

the so-called Chained CPI would be that beneficiaries who retire at age 65 and receive average benefits would get \$560 less a year at age 75 than they would under current law. Around here \$560 may not seem like a lot of money. But if you are 75 years of age and are bringing in \$14,000 or \$16,000 a year, and you are trying to pay for prescription drugs or health care, \$560 is, in fact, a lot of money. Worse, if we moved toward that Chained CPI, Social Security benefits, by the time a senior reached 85, he or she would receive \$1,000 less a year, which would be a 6.5-percent cut in their benefits.

So we are in an unusual moment in that the people who helped cause this recession—the greedy people on Wall Street whose recklessness, whose greed, whose illegal behavior drove us into this recession—are not being asked to contribute one nickel toward deficit reduction. They were bailed out by the American people, and in many respects they are now doing better than they did before the Wall Street crash.

Many here are saying, my Republicans friends especially: No, Wall Street CEOs making tens of millions a year, who helped cause this recession, do not have to contribute one penny toward deficit reduction. But if you are an 85-year-old senior citizen who is struggling to take care of basic necessities, well, my goodness, we are going to have to do deficit reduction on your back.

That is not what America is supposed to be about, and that is not what the American people want. Poll after poll suggests the American people believe we should move toward deficit reduction based on the concept of shared sacrifice; that we are all in this together.

Even if you are a millionaire and you make a whole lot of campaign contributions, and, yes, if you are a billionaire and you have lobbyists running all over Capitol Hill, you know what. You are going to have to help us with deficit reduction. And, yes, given the fact that we have major corporation after major corporation—oil companies and Wall Street—making billions of dollars in profits and in some cases paying nothing in taxes, guess what. We are going to do away with those loopholes so they start contributing toward deficit reduction. Given the fact we have tripled military funding since 1997, yes, we are going to have to make some cuts in military spending.

Let me conclude by simply saying: Yes, we have to reduce our deficit and deal with our national debt. But the issue is not a big deal or a small deal, the issue must be a fair deal—one which protects Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, the needs of working families, and a deficit-reduction approach which asks the wealthiest people and the largest corporations to also participate in deficit reduction.

With that, Mr. President, I yield the floor.

RECESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will stand in recess until 2:15 p.m.

Thereupon, at 12:30 p.m., the Senate recessed until 2:15 p.m., and reassembled when called to order by the Presiding Officer (Mr. WEBB).

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Illinois.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. JOHNSON of South Dakota. I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Morning business is now closed.

MILITARY CONSTRUCTION AND VETERANS AFFAIRS AND RELATED AGENCIES APPROPRIATIONS ACT, 2012

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will resume consideration of H.R. 2055, which the clerk will report.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (H.R. 2055) making appropriations for military construction, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and related agencies for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2012, and for other purposes.

Pending:

Coburn (for McCain) amendment No. 553, to eliminate the additional amount of \$10,000,000, not included in the President's budget request for fiscal year 2012, appropriated for the Department of Defense for planning and design for the Energy Conservation Investment Program.

Johnson (SD) modified amendment No. 556, of a perfecting nature.

Mr. JOHNSON of South Dakota. Mr. President, as we begin our third day of debate on the Military Construction-VA appropriations bill, I would like to encourage my colleagues to file any amendments they may have as soon as possible, as we would like to begin disposing of amendments in short order. While we are waiting, I would like to take a few moments to talk about the VA portion of this bill.

The bill totals \$58.6 billion in discretionary spending for the VA in fiscal year 2012. Additionally, the bill contains \$52.5 billion in advance appropriations for health care for our vets. One of the very few funding increases above the budget request contained in this bill is for VA medical research. As every Senator knows, the unique combat situations in Afghanistan and Iraq have left many vets suffering significant injuries, including PTSD and TBI. We have a moral responsibility to take care of those who have put their lives

on the line to defend our Nation and it would be shortsighted to cut funding for critical research designed to improve medical outcomes from injuries suffered on the battlefield.

Over the last several years, tremendous progress has been made by the Department in reducing the number of homeless vets. According to the VA, in 2005 an estimated 195,000 vets experienced homelessness on any given night. Today that figure is down to 75,600. Progress is being made and this bill continues those efforts.

The bill also includes funding for the VA to transform from a Department heavily dependent on paper to a modern agency that leverages technology to shorten the time vets have to wait for services. The funds contained in this bill are necessary for the VA to deploy its automated claims processing system on time.

These are only a few highlights of the VA title of the Military Construction-VA appropriations bill. As I have mentioned from the outset, this bill is a result of a bipartisan effort. Again, I urge my colleagues to file any amendments they may have so that we can continue to make progress in moving this bill toward final passage.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. JOHNSON of South Dakota. I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

Mr. JOHNSON of South Dakota. I ask unanimous consent that Senator COLLINS be added as a cosponsor to amendment No. 556.

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

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. FRANKEN). Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. WEBB. Mr. President, I wish to begin by expressing my appreciation for the remarks of the Senator from South Dakota about the need to help our veterans, particularly those who have been serving in these recent endeavors. I wish to express my personal appreciation once again for the service his own son has given our country during this period, and to the service of the Senator from Illinois, the ranking Republican on this bill, as well as to my own son for having served as an enlisted marine and infantryman in Ramadi, Iraq, through some of the worst fighting of that war.

I rise today to discuss two amendments Senator WARNER and I have filed to this particular bill. Each relates to the Navy's proposal to homeport a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier at Naval Station Mayport in Florida by 2019.

One amendment would eliminate funding of nearly \$15 million for a Navy

military construction project—a four-lane divided highway on the naval station. The Navy describes it as the first in a series of what will be increasingly expensive projects required to enable the Navy to create a second homeport for aircraft carriers on the east coast.

The second amendment would eliminate approximately \$15 million for architectural planning and design services for a number of follow-on military construction projects at Mayport tied, again, to carrier homeporting.

This is a slippery slope. The Navy says it will cost more than $\frac{1}{2}$ billion in one-time costs to homeport a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier in Mayport. Other recurring costs will push the expense much higher. In fact, there are estimates these costs could achieve more than \$1 billion by the end of this decade.

The reason for filing these amendments is straightforward. We owe it to the American taxpayers, as well as to the integrity of our DOD budget process. The Department of Defense has been directed to achieve reductions in defense spending totaling hundreds of billions of dollars. No part of that budget should be off-limits, especially a duplicative, redundant project such as the Navy's carrier homeporting plan for Mayport.

I wish to make it clear at the outset that this is not a Virginia v. Florida issue, although there are strong political implications in both Virginia and in Florida for this move. I have been involved in one way or another with naval service since I was 17 years old, and I will continue to be involved in one way or another long after I am involved as a Senator in the Senate.

I support the Navy's requirement to sustain the naval station at Mayport in some fashion, but speaking as a former Secretary of the Navy, I wish to point out there are other ways to get there. I question the fiscal responsibility and the strategic necessity to homeport an aircraft carrier in Mayport when less expensive homeporting alternatives do exist.

