

It seems to me we have two issues we have to address. No. 1, how do we create the jobs this country desperately needs? How do we protect the most vulnerable people? And simultaneously, how do we address the deficit crisis and our national debt?

I suggest now is the time to rethink the priorities that have existed for a number of years. Now is the time to ask the wealthiest people to start paying their fair share of taxes. Now is the time to take a hard look at all of our Federal agencies for waste and fraud and abuse but also including the military.

The issue is not whether we deal with the national debt and our deficit. The question is, how we do it, and how we do it in a way that protects the middle class and some of the most vulnerable people in society.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Illinois.

Mr. DURBIN. I thank the Senator from Vermont and those who are gathered this evening. This was such an important day. Some in this Chamber may have heard some cheering in the hall. I believe that signifies that the House of Representatives has finally passed the reconciliation bill which passed this Chamber earlier this afternoon. Now health care reform, with its improvements, is on its way to being signed by the President and becoming the law of the land. It is a day of great celebration for those of us who had the privilege and honor to vote for it but to participate as well in the difficult task of putting this bill together—a controversial bill; lots of people hate it; lots of people love it across America. Many of us believe it is an extraordinary improvement. It is progress in America. It will give families across America a fighting chance to get health insurance they can afford, to be able to fight the health insurance companies that turn them down when they need it the most.

Thirty million Americans will have health insurance who don't have it today. It is going to give seniors on Medicare better assistance to pay for their prescription drugs. It is a plus in many directions.

We left the euphoria and happiness of that moment on the floor, when they announced the vote of 56 to 43, and within minutes, we were told there is another battle. This time the Republicans have come to the floor and refused to extend unemployment benefits to those unemployed in America. The date that occurs is April 5. In State after State, hundreds and then thousands of people will see their unemployment checks stop. These are people who lost a job and they can't find one. We estimate there are five unemployed people for every available job. I have met with the unemployed in my State. They are desperate. They have tried everything they could think of. We think our economy is starting to turn but not quickly enough for them. Out of work

for weeks, months, sometimes years, they have exhausted their savings. They are living literally hand to mouth. Some have lost their health insurance. The only thing that keeps them going, that keeps the lights on and the food on the table, is the unemployment check.

The Republicans came to the floor today and said: Cut it off. They said cut it off, because they believe this is the moment and this is the issue to take a stand against the national deficit.

Do we have a national debt that should concern us all? Of course. The deficit we have is growing because of the recession, unemployment, fewer tax revenues by the government, and we understand that. Should we deal with it? Of course. But it is interesting that these Republicans would take their stand on fiscal conservatism and deficit reduction when it comes to unemployment benefits.

Twenty-four hours ago, Senator GREGG of New Hampshire, a Republican, floor manager for their side, offered an amendment on the floor to the reconciliation bill to pay for the compensation of doctors treating patients under Medicare. It added \$65 billion to the deficit, and it was not paid for. Every Republican voted for it. I think it is a good thing to do. It is a policy we should support, because we want doctors to treat Medicare patients. But how can these same Republican Senators ignore the fact that they voted to do so last night and then come here tonight and say: Unemployment benefits for a month in America? That will cost \$9 billion. It is time to take a stand against the deficit. Sixty-five billion last night, these same Senators voted to add to the deficit; \$9 billion for the unemployed today, they say, is the straw that broke the camel's back.

This is unfair and unfortunate. Here is what we know. Every dollar in an unemployment compensation check that goes to an unemployed person is spent directly into the economy. The CBO says there is no faster and better way to inject billions of dollars into the economy that translates into the purchase of goods and services, helping small businesses and creating jobs. For the question of economic development, unemployment compensation is the most valuable thing to do. What happens to these poor people when we cut off their unemployment compensation? I am not sure where they will go.

Bill from Illinois writes: I have been unemployed as a steel salesman since June of 2009. I am sitting in the Naperville library, as I do every day, applying for jobs on line. And still no luck. I will be ruined financially if you stop my unemployment benefits. Please extend them.

