

A bill (S. 3044) to provide energy price relief and hold oil companies and other entities accountable for their actions with regard to high energy prices, and for other purposes.

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I object to any further proceedings with respect to these bills en bloc.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Objection having been heard, the bills will be placed on the calendar under rule XIV.

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

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

BUDGET CONFERENCE REPORT

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, let me say to my good friend, the majority leader, we would be happy to work out a process by which we could have the debate on the budget today. We would even be prepared to have the vote on the budget today, but I understand that is problematic.

Mr. REID. I think we could probably do that.

Mr. MCCONNELL. Well, that is something we could probably work toward, yes.

Mr. President, with regard to the budget, we have our differences in the Senate, but there are a few ideas that have wide bipartisan agreement. One is we need to rein in Federal spending, and another is we need to do our part to ensure that middle-class families keep more of the money they earn.

But the Democrats' latest budget shows we have a very different view of what these ideas mean. Our friends on the other side said they wanted to raise taxes on the rich and keep taxes low for working families. But this budget would provide for the average family a tax hike of \$2,300 on people earning as little as \$31,000 a year and couples making \$63,000 a year. For a little perspective, first year schoolteachers in my hometown earn \$35,982, and I do not think they consider themselves rich.

With rising gas prices and economic concerns, middle-class families are tightening their belts. Yet this budget would take more money out of the paychecks of these families to fill the Government's coffers. At a time when all Americans are watching their spending, shouldn't Washington be doing the same?

Not according to this budget, which does nothing to address entitlement spending and sets a new record—a new record—for nonemergency spending, topping the \$1 trillion mark for the first time in American history. That is not a record I think we should be welcoming.

So I am a little confused as to why this budget is at odds with the Democrats' promise of keeping taxes low for working families and putting a stop to wasteful Washington spending.

It seems to me, if Congress was serious about letting Americans keep more of the money they earn, we would make tax relief permanent. If we were serious about reining in spending, we would pass a budget that calls for responsible growth. Instead, we are on the verge of passing a budget that goes in the opposite direction, contains the largest tax hike in U.S. history, and sets a new record for spending.

American families cannot afford this budget, American job creators cannot afford this budget, and our economy cannot afford this budget. I urge all of our colleagues to protect the American family's budget by voting against this budget when we have an opportunity to do that.

I yield the floor.

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 of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak for up to 10 minutes each, with the majority controlling the first 30 minutes, and the Republicans controlling the next 30 minutes, with the time from 11 a.m. until 12 noon reserved for Senators to make tributes to former President Lyndon B. Johnson, and the time equally divided and controlled between the two leaders or their designees.

The Senator from Michigan is recognized.

Ms. STABENOW. Thank you, Mr. President.

SUPPLEMENTAL APPROPRIATIONS

Ms. STABENOW. Mr. President, I rise today to speak about two items that are in the supplemental that has come from the House of Representatives. I find it difficult to speak about either one, but particularly the first one, without turning and looking behind me to see the great champion of the Senate, Senator TED KENNEDY, leading this debate and discussion.

The first item I want to talk about is how we help middle-class families, working families who have lost their jobs, to be able to keep their home, their dignity, and put food on the table while they look for that next job.

No one has been a greater champion—no one—in this body or anywhere in the country for working men and women, for folks who are working hard every day to meet the American dream, than our own Senator TED KENNEDY.

So as I speak today, I want to send my wishes, as my colleagues have—all of my colleagues from both sides of the aisle and every part of this building

and this city—to say to TED that we miss you and we need you back and we are sending our love and our prayers to you and Vicki and the entire family because we need you. While we are very saddened about the news, we know—as you have championed and had such great courage in fighting for those who have needed a voice, who have needed a champion in the Senate—we know you will fight with the same vigor, and we will be right there with you to do everything we can to make sure you are back leading us, leading the charge.

I have stood on this floor many times with the great leader, the great Senator from Massachusetts, to talk about what is happening to families all across America. I represent a State with the highest unemployment rate in the country. Those in Michigan who are seeing their unemployment benefits expire, who are valiantly looking for work every day, have been looking to us to help them extend that insurance benefit until they can find a job.

We know there are 7.7 million people looking for work right now and competing for about 4 million jobs. So I am proud of the fact that our caucus, the Democratic caucus, has placed creating jobs at the top of the list of the budget resolution we will be discussing and voting on this week.