These amendments are directed toward necessary congressional oversight. The GAO has initiated an independent analysis of alternatives. Its assessment will be completed next spring. Before we commit to a plan to build expensive, redundant, nuclear-supported infrastructure on the east coast with long-term spending implications, our views on the Navy's proposal should be informed by this GAO study.

Let me explain my hesitations about this project. First, the Navy is proposing to expand a facility at the same time the size of its fleet has radically declined. This chart shows the size of the U.S. Navy active ship force vessels levels from 1970 until today. In 1970, the U.S. Navy had 743 active ships. Today they have 284 deployable battle force ships. It is rather ironic as I stand here today because when I was Secretary of the Navy in the late 1980s, the Navy had exactly twice as many

combatants as it does today—568 combatants. It is only logical that the Navy's shore footprint should reflect this reality. The Navy's plan to build a large duplicative facility for aircraft carriers in Mayport contradicts this logic.

In 1970, with 19 aircraft carriers, which is this line showing the historical trend on aircraft carriers, the Navy homeported carriers at 6 locations. As the number of aircraft carriers has declined from 19 to 11 today, the number of their homeports has held fairly constant. There are now 5. So when we had 19 aircraft carriers in the Navy, they homeported them at 6 locations.

Today, with 11 aircraft carriers and 1, quite frankly, at risk, which I will speak to in a minute, we have 5. The Navy has upgraded its facilities and home ports on the west coast and in Japan, as well as our east coast home port in Norfolk to accommodate today's all-nuclear carrier fleet. With a fleet less than half the size of what it was in 1970—almost one-third of the size of what it was in 1970—it is only logical that we do not require the same number of shore facilities to support it.

Quite frankly, if I had \$1 billion to spend, I think I would buy a couple of ships with it and try to get the Navy up to its stated goal, which I support, of 313 combatants. These are issues of fiscal responsibility—where the Navy puts its money.

Over the past 5 years, the Navy has had validated unfunded requirements—validated unfunded requirements—of more than \$50 billion across its operations, military construction, modernization and acquisition programs. I believe it is more fiscally responsible for the Navy to reduce these unfunded requirements than it would be for them to build a redundant facility.

From fiscal year 2008 through 2012, the Navy reported unfunded priorities totaling \$11.8 billion. These are priorities totaling \$11.8 billion. They cover shipbuilding, aircraft procurement, aviation and ship maintenance, military construction, and other programs—all for future readiness needs.

The Navy's backlog in critical modernization repair projects at the four naval shipyards increased to \$3.5 billion in fiscal year 2010 as a result of inadequate investment. The Navy acknowledges that the growing risk for shipyard operations is a major concern. Overall, the Navy's shorewide modernization backlog grew to \$39.2 billion last year—up nearly \$3 billion from the previous year. Simply stated, the Navy needs to do a better job of managing its existing facilities.

So I ask my colleagues: How can we be sympathetic to the Navy's request for additional funding to cover such shortfalls when it wants to invest up to \$1 billion in an ill-advised, duplicative carrier homeporting project in Mayport?

There has been much discussion about the strategic justification and

ramifications of only having one nuclear aircraft homeport on the east coast. Let me talk about that. First, the Navy says the new homeport is needed to mitigate the risk of a terrorist attack, accident, or natural disaster at the homeporting facility in Norfolk. However, every Navy risk assessment states there is a low risk of such events occurring in the Hampton Roads region. Alternate maintenance facilities for a carrier exist at Norfolk Naval Shipyard and the private shipyard in Newport News. Last year, I supported projects at Mayport to cover this possibility as well—to dredge its channel and modernize a pier so that a carrier could make a routine port visit there in the unlikely event that operations in Norfolk were interrupted so that a carrier could use Mayport in an emergency.

There has been some talk about the need for strategic dispersal. I recognize that concept. There have been photographs of Pearl Harbor with battleship row, with the ships bunched together, showing how the Japanese aircraft were able to knock them out in 1941. There was justification for the Navy's concept of dispersal during the Cold War. But even then many critics from GAO were faulting the Navy at a time when I was at the Pentagon for its lack of a focused threat assessment to justify what some people were calling "strategic home-porking"—putting ships in too many different locations.

Today's threats are entirely different, and I would make the rather ironic note that dispersal in many ways has occurred through reduction. I will say this again: The U.S. Navy today is one-half the size it was when I was Secretary of the Navy, when we had 568 combatants. A certain amount of dispersal has occurred by the dwindling size of the Navy.

The second point is a conventional Pearl Harbor-type attack is very unlikely. Secretary of Defense Panetta mentioned this during his Senate confirmation hearing in June:

The next Pearl Harbor that we confront could very well be a cyber attack that cripples our power systems, our grid, our security systems, our financial systems, and our governmental systems.

I do not minimize the need to protect our fleet from any sort of attack. We have done an extraordinarily good job of that in the Norfolk area with high-tech defensive systems. This is not the same type of situation that people have talked about in terms of what happened at Pearl Harbor in 1941.

Another point is that less expensive homeporting options do exist. Our Navy's own studies identify other less-expensive options to sustain the facility at Mayport, and I do believe Mayport as a Navy town is very important to the interests of our country and to that region. It is an important naval base. But we have a clear responsibility to find more cost-effective, more strategically responsible ways to do that.

Again, if I had \$1 billion I would put it into ships. If I were looking for the

right kind of ship to go to Florida, I would look for amphibious and smaller ships so we don't have to build these highly expensive, nuclear-capable facilities that, again, are redundant.

I must also note that pressures to reduce the Navy budget are getting worse. Last week, Marine Corps GEN James Cartwright, the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, highlighted this challenge, saying that the Defense Department is "looking at all options" to reduce its budget by \$400 billion over the next 10 years. General Cartwright then confirmed that the Navy was considering such options as delaying the construction of a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier or possibly cancelling a future aircraft carrier acquisition.

The effects of these budget pressures are manifested in the fleet today. The Navy's readiness for aviation squadrons and its surface ships has continued to decline since 2007, owing to inadequate funding for maintenance, deferred availabilities, and the fleet's high operational tempo. In their testimony on Navy readiness to the Readiness Subcommittee on the House side just last week, the Navy witnesses said, "This is unsustainable over the long term."

So do we want to spend \$1 billion on a redundant homeport at the expense of building ships and maintaining our fleet? I would encourage my colleagues to consider a commonsense approach and to take a year's time out before embarking on a duplicative enterprise that the Navy simply cannot afford. The service has far too many higher priorities, unfunded requirements, and readiness problems on its plate.

The GAO study will be comprehensive, it will be rigorous, and it will give us the information we need to make informed judgments next year regarding the Navy's homeporting plan for Mayport. There is no cause to rush to judgment now. There is \$30 million that could be saved presently.

As I said, this is a slippery slope that could take us down the road to \$1 billion. We don't need it. We need the money in other areas in the Navy budget.

