

or impending deficiencies in various specialties, including cardiology, rheumatology, and neurosurgery, as well as primary care.

I think most Americans understand the significance of this situation. We can build all of the medical facilities we want, but they serve no purpose if there are not enough medical professionals to work in these hospitals and clinics.

That is where the VA and other medical facilities, be they public, private or nonprofit, run into each other. They are all competing for a pool of health care professionals that is not growing, and that is not growing as quickly as it is needed. I am concerned that ultimately this will diminish the quality of health care that is delivered to our Nation's veterans and, of course, to all Americans.

So how do we address the health care needs of all Americans when faced with these challenges? I think we need to examine how we can integrate VA facilities with other health care facilities to better serve not only veterans but entire communities. Is there a way that we can utilize existing VA facilities to serve all of those living in rural communities that struggle to recruit health care professionals without compromising care for veterans? Is there a way we can change the VA health care system to enable veterans to receive care at their local non-VA health care providers?

I know these kinds of changes will not happen quickly and they will not happen easily. Earlier this session I introduced two pieces of legislation that proposed dramatic changes in the VA health care system. I will say that these proposals were not enthusiastically welcomed by many of those entrenched in the veteran advocacy community. S. 815, the Veterans Health Care Empowerment Act, would allow veterans with a service-connected disability to receive hospital or other medical care at any Medicare or TRICARE-eligible facility.

When I introduced this legislation last March, I stated my belief that most veterans would choose to continue to receive health care at a VA facility. I still believe that is true. But I also know this legislation would enhance access of care for veterans who do not live near a VA facility by serving them in the communities in which they live.

I also introduced legislation, S. 441, the State Veterans Home Modernization Act, which would allow, instead of building veterans homes, noninstitutional care and daycare and respite care for our veterans. I know my time is now limited, so let me close with this thought.

Earlier this year, a group of young Idaho Iraqi and Afghan vets came to my office concerned about health care. One of them pulled from his pocket a credit card and said: Senator, why cannot this become a VA health care card that allows me access to health care in

my community paid for by the Veterans' Administration because I have, upon my service and upon my disability, been granted access to the VA health care system? I live in rural Idaho. But why must I travel miles when there are hospitals and clinics all around me? I cannot have access to them.

What is wrong with that picture? What is wrong with that picture is that this wonderful, marvelous VA health care system is a static, in-place system that does not have the flexibility that modern health care speaks to and that it must have in the future.

I am retiring from the Senate, so these pieces of legislation will not be introduced again. But I am challenging my colleagues, as you stand and so proudly speak of your concern for veterans and your concern for their care, that you step away from the bricks and mortar and from the rigidity of the activist advocacy groups who think that health care for veterans can only be delivered in one form. Modernize it. Change it. Give it flexibility if we want to give ultimate health care to our veterans, and if we want to integrate non-veterans into that quality health care system in a way that strengthens it, improves it, and sustains it in an economical fashion.

I yield the floor.

RECESS SUBJECT TO THE CALL OF THE CHAIR

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the Senate stands in recess subject to the call of the Chair.

There being no objection, the Senate, at 2:29 p.m., recessed subject to the call of the Chair and reassembled at 3:12 p.m. when called to order by the Presiding Officer (Mr. TESTER).

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Republican leader is recognized.

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, we are in morning business, right?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. We are in a period of morning business.

ECONOMIC STABILIZATION PLAN

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, Senator McCain has just announced he is willing to suspend his campaign, set politics aside, and sit down with all sides to come to a solution to the looming threat to our economy. That is really an outstanding idea. The threat to Americans and their homes, savings, and retirements is really not a partisan problem, and it will not be fixed with a partisan approach. Americans want to know that their home values and college funds and retirement accounts are safe; in other words, that the problems on Wall Street are not going to spread to Main Street. So I appreciate my colleague's proposal,

and I hope it will be given serious consideration.