But in the meantime we have to do everything we can to support those families. In the supplemental that has come over from the House, I am very pleased they have included a greatly needed extension of unemployment insurance benefits because the reality is we have lost, since January, 260,000 good-paying American jobs, 260,000 middle-class jobs—the jobs that pay the mortgage, put food on the table, send the kids to college, buy clothing, pay for gas—which continues to grow outrageously higher every day.

Part of our responsibility is to make sure those families receive the insurance benefits they need while they pick up their lives, move in a new direction, find work, so they can continue to have the American dream.

Some of those families have members who are in Iraq or Afghanistan or around the world serving us right now. Unfortunately, we have too many families where one person—while we are grateful—is serving us in our armed services and the other breadwinner in the family has, in fact, lost their job. So there is a direct relationship between what we are doing to support the unemployed to be able to continue to look for work and to be able to care for their families in the meantime and what we are doing on this supplemental.

Mr. President, there is another incredibly important piece of supporting our troops that is in this legislation coming over from the House of Representatives. Again, I hear the voice of Senator KENNEDY championing this as well in terms of making sure we are doing everything possible for our troops, both when they are in harm's

way and when they are coming home, putting on a veterans cap and continuing to live their lives in America.

I am very proud to have cosponsored the 21st century GI bill. Senator WEBB has been our champion. This is bipartisan legislation. Today's veterans deserve the same opportunities and thanks that have been given to earlier generations.

This bipartisan bill has overwhelming support in both the Senate and in the House. Veterans service organizations and millions of veterans and Active servicemembers have raised their voices in support of this legislation.

I don't understand how anyone could fully support our troops by fully funding the needs of our troops and then oppose the GI bill. Full funding for our troops really does include the GI bill. That is what this is all about: making sure we are keeping our promises. The men and women who sign up, who are overseas now, who are in harm's way, who have lost limbs, who come home with post-traumatic stress syndrome, those who are willing to put their lives on the line for us expect us to keep our promises.

I am proud of the fact that our Senate Democratic majority made fully funding veterans health care a top priority when we came into the majority last year. We kept that promise. This is the first year since this war started that we have met the numbers the veterans organizations say are needed to be able to provide health care. This is the second piece we are committed to achieving and making sure we have a 21st century GI bill fit for the brave women and men who are serving us today.

Last week, as chair of our Steering and Outreach Committee, I was able to join 23 other members of our caucus, all of our leadership on the majority side, and we met with 21 members from veterans service organizations who were unanimous in supporting not only the GI bill that is included here, that has come from the House, that we so strongly support, but in saying this should not be a partisan issue, this should not be a political issue, this is the right thing to do. It is the right thing to do. It needs to be done for the right reasons. We owe it to our veterans to pass this. It is a critical part of what is in front of us. It is essential we make sure that when we leave here, we can hold our heads high and say we have provided full funding for our troops by funding the GI bill and including it in this legislation.

This bill will pay for qualified veterans to attend any public university in the Nation. If a veteran chooses to attend a private school, the bill would also allow that to happen. It would pay tuition up to the amount of the most expensive public school in the State, so every choice would be available for our veterans. Under the bill, private contributions would be matched by the Federal Government. There would be

sufficient funding for desperately needed books. The costs go up every year. I can attest to that, having put two children through college and seen the incredible expense for books alone, as well as living expenses. Those things would be covered as well. We need to do this because when our veterans get a good college education, all of society benefits. Their family benefits, the community benefits, the country benefits.

Providing a college education for veterans is very important for our economy. World War II provided a great example of how the GI bill made it possible for our greatest generation to get an education, find good jobs, buy a home, contribute to the American economy, and raise their families.

I can speak to that directly. My father was in World War II. He was in the Navy. He came home as a veteran. Because of the GI bill, he was able to get an education, to be a small business owner, to raise a family—which I was very proud to be a part of—to send his kids to college, and to make sure we had what we needed to be able to live our American dream. It was the GI bill after World War II that gave my dad a chance. And through him and through that commitment to my father and to our family, it gave me a chance to be here today as well.

Today's veterans have served our country with the same honor and the same courage as those in World War II. They deserve the same benefits. They deserve the same opportunities, the same chance to shape their futures, the future of their communities, and the future of the American economy.