Elliot from Illinois writes: As a citizen of the United States and a U.S. Navy veteran, I cannot believe the Senate would let unemployment funding stop for the millions of people struggling to make ends meet. Just one un-

employment check not processing will hurt thousands of people and, with the lack of life-supporting employment, will push a bunch of folks closer to the edge of foreclosure and other losses.

I acknowledge this deficit and this debt and what we need to do about it. This issue is a defining issue for this Congress and this Nation. If we have reached the point that we will turn around and walk away from those who have lost their jobs through no fault of their own, if we will turn a blind eye to families who are doing without the basics of life, if we believe this is the best fiscal policy for America, then we have lost our way. We are a caring nation. We care for one another. We are a community, a community that reaches out, through the taxes we pay and the good deeds that many do, to help the less fortunate. Yet when it comes to unemployment benefits, the Republican Senators have said: This is where we make our stand. This is where we enforce our deficit.

Well, I think they have taken off and created more victims in our economy at a time when so many have lost their jobs.

I looked at the States represented by the Republican Senators who spoke earlier today. The Senator from Nebraska is fortunate in one respect. His State has an unemployment rate of 4.6 percent. The Senator from Oklahoma, he, too, is fortunate. His State has an unemployment rate of 6.7 percent. My State is up at 12 percent unemployment, and others such as Michigan are over 14 percent unemployment.

This is a crisis in our State, and it is a crisis that will be made worse when these checks are cut off. I would urge my colleagues to view this unemployment benefit request as the emergency that it is. If nations can rise to the occasion of disasters—unanticipated calamities, natural disasters such as floods and hurricanes—if we can view those as emergencies, shouldn't we look at the hurricanes that have hit the lives of those unemployed Americans and be ready to stand by their side?

I hope when we return after the break over Easter and have our chance to vote, we can finally bring forward enough moderate Republicans on that side of the aisle to join us and say: Yes, we need to fight the deficit, but let's not do it at the expense of the neediest people in America.

Madam President, I yield the floor at this time and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. DURBIN. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate

proceed to a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak for up to 10 minutes each.

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

COAL MINING PERMITTING PROCESS

Mr. McCONNELL. Madam President, I rise to sound an alarm about a threat to coal-mining businesses in Kentucky. Coal is a vital part of my State's economy, and a vital part of America's energy portfolio. The coal industry creates over 60,000 jobs in Kentucky, including approximately 15,000 coal miners. More than half the country's electricity is generated by coal, electricity those workers help generate.

But this important sector of the economy now faces a back-door attempt to restrict coal mining, one that was implemented without a hearing or a vote by this administration's Environmental Protection Agency. The EPA is overstepping its authority by using an approval process meant to assess the environmental impact of mining operations as a means to halt those mining operations altogether.

According to one study by the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, it could be estimated that roughly 3,500 mining jobs in Kentucky are in jeopardy if the EPA does not let go its stranglehold on the growth of that industry. And mining industry jobs are not the only jobs lost thanks to this wrongheaded, bureaucratic overregulation. For every coal-mining job, 11 other jobs are dependent on it. That means up to 38,500 jobs in my State alone could be affected.

Let me give a concrete example of how what the EPA is doing directly affects jobs. Out of 49 Kentucky applicants for permits under section 404 of the Clean Water Act, only one application—that is right, one—is actually under review. 1 out of 49. Actually, that should be 1 out of 42 because seven applicants were kept waiting so long by the EPA's foot-dragging tactic that they had no choice but to withdraw their applications.

After all, during this whole length of time that the EPA unfairly prolongs the process, mine operators must still spend resources to keep their mines ready to operate. Eventually paying these costs while earning no profit in return forces many of these businesses to just give up.

While the rest of the permits are technically pending a review, in reality they are in limbo and essentially dead as long as the EPA refuses to even begin its official review process. This "run out the clock" tactic is bad news for Kentucky's economy.

I know I don't have to tell my colleagues we are in a recession. Unemployment is higher than any of us would like it to be. In Kentucky it is 10.5 percent, higher than the national average. My highest priority as the Senator from Kentucky is to help ev-

eryone from my State who wants a job to find one.

