

I support our troops. Whenever I say something like that, I think of the Presiding Officer and others in this Chamber who know what it means to support our troops, as someone who has carried weapons in support of his country and as someone who has been injured as a result of wearing the uniform of this country. So I say this with a lot of humility, but I, along with everyone in this Senate, support our troops. Every one of us is honored by their sacrifice and grateful beyond expression for their outstanding work.

When it comes to judging the Iraq war, only one question matters: Are we safer? The answer is undeniably no, and no amount of spin from the White House can change that.

Because of Iraq, our military is stretched thin and its ability to address new threats is compromised. Many of our troops are now on their third, fourth, and some are on their fifth tours of duty in Iraq.

Are we safer with bin Laden free and al-Qaida strengthening? Of course not.

Because of Iraq, our National Guard—the brave men and women charged with protecting us from disastrous threats here at home—don't have the manpower or the equipment to do their job effectively at home. Are we safer with a weakened National Guard to protect us at home? Of course not.

Because of Iraq and the Bush administration's shoot first, talk later style of cowboy diplomacy, our moral authority in the world is shattered, and to talk about this being cowboy diplomacy is an insult to cowboys. Our former allies are unwilling to stand by our side. Our ability to solve conflicts through diplomacy are diminished.

Are we safer as a weakened moral force in the world? Of course not. The American people know this by overwhelming numbers. They continue to oppose this war, and with good reason: We are objectively less safe because of Iraq.

The cost of the war to our country has been enormous, not only in the loss of lives—now more than 4,000—but also tens of thousands wounded, a third of them gravely. We are now spending \$5,000 every second in Iraq—every second—\$12 billion a month. No weekends off. No holidays off. We are spending \$5,000 a second of borrowed taxpayers' money. The President told us the war would cost no more than \$60 billion. Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz said it is going to cost us \$3 trillion.

In Iraq, we—the American taxpayers—are building hospitals, roads, bridges, dams, water systems, sewer systems, barracks for the Iraqis, when we should be helping millions of Americans avoid losing their homes to foreclosure. We are policing the streets in Baghdad when we should be investing in health care and a better education system. We are protecting oilfields in Basra when we should be funding renewable energy production to help stem the tide of global warming.

When all is finally said and done, experts say the war is going to cost as much as \$3 trillion or more, as I have said. Where does this come from? It is all borrowed for future generations to pay back. The legacy of our generation could be to leave our children and grandchildren with a safer, cleaner, and more prosperous country. Instead, the war in Iraq will ensure that we leave future generations with trillions of dollars in debt.

Instead of making our country safer, we are greasing the pocketbooks of corrupt Iraqi politicians and buying their temporary cooperation. Let's not forget this: Iraq is a rich country. It is not a poor country—far from it. Its oil resources make it one of the world's wealthiest countries. With the price of oil skyrocketing as it has, think of the money that is going into their coffers. Record-high oil prices have supplied Iraq with literally more money than they know what to do with, but we keep spending \$5,000 a second in Iraq. As we borrow and spend billions of dollars to provide the security that the Iraqi Government has failed to create for themselves, Iraq is bringing in billions of oil money faster than they can open bank accounts to store it all.

If a parent gives a teenager the choice of either getting a job or receiving an allowance for doing nothing, the teenager will often choose to do nothing. As long as we guarantee to the Iraqi Government that our troops and our money will support them, they will never have an incentive to do the job themselves. The security welfare state we have created will go on and on forever.

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Republican leader is recognized.

SOLVING PROBLEMS OR POLITICAL POSITIONING

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, the Senate certainly has a lot of work to do, and we have a good stretch of time in front of us in which to do it. First and foremost, Americans are waiting on Congress to address the housing crisis and the broader economy as well. They are waiting for us to give intelligence officials the tools they need in the hunt for terrorists. They are waiting on us to confirm qualified judges. Farmers are waiting for a farm bill that has been in limbo for literally months. All of us are eager to hear next week's report from General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker on political and military progress over in Iraq.

In all of these areas, the Democratic leadership has an option: It can work with Republicans to deliver help to the American people or it can follow the partisan path that views every piece of legislation as an opportunity not to solve problems but to position itself for the next election.

Some on the other side are talking openly about a grand strategy for pick-

ing up more seats in November, but their vision seems to end right there. They seem to forget that once these seats are filled, people expect us to accomplish something. The political route, as we have seen time and time again, doesn't accomplish much.