I also support this bill because it treats our Active-Duty Guard and Reserve Forces the same way through their wartime service. This is especially important now, as we know, as the Guard and Reserve take on a greater and greater share of the combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is no less important that Guard and Reserve members often return home to communities that don't have the same resources as the Active-Duty servicemembers have on base. So making sure our Guard and Reserve can attend college, can get an education, the skills they need to be successful, will help ease their transition into civilian life.

I stand with those who are supporting our brave men and women in the armed services and those who have served in the global war on terror. This bill is long overdue and should be enacted right now. That is what 21 veterans service organizations have said to us, and millions of veterans across the country. We have a duty to give our veterans what they deserve. They have offered the greatest sacrifice and should be given a chance for a solid education in these competitive times to become successful after their military service is done.

So, like the rest of the supplemental, this is full funding for our troops. It is full funding for our troops. We need to

make sure they have what they need, not just on the battlefield but when they return home. We have kept the promise on health care, and our Senate Democratic majority is committed to continue to do that every year.

We have also been committed and are very pleased that the House sent to us a GI bill that we have been working on with leaders in our caucus, including Senator WEBB and certainly our leader, Senator REID, and many others, to make sure we keep the rest of the promise. We need a modern GI bill that fits what is happening for our veterans around the world, to make sure Guard and Reserve are treated with the same dignity and have the same opportunities as our Active-Duty personnel.

As we debate this supplemental, I sincerely hope we will not leave this Chamber without making sure that full funding for our troops includes the passage of this greatly needed GI bill.

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

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

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. TESTER. 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.

Mr. TESTER. Mr. President, I rise today to discuss two important domestic priorities that are funded in the Senate's emergency supplemental. Those two priorities are the Secure Rural Schools and JAG/Byrne funding. These programs are critically important to Montana and rural America. I hope my colleagues continue to support them.

Last year, a 1-year extension of the Secure Rural School and Self-Determination Act was included in the emergency supplemental, giving much relief to rural counties.

We also narrowly lost the opportunity to pass a 5-year reauthorization during the debate on last year's energy bill. But now, today, we have the same opportunity to provide temporary relief while we work to provide the longer term funding solutions that our counties and schools deserve.

Why is this so important? Because county payments assist 600 rural counties and 4,400 schools in 42 States.

A majority of the counties in my State of Montana receive benefits from this program. Without an extension, these communities will suffer, and schoolteachers and county workers will be laid off.

Less money for rural schools means less opportunity for our rural students, lower teacher pay, bigger classroom size, fewer activities, and students who start to fall behind. Rural America's students deserve the same opportunities as their urban counterparts, and this program helps them to keep pace.

Fewer dollars for the counties mean higher local property taxes, poorer

roads, and local public work projects that do not get done. Overall, rural economies will suffer in a big way.

In the West, we are rich in public lands. One-third of Montana is in public ownership. Much of it is timberland. It only makes sense that the Federal owners help support local services.

These counties are, by nature, rural, and Secure Rural Schools funding makes up a large portion of their local budget. Without this extension, local communities will not be able to make ends meet. For these reasons, I hope the funding for Secure Rural Schools remains in the supplemental.

I also express my appreciation for the work of Senators WYDEN, BAUCUS, and others who have fought so hard to fund this program over the years. Rural America needs this support to continue.

Another issue I want to draw attention to is the JAG/Byrne funding used by America's drug task forces. These justice assistance grants help local law enforcement agencies fight drug dealers and manufacturers across this country.

There is \$490 million in the supplemental to restore funding to this critical program that will bring the amount of last year's level up to \$660 million.

Montana has seven drug task forces, which cover three-quarters of Montana's 56 counties. In 2007, Montana's Drugbusters received almost \$1.3 million. This year, Montana is set to receive only \$473,000. That is a loss of \$817,000 in 1 year. The folks on the ground have told me they are going to have massive cutbacks in programs and in surveillance. In fact, 27 of the 49 agents statewide would be laid off. Three of the seven drug task forces would have to close their doors altogether.

Montana is the fourth largest State, geographically. It is too big and expansive for us to think we can keep a handle on drug traffickers with such limited resources. What would happen? More drugs would remain in our communities, more weapons in the hands of criminals, more crimes, and more children would be exposed to danger because they would be continually exposed to volatile situations, criminal behavior, and drugs. We do not want to go backward.

