

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. WICKER. I ask to be allowed to speak as in morning business.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

DON'T ASK, DON'T TELL POLICY

Mr. WICKER. Mr. President, yesterday the Senate Armed Services Committee completed its markup of the Defense authorization bill. Normally, Senators are asked to wait for a period of days until the report can be issued and the specifics are made public. But yesterday the chairman clearly understood when we were finished with business that there were two items dealing with social policy that would be widely known immediately. I speak on those topics today with a clear understanding that the Chair knows that these items will be talked about, an exception to the general rule.

Yesterday, I believe, the committee made a very grave mistake with regard to the provision involving the repeal of the don't ask, don't tell policy. This has been the policy since the days of the Clinton administration. It has worked reasonably well. I am opposed to the repeal of the don't ask, don't tell policy.

In February of this year, Secretary Gates announced that a survey would be conducted with a view toward assessing whether this policy should be changed. There was a working group that was going to be established and a survey of servicemembers and their families would be conducted. This working group would report the results of this assessment by December of this year. At that point, the Congress and the administration would have additional information about how today's servicemembers and their families would feel about a change which would allow gays and lesbians to serve openly in the military. This would, of course, be a dramatic change.

That was the policy. A number of us were skeptical about it, but that was the announced policy. Somehow, in the last few days that has changed, and a so-called compromise has been put forward and adopted now by the committee and apparently by the House of Representatives also that would say that while the assessment is going on—which, as I said, is to end in December—that we would vote on this bill this summer, possibly in the next few weeks, to go ahead and repeal the don't ask, don't tell policy and then to allow the President, the Secretary of Defense, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to review the assessment in December and see whether, indeed, the enactment of the bill by the Senate and House should go forward.

This seems to be getting the cart before the horse. I want to make several points.

This so-called compromise is not a compromise. It is, in effect, for all in-

tents and purposes, a repeal of the don't ask, don't tell policy. Giving the President and the two military people who are most answerable to him the authority to make this decision and pretend they might decide against it is a mockery, and it is a figleaf.

Does anyone doubt what their decision will be? After all, the President of the United States campaigned that he wanted to do away with the don't ask, don't tell policy. There is no question he favors this. The Secretary of Defense answers directly to him. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff answers directly to the President of the United States. It is foolhardy for anyone in this Senate to suggest there will be any decision other than a repeal of the don't ask, don't tell policy.

It is said that these three people will wait for the assessment to see what military members and their families think. I think Congress has the authority to do this. Congress should wait for the assessment. We might be surprised. We might be troubled by what the assessment shows. But it is, as I said, a mockery to make the decision now in May or June or July and then look forward to an assessment which is due in December.

What has changed? I ask my fellow Members and the American people: What has changed? What has brought about this sudden compromise over the past weekend and attaching this bit of social engineering to the national Defense authorization bill?

Frankly, I think a lot of Americans are going to conclude that politics changed. We can look at RealClearPolitics that estimates Republicans may gain six seats in the November election. That would be before the December assessment is due. Some people say Republicans may gain 8 to 10 seats. That would change attitudes considerably with regard to don't ask, don't tell. It would allow the people of the United States to be heard on this issue.

Americans are justified in concluding that with this election looming, that is what changed. There has been no change in the national security needs to rush this process ahead and get the cart before the horse and make the decision before the assessment is made.

The point of view of those of us in the committee who voted against the Lieberman amendment yesterday is supported by the heads of the four branches of our service. They support the original plan of Secretary Gates announced in February to do an assessment and then to make a decision based on what we find out in the assessment.

I have a letter dated May 26, 2010, to Senator JOHN MCCAIN from George Casey, general, U.S. Army, the Chief of Staff of the Army. He says to Senator MCCAIN that his views have not changed since his testimony.

I quote directly:

I continue to support the review and timeline offered by Secretary Gates.

I remain convinced that it is critically important to get a better understanding of where our Soldiers and Families are on this issue.

Yesterday, in their wisdom, the members of the Armed Services Committee decided they knew better than our soldiers and their families.