My constituents are not calling and asking me to help their brokers. They are asking for help to protect their mortgages, their ability to grow their small businesses, their ability to send their kids to college. And they are worried about the security of their life savings. I am concerned that if we do nothing, their savings, their ability to buy a home or finance college, and their financial security are all at very serious risk.

These are not ordinary circumstances, and if this economic stabilization plan was nothing but a bailout for Wall Street bankers, I would not have anything to do with it.

The only reason to support this action is to save ordinary Americans from an economic disaster that they had absolutely no hand whatsoever in creating. And to say that I am more than a little mad at this situation—created largely by bad decisions of those in the subprime housing market—is an understatement.

But if we are to take action, then it needs to put Main Street ahead of Wall Street. This isn't about bailing out investment bankers; this is about keeping the U.S. economy from entering a downward spiral. To that end, any action we take must include the following: No. 1, limits on executive compensation; No. 2, debt reduction; No. 3, congressional oversight and transparency. And yes, of course, taxpayer protection.

With regard to executive compensation, if weak companies are seeking Government assistance, the taxpayers should expect no less than a firm limit on what kind of executive compensation might be possible for those involved in these distressed companies.

Debt reduction. Any proceeds that are earned from the Government buying these assets and then selling them in the marketplace must be used to reduce the national debt. These revenues must not be used to pay for unrelated and unnecessary pet projects.

Congressional oversight and transparency. Americans need to be able to see how their money is being used and that it is being managed wisely. We in Congress will watch where every dollar goes to ensure there is no waste and no funny business.

Taxpayer protection. Americans have a right to expect that there is no fraud or abuse. It is the taxpayer and the American economy we are protecting, and we must take steps to ensure they are protected first.

The American people who were not involved in creating this situation need to be protected from the mistakes of those who were. Main Street needs to be insulated from Wall Street. That is what this plan is meant to accomplish. But we must insist on the protections I have just enumerated.

Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

Mr. COBURN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to be recognized for such time that I might consume in morning business.

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

CONGRESSIONAL OVERSIGHT

Mr. COBURN. Mr. President, I wish to spend a few minutes talking about a perspective that I think is lacking, and I hope we have an opportunity to gain. I was intrigued and interested as I listened to the senior Senator from New Hampshire explain to the American people what actually is going on in terms of our financial system. I don't believe there is anybody in the Congress, or anybody in the country, who is happy about where we are today: contemplating putting the Federal Government as the owner of a bunch of toxic assets that were accumulated on the basis of greed, poor policy, bad management, and bad regulation. I don't believe anybody is happy we are here. I don't believe the regulators are; I don't think Members of Congress are; I don't think people in this country are.

But from that, we can learn something. My worry is that we will not. I heard this morning the majority leader—and I have a great deal of respect for him—laying this all at the foot of President Bush. Presidents can do very little other than what we let them do. When we talk about the lack of oversight and regulation, the problem is, we were not watching the regulators, and our constitutional duty is that we should have been.

There is a lot of blame to go around—and it is not partisan—Republicans and Democrats, the executive branch, even the judicial branch in some of their rulings that created some stupid consequences to things that were never intended by Congress.

But what we ought to learn, and what I think is most important is, if you are an American right now and you are worried, you have a great reason to be worried. It is not about some impending financial crash. What you should be worried about is the Congress is not listening.

Let me explain what I mean.

We are going to finish at the end of this year with over \$10 trillion in debt. That is over \$33,000 for every man, woman, and child. We are about to pass some type of system to salvage credit liquidity in this country that is going to cost another \$2,000 to \$3,000 per man, woman, and child in this country.

We are going to have a continuing resolution that comes to this body this evening or maybe tomorrow morning that continues to do the wrong things

that got us into the mess in the first place.