As a result of the efforts of Montana's Drugbusters, there has been a significant decrease in the number of meth labs. For instance, in 2002, there were over 120 labs. In 2006, thanks to the Montana Drugbusters, there were less than 10 labs in the State of Montana. This is great work and this work must continue.

Without the restoration of this funding, our efforts to limit drugs in Montana and throughout the country will be devastated. Our children's exposure to drugs and crime will be increased, and our families will be torn apart. Montana cannot afford it. No State can. Americans deserve better.

I know many of my colleagues share in my strong support for JAG/Byrne funding and county payments. I appreciate their help in developing and continuing these programs. I hope this supplemental, in the end, includes these important programs and that the President signs the supplemental into law.

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

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

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. CORNYN. 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.

APPROVAL RATING OF CONGRESS

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, this week we reached a milestone in Congress, because on Monday it was the 500th day since our friends on the other side of the aisle took control of both the Senate and House following the 2006 election. In those 500 days, we have seen congressional approval rating, according to Rasmussen Surveys, drop to 13 percent of the respondents who believe that Congress has performed in a good or excellent fashion. I believe one reason why we have seen this drop in Congress's public approval rating is because we have failed to address some of the biggest concerns that confront the American people.

Here is a chart. Four of the concerns are depicted here. The first number I mention here is the 96 days that Congress—specifically the House of Representatives—has failed to act to modernize the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act. The Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, of course, is the law that allows our intelligence community to listen to telephone conversations between foreign terrorists to learn of attacks being planned, so as to not only detect them but also to deter them and defeat our enemies. Why Congress would fail to act to reauthorize this important piece of legislation for 96 days, I think, can only cause us to scratch our heads and wonder what could possibly justify that effective blinding of our intelligence community to new threats and the kinds of threats that could make us safer, if detected, deterred, and defeated, and could make us safer here at home and make our troops safer in places such as Afghanistan and Iraq.

At the same time, we have been waiting 547 days for Congress to take up and pass the Colombia Free Trade Agreement. This is important to our Nation and it is important to my State. Last year alone, Texas sold \$2.3 billion worth of goods and produce to Colombia, a large nation in South America. Because of tariffs that are currently imposed on those goods that are sold from Texas to Colombia, or

from the United States to Colombia, it actually discriminates against my small business man and woman, against the manufacturer, against the producer of farm goods; whereas, Colombian goods coming into the United States because of another agreement have no similar tariff or financial discrimination.

If the Speaker of the House would take up the Colombia Free Trade Agreement, we could restore a level playing field and create more jobs in the United States because we would be creating more goods here in America to sell in Colombia.

Free trade is something that, amazingly, this Congress seems more and more afraid of, when, in fact, I think it is one of the ways out of our current economic doldrums. If we continue to create new markets for our goods and services across the world, that creates jobs at home. If there is anything like a stimulus package Congress could pass, free-trade agreements, such as the Colombia Free Trade Agreement, is one of them.

It is more important than that because Colombia, of course, is one of our very best allies in Latin America, sitting right next door to Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, someone who is not our friend and has declared us his enemy.

I have to think that Raul Castro and Fidel Castro in Cuba and Hugo Chavez in Venezuela are sort of chuckling to themselves, seeing how America is treating one of our very best allies in Latin America. In fact, it is President Uribe in Colombia who has been heroic in his fight against the narcoterrorists, known as the FARC, who recently, we found out, were not only in cahoots with Venezuela and Hugo Chavez but planning a lot of no good—buying arms, buying military materiel from Russia and other places right in our backyard, in Latin America. Why we would stiff-arm President Uribe in Colombia, one of our very best allies in Latin America, when it is in our self-interest to create more markets to sell American goods and services, frankly, is beyond me.

The next number is 692 days. This is how long some judicial nominees, nominated by President Bush, have been waiting for Senate confirmation.

We know the majority leader pledged to confirm at least three circuit court nominees before the Memorial Day break. We only have 2 more days left to go. Obviously, we are not going to meet that pledged goal. So 692 days with nominees waiting for a vote with no real end in sight. It is clear what is happening. It is an attempt to drag this out until the election is nigh upon us and then the majority leader can say: We can't get any more judges confirmed because we are going to have to wait for the Presidential election to see who will fill those vacancies. But to wait 692 days without even giving these nominees simply the courtesy of a hearing or an up-or-down vote is inexcusable. There is just no reason for it.