Mr. NELSON of Florida, Mr. President, I rise today to discuss the strategic dispersal of our naval fleet, and how this is vital to our national security. Why is strategic dispersal important? Well, we only have to look back a few decades to December 7, 1941, to see why all of our eggs should not be in one basket.

In the Pacific fleet, our Navy has had the forethought to station our most priceless assets at four different homeports—San Diego, Bremerton, Everett, and Japan. The Navy has been slow, however, to accomplish the same thing with our Atlantic fleet. When the last conventionally powered aircraft carrier, the John F. Kennedy, was decommissioned in 2007, we had a problem. All five nuclear carriers were now in one homeport Norfolk, VA. So since 2007 this has heightened the national security threat.

The threat could be an asymmetric one like the USS *Cole* bombing or the sinking of a freighter in the 15-mile-long channel at Norfolk, which would bottle up the carriers in port.

If we have learned anything, it should be this—we are not invulnerable to attacks or to the whims of Mother Nature, nor are we very good at anticipating when and where the next catastrophe will occur. Mayport, unlike Norfolk's carrier berths, is at the mouth of the river, adjacent to the ocean, with a protected harbor from the commercial ship channel.

The President's budget request supports the infrastructure improvements needed in order to homeport a carrier in Mayport, FL, in 2019. Why? The Chief of Naval Operations, ADM Gary Roughead, said that "Moving a carrier to Mayport is needed regardless of cost." The Secretary of the Navy, Ray Mabus, said "We have to disperse our carrier fleet, from a naval standpoint; it's something we have to do."

The cost to homeport a CVN at Mayport is much less, almost half, of what the Navy anticipated. The Government Accountability Office estimates that the total cost of remaining projects will be from \$258 million to \$356 million, instead of \$537 million. Indeed, this is cheap insurance when you consider the costs of replacing a carrier at \$11.5 billion.

The military decision to disperse the fleet has been studied and restudied. Admiral after admiral, Secretary after Secretary have all testified keeping a second Atlantic homeport is essential to national security. The U.S. Congress has supported this decision for years.

The Senate Armed Services Committee and the Senate Appropriations Committee both have recommended the full funding of the President's budget request for Mayport improvements in 2012. The carrier move enjoys broad, bipartisan support in this Chamber.

With that, I yield the floor, and 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. VITTER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

AMENDMENT NO. 568

Mr. VITTER. Mr. President, I rise to make pending the Vitter amendment which is at the desk, and I will be happy to explain what it is about. If it is necessary, I ask unanimous consent to set aside the pending amendment and make the Vitter amendment pending.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Without objection, it is so ordered.

The clerk will report.

Mr. VITTER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to waive reading of the amendment.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the amendment by number.

The assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

The Senator from Louisiana [Mr. VITTER] proposes an amendment numbered 568.

The amendment is as follows:

(Purpose: To provide that none of the funds appropriated or otherwise made available by this Act may be obligated or expended at a rate higher than the level of the Senate and House of Representative concurrent budget resolution for fiscal year 2012)

On page 117, between lines 12 and 13, insert the following:

SEC. 410. None of the funds appropriated or otherwise made available by this Act shall exceed the level of the concurrent budget resolution for fiscal year 2012.

Mr. VITTER. Mr. President, I will read it. It is very short, and I will explain it. This amendment simply says:

None of the funds appropriated or otherwise made available by this Act shall exceed the level of the concurrent budget resolution for fiscal year 2012.

That is the entire amendment.

The point this amendment makes is a pretty simple but a basic and important one. We do not have a concurrent budget resolution for fiscal year 2012. We are in the process of passing an appropriations bill, spending money without a budget, without a game plan, without a framework. That is clearly putting the cart before the horse and clearly having things backward in a dysfunctional process.

Every Louisiana family, every Louisiana small business, as families and businesses do in Minnesota, sits down and makes a budget, and then they spend money under that budget. That is the rational, straightforward way to do things. Unfortunately, that is not what we are doing in Congress and in the Senate.

This simple, straightforward process is not only rational, it is not only commonsensical, it is also required by law. Under Federal law, the Congress is mandated to pass a budget, to pass a concurrent budget resolution by April 15 of every year. We are months beyond April 15—several months and counting—and not only do we not have this required budget, this game plan, this framework which we are supposed to be living by, but on the Senate side we have not even made a meaningful effort to get there.

The distinguished chairman of the Budget Committee has not made an effort in committee to come up with a Senate budget resolution. There has been no effort in committee, and so no Senate budget has been sent to the floor. In fact, the same thing happened in the previous fiscal year. So we are now not just several months past this year's April 15 deadline, but we are over 800 days since the last time we had a budget resolution as required by Federal law—800 days, over 800 days and counting.

I am afraid this is exactly the sort of thing the American people shake their

heads at. This is exactly the sort of thing they scratch their heads about, shake their heads at, and say: What is wrong in Washington?

Every Louisiana family has a budget they have to live within. Every Louisiana small business has a budget and that is their framework and they operate within that. Yet Congress, apparently, does not get it, particularly the Senate does not get it under this majority leadership and is not even making an attempt to do what is not only a good, sound idea but is required by Federal law.

Again, I just suggest we put first things first: We have a budget and then we only spend money, only pass appropriations bills pursuant to and consistent with that budget. That is why, again, my amendment is very simple:

None of the funds appropriated or otherwise made available by this Act shall exceed the level of the concurrent budget resolution for fiscal year 2012.

I urge us all to do the right thing. We will have different ideas about a budget. We will have different priorities. We will have an important and healthy debate, but we need to follow the law. We need to follow common sense. We need to have a budget and then only pass spending and appropriations bills under that budget and consistent with it.

With that, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant editor of the Daily Digest proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. KIRK. 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. KIRK. Mr. President, I share very much the sentiments of my colleague from Louisiana, Mr. VITTER, but I would urge us to not support the amendment because the Senate has already ruled on this question.

When we debated whether to take up this bill, we voted on a cloture motion in order to bring up an appropriations bill. Normally, we would want to pass a budget resolution before bringing up an appropriations bill, and it has been, I think, over 800 days since the leadership of this institution has even written and presented a budget. But I would put forward that this bill is rather unique because it conforms to the House Paul Ryan budget that passed the House on April 15. The legislation before us has come before the Senate because Chairman JOHNSON and I have agreed to put forward a VA-MILCON bill that is \$1.255 billion in discretionary budget authority below the President's request. We are coming in \$620 million below the 2011 enacted level.

We all remember that the House of Representatives has already adopted the MILCON-VA appropriations bill under Chairman CULBERSON, and the Senate bill actually spends in budget authority on the discretionary side \$2.5

million less than the House bill. Because we did that, 71 to 26 was the vote on cloture to bring up this bill, including the support of the Republican leader, Mr. MCCONNELL, and our vice chairman on the Republican side of the Appropriations Committee, Mr. COCHRAN.

