

They live on hope. They do not come to work in blue suit. They put on work shoes and work clothes and work hard, and all they ask for is a decent return on their investment, despite the substantial risks they take. Because of that this Congress, for a long period of time, over many decades, has decided to create a safety net so that when family farmers run into a patch of trouble, this Congress and this country say: You are not alone. We want to help you through these price valleys and through these tough times.

So that safety net was significantly what we voted on today. The President began last year threatening to veto a farm bill, and consistently threatened that veto, and finally decided to exercise that veto, and the Congress said: You are wrong, Mr. President.

The President came to my State of North Dakota. He said to farmers: When you need me, I will be there. But when farmers needed him, he was not there. That is a matter of fact. This Congress has used awfully good judgment in overriding the President's veto.

About a year ago, a little over a year ago, I introduced an agriculture disaster bill here in the Congress. For 3 years in a row I have added an agriculture disaster piece to the supplemental appropriations bill because we did not have a disaster title in the farm bill. For 3 years as an appropriator I put disaster money in the Appropriations supplemental bill. Finally, on the third opportunity, we got it in a bill the President had to sign. But we had to go on bended knee when they had disasters over much of farm country to get disaster help. Now we have a farm bill that has a disaster title. That is a significant step forward.

A lot of folks do not understand much about farming. They think that Corn Flakes, oatmeal, and puffed rice come in boxes. They do not. But those who put it in the boxes make much more money than those who plow the ground and plant the seeds that produce the corn and the oats and the wheat.

Now, this is a pretty substantial day for those of us who care about family farmers and want good farm policy. This veto override is good public policy.

Rodney Nelson, a cowboy poet from North Dakota, who is a rancher and a farmer out near Almont and Judd, ND, wrote a piece. I have mentioned it before to my colleagues. But he asks this question rhetorically in his piece: What is it worth? What is it worth for a kid to know how to weld a seam, to drive a combine, to fix a tractor? What's it worth for a kid to know how to pour cement? What is it worth for a kid to know how to work livestock, work in the hot summer sun and the cold winter day? He asks: What is it worth for a kid to know how to teach a calf to drink milk out of a pail? What is it worth for a kid to know how to build a lean-to? What is it worth for a kid to know how to fix a tractor that won't run?

There is only one place in this country where all of those skills are taught, and that is on America's family farms. That is the university where all of those courses exist, and we lose it at our peril. That is why we write farm legislation. What is it worth? It is worth plenty to this country to say to family farmers during tough times: You are not alone, because we have created a farm bill to say here is a helping hand during tough times. That is what this is all about. I think the action today is something we ought to be proud of.

Is this bill everything I would have liked? No. My colleague and I, Senator GRASSLEY, offered an amendment on the floor of the Senate that was critical in terms of policy dealing with payment limits. We lost. We got 56 votes, we needed 60.

The fact is, this bill remains a good bill. It is late. It should have been done months ago. We fought through 9 or 10 months of Presidential veto threats. But it is done and finally I think farmers who are working their fields now in the spring and trying to figure out how they are going to do this year, I think farmers are going to be able to look at this bill and say: Congress cared. Congress cared enough to override the President's veto and put in place a farm bill that once again says: America cares about family farming and its future.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Pennsylvania is recognized.

THINKING OF SENATOR KENNEDY

Mr. CASEY. Mr. President, let me say first I commend the remarks of the Senator from North Dakota who again reminds us of the importance of this legislation that we have been working on for many months now, and now having the votes, an overwhelming number of votes in the Senate to override the President's veto.

It is a bill that will help our farm families. But it is also a bill that we know from the percentage breakdown is about nutrition and conservation and so much else. So we are grateful for all of the work that went into this.

I am thinking today about not only this legislation. I want to spend a few moments talking about our veterans. But also we had an opportunity today at lunch to listen to three individuals whose stories, among others, are portrayed in a book about the Freedom Riders in the early 1960s and the impact they had on civil rights, and the courageous witness they provided is an understatement. People literally risked their lives for freedom in the South.