The financial mess we are in is because confidence in the country and our response has been eroded. As I got on a plane to come back to Washington, I talked with a businessman from eastern Oklahoma who has a worldwide business. He talked about on August 20, he saw this tremendous worldwide drop in demand for his product. It didn't have anything to do with his product. It had everything to do with people now worried about if they should hang on to cash because the economics don't look good.

Whatever they do here, the No. 1 goal has to be reestablishing a confidence in this country that, yes, we can have an economy that works, we can rebuild faith in the financial institutions, and we can do that, best of all, by not repeating the mistakes we have made in the past.

To outline, the Defense appropriations bill has over \$10 billion in it for airplanes the Air Force doesn't want. Think about that. There is \$10 billion worth of airplanes in the Defense appropriations bill that is going to pass that they are going to have to buy that they neither want nor need. Why is that happening? Because we are putting local, parochial politics ahead of the best interests of the country.

We are going to buy some ships the Navy doesn't want. Same reason, different area of the country. But we are going to buy them because we are going to put a parochial benefit to a Member of Congress ahead of the best interests of the country.

There isn't a family out there who doesn't have to weekly or monthly make hard choices about how they spend their money. We, unfortunately, continue to make decisions on how we spend your children's money and your grandchildren's money on a parochial or political interest that benefits Members of Congress. That is what has to change.

If there is a lesson in what has happened to us in terms of the loss of confidence in the financial system in this country, all I have to say is Congress earned it. We created it. We expend 100 times more effort trying to create new programs and new ways of spending than we do managing the very Government you send us here to put under control.

I take the Constitution literally. It has a section in it called the enumerated powers. It is article II, section 8. It spells out exactly what the role of Congress is. If you look at how we got into this mess, every example of that goes back to the fact that Congress is violating what the Constitution says is our legitimate role, is doing something that is outside the legitimate role, and we rationalized it for the political benefits for either career politicians or party, one side of the aisle or the other. That is why Congress has a 9-percent approval rating, because we are more interested in us than we are the

best interests of the country. And it shows.

We have the financial debacle in front of us today to prove it. Imagine what would have happened had Congress been aggressive in its oversight. Imagine what would have happened after the failed attempt 4 years ago to try to put the controls of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac that we had a monthly hearing outlining the worsening—worsening—condition so we could have avoided this situation. Instead of us doing that, we did what was easy. We took the easy road, the wide road. We didn't do what our oath calls us to do.

I think we are going to see some very different behavior when it comes to us approaching the financial package that we are going to put together that will enable an economic recovery in this country. I believe you are going to see people vote for bills they basically don't like because it is in the best interest of the country. My hope is that when we do that, it would not be a one-time happening; that we will, in fact, move back to the position to take a decision on how we vote on something and not do a finger to the wind on how it looks back home or how it looks for our political career but, in fact, look at the U.S. Constitution and say: Does it square with that, and does it match our oath to do what is in the best interest of the country? When we get through with this exercise, as far as this economic recovery, I think the country can once again maybe start to have confidence in Congress; that we will, in fact, address the issue; that we will vote against our political best interests, but we will vote in the best interests of the American people.

Senator GREGG has outlined very eloquently what is happening, what has happened, what the response has been thus far, and what needs to be done in the future. If you have not heard him speak to this, I would suggest my colleagues listen to him. You can get it, what he spoke about this morning, before lunch, an understanding of what is necessary to reestablish confidence. It is not a time for politicians to win, it is a time for the American people to win. The only way they win is when we put them first and us second.

Mr. GREGG. Will the Senator yield for a question?

Mr. COBURN. I will.

Mr. GREGG. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that at the conclusion of the time the Senator from Oklahoma has used, I be recognized for 10 minutes under morning business; and at the conclusion of my time, Senator ALEXANDER be recognized; and if a Democratic Member wishes to speak, that they be inserted in the proper order.

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

Mr. GREGG. Mr. President, I wish to congratulate the Senator from Oklahoma. He has made an extraordinarily statesmanlike presentation. This isn't about the politics of the day, it isn't