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Senate

The Senate met at 9:30 a.m. and was called to order by the Honorable MARK L. PRYOR, a Senator from the State of Arkansas.

THE PRESIDING OFFICER. Today's prayer will be offered by Rev. Don Davidson of First Baptist Church, Alexandria, VA.

PRAYER

The guest Chaplain offered the following prayer:

Shall we pray.

Dear God, our Heavenly Father, creator of this vast universe and lover of all mankind, we begin our day with the recognition that You are sovereign Lord and that we are accountable to You above all other allegiances.

Thank You for this rich and diverse country, the United States of America, and for this great deliberative body and the role each Member plays in leading our Nation. Grant that these Members of the Senate will have wisdom as they wrestle with issues large and larger. Show them what is right, and may they find the courage to act according to their convictions and not the whims of ever-changing culture.

As the prophet Jeremiah said: When they stand at the crossroads and look, may they ask for the ancient paths and where the good way is and walk in it. Then our Nation can have rest for her soul.

We ask You to pour out Your blessings on America. But we are weak, Lord, prone to wander, and we feel it; prone to leave the God we love. Yet You are gracious, compassionate, full of mercy, and eager to forgive. We turn to You for grace and hope and health.

May this be a day when all of us, inside and outside this Chamber, wherever we be, seek the fulfillment of Jesus's words: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven."

I pray this in His precious Name. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The Honorable MARK L. PRYOR led the Pledge of Allegiance, as follows:

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

APPOINTMENT OF ACTING PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE

THE PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will please read a communication to the Senate from the President pro tempore (Mr. BYRD).

The legislative clerk read the following letter:

U.S. SENATE,
PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE,
Washington, DC, April 24, 2008.

To the Senate:

Under the provisions of rule I, paragraph 3, of the Standing Rules of the Senate, I hereby appoint the Honorable MARK L. PRYOR, a Senator from the State of Arkansas, to perform the duties of the Chair.

ROBERT C. BYRD,
President pro tempore.

Mr. PRYOR thereupon assumed the chair as Acting President pro tempore.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The majority leader is recognized.

SCHEDULE

Mr. REID. Mr. President, we are going to be in a period for the transaction of morning business this morning for 1 hour. The majority will control the first 30 minutes and the Republicans will control the final 30 minutes.

Following morning business, the Senate will resume consideration of S. 1315, the Veterans' Benefits Enhancement Act. There will be up to 60 minutes for debate on the Burr amendment prior to a vote in relation to the

amendment, to be followed by a vote on passage of the bill.

Upon disposition of the veterans bill, the Senate will consider H.R. 493, the Genetic Nondiscrimination Act. The only amendment in order to the bill is a Snowe-Kennedy-Enzi substitute. There will be up to 2 hours for debate on the substitute and on the bill prior to a vote on passage of this legislation. We expect the first vote to occur around noon today, Mr. President.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

MORNING BUSINESS

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the Senate will proceed to a period for the transaction of morning business for up to 60 minutes, with Senators permitted to speak for up to 10 minutes each, with the time equally divided and controlled between the two leaders or their designees, with the majority controlling the first half and the Republicans controlling the final half.

The Senator from Washington.

VETERANS' BENEFITS ENHANCEMENT ACT

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, we are now 5½ years into the war in Iraq. We have been at war longer now than we fought in World War II, and we are creating hundreds of new veterans each and every year. Yet, too often, what we have seen is that this administration has failed to acknowledge the price our veterans and their families are paying in service. From the shameful conditions at Walter Reed Hospital a year ago, and VA facilities across the country, to a lack of mental health counselors, to a benefit claims backlog of months and sometimes years for our

• This "bullet" symbol identifies statements or insertions which are not spoken by a Member of the Senate on the floor.



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veterans, our veterans have had to struggle to get the basic care they were promised. And now, just this week, in the last few days, we got more evidence that this administration has been covering up the extent of the toll this war has taken on our troops.

Internal e-mails that became public in a court hearing showed that the VA has vastly downplayed the number of suicides and suicide attempts by veterans in the last several years.

Last November, an analysis by CBS News found that over 6,200 veterans had, sadly, committed suicide in 2005. That is an average of 17 a day. When they were confronted then, the VA said: Oh, no, no, no, those numbers are much lower than that. Now we find that according to internal e-mails from the VA's head of mental health, Dr. Ira Katz, 6,570 veterans actually committed suicide in 2005, an average of 18 a day. Those e-mails also revealed that VA officials also knew that another 1,000 veterans who are receiving care at our VA medical facilities attempt suicide each month. Those numbers offer tragic evidence that our Nation is failing thousands of veterans every year, and they reflect an administration that has failed to own up to its responsibilities and failed even to own up to the true impact of the war on our veterans.

What is most appalling to me is that this is not the first time the VA has covered up the problems facing our veterans who have sacrificed for our country. Time and again, this VA told us one thing in public while saying something completely different in private. It is outrageous to me that our VA officials would put public appearance ahead of people's lives. Yet it appears that is what is happening again and again.