When I think about our veterans today, the GI bill that Senator WEBB brought to this body, and so many of us cosponsored, when I think about the GI bill, the work today on agriculture and nutrition, and also the witness provided by these speakers today at lunch who were Freedom Riders, I am, of course, thinking about Senator KEN-

NEDY who is not with us today. He is outside of Washington and we are anxiously awaiting his return.

But I was thinking, as we all are today, about him and about his health but also his presence here. Everything we did today virtually he has had an impact on for more than a generation, whether it was nutrition or whether it was helping our veterans or whether it was having the courage to stand up for civil rights. So we are thinking of him today.

GI BILL OF RIGHTS

Mr. CASEY. Mr. President, I wanted to make a couple of remarks about the GI bill of rights. We had an opportunity today to vote on a piece of legislation which included that. That legislation is so necessary for our veterans. I know, Mr. President, you in your State, as a former Governor and Senator, know the impact of veterans.

In Pennsylvania, we have over a million veterans, and so many of them served our country in war after war. And in this war, the war in Iraq or anywhere in the world where they serve, all they are asking us to do is to help them in a couple of very basic ways: They want our respect, which we should always provide, and I think most Americans do over and over again. But they also should have the right to an education after they have served their country. It is that simple. We all know education is often referred to as the great equalizer. Sometimes when someone comes from a disadvantaged background, they are able to lift their sights and partake in the American dream because they have an education.

If soldiers are serving in combat, men and women in uniform for America, the least we should do is provide them with an education when they come home so they can have the chance at the American dream here at home.

I think the last thing, certainly not in that order, they have a right to expect is quality health care. We have a long way to go. Despite great work by people who work in the VA, there is a long way to go to provide the kind of quality health care our veterans have a right to expect.

So when we remember on this floor the words of Abraham Lincoln a long time ago when he talked, about people who served in combat and war, he talked about caring for him who has borne the battle and his widow and his orphan. When we think about that today, caring for him or her who has borne the battle, it must mean at least those three things: our respect, quality health care, and a quality education.

That is why this bill is so important. I am grateful so many of our colleagues agree with that. But we have got a long way to go to make sure the GI bill is the law of the land, not just something to debate but the law of the land.

I hope the President, I hope people on both sides of the aisle here join us in that, in making sure the GI bill of rights at long last is the law of the land.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Ms. KLOBUCHAR). The Senator from Louisiana.

HEALTH CARE

Mr. VITTER. Madam President, I rise to talk about the need for dramatic, bold health care reform in this country, so every American has real access to good, affordable health care. In doing so, I wrap up a project I began 8 weeks ago with six of my Senate colleagues to highlight our proposed solutions to reforming health care in America.

I start by thanking those colleagues, Senators COBURN, DEMINT, THUNE, ISAKSON, MARTINEZ, and BURR for joining me here on the Senate floor and in other venues to talk about this enormously important challenge for all of us.

We have reaffirmed what I think virtually every American knows, that we are in a health care crisis in this country, and there are some fundamental things broken, some fundamental things wrong with our present health care delivery system.

I want to reaffirm what was said: We need not just tinkering at the edges but some bold, dramatic reform to fix that system and give every American access to good quality and affordable health care.

But I also want to reaffirm there are clear choices to be made, dramatically different alternatives. We have laid out our positive choices in contrast to the other large alternatives, the single payer socialized solution that several of our colleagues here in this body have long advocated.

Our message, my colleagues and mine, Senators COBURN and DEMINT, THUNE, ISAKSON, MARTINEZ, and BURR, has been simple at its core: The health care system must be centered on the doctor-patient relationship. Health care plans must be flexible and there must be real choice. Americans must be able to own and control their own plans and decisions and choose how those plans work for them, and Washington should not control or run or mandate all of this.

We believe individuals and families should own their own health insurance, and we oppose the Government managing or rationing people's health care. We believe individuals are capable and are better than bureaucrats at choosing that coverage which is best suited for their own needs.

We are opposed to forcing people to enroll in a plan versus providing incentives to encourage individuals and families to choose to enroll. We believe existing Government programs can be improved and modernized so they provide more efficient quality care to serve the purpose of their enactment.

