

by car—by armored vehicle—into downtown Baghdad. Every year before we had to fly in on Apache helicopters because of the ground fire and the danger. We arrived in Baghdad in the Green Zone and spent the night. On every trip before to Iraq, they took us out to Kuwait City to a Sheraton Hotel when darkness fell in Baghdad because it was so dark. Twice during the course of the visit we got outside of the Green Zone and into a Chevy Suburban in one case, and into an MRAP in another case, and went out on two excursions. I would like to talk about them for a second.

The first was in an MRAP. I have to pause here and pay great tribute to Senator BIDEN. About 18 months ago, Senator BIDEN led the charge in this body for us to fund the MRAPs to try and do away with the tragic loss of life that was taking place through IEDs on the ground and on the roads in Iraq and in Baghdad.

There is no question in this body that the most strident voice in favor of that funding and that commitment was the Senator from Delaware. Today, the soldiers of the United States of America and of Iraq and of our coalition partners ride in the new MRAP vehicles, which are remarkable. General Petraeus told me at the dinner I had with him that in the first five hits where an IED exploded under an MRAP, there was not a single scratch of an American serviceman. I know a week ago we lost our first serviceman in an MRAP, but that serviceman was the gunner above the turret at the time he was hit. It has a 100-percent record in terms of those inside of the MRAP when moving the troops. It is a marvelous transformation and a great testament to this body, Republican and Democrat alike, to rise to the occasion to see to it that when our men and women are threatened, if there is a technique, if there is a technology, if there is engineering sufficient to bring about a new product, we will do it, and we will fund it. We did it on the MRAP, and today our soldiers are safer and our efforts stronger.

I rode in one of those MRAPs to a neighborhood known as Gazaria. Gazaria was the neighborhood that was completely destroyed 2½ years ago. I went to a market that had about 20 shops, of which about half were open, and traveled with a squad headed by a lieutenant colonel who was making microgrants and microloans and measuring the progress of previous loans that had been made to Iraqis who were reopening their stores. Senator CORNYN, Senator COBURN, and myself stood in a bakery and ate an Iraqi-type of flatbread and drank tea in a market that had been totally destroyed and unoccupied for 2½ years. We went to an auto repair shop where two brothers had reopened the shop and were beginning to do repairs and had bought a generator to provide them with reliable, continuous electricity. These are microloans made by the United States

of America to the Iraqi people to reinvest in themselves, reinvigorate their enterprises, reinvigorate their employment.

Was it dangerous? Sure. We had on bulletproof vests, we had on helmets, and we traveled in MRAPs. But heretofore you could never have gone into downtown Baghdad as we did on this trip. Twice we ran into local Iraqis: once two Sunnis who joined the awakening movement and the CLCs who were taking up arms to guard the secured market to see to it that no terrorist or insurgent could come in and do damage, and then twice to refugee families who over 2 years ago had left Baghdad and Gazaria with no intention of ever returning, but now, because of its relative security, they returned.

The second trip was made by Chevy Suburban—not by armored tank or not by MRAP—and we left the Green Zone and went through Baghdad to the government building where we met with Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish leaders. For the first time in my annual trips back there, the talk was substantive and the inference on the part of the leadership was that things were getting ready to get better. As all of us know, on debaathification and reconciliation, things have started to happen.

As the President acknowledged in his speech last night, they will be happening in terms of sharing the oil revenues and eventually a hydrocarbon law for the entire country.

My point in bringing this story to the Senate and telling it firsthand is the progress the President described last night is real. It is tangible. Things are changing in Iraq, and they are changing for the better for the Iraqis and for us. We have brought back two groups, and as the President said, we will bring back five more without replacing them this year. Our troop level will be going down. We are going from a combat confrontation to an oversight role in terms of helping and providing logistics to the Iraqis.

Have the Iraqis responded? Think about this: Remember about 6 months ago when the Prime Minister of Great Britain said they were pulling the British troops out of Basra, and the American press wrote about another failure: One of our partners was leaving, so what were we going to do. Nobody has written about Basra since then because here is what happened: All the Brits who left were replaced by Iraqis—not by Americans, not by coalition forces. Have you read about damage or problems in Basra? No, you haven't because the army has performed magnificently—the Iraqi Army.