General Casey said we need to know whether this "impacts on readiness and unit cohesion."

He concludes by saying:

I also believe that repealing the law before the completion of the review will be seen by the men and women of the Army as a reversal of our commitment to hear their views before moving forward.

ADM Gary Roughead, Chief of Naval Operations, in a letter to Senator MCCAIN dated May 26 says, among other things:

I testified in February about the importance of the comprehensive review that began in March and is now well under way within the Department of Defense. We need this review to fully assess our force and carefully examine potential impacts of a change in the law.

Yesterday, the members of the Armed Services Committee said: No, we disagree with Admirable Roughead, the Chief of Naval Operations. We don't need this review. We, as the elected representatives of the 50 States, are going to punt that decision to someone whose mind is already made up.

Admirable Roughead goes on to say:

I have spoken with sailors and fellow flag officers alike about the importance of conducting the review in a thoughtful and deliberate manner.

In this quick reversal that occurred just yesterday in the Armed Services Committee, we abandoned the thoughtful review.

GEN James T. Conway, Commandant of the Marine Corps, said to Senator MCCAIN in a letter dated 25 May 2010:

During testimony, I spoke of the confidence I had as a Service Chief in the DOD Working Group that Secretary Gates laid out in the wake of President Obama's guidance on "Don't Ask-Don't Tell." I felt that an organized and systematic approach on such an important issue was precisely the way to develop "best military advice."

He goes on to say:

I encourage the Congress to let the process the Secretary of Defense created to run its course.

That was the Commandant of the Marine Corps.

Finally, a letter from GEN Norton A. Schwartz, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, says:

... my position remains that DOD should conduct a review that carefully investigates and evaluates the facts and circumstances, the potential implications, the possible complications, and potential mitigations to repealing this law.

All four of our service heads were explicit in asking the committee to let the process continue. Yet, in our wisdom, with an election looming, the committee voted with a majority vote to go ahead and say: We really don't care to hear what the assessment says. We are just going to let three people make that decision on their own.

I have this question for Members of the Senate who will be asked to vote on this after the break: What if the assessment comes back and says that soldiers and marines in significant numbers are not willing to continue in a voluntary service under these conditions? What if that is the result of the assessment? Then it will be too late for the Members of the House and Senate to make a change in this policy.

The time to take a pause and the time to see what our members actually think is now. We can force this on the services, but in a voluntary armed force, we cannot force members to enlist. We cannot force marines, who are putting their lives on the line for what they believe is the American way of life and for our freedom and for the security of all Americans, to reenlist when their time is up. We need to know if they are going to be willing to stay in the service and to make that commitment and to put themselves in harm's way under this very drastic, dramatic change. We should not substitute our judgment for what the members of the service and their families think. And I regret that we have gone this far and regret the action of the Armed Services Committee.

There is one other issue that was regrettably voted on in the affirmative by the committee yesterday, and that is with regard to abortion policy. Since 1996, we have had a policy that abortions—elective abortions—will not be performed on our military installations. This is a policy that was passed by the House and Senate and signed into law by a Democratic President, President Clinton. For the past 14 years, it has been our policy that elective abortions will not be performed in our military installations.

Yesterday, the committee decided to reverse this longstanding policy and to say that, indeed, abortions for whatever reason will be performed in these facilities that are paid for at taxpayer expense and are there for the care of our servicemembers, to keep them healthy and to repair their injuries. We are going to use those facilities for elective abortions.

I guarantee you this will be challenged on the floor of the House and Senate with separate amendments, and Members will be given a chance to vote on this separate issue. But if this amendment stands, the medical facilities of our military installations—Fort Bragg, Columbus Air Force Base, Keesler Air Force Base in my home State of Mississippi—will be able to be used for abortions performed late term, abortions performed for purposes of sex selection, abortions performed for any reason, abortions at will. That will be the requirement for our military installations and the medical facilities on those installations—again, another piece of social engineering, another vast and serious and consequential departure from longstanding Department of Defense policy.