In contrast to that, we oppose attempts to expand these specifically targeted programs and make them a Trojan horse for broader overreaching socialized medicine and sickness management by the Federal Government.

Instead of looking to put more people on Government health care, we should assure that the truly indigent have health coverage. My friends and colleagues who tried to rationalize a dramatically expanding SCHIP, for example, the ability to offer Government health care to already insured children, argued we have to put children first. But last year this Senate unfortunately and overwhelmingly rejected an amendment by Senator COBURN that would have assured that all children in the United States would have health care coverage before funding special interest pork projects.

We believe we should open and expand the health insurance marketplace to Americans so they can shop for health care across State lines and let insurance companies compete to provide quality, cost-effective care.

We oppose increasing the number of costly mandates that price individuals in so many cases out of the market and restrict consumer choice and access.

As my friend from South Carolina stated, there are almost 2,000 individual mandates in health care, covering in some cases acupuncturists and hair prostheses.

These mandates obviously drive up the cost of health care. In fact, according to the CBO, for every 1 percent increase in the cost of health care, 300,000 people lose their insurance. So there is a real human cost to so many of these mandates. This is supposed to be a free market society. I am perplexed as to why a consumer in South Carolina should not be able to shop for cheaper health insurance if that product is offered and sold in Louisiana.

This is commonsense reform to drive down mandates to a reasonable level. It would force insurance companies to compete with each other across State lines to offer cheaper quality plans. Americans are able to purchase or invest in almost anything in any State of the Union. This does promote competition. It encourages companies to offer better prices and better quality and more attractive interest rates for savings and better service. Why can't we bring that positive aspect to the market of health insurance?

My colleagues and I who join together in this discussion recognize that seniors have increasingly turned to Medicare Advantage plans because they offer better value, more choice, a higher quality of care than traditional fee-for-service Medicare. We oppose attempts to cut Medicare Advantage and reduce health care choices for seniors. Again, unfortunately, too many folks in this body are moving in the other direction. In fact, the chairman of the Finance Committee has indicated that the majority side of the aisle will offer a Medicare package that will likely

significantly cut funding for the popular Advantage plan.

I have heard from thousands of Louisiana seniors who are overwhelmingly pleased with their Medicare Advantage plans. I hope we can preserve this option for seniors and find a reasonable compromise so we don't cut Medicare Part C and negatively affect those seniors.

We believe we should dramatically reform the tax treatment of health care by providing powerful incentives that will increase access by allowing Americans to keep more of their hard-earned money to pay for health care. We oppose tax increases that do the opposite, that seize American money from American families to pay for government-run and government-dominated health care. That limits access to doctors. It lowers the quality of health services. Addressing health care through our Tax Code would fundamentally change the health care market, if we do it in the right way. By letting Americans keep more of their money for health care through refundable tax credits, we can empower Americans with more resources to obtain and access care.

We have seen the results of increased utilization of health savings accounts. We want to see that when given the freedom to keep their tax-free money for health care, Americans will make conscious efforts to stay healthier, make better health care decisions, and shop for more cost-effective care and services. HSAs, health savings accounts, are a newly implemented concept and one that is working. Americans want choice, and tax advantage options such as HSAs allow for more choice in health care. We know our proposals would reform a broken system into one that is patient centered, high quality, lower cost, and where families choose and own their own health care plan. Government-run health care does not work and limits access and choice for families.

If you do not believe that, look to our neighbors. To the north we see Canada, which has a weekly lottery to see which of their citizens, in essence, can go to the doctor. Look to our friends across the Atlantic, to the British. The British National Health Service recently promised to reduce the wait time for hospital care to 4 months. That is supposed to be a dramatic improvement under that model, under Great Britain's national health care system.

Is that the kind of health care we want Americans to have? I sincerely hope our proposals over the last 8 weeks will be some part of promoting this badly needed debate. I sincerely hope that important debate leads to action, to results in the Senate and the Congress, results for the American people. Health care is one of the most important issues for American families today. It is time we actually do something instead of sitting on our hands in Washington. We need to go back to the