I do think for a bill that has been endorsed by the Veterans of Foreign Wars and other veterans service organizations, a bill that gets the Senate moving again for its regular duties as part of the appropriations process, and for a bill that actually cuts funding—Chairman JOHNSON and I have reduced funding in 24 separate programs in this budget, including denying a brandnew courthouse for the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims and pressuring the Army, for example, when we found a proposal to spend \$1.4 million on a general's garden in Germany. When all those 24 reductions were made—when we denied the new building, when we made the other reductions—we came in with a bill that is below the bill passed by the House of Representatives.

That is why this legislation has come up. That is why the Senate voted 71 to 26 for cloture to bring up the bill. I would just put forward that the fact is, this bill does actually comply with a budget. It complies with the budget of the House of Representatives, which is why it has such strong bipartisan support.

With that, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Indiana is recognized.

Mr. COATS. Mr. President, I congratulate Senator KIRK for bringing this legislation to the floor and getting it through committee in a way that is indicative of where we need to go. We were sent here not to increase spending. We were sent here to try to find a sensible way of moving forward by reducing expenditures and still providing essential services that only the Federal Government can provide. His subcommittee and committee have done that with this bill before us.

I commend him for bringing this in under budget. Savings actually have occurred. We are changing the culture of the Senate from one of increasing spending to one of oversight and looking carefully at how Washington spends taxpayer dollars. Every dollar is important. We have a lot of those dollars stacked up, in terms of debt, that have to be addressed. Looking at each appropriations bill and getting them through regular order is how the Senate needs to function. We know we cannot get there until we settle this debt limit situation with a sensible, rational plan that is credible with financial markets.

I have looked at details of this legislation as a member of the Appropriations Committee, and I think the Senator from Illinois and his colleague, the chairman, Senator JOHNSON, have come forward with a very good product that addresses our military construction needs and our welfare benefits and does it in a way that shows we can achieve savings.

What I wish to speak about is the balanced budget amendment we will be dealing with later this week. When I first came to Congress, I committed to the people of Indiana to support a balanced budget amendment. I have watched the process, and since I have left office and now come back, I have continued to watch the process, and we simply don't have that discipline that enables us to keep our fiscal house in balance.

There are so many temptations as a Member of Congress to say yes to everybody. Everybody pleads their cause. They come in and make their case. Over the years, our country has accumulated gradually a substantial amount of debt that we no longer can afford.

Washington needs something that locks us into a commitment to be careful with taxpayers' money and not spend more than we take in. Every family understands this. There is a point at which we simply have to say stop spending at this rate because we cannot afford it. Every business understands that. Most of our local governments and State governments are now realizing that.

As we see across the country, very drastic steps need to be taken to get the fiscal house back in order. That hasn't happened yet at the Federal level. Thankfully, we have before us this week attempt to debate and address the issue of a constitutionally mandated balanced budget. I look forward to that debate.

Let's just look back at a little history. When the balanced budget amendment came before the Senate in 1997, our Nation's debt stood at \$5.36 trillion. Today, the debt has accelerated to \$14.3 trillion and, as we know, it is accelerating even faster and climbing toward much higher numbers. We are borrowing more than 40 cents of every \$1 we spend. That is unsustainable. Ultimately, it is having a negative impact on our economy, but it will continue to have an ever-increasing negative impact in the future if we do not get our fiscal house in order.

We clearly need a commitment. When we put our hand on the Bible and raise our right hand and swear to uphold the Constitution of the United States, that includes a commitment to be careful with the taxpayers' dollars and particularly understand the impact that deficit spending has on our economy and on unemployment—a commitment to be open and fair and upfront with the taxpayers who are funding all this.

Our State of Indiana has to go before the taxpayers each year and say this is a nice proposal, but this is how much it is going to cost. If we, the taxpayers, want to pay for such a proposal with increased taxes or we want to pay for it by reducing spending somewhere else, one of those processes will keep us in balance. Congress cannot end this session without achieving that balance. Our State has to go through that every

year. That is true of the majority of the States in this country.

That doesn't happen here in Washington. We just borrow more and worry about it later. The end of that road is here. We have hit the wall. Later is no longer a viable option. More debt is no longer a viable option. Without a constructive plan in place to address this now, we are going to continue to, in my opinion, remain at a stalemate. There is a lot going on in the Senate. There have been hours upon hours of discussions. Both sides, together, are trying to figure out a plan that will put us on a path to fiscal responsibility, which can both pass the House and the Senate.

The opportunity now is here to include in that plan a balanced budget amendment. We know it is going to take time to pass this. It requires a two-thirds vote of each House. If passed and agreed on, it has to be sent to the States, and three-quarters of the States have to ratify it. If the American people understood that behind whatever plan we put in place to deal with our fiscal problems we had a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution in place, they would have assurance that we are on the right track. I think that signal to the financial markets and the world. It would show that the United States is aware of its problem, has taken action, and is getting its fiscal house in order. The dollar will stay the world's currency, and America will remain the safest haven in the world to invest.

We are seeing debt crises all over the world, and we see our own dollar being challenged. The rating agencies are coming forward and announcing the possibility of a drop in our credit rating. The statistics show that a 1-percentage point increase in interest rates—which investors will demand if we don't show them a credible plan—produces, over a 10-year period, \$1.3 trillion of extra money that we will have to spend to cover our debt. We simply cannot continue this process and ignore the problem. The time to do it is now.

Is it difficult? Yes. We have been trying to debate this and work on it ever since January. We are not there yet, and the clock is ticking toward August 2. A balanced budget amendment will help enforce a debt-reduction plan and gain the confidence of the American people that this will not just be something overturned by the next Congress, and it will not just be a piece of paper that doesn't have a long-term effect. Backing up a plan with a balanced budget amendment will provide the assurance that going forward America will tend to its fiscal needs and stay strong as a nation financially, as well as every other aspect.

With that, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Oregon.

Mr. MERKLEY. Mr. President, I ask for 10 minutes in morning business.

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

Mr. MERKLEY. Mr. President, I rise to address an issue of fairness for our National Guard soldiers. They serve with honor and bravery at home and abroad. They have earned the respect and admiration of an entire Nation with their incredible sacrifices over the last decade.

We must not forget they have also, in addition to our respect and admiration, earned their compensation and their benefits. To take back a veteran's compensation after she or he has fulfilled the requirements for it is unthinkable. Yet that is exactly what is happening around the country in regard to National Guard bonuses.

Let me share the story of PFC Chelsea Wells. This story is emblematic of the struggle many men and women in the National Guard are facing today.

I thank Congressman WALDEN for bringing this situation to the public's attention and to my attention. I add my voice to his to call for fairness for PFC Chelsea Wells and for all other members of the National Guard.

Private First Class Wells is from my home State of Oregon, where she has served in the Oregon National Guard for the last 3 years.

In 2007, she enlisted as an intelligence analyst in response to the needs of the Army. At the time when she signed her enlistment document, she signed an additional document that stipulated she would receive a \$20,000 bonus for enlisting in a critical Military Occupancy Specialty or MOS.