America faces urgent problems, and most people care more about addressing them than about anybody's elective prospects. We came together earlier this year on an economic growth package and had an accomplishment. It was a good start, but it didn't last. As the Senate began to address the housing slump, our friends on the other side shut Republicans out of the debate and offered a proposal of their own that was guaranteed to fail. They proposed an ill-conceived plan that will substantially increase monthly mortgage payments on everyone who buys a new home or refinances. But why would Congress want to raise mortgages at a time like this? There is simply no way that proposal is going to fly. If our friends on the other side want to help homeowners, they need to work with Republicans on proposals that will draw substantial bipartisan support.

Republicans have put a number of sensible ideas on the table, including \$10 billion to refinance distressed subprime mortgages and \$15,000 tax credits for people who buy foreclosed homes as their primary residence—a proposal that will raise the value of homes and increase the stability and security of neighborhoods that have been hit hard by foreclosures. We have proposed new tax benefits for struggling businesses, new truth-in-lending requirements, expanded protections against foreclosure for returning veterans, and FHA reform to assist struggling homeowners who are trying to stay in their homes.

Our proposals to address the current housing crisis have broad bipartisan support. Unlike the Democratic bill which skipped the committee process, the FHA reform piece we proposed passed in committee by a vote of 20 to 1.

For the good of the economy, we asked our friends on the other side to allow a vote on these sensibly, targeted provisions. The partisan housing bill Democrats put forward failed. Why not give our bipartisan alternative, which will help homeowners without raising their mortgages, a chance to succeed?

Another thing Congress can do to help the economy is to expand markets for U.S. goods abroad, and that is what the Colombian Free Trade Agreement would do. The Colombian Free Trade Agreement is more than an act of friendship between allies; it would also strengthen our economy, and it would send a strong signal to Colombia and our other Latin American allies that the United States stands with those who support strong markets and free societies in the face of intimidation and threats.

Our friends on the other side can help American farmers by finishing the

farm bill. More than 3 months has passed since the Senate completed action on this legislation. Yet House Democrats still have yet to appoint conferees to put together a final product. With the short-term extension of current law expiring in just a few weeks, American farmers are about to enter the planting season without any certainty about legislation that significantly affects their lives.

Turning to national security, it has been nearly a year since the Director of National Intelligence asked Congress to modernize our Nation's electronic surveillance laws. The House had a chance to make the necessary changes before the recess, but it chose an irresponsible path instead, passing an amendment to the bipartisan Senate bill that included none of the things the National Director of Intelligence had called for. Ignoring the carefully crafted Senate bill, the House decided it was more important to let people sue phone companies that stepped up when the country needed them. The clock is ticking on the legal authorities contained in the current temporary fix, and a burden has been placed on House leadership to show that it can be trusted in matters of national security.

General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker will be here next week, and Americans are eager to hear what they have to say.

Under the leadership of these two men, our prospects for protecting America's national security interests in the Persian Gulf have vastly improved. Last year's bold decision to launch a counterinsurgency plan under the direction of General Petraeus has renewed our hopes for a unified Iraq that can govern, defend, and sustain itself as an ally in the war on terror. Our men and women in uniform have protected the Iraqi people, scattered al-Qaida, deterred militias, and helped create an environment that has led to progress not only at the tactical level but in governing and reconciliation as well.

Six months ago, General Petraeus proposed a plan for bringing counterinsurgency forces back home and transitioning their mission from combat to partnership and oversight. A reduction in forces is underway, and the Iraqi people are now preparing for provincial elections, hopefully this October. Thanks to the efforts of the counterinsurgency forces, Sunni allies now serving as sons of Iraq will have a real stake in these elections.

Last week's decision by the Maliki government to go on offense against Shiite militias in Basra and Baghdad showed us that we have come a long way from the days when the Iraqi security forces wouldn't even show up for a fight. Now they are taking the lead in major combat operations, with recent offensives against the Iranian-trained Special Groups, al-Qaida in Iraq, and the militias.

Next week, we will learn more about the pace of transitioning the mission.

But with U.S. forces still in harm's way, the Senate needs to quickly approve the supplemental spending bill without any unrelated nondefense spending. It would be pointless to repeat the partisan battles over the supplemental that consumed so much of our time and our energy last year. We should set aside policy prescriptions and withdrawal timelines based on political calculations in Washington and deliver the funds our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan need.

As we seek to help the Iraqi people stand up a stable government, we should not neglect our own by allowing vacancies on Federal courts to go unfilled. Three months into the new year, the Senate has not confirmed a single judicial nominee of any kind. Let me say that again. Three months into the new year, the Senate has not confirmed a single judicial nominee of any kind, and it has held only one hearing on a circuit nominee since September of last year. The process, it appears, has ground to a complete halt. This is unacceptable, it is unfair, and the excuses we have heard are not convincing.

