take an average of 13.6 hours to complete form 1040; they fill out one page. Compliance costs are not \$265 billion; they are dramatically reduced. Compliance costs for Tennesseans, \$705 dollars in 2005, go down by hundreds of dollars a year.

The operating costs of the IRS ought to be cut, instead of increasing, as they review one-page optional tax forms. The same would be true for businesses who also would have the option of filing a flat 17 percent tax, on one page. So as we look ahead to tomorrow and filing our tax returns, and we think about the upcoming debate about whether to stop the largest tax in-

crease in history, let's get on a constructive page and say to the American people: By this time next year, April 15, 2009, you will have the option of filing a one-page Federal income tax return with a 19-percent rate for 2 years and 17 percent rate thereafter; businesses will get the same thing.

It will save money. It will encourage growth, and it will relieve a great deal of anxiety that occurs every spring when April 15 rolls around.

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

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

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mrs. BOXER). Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. WEBB. I ask unanimous consent to speak as in morning business for 5 minutes.

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

Mr. WEBB. I thank the Chair.

FAMILY EDUCATIONAL RIGHTS AND PRIVACY ACT AMENDMENTS OF 2008

Mr. WEBB. Madam President, as we approach the anniversary of the Virginia Tech tragedy, I am introducing legislation to implement one of the key recommendations from the Virginia Tech Review Panel that was formed by Gov. Tim Kaine to examine some of the issues that arose following the shooting.

It is exactly 1 year this week when a disturbed young man took the lives of 32 students and faculty and wounded several others on the campus of Virginia Tech. I commend the Virginia Tech community for pulling through such a difficult time and for the tremendous amount of courage they displayed. I also wish to extend my continuing sympathy to the families of the students and faculty who were directly impacted by these shootings.

On April 19, 2007, 3 days after the Virginia Tech shooting, Governor Kaine announced the formation of the Virginia Tech Review Panel to perform a review of the events of April 16. This panel included individuals with the expertise and autonomy necessary to conduct a comprehensive review. These nationally recognized individuals brought expertise in many areas, including law enforcement, security, governmental management, mental health, emergency care, victims' services, the Virginia court system, and higher education.

The genesis for the legislation I am introducing is the report prepared by this panel and released to the public in August 2007. A similar report was prepared for President Bush by the Attorney General and the Secretaries of Health and Human Services and Education in follow-up to meetings with