That agreement, which was also signed by the enlisting official at her processing station, also stated she would receive the first half of her bonus upon completion of her initial training and the second half after 36 months of service.

As planned, Private First Class Wells received that first \$10,000 upon completion of her initial training. However, when her 36 months of service was completed, the second half of the bonus was nowhere to be seen. In fact, it was denied.

Following an inquiry from Congressman WALDEN, the National Guard stated the payments had been denied because her specialty was not on the critical skills list at the date of enlistment. However, the very document Private First Class Wells signed—also signed by the enlisting official—very specifically listed her Military Occupancy Specialty, 35F, as indeed being a critical skill specialty.

I have that document here: "Annex E to Defense Department Form 4, Non-prior Service Enlistment Bonus Addendum."

It says the purpose of this form is "to explain and confirm obligation and to ensure that agreement to these conditions is a matter of record."

The entire point of this document is to ensure that there is a clear understanding in regard to eligibility for bonuses. This document says on its list of eligibility—and this section is signed by the soldier:

I am enlisting into a critical skill MOS under the 6x2 or 8XO enlistment option and will receive a NPS Critical Skill Bonus (50/50 payment.)

That means 50 after initial training and 50 at the end of 3 years.

At the end of this document, it has section IX, "Certification by Service Representative," and this is in regard to the enlisting official, the recruiting officer. It says:

I certify that I have witnessed the reading and signing of the above agreement and the signature appearing is that of the applicant. I have verified the soldier meets the eligibility requirement of NGR 600-7, paragraph 2-3, and the applicant's MOS/unit is currently eligible for an enlistment cash bonus.

I think that is pretty clear. The story gets even worse. Not only is our own military saying they are not going to award the second half of the bonus, but they want her to return the first half because, apparently, they made some kind of mistake in between the recruiting officer and the higher-ups. I must say any individual should have the right to a reward that he or she was contractually owed. And there are no individuals who deserve their reward more than our brave men and women in uniform who have already made so many sacrifices, large and small, to ensure the security and safety of our Nation.

Private First Class Wells upheld her end of the bargain. She signed this enlistment document in good faith. She answered the call to serve when she was needed, and she served with honor for the full term. Now we must uphold our promise to her and to other National Guard veterans who find themselves being punished due to a dispute that was no fault of their own. They signed these documents in good faith, with the certification of the listing officer that they were indeed eligible. What is absolutely clear is that whatever dispute there may be between the listing officers and authorities higher up the chain, that is not Chelsea Wells' fault. She served in good faith under a very clear document, and we owe her and all the National Guard soldiers who are being pursued in the same fashion the bonuses that were promised to them.

We ask a tremendous amount of those who serve. Now is when we should be giving back, not asking for more. Asking a soldier to give back money they have received under a document they signed in good faith and fulfilled in good faith is 100 percent unacceptable. I and my colleagues from the State of Oregon call on the National Guard today to resolve this matter and to make sure this wrong is made right.

Mr. President, I yield the floor, and 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. WYDEN. Madam 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.

AMENDMENT NO. 570, AS MODIFIED

Mr. WYDEN. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent to set aside the pending business to call up my amendment, amendment No. 570, as modified.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Is there objection?

The clerk will report.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

The Senator from Oregon [Mr. WYDEN], for himself and Mr. MERKLEY, proposes an amendment numbered 570.

The amendment is as follows:

(Purpose: To provide for the closure of Umatilla Army Chemical Depot, Oregon)

On page 84, between lines 5 and 6, insert the following:

SEC. 127. (a) CLOSURE OF UMATILLA ARMY CHEMICAL DEPOT, OREGON.—The closure of the Umatilla Army Chemical Depot, Oregon, and subsequent management and property disposal, may be carried out in accordance with procedures and authorities contained in the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Act of 1990 (part A of title XXIX of Public Law 101-510; 10 U.S.C. 2687 note).

(b) RETENTION OF PROPERTY AND FACILITIES.—The Secretary of the Army may retain minimum essential ranges, facilities, and training areas at Umatilla Army Chemical Depot, totaling approximately 7,500 acres, as a training enclave for the reserve components of the Armed Forces to permit the conduct of individual and annual training.

(c) OFFICE OF ECONOMIC ADJUSTMENT ACTIVITIES.—Notwithstanding any other provision of law, the Office of Economic Adjustment Activities of the Department of Defense may make grants and supplement other Federal funds, using funds made available by title, in connection with the closure and management and disposal provided for in this section, and the projects so supported shall be considered to be authorized by law.

Mr. WYDEN. Madam President, I ask for the immediate consideration of amendment No. 570, as modified.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The amendment has been reported. It is now pending.

Mr. WYDEN. Madam President, when we have a conflict or a problem in my home State, we resolve it the Oregon way: by finding consensus and building common ground.

That is why, when it became apparent 20 years ago that the U.S. Army's Chemical Depot in Umatilla, OR, would be closing once all the chemical weapons were destroyed, the community leaders gathered all the stakeholders and began the process of planning what to do with the land once the facility closed. The Umatilla Depot straddles two counties, several cities, and historic tribal lands, so there are a lot of folks in my home State who are interested in what happens to the land.

As progress was made in destroying the weapons at Umatilla, the community built common ground and found a genuine consensus. The Federal Government would support it. It gave more than \$1 million in assistance. When the facility was listed in the 2005 BRAC recommendations for closure, the Pentagon eventually recognized the group

of stakeholders as an official Local Reuse Authority.

Everything appeared on track until last month. That was when, at the eleventh hour, the Pentagon changed the rules. After decades of planning and \$1 million in preparation, a lawyer at the Pentagon decided to reinterpret the law and declared that the 2005 BRAC report—which became law when Congress didn't pass a resolution of disapproval—didn't matter. That lawyer decided that the Umatilla Depot would be closed outside of the BRAC authority because the last of the chemical weapons wouldn't be destroyed until after the 6-year limit for completion of BRAC actions. What this lawyer either didn't know or somehow missed is that this was precisely the intention of the BRAC Commission when they put the Umatilla Depot on the closure list.

The BRAC report discusses the fact that the mission of destroying the chemical weapons wouldn't be completed until after the deadline. On page 239 of the report, the Commission found that Secretary Rumsfeld's assertion that the chemical demilitarization mission at Umatilla would be complete by the second quarter of this year was optimistic. The Commission wrote:

An examination of status information for the depot's mission completion and subsequent closure revealed that dates may slip beyond the 6-year statutory period for completion of the BRAC actions.

Therefore, the Commission took the Secretary of Defense's recommendation "Close Umatilla Chemical Depot, OR" and changed it to "On completion of the chemical demilitarization mission in accordance with treaty obligations, close Umatilla Chemical Depot, OR."

These facts make it clear the Commission did not—as the Pentagon has claimed recently—make a conditional recommendation that the facility only be closed if the chemical demilitarization mission is completed by September of 2011. Rather, the Commission acknowledged that the closure will have to happen when the demilitarization mission is completed even if that is after September of 2011. That decision by the Commission became law.