Some nominees have waited hundreds of days for a simple hearing, including those who satisfy the specific criteria of the chairman of the Judiciary Committee for quick action, such as strong support of home State senators. These vacancies need to be filled, especially in places that have been declared judicial emergencies such as the Fourth Circuit, where one of every three seats is currently vacant. Nominees for seats on the Fourth Circuit—which covers North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, West Virginia, and South Carolina—are ready, well qualified, and they have been waiting and waiting.

Since the committee has nearly stopped holding even simple hearings for circuit court nominees for the last several months, it should make up for lost time by holding hearings on more than one circuit court nominee at a time, as both Democratic and Republican chairmen have done in the past. That way, we can get these nominees confirmed.

It is time our friends on the other side stop blaming others for their failures to act on judicial nominations. If they don't, regretfully, Republicans will be forced to consider other options.

The Senate faces difficult challenges domestically and internationally. Conventional wisdom says we want to address them because it is an election year. Experience suggests some of our friends on the other side will prefer political efforts to bipartisan accomplishments. We saw signs of hope for a more responsible and productive path in a rush of bipartisan accomplishments at the end of last year and in a bipartisan economic growth bill this year, and we have an immediate opportunity in the work period that starts today to choose the better path on an issue that is vexing millions of homeowners.

Knowing that public patience with partisan political games is wearing

thin, I am confident we will seize the opportunity and deliver something soon for the American people. Then, hopefully, we can follow it up with other accomplishments. We have the potential for a very productive work period. Why don't we get to work and see what we can accomplish over the next 8 weeks.

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The majority leader is recognized.

Mr. REID. Mr. President, the first indication we have to move forward and have a productive work period is to see if we can do something to help the beleaguered people who are losing their homes as we speak. We have the opportunity to do that tomorrow.

For those within the sound of my voice, before we can move to a piece of legislation, the Republicans have to sign off on that. They can do it by approving what we call a motion to proceed. That motion to proceed failed before because the Republicans voted no on our ability to proceed. We need 60 votes to do that. I hope they will join with us to move to this housing package and work to help us come up with a good piece of legislation to show there must be some merit to our legislation.

I have seen Senator BOND's legislation. It has most of our stuff in it. It is a pretty good piece of legislation. It also has some other things in it. It seems to me we are at a good starting point if we have one of the main Republican proponents of housing legislation who includes in his legislation much of what we want to go forward on. So I think that is a good start. So I hope we can do that tomorrow. If we move forward on the piece of legislation we have, we will finish this. We can do it this week and send it to the House and I think they can work much more quickly than we do. That would be a good indication we are going to work together.

Let me say this about a couple of other things. As to the confirmation of judges, Josh Bolten, the President's Chief of Staff, and I spent a lot of time the week before we went on the Easter recess. We were able to accomplish a lot of good things. I don't know the exact number, but we were able to work through scores of Republican nominations the President sent forward. I think the Democrats got 5 or 6 and the Republicans got 50 or 60. We don't have the opportunity to send as many names to the President as he sends to us. The President's Chief of Staff wrote a nice letter, which I received last week, saying we have established a working facility. He is assigning one of his people at the White House, and I have assigned my Chief of Staff. If there are things we cannot work out, Mr. Bolten and I will work on it face to face. Part of that is judges. We are going to do our best to work out something on judges. That is part of the entire package.

Now, even Mr. Bolten would recognize the number of judges being sent to us has been pretty slow. But that is no excuse. We will be happy to move forward on nominations, generally. The White House needs a lot of these people, and we understand that. There has to be a give and take on this, as the White House showed the week before the recess, which Mr. Bolten and I worked on.

So I am convinced there are a lot of things we can do. The farm bill is something where we also need the cooperation of the White House. The managers of this bill have worked very hard—the Senator from Georgia and the Senator from Iowa—along with the two managers of the bill, as it relates to finance, who have worked with their counterparts in the House. We need to get a little better work from the White House. We have basically worked out the numbers. We cut back the President's numbers. We are working on the offsets now. That should be something we can do. We need to have the White House engaged in this, but more so than they have been.

The farm bill is important. I tell my distinguished counterpart that I heard about this farm bill during the break. I had calls from many of my Senators asking what can be done about this. We are trying. As Senator MCCONNELL notes, Senator CHAMBLISS, the ranking member on the Agriculture Committee, has worked with Senator HARKIN. We are doing our best to work through this. I hope we can get something done so we don't have to extend it again. The bill expires again on April 18. We cannot go on without renewing this bill and/or passing a new bill. If we do not renew this legislation, the price of milk will basically go back to 1949 levels. Based on that, a half gallon of milk would be about \$5. So we have a lot of work to do.