That is why I must speak out against what the EPA is doing. Their attack on an important Kentucky industry hampers the growth of jobs, and it especially hampers the growth of small businesses—the greatest engines of job creation.

The EPA has turned the section 404 permitting process, already a cumbersome process to begin with, into an illegitimate, backdoor means of shutting down Kentucky coal mines. This is outside the scope of their authority and the law. It represents a fundamental departure from the permitting process as originally envisioned by Congress.

This Senate needs to make it clear to the EPA that they must complete the permit review process in a timely manner, and provide complete transparency along the way to all sides. They cannot continue to impose a backdoor ban on mining operations in Kentucky through an illegitimate process.

Let me add one more thing. The section 404 permit review process is only one aspect of the EPA's war on coal. They are also seeking to impose a backdoor national energy tax by regulating carbon dioxide emissions from coal plants under the Clean Air Act, which will hurt our economy and endanger millions of jobs across the country. The Senate will have an opportunity to vote on the EPA's actions in that regard in the near future.

MINIMUM ESSENTIAL COVERAGE

Mr. AKAKA. Madam President, as chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, concerns have been raised to me about a technical error in the health care reform bill that was recently passed, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, H.R. 3590. In drafting the PPACA, a provision was included which designates health care provided under VA's authority as meeting the minimum required health care coverage that an individual is required to maintain.

However, due to the way this exemption was worded, this definition may exclude children with spina bifida, who are seriously disabled and to whom VA provides reimbursement for comprehensive health care. The underlying bill gave authority to the Secretary of Health and Human Services to designate other care, which could include the VA spina bifida program, as meeting the definition of minimum essential coverage. This bill would simply clarify what was originally intended.

Chapter 18 of title 38 contains the Spina Bifida Health Care Program, which is a health benefit program administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs to provide reimbursement for comprehensive health care for children with spina bifida who are born to veterans of the Vietnam War and to some veterans who served in Korea during specified times, as well as chil-

dren of women Vietnam veterans with certain birth defects. The program provides reimbursement for medical services and supplies.

My legislation corrects this small error. Additionally, this legislation would clarify that recipients of CHAMPVA would also be considered as meeting the requirement for minimum essential coverage. This legislation is currently supported by 59 cosponsors, including my friend from North Carolina, and the ranking member on my Committee, Senator BURR. Additionally, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, and the Military Officers Association of America have endorsed this bill.

Thank you, Madam President and I thank my colleagues for their support in making this small but important clarification for veterans.

HONORING OUR ARMED FORCES

CHIEF SPECIAL WARFARE OPERATOR ADAM LEE BROWN

Mrs. LINCOLN. Madam President, today I honor Chief Special Warfare Operator Adam Lee Brown, 36, a Navy SEAL from Hot Springs who died in Afghanistan March 18. My heart goes out to the family of Chief Special Warfare Operator Brown, who made the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of our Nation. According to those who knew him best, he was a caring, compassionate individual, who always put others ahead of himself. He was in his eighth tour of duty in Afghanistan and is survived by his wife, two young children, and his parents.

Along with all Arkansans, I am grateful for the service and sacrifice of all of our military service members and their families. More than 11,000 Arkansans on Active Duty and more than 10,000 Arkansas Reservists have served in Iraq or Afghanistan since September 11, 2001.

It is the responsibility of our Nation to provide the tools necessary to care for our country's returning service members and honor the commitment our Nation made when we sent them into harm's way. Our grateful Nation will not forget them when their military service is complete. It is the least we can do for those whom we owe so much.

CALIFORNIA CASUALTIES FROM IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN

Mrs. BOXER. Madam President, I rise today to pay tribute to 14 servicemembers from California or based in California who have died while serving our country in Operation Enduring Freedom since December 16, 2009. This brings to 147 the number of servicemembers either from California or based in California who have been killed while serving our country in Afghanistan. This represents 14 percent of all U.S. deaths in Afghanistan.

PFC Serge Kropov, 21, of Hawley, PA, died December 20, 2009, as a result of a nonhostile incident in Helmand province, Afghanistan. Private First Class