It is also important to note that the Commission is aware that the demilitarization mission had a deadline of its own. Under the terms of the Chemical Weapons Convention Treaty, Umatilla must complete the mission by April 29, 2012.

UMCD will meet this deadline, if not beat it. The Commission was not giving authority for the mission at UMCD to be one of a never-ending nature. They were simply giving UMCD the additional 8 months provided under the Chemical Weapons Convention.

The depot should be closed under BRAC so the will of the community, in the form of the local reuse authority, and the will of Congress in the BRAC law will be taken into account.

I strongly believe the local community should decide what to do with the

land and not somebody who is off in the basement of the Pentagon.

I have spoken with Secretary Panetta about this matter, and he is fully supportive of our efforts.

I wish to also thank Senator JOHNSON and my good friend from Arizona, Senator MCCAIN, who have also been very helpful—and their staff—in working with us. The Pentagon has to implement the law as it is, not, in my view, as it wants. But since the lawyers at the Pentagon have in recent weeks thought there was some ambiguity, I wished to clarify it for them with the amendment that has been modified with the good counsel of the staff of Senator MCCAIN.

Let me also say, the staff of Senator MCCAIN has been very helpful in saying this would be permissive authority in terms of the Pentagon and that the Senator could join me in a letter making it clear it is important this be moved expeditiously. I hope we can complete this matter at this time.

My amendment, which I offer on behalf of myself and my colleague, Senator MERKLEY, would allow the Pentagon to follow the BRAC Commission's report and close the Umatilla Depot under BRAC.

With that, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. CASEY). The Senator from Arizona.

Mr. MCCAIN. Mr. President, first of all, I wish to thank the Senator from Oregon. This is an issue that needs to be resolved, and it has been a pleasure working with him on not only the behalf of the people of Oregon but also on behalf of the Department of Defense.

AMENDMENT NO. 564

Mr. President, I join the Senator from Oklahoma in supporting the amendment which Senator COBURN had intended to propose. The amendment would have amended Public Law 102-4, the Agent Orange Act of 1991, which I cosponsored, to provide clarity on the factual basis required for the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to make future determinations on the presumption of connection of military service in Vietnam with diseases associated with exposure to the herbicide commonly known as Agent Orange.

Agent Orange was unanticipated and certainly not something that at the time, given the scientific knowledge and information we had, was thought would be detrimental to the health of the men and women who were serving in the Vietnam war. But the fact is, Agent Orange did have a very serious health effect on the men and women who were serving and those who came in contact with it. For years, we delayed compensating our veterans, those who were exposed to Agent Orange.

In 1991, the act was a long overdue answer to questions on the health effects of exposure to Agent Orange, and it directed much deserved compensation to our veterans for certain diseases, including non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and certain cancers.

What has happened, and the reason why I appreciate the Senator from

Oklahoma raising this issue, is it has obviously now reached a point where the Secretary of Veterans Affairs has now expanded the eligibility to the point where it is beyond any scientific evidence that compensation would be required.

In 2006, it was found that the evidence linking ischemic heart disease to exposure to herbicides was inadequate or insufficient. Heart disease, as we all know, is the leading cause of death in America today and has been so for decades.

In 2008, they updated their findings based on two epidemiological studies which provided “statistical” evidence of a relationship. Still, they categorized the link between ischemic heart disease and exposure to Agent Orange as “limited or suggestive evidence of an association.” That already low standard was further qualified with the following statement:

Epidemiologic evidence suggests an association—

Suggests an association—

between exposure to herbicides and the outcome, but a firm conclusion is limited because chance, bias and confounding could not be ruled out with confidence.

Despite this doubt, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs decided to grant a new presumption for ischemic heart disease, which according to the Department of Veterans Affairs will cost nearly \$31.9 billion over the next 10 years. Similarly, with Parkinson’s disease, which was also found to be in the category of “limited or suggestive evidence,” a decision was made to grant compensation and benefits based on exposure to Agent Orange, which according to the VA will cost \$3.5 billion over the next 10 years.

This process is a risky, hit or miss, and costly way to administer the veterans disability program and resources, which are in scarce supply and which our veterans need and deserve in return for their sacrifice to our Nation.

In its report to the congressionally mandated Veterans’ Disability Benefits Commission in 2007, the Institute of Medicine itself found that the “association” standard contained in the Agent Orange Act was inadequate and potentially misleading. That report recommended the goal of the presumptive disability decisionmaking process be to ensure compensation for veterans whose diseases are caused by military service and a new primary standard that sufficient evidence to support a determination of presumption would exist when evidence is sufficient to conclude that a causal relationship exists.

The Veterans’ Disability Benefits Commission endorsed the need for establishing a new framework for presumptions with more transparent processes, but it failed to take the full step of embracing causality in decisionmaking.

The amendment my colleague from Oklahoma so bravely intended to offer would have achieved the goal identified

by the Institute of Medicine to ensure that scientifically based causality is at the heart of the disability determination process.

My vote in favor of the Agent Orange Act of 1991 was a vote to discern facts from rhetoric and even politics and to put the welfare of our veterans above all other considerations, including costs. My support of the Coburn amendment would be no different. It is appropriate to adopt a clearer, stronger standard for the presumption of service-connected disabilities to ensure greater consistency in this process and, in doing so, to help ensure that our Nation’s resources are available to provide appropriate compensation and benefits for veterans of wars to come.

Former Secretary of Veterans Affairs, the Honorable Tony Principi, before the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, on September 23, 2010, on this very subject—the subject of presumptive disability decisionmaking—said:

Make no mistake: these decisions do not merely affect those who may or may not receive presumptive service connections and their families. The American people watch these decisions closely, both to ensure that those who have defended our Nation while in uniform are treated fairly, and to ensure that those who have been given the responsibility to administer the program are good stewards of the resources with which they have been entrusted. If the American people lose faith in the integrity of our disability benefits system, veterans and their families will be the ones who suffer. The surest way for that to happen is for the public to be convinced that presumptive service connection decisions are based on anything other than sound scientific advice.

There is no sound scientific advice that indicates that many of these decisions are valid and directly connected to exposure to Agent Orange. I urge the chairman of the committee to look into this issue. We are talking about \$31.9 billion and another \$3.5 billion which may not be necessary to be spent.

I believe and understand the emotion associated with the issue of Agent Orange because for so many years our Nation neglected—that was not benign neglect, it was neglect—the plight of veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange and the terrible physical problems that ensued as a result of that exposure. But now it is pretty clear that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs has gone way over in the opposite direction in giving presumptive service connection when there is no valid scientific evidence to convince me that kind of illegibility is there.

So I thank my colleague from Oklahoma.

I urge the Senator, the distinguished chairman of the Veterans’ Affairs Committee, to look at this issue, look at whether this \$31.9 billion, plus \$3.5 billion—over \$35 billion—over the next 10 years is wisely spent. That does not mean we do not provide disability payments to those who actually have been exposed and need it. But there is a lack of scientific evidence that many of the benefits that are being extended are absolutely warranted.