When we as Members of Congress sit down to try to determine what resources we need to give to the VA, we have to truly understand what is going on. If there is a problem, we have to act. It is our duty and the duty of this administration to care for our veterans. By covering up the true extent of the problem, the VA has actually hindered our ability to get those resources to the veterans who need them. That is irresponsible, and it is wrong.

I have come to the floor today because we now have an opportunity to extend benefits to our veterans. These benefits that are in the bill that is before the Senate today will help them with job training, insurance, housing, and other matters. The bill that is before us offers veterans peace of mind and will help them to readjust as they come home to civilian life.

The Veterans' Benefits Enhancement Act the Senate is currently considering expands traumatic injury insurance. It increases job training—vital to many of our veterans who are coming home. It extends housing benefits to veterans with severe burns, something we have to do. And critically, it restores limited pension benefits to Filipino veterans who fought for our country in World War II.

This is a bill that we have done in our VA Committee that normally would come to the floor and pass straight through this body by unanimous consent. It is budget neutral, and it works to provide long overdue care for some of our Nation's heroes. But, instead, this bill has languished for 9 months. Why? Because the Republicans chose obstruction over our veterans. The majority leader and our chairman, Senator AKAKA, have worked since last August to try to come to an agreement. They have tried to come to the floor and work out amendments and figure out a way to move this bill forward. But for 9 months the Republicans preferred to play political games and block this critically important bill. It is just part of an overall pattern we have seen on this floor with numerous bills we have been trying to bring forward.

Today, finally we have come to an agreement—late, but finally have come to an agreement—and the Republicans have agreed to move this bill forward.

Later this morning, we are going to have the opportunity to vote for legislation that extends important benefits to help our veterans transition back into civilian life. It expands home-improvement benefits to completely disabled servicemembers before they enter the VA system to help them adapt to their new homes. This will prevent months or even years of delays while they transition from the military into the VA care. The bill we are considering extends monthly educational assistance for veterans who are pursuing an apprenticeship or on-the-job training, and it requires the National Academy of Sciences to study the risk of developing multiple sclerosis as a result of serving in conflicts since the gulf war. This last piece is one I have worked on extensively, as I have worked with gulf war veterans in my State from the early nineties who are now coming in with high rates of multiple sclerosis, to find out if there is a connection. It is a critical piece of legislation.

But I am disappointed that the Republicans object to the provision in the bill before us that extends VA benefits to Filipino World War II veterans. Those now very elderly Filipino veterans were called to service by our country and by President Roosevelt in 1941. They served right alongside our U.S. troops. They fought to protect our interests as they were asked to in the Pacific. They consider themselves to be American troops, and we consider them to be part of our military.

We have a moral duty to repay their sacrifice by providing them with the care they have earned, just as we should do with all of our veterans. But in 1946, when the war was over, our Nation turned its back on them and stripped away their rights to their veterans benefits. That act of Congress denied those men the access to health care and limited compensation to half of what their U.S. counterparts re-

ceived. I believe that act of Congress was wrong, but I believe it is just as wrong that 62 years later we still have not corrected that injustice.

Some on the other side are saying those benefits are too generous. Those veterans have been denied benefits for over 60 years. How can we say giving them a few hundred dollars in the last remaining months of their lives is too much? Sixty-two years later, those veterans are in their twilight years. They need and they deserve the care this country ought to give them. We cannot make up for lost time for these veterans, but certainly we can right this injustice. We have the opportunity today to do what is honorable, what is moral, and treat our Filipino veterans as the heroes they are, and it is long past time that we did.

I urge my colleagues to support this bill later this morning when we vote on it and to oppose the Burr substitute amendment which would remove those provisions for our Filipino veterans.

Our veterans have waited 9 months for this bill to come before the Senate. Our Filipino veterans have waited more than six decades. Our veterans have all earned these benefits by sacrificing for us. They should not be forced to wait any longer.

To our VA which has continually hidden the facts from us, we need them to be honest and forthright. This country wants to be there to support our veterans, and we cannot do that if we are being given misinformation.

So my message to the VA is: We stand beside you as a country to work to make sure our veterans get the care and support they need. We expect you to do the same.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Republican leader.

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, I yield myself whatever leader time I may use.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator has that right.

208TH ANNIVERSARY OF LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, the Library of Congress celebrates today its 208th anniversary. On this day in 1800, President John Adams approved the appropriation of \$5,000 for the purchase of such books as may be necessary for the use of Congress.

The original collection included just 740 volumes and 3 maps, which are stored right here in the Capitol. In fact, what is now the reception area of the Republican leader's office was the Library's very first home. When British troops burned the Capitol building in 1814, they used the books and maps of the Library to ignite the flames, and all 3,000 volumes in the collection were destroyed.

Several years ago, when British Prime Minister Tony Blair addressed a joint session of Congress, he visited the leader's suite and told then-majority