I appreciate the constructive attitude of the Senator from Kentucky. I don't agree with a lot of his illustrations, but I think it was a positive statement. I hope we can work something out on these and other issues.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Kentucky is recognized.

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I appreciate the spirit in which the majority leader addressed my remarks on the housing issue. I think it is safe to say there is interest on both sides in moving forward. Whatever reservations we have on this side relate to how the minority will be treated once we have made the decision to move forward. This is something the majority leader and I will continue to discuss, as we have in the last few weeks.

With regard to judges, with the best of intentions, the majority leader and I both came up with what we thought was a reasonable goal for the number of circuit judges that ought to be approved in this Congress based on the pattern of each of the last three Presidents, which had, from their point of

view, the misfortune of ending their terms with the opposition in control of the Senate. The lowest number achieved in circuit judges was under President Clinton. It was 15. We currently have six. If we are going to have any chance of getting to what the majority leader and I agreed was at least a modest, achievable goal in this Congress, we have a ways to go. I am not blaming him for that. It strikes me that the Judiciary Committee simply isn't functioning. But it remains the goal of mine—and I hope it is still his goal—to meet a sort of minimal threshold of an acceptable level of circuit judge confirmations.

I appreciate the attitude in which the majority leader has pursued that issue from the beginning of this Congress. I hope we can continue to work to try to get to some level that would be widely considered by any objective standard as a fair number in this situation.

I yield the floor.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, leadership time is reserved.

MORNING BUSINESS

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the Senate will proceed to a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

The Senator from Georgia is recognized.

Mr. DORGAN. Will the Senator yield?

Mr. ISAKSON. Yes.

ORDER OF PROCEDURE

Mr. DORGAN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that I be recognized to speak for 30 minutes in morning business following the presentation of the Senator from Georgia.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Without objection, it is so ordered.

The Senator from Georgia is recognized.

SOCIAL SECURITY AND MEDICARE

Mr. ISAKSON. Mr. President, today, I will pay tribute and make some celebratory remarks about two exciting lives in my community. First is the upcoming celebration of the 80th birthday of Mack Henderson, a man in my community who, besides being a leader, has been a warm and trusted friend. He and his wife Jean have been pillars of our community. The women's health care facility in Kennesaw was named after them as a tribute. Mack's daughter lives in this area, in Alexandria, VA. She has been a great friend to me. The entire Henderson family is going to gather to celebrate the 80th birth-

day of Mack Henderson, a great American and a great citizen of Cobb County. I wish him a most happy birthday.

On March 10, another birthday occurred—the very first of my grandson, William Edwin Isakson, born to my son Kevin and his wife Katherine Isakson. William is our eighth grandchild. He weighed 7 pound 9 ounces. He has a great future ahead, and I wish him the very best.

It occurred to me, when I was coming to the floor to pay tribute to Mack Henderson on his 80th birthday and to recognize the birth of my eighth grandchild, that as I look into the future, I wonder about what has been said in recent months about Social Security and Medicare and about what Mack Henderson has enjoyed in his life and what I hope we can save and procure for the life of young William Edwin Isakson.

In Mack's early years, Social Security was created. It was a promise to Mack and to every citizen in America that when you reach the age of 65, and when you sign up and are declared eligible, you will receive a supplement to help you in your retirement years. Mack has been retired for 15 years and is enjoying the benefit of that.

Last week, the Social Security Administration sent out a mailer notifying us that the time the Social Security goes bust is now moved forward to 2041. So in Mack's lifetime, Social Security was created, and by the 33rd birthday of my new grandson, Social Security will be gone. Even worse, Medicare, created after Social Security, has benefitted Mack. He has had a heart transplant and other medical problems, and he came through them with the help and assistance of Medicare. As for my grandson William, before he is a teenager, Medicare will be broke, inverted, and gone. As a Member of the Senate who takes a privilege to come to this floor and celebrate the birthday of a great friend and the birth of a new grandson, I know I have some work to do. So do the other 99 Senators and the 435 Representatives on the other side of this building.

The President who serves now, and who will go out of office in January, has made an effort on Social Security, and it was rejected by organizations and others. It was an effort of privatization.

The next President will not be so lucky to be able to neglect this. Time is running out. The next President will probably serve for 8 years. When they are out, it will be 2018, 1 year before Medicare goes broke. I don't think we can afford to allow that to happen.

As I come to the floor and pay tribute to these great lives which are so meaningful and significant to me, it is also an early warning for all of us to get to work on Medicare and Social Security. I commend JUDD GREGG, the Senator from New Hampshire, for his efforts time and again to get us to deal forthrightly with these issues. They are not going to be easy.