So I know the Senator from Oklahoma will not be proposing this amendment, and I understand that. But I wish to assure the committee chairman that when we are talking about this kind of money, we need to investigate it very seriously and reach decisions which are in the best interests of our veterans. There are veterans out there who need compensation, and every day, unfortunately, we are having young men and women return from the battlefield who have disabilities as a result of serving our Nation in combat. So I hope the chairman of the committee will look at this issue very seriously.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Oklahoma.

Mr. COBURN. Mr. President, let me update my colleague. I do plan to call up this amendment, and I do plan to ask for a vote on it because it is important. I will call up the amendment in a moment.

What has happened—the Senator from Arizona has had the disease melanoma, cancer melanoma at his age. We kind of know somebody at his age, if they have large amounts of Sun exposure over prolonged periods of time on nevi or birthmarks, can develop melanoma. There is causation related to that. I have also had melanoma, but I had it as a very young man. What science also knows is that one can develop melanoma without any Sun exposure to a birthmark or a nevus or a mole.

What has happened within the VA, we have taken and gone away from causation and gone to any association that could ever be made.

I am a survivor of colon cancer. What we know is, our risk for colon cancer goes way up if we eat a highly refined diet, with very few vegetables, and have that kind of a diet associated also with high levels of sugar. I did not have any of those things, but yet I had colon cancer. Because there is an association, we cannot infer causation.

So what is happening now?

The Secretary of Veterans Affairs has put us on the hook for people who have no causation but do have association. This amendment, which I will call up, does not change our ability to do that in the future when we, in fact, would see causation. But the presumption that association with the Sun caused my melanoma is wrong. The assumption that my diet caused my colon cancer is wrong. It does cause colon cancers, but we cannot show causation.

Nobody can speak for veterans better than JOHN MCCAIN, having served the amount of time he did in Vietnam as a prisoner of war. He has the body image that shows his sacrifice. Let me tell you what has happened.

We are transferring \$½ million to veterans under this decision by Secretary Shinseki for people who weigh 350 pounds, smoke three packs of cigarettes a day, and have hyperchol-

esterolemia because they will not take their medicine. We are saying the reason they have heart disease is because, at some point in time they were in Vietnam, because they moved from causation to association.

I can think of nothing unfairer to those who are truly needing to benefit from this than to give the benefit to somebody whose lifestyle absolutely caused their heart disease, and there is no association with dioxin or Agent Orange, the active ingredient that causes disease, which we know several of them actually did have. But now we have moved to a whole new level where we are saying if someone was exposed, both above or in Vietnam, and they have any of these other diseases which he has listed, that there can be an association.

Let me remind you that an association doesn't prove anything about cause. It just says there is a statistic out here, and it may be right or may not in fact be right. All of the evidence is the other way. The Secretary has chosen to spend \$42 billion—counting last year and this year—on this program for diseases that are not caused by Agent Orange. How is that fair? How is it fair to the people who are administering this? I found out about it because VA workers called me and said: This cannot be right. What are you all doing? Why are you giving money to people who have no association with the disease caused by that? Yet you are paying them out of money that should be reserved for those who have a disease really caused by Agent Orange. Consequently, we are going to spend \$42 billion that we don't have to pay people.

Another interesting fact is, I have a brother who has idiopathic pancreatitis. The VA told him that under this new guideline he can be eligible for Agent Orange compensation. He served in Korea, but because he has a chronic disease now, they are lining him up to get a payment from the VA because he has idiopathic pancreatitis. He is going to get approved. There is absolutely no association or causation with that. Yet that is what is happening.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that amendment No. 564 be called up, and the pending amendment be set aside.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection? Without objection, it is so ordered.

The clerk will report.

The assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

The Senator from Oklahoma [Mr. COBURN] proposes an amendment numbered 564.

Mr. COBURN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that reading of the amendment be dispensed with.

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

The amendment is as follows:

(Purpose: To require evidence of causal relationships for presumptions by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs of service connection for diseases associated with exposure to certain herbicide agents)

On page 112, between lines 2 and 3, insert the following:

SEC. 230. (a) Section 1116(b) of title 38, United States Code, is amended—

(1) in paragraph (1), by striking “positive association” and inserting “causal relationship”; and

(2) by striking paragraph (3).

(b) The amendments made by subsection (a) shall apply with respect to determinations made by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs under section 1116 of such title after the date of the enactment of this Act.

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

Mr. COBURN. Yes, I will.

Mr. MCCAIN. Mr. President, I want to make it clear that in this amendment there is no desire to deprive someone who was actually exposed to this herbicide called Agent Orange and suffered physical consequences as a result; that this amendment basically draws a difference among three words: One is “causation,” which is generally the criteria used in any of these cases, the causation, and that would replace the current “positive association.”

As the Senator just described, positive association could be most any encounter that anybody would have had who served. I always thought it was in Vietnam, but now he tells me it is even adding someone who served in Korea.

Isn't it true that we are not trying to deprive anyone who was legitimately exposed to Agent Orange and shows the causation, and that they are entitled to benefits from the taxpayers of America? What we are talking about, isn't it true, is that “positive association” is such an amorphous definition that it leads to an enormous waste of taxpayer dollars, while there are veterans out there who are in need of these taxpayer dollars for their legitimate reasons?

Mr. COBURN. Mr. President, the answer is that the Senator is absolutely correct. We have a lot of science that shows causation with this herbicide and disease. We have made the assumption that any other association should fall into that same category, such as hairy cell leukemia, and we know lots of things about this group to which there is only an association, statistical association, and no correlation, no causation, such as if someone has Parkinson's, they are compensated from Agent Orange. Yet there is not one scientific study that will show there is any causal relationship between those two diseases.

I will answer that I want every veteran to get the compensation due them when they have a disease related to this chemical. If we find in the future more science that would say so, then we will go on the science.

Now, we have had a Secretary who doesn't understand the difference between association and causation, and we are going to spend \$42 billion that we don't have, giving it to people

whose diseases were not caused by Agent Orange. That is my problem.

As a physician, I could never defend myself in a court of law using this logic on anything I would do in practicing medicine. As I stated while the Senator was talking with the chairman, we have both had melanoma. The Senator's came from something that we know is associated with it and also a cause—it is called the Sun, ultraviolet radiation. Mine didn't come from that because I didn't have that kind of exposure, and I experienced it at a very young age. Under the guidance of the Secretary, we both would be compensated as if ultraviolet light was the cause of both of our melanomas—the Senator from Arizona, appropriately; me, inappropriately.

So the fact is, no one ever wants to move back, but this is a mistake the Secretary made. My intent is not to harm any veteran who has a disease that is truly caused by Agent Orange. My intent is to make sure we can have the ability to take care of our veterans in the future by spending money wisely to compensate those who are truly injured, truly inhibited and limited by their exposure to that as a result of their service to this country.