Today we read of reports in Mosul, and we mourn the tragedy of the loss of U.S. soldiers, but in that big attack going on against one of the last strongholds left of the insurgents of al-Qaida, the spear of that attack, the point of that attack was all Iraqi soldiers. I had the privilege to meet with Iraqi generals who, for the first time, see themselves energized, see themselves fully

capable of assuming the role that we have taken for so long: for us to move to oversight and for them to move to the point of the spear.

The practical matter is, whatever mistakes may have been made in the past, whatever differences we may have had, the young men and women of the United States of America have performed magnificently. General Petraeus has lived up to every single promise of hope we had for him.

In the name and in the memory of the tragic loss of life in Iraq, Georgia soldiers such as Diego Rincon, LTG Noah Harris, SGT Mike Stokely, and the other 119, the sacrifice they have made has not been in vain, and we are on the doorstep, hopefully, of building and of helping to have created a democracy that will last and endure in the Middle East. Hopefully, it will be the first step of many to accomplish the hope of peace, freedom, and liberty that we in this country so often take for granted but the rest of the world cherishes.

So the President was right last night in his State of the Union speech. We have made great progress. There is work left to be done, but there is light at the end of the tunnel, and it is not a locomotive. It is the light of hope, liberty, and peace and freedom because of the sacrifice and the endurance of the fine young men and women in the U.S. military serving in harm's way today in Iraq.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. CASEY). The Senator from Vermont is recognized.

Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to speak as in morning business.

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

THE ECONOMY

Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, last night I listened intently to President Bush's State of the Union speech, and, frankly, I had a hard time understanding what country the President was talking about and what reality he was talking about. Certainly, if the State of the Union refers to what is happening to the shrinking middle class of this country and how we as a people are doing, the President had almost nothing to say that rang true. In fact, last night's speech just reminds many of us how far removed from the reality of ordinary life this President is and how little he and his administration know about what is going on in the lives of millions and millions of people in cities and towns across this country.

In my view, the President's speech was lacking not just for what he said but, perhaps more importantly, for what he didn't say. Somehow, President Bush forgot to mention some of the results of his failed economic policies and how they have impacted the lives of ordinary people. So let me take

a moment, therefore, to review the record the President refused to talk about last night.

Since George W. Bush took office in 2001, nearly 5 million Americans have slipped out of the middle class and into poverty. These are mostly low-income working people whose wages have not kept up with inflation. These are people all across the country who are trying to make it on \$6 or \$7 an hour without any health insurance, desperately trying to keep their families above water. These are, by the way, parents and kids in Pennsylvania and in Vermont who are now flocking to emergency food banks because they simply don't have the income to buy the food they need in the United States of America in 2008. It might have been a sign of decency on the part of the President to at least recognize that reality which is impacting so many of our people, and the reality that hunger in America is actually going up.

Since George W. Bush has been in office, median household income for working-age Americans has declined by almost \$2,500. That is a lot of money. Also, overall median household income has gone down by nearly \$1,000. This is the shrinking middle class, and maybe as people are working longer hours for lower wages, maybe as people are working 50 or 60 hours a week trying to bring in enough money for their families to pay the bills, maybe the President might have said a few words to them that he understands the reality they are experiencing. Maybe he might have said to the young people of our country that he is concerned if we don't turn around our economy, for the first time in the modern history of this country their generation will have a lower standard of living than their parents; maybe just a few words to those young people so they know he knows what is going on in their lives.

But I didn't hear that. I didn't hear that at all.

Mr. President, since George W. Bush has been in office, 8.6 million Americans have lost their health insurance, and we are now up to 47 million Americans without any health insurance whatsoever. Meanwhile, health insurance premiums have increased during Bush's tenure by 78 percent—a huge increase in the cost of health care.

Last night, while the President gave us his usual rhetoric about all of the virtues of free market health care, he somehow forgot to tell us why we spend almost twice as much per capita on health care as any other nation, and why we are the only major country on Earth without a national health care program guaranteeing health care to all people. The President didn't even tell us why he vetoed legislation that would expand health insurance to millions more children; just the usual rhetoric about free market health care, which is failing us every single day.