I regret these two positions. I call on my colleagues, Mr. President, during

this Memorial Day break, when we are talking with those who have served, who have put themselves in harm's way, and when we are talking with the families of those who have served and who have given the ultimate sacrifice, that we seriously consider whether the committee has made the right decision and that we come back to Washington, DC, with a determination to reverse these two very harmful and, in my view, mistaken actions by the Armed Services Committee.

With that, I wish my friend, the Acting President pro tempore of the Senate, a happy and prosperous Memorial Day, 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. REED. 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.

THE RHODE ISLAND FLOOD

Mr. REED. Mr. President, in March my State was hit with back-to-back historic floods that caused hundreds of millions of dollars in damage in Rhode Island. I thank the chairman of the Appropriations Committee, Senator INOUE, and the ranking member, Senator COCHRAN, and my colleagues on the committee especially, who have recognized the needs of Rhode Island in the appropriations bill we recently completed. We are struggling to overcome the effects of the worst flooding in centuries in the midst of the worst economic environment we have seen since the 1930s.

Indeed, Rhode Island was among the first States to sink into this latest recession. In the last 2 years, Rhode Island has consistently ranked among the top three States in unemployment, with as many as 12.7 percent of our workforce without jobs. By the latest estimates, 12.5 percent of the State is out of work, and this is not including all of the jobs that have been lost in the flooding.

Our major commercial mall in Warwick, RI, has been closed since March. Hundreds, perhaps even 1,000 or more jobs, have been lost. They are rapidly trying to reopen this facility under the incredible leadership of the owner, Aram Garabedian, but to date they have opened one store. Soon they hope to open another. For those hundreds of people, they have lost their jobs and are waiting to go back to work.

The reach of the flood was widespread, covering every county of the State. In the space of 2 weeks, separate rainstorms caused four rivers—the Blackstone, Pawtuxet, the Pawcatuck, and the Pocasset—to go above flood stage. Interstate 95, the major north-south route in the Northeast of this country, was closed for 2 days. It has

never been closed for that length of time. The last time I can recall it being closed was in 1978 during a huge blizzard which shut down traffic for about a day or so.

President Obama and FEMA issued major disaster declarations for the entire State, and I thank the President. He moved very quickly and very aggressively. I also thank FEMA. They dispatched immediately their deputy for disaster operations. They had on the ground within, it seemed, hours, key personnel. I particularly want to recognize Gracia Szczech, an incredible woman who, in fact, frankly, left Rhode Island to be sent down to the next great flood in Tennessee. Senator ALEXANDER and Senator CORKER have spoken about their problems. I thank both the President and FEMA for the incredible response.

But what you find in a flood like this—all of my colleagues have been subject to them and, frankly, this is a phenomenon that is usually found in other parts of the country—but what you find in floods is that the water recedes, the Sun comes out, but the damage and devastation remains. We have about 2,000 households that are still not able to live in their homes. This is something that has caused a tremendous shock to our economy and to our workforce and to the people of Rhode Island.

After 2 months, homeowners and businesses in much of the State are still struggling with these effects. The flooding caused job losses in a number of sectors; 1,800 jobs were lost in the food services and accommodation sector alone. I mentioned the Warwick Mall. Approximately 1,100 people have lost their jobs because of the shutdown of that commercial center. Health, education, manufacturing, construction, transportation, art and recreation—all of these sectors have experienced significant job losses.

As my colleagues know, Rhode Island has been fortunate for many decades to have avoided this kind of natural disaster, particularly from flooding. The last major natural disaster of the State was Hurricane Bob in 1991. It roared up and hit our State, like other parts of the Northeast, and we suffered significant damage. Since that time we have been rather fortunate, but our fortune ran out with these floods this spring.

There has been no question about the support of people of Rhode Island or my colleagues in our State's congressional delegation when this type of disaster hits elsewhere. Midwest flooding, Katrina in Louisiana and along the gulf coast—we are there because we know, No. 1, Americans, our neighbors, are suffering, and that is when we all have to pull together and help them. We also know, too, and expect that when it happens in our home States that same spirit of pulling together, of helping out, of getting people back in their homes and opening up businesses would be something we would experience and we would see too.