With that, I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

Mrs. HUTCHISON. Mr. President, I first want to say what a good job—actually, a wonderful job—the Military Construction Subcommittee appropriators have done. They have adopted a very strict budget line, the same as the House of Representatives, and the chairman, Senator JOHNSON, and the ranking member, Senator KIRK, have put together a very good, solid proposal for military construction, and I appreciate working with them. I was the chairman and ranking member of that subcommittee, and I loved working on it because I wanted to take care of our troops and to make sure they had the construction they needed for housing and for training headquarters. So I commend the great staff of that subcommittee and am very pleased it is continuing in good hands since I have left that committee to go to the Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies Subcommittee.

I also want to say that there is so much going on in the Capitol right now. I think America is focused on the debt ceiling issue, the overwhelming debt we have in this country. We know it is too much, and so many have been working in different quarters trying to solve this issue.

Senator MCCONNELL, the Republican leader, came out with a proposal early this week to try to assure the markets

and all of the people watching so carefully that we were going to address this issue, even if, in the end, we couldn't come to an agreement. So I commend Senator MCCONNELL. He has taken a lot of criticism for the proposal he made, but I think he said from the beginning that it was the last effort so we wouldn't have a default by our country. It wasn't his first choice or his second choice or even his third choice, but leaders have to make tough decisions to ensure bad things don't happen, if they can avoid leading Members into bad situations. So he was trying to ensure that we wouldn't. I think Senator MCCONNELL's proposal has actually spurred people to get going and try to come to agreement.

I believe the group who is being called the Gang of 6 has come up with some very concrete proposals. It is the first plan I have seen that I believe really begins to cut spending, and it cuts spending immediately. It also has mechanisms that will ensure that the spending cuts happen. Caps are put in place.

There is a freeze in spending for 4 years. There is a freeze in all the elected representatives' pay. Every Member of Congress and the President would have a freeze in pay. There is a freeze in budgets.

I think it also begins entitlement reform, which is very bold, and it is very important that it be done in a bipartisan way. It would go to the chained CPI, which is a better base for determining what kinds of increases there should be for payments that have to be adjusted. So I believe they have taken a first major step. Now, I put out a Social Security reform proposal that also lowered the rate of increase of the COLAs. This one does it in a different way. All I wanted to do was to make sure we address that issue as part of Social Security reform, but it also affects many other areas, and I think it is something all of us, in a bipartisan way, can accept as a reasonable adjustment that will preserve the basic benefits that go across many areas.

Also in the proposal that was put out today is a safety net for people at 125 percent of poverty. They will be getting a benefit that increases more—and I think everyone would agree that is a good thing—and then the CPI adjustment will be in place for others.

I think it also has a very good proposal in the area of taxes because they want to lower the overall rates for everyone and make fewer rate groups, so the top rate would be 29 percent. They even cut the lower rate down to 9 percent.

So these are good proposals, and I think tax reform is something that will bring in more revenue, and it will bring in more revenue in the right way. It will bring in revenue by building the economy, by ensuring a more fair tax system so there will be less fraud and fewer numbers of people who don't pay taxes.

So I think this group has done a good thing—three Democrats and three Re-

publicans working together. Not one of us would have written a proposal exactly the same way, but there are 100 in this body, so we know we cannot dictate exactly what we want. I do believe this is a responsible approach that should give us a good start and something that, over a 10-year period, will put us in the position of bringing down our enormous debt, lowering our deficits, lowering our interest costs, and also beginning to reform entitlements.

There is going to be so much written and talked about—a lot of education. This plan will begin to go into legislative language, and there may be refinements of it. I am sure there will be amendments. But it is a great start, and it has provided great leadership. So many people have been involved in this process—our leaders, the group who has been meeting for months, others who have come together in a bipartisan way to do what is right for our country and for our children and grandchildren.

So I am very pleased we can start this debate and get these things out in a way that the American people will have the confidence we are going to address the debt, do the right thing, bring down the deficits, bring down the interest our country is paying, and, most of all, put people back to work by enlivening our economy.

That is the key. You can't have 9.1 percent unemployment in this country and believe that is a recovery. You can't do it. You have to put people back to work. That is the way you increase revenue, by putting people back to work and having the economy revived. That should be all of our goal, and I think that maybe, just maybe, we are on the right track and can do in a bipartisan way the entitlement reforms, the tax reforms, and the spending cuts that will put together a package that will put our country on a fiscally responsible path for the future.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from South Dakota.

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. JOHNSON of South Dakota. Mr. 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.

The Senator from Colorado.

BUDGET NEGOTIATIONS

Mr. BENNET. Mr. President, I wanted to talk a little bit about our debt ceiling and our deficit and debt issues as well.

I wish to thank the Senator from Texas for her words of encouragement for the product that the so-called Gang of 6 read out this morning. It was a remarkable hour. To see roughly 50 Senators, both Republicans and Democrats, set aside the talking points and

try to come across a partisan divide to hear their colleagues who have been working for such a long time on a plan, a bipartisan plan, three Democrats and three Republicans, to really try to address in a material way our debt and our deficit was, to say the least, refreshing. I wish it weren't as unique an experience as it has been, but in the 2½ years I have been here, I can't remember as thoughtful a conversation as the one we had this morning.

I have said for months, month after month, week after week on the floor of the Senate, that I think I am pretty clear about what Colorado wants, whether it is red parts of the State or whether it is blue parts of the State.

They want a plan that materially addresses the problem we face. They know we can't solve it overnight because the hole is so deep, but they want us to move past the rhetoric and the talking points and actually start materially addressing the problem.

They want to know that we are all in it together. It took all of us to get to this point of a \$1.5 trillion deficit and almost \$15 trillion of debt, and it is going to take all of us to get us out of it, and the people in Colorado know that.

They want the plan to be bipartisan because they don't have any confidence in either party's go-it-alone approach on this particular set of issues and I think on many other issues as well.

The only corollary that I have added to all of that is we need to do something that satisfies our capital markets that their paper is worth what we have paid for it and that the full faith and credit of the United States is good.

We face something momentous at this moment in our country. I wanted to quote just three brief quotes from the rating agencies recently.

This is S&P, July 14:

Today's CreditWatch placement signals our view that, owing to the dynamics of the political debate on the debt ceiling, there is at least a one-in-two likelihood, 50 percent chance, that we could lower the long-term rating on the United States within the next 90 days. We have also placed our short-term rating on the U.S. on CreditWatch negative, reflecting our view that the current situation presents such significant uncertainty to the U.S.'s creditworthiness.

It is important to realize this isn't just about the debt ceiling, although that is a very important piece of this.

Here is S&P continuing:

The CreditWatch action reflects our view of two separate but related issues. The first issue is the continuing failure to raise the U.S. government debt ceiling so as to ensure that the government will be able to continue to make scheduled payments. The second pertains to our current view of the likelihood that Congress and the administration will agree on a credible, medium-term fiscal consolidation plan.

Now, I have taken the view all along that we shouldn't make raising the debt ceiling contingent because it has been a ministerial act for most of our history; it is about debts that are already incurred, not about debts that