During his remarks last night, somehow President Bush neglected to mention that 3 million workers, since he

has been in office, have lost their pensions—the promises that were made to them for their retirement years—and about half of American workers in the private sector have no pension coverage whatsoever. I didn't hear much from the President about that.

What I did hear is the President's rhetoric about "Social Security reform," which are code words for the privatization of Social Security. At a time when seniors are facing more and more insecurity than they have seen for a very long time, privatizing Social Security is the last thing this country needs.

Last night, President Bush once again pushed for more unfettered free trade agreements, despite the fact that since he has been in office the annual trade deficit has more than doubled, and over 3 million manufacturing jobs—good-paying jobs—in this country have been lost. It astounds me that, despite the horrendous record of these unfettered trade agreements—NAFTA, CAFTA, and permanent normal trade relations—we have a President who says: Look, we have failed year after year, we have lost millions of good-paying jobs, our trade deficit is soaring, and do you know what the answer is? We need more of this failed trade policy. In my own small State of Vermont, never one of the great manufacturing States in this country, we have lost, since the President has been President, 10,000 manufacturing jobs—25 percent of the total or one out of four manufacturing jobs. And President Bush says we need more outsourcing; we need corporations to throw more American workers out on the street so they can run to China and pay people 50 cents an hour there, and then bring the products back into this country.

Last night, President Bush did say a word about gas prices going up. But he did forget to tell us that since he has been President the price of gas at the pump, and home heating oil, has more than doubled. For whatever reason, he also forgot to tell us that, year after year, while Americans are paying outrageous prices for oil and gas, the oil companies are enjoying record-breaking profits. I didn't hear him mention anything about that, not one word.

A couple of years ago, for example, ExxonMobil—which has enjoyed huge profits while Americans are paying \$3.15 for a gallon of gas at the pump—gave a \$398 million retirement package for its former CEO, Mr. Lee Raymond. And our people are paying \$3.15 for a gallon of gas. The President forgot to talk about that.

Also, I found it interesting that President Bush neglected to discuss that for the first time since the Great Depression the personal savings rate in this country is below zero. This means that because of the dire economic conditions facing so many of our people, we as a people are actually spending more money than we are earning. In fact, today, millions of Americans are

buying their groceries with credit cards. They don't have the cash to buy the food they need. They are going into debt to buy groceries. And our friends in the credit card industry are then charging them 25 or 30 percent interest rates for the groceries they are buying on credit.

For some reason, last night in his State of the Union Address, the President also neglected to mention that home foreclosures are the highest on record, turning the American dream of homeownership into an American nightmare for millions of our fellow citizens.

The reason I am raising these issues is because if we as a Senate, as a government, do not talk about and discuss the reality of life in this country for the vast majority of the people, if we do not understand what is going on in the cities and towns across our Nation, then it will be virtually impossible for us to formulate the public policies we need to transform our economy so that it begins to work well for all of the people and not just the wealthiest people on top.

Also, we do not do this enough. It is important to take a look at what is going on in our country compared to what is going on in many other industrialized nations. Very often, I hear people on the Senate floor say we are the wealthiest and the greatest Nation in the world. We are all of these things.

Let's look at some of the facts as they apply to the lives of ordinary people. What country in the industrialized world has, by far, the highest rate of childhood poverty, where one out of five children are living in poverty? Is it France, Germany, or the U.K.? No. It is the United States of America. One out of five children in this country live in poverty. And shock of all shocks, we end up having the highest rate of incarceration—putting people behind bars—of any other country on Earth. If you think there is not a correlation between those two factors, I would strongly disagree with you.

Unfortunately, the U.S. today has the highest infant mortality rate of any major country on Earth, the highest overall poverty rate, the largest gap between the rich and the poor, and we are the only major country in the world not to provide health care to all of their people as a right of citizenship.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator's time has expired.

Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the period for morning business be extended until 12:30 p.m., with the time equally divided.

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

Mr. SANDERS. With that, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Idaho is recognized.