

agencies that are supposed to have jurisdiction over all this. They have let this go unchecked for too long and have only recently begun to take action. I must say they are not alone.

A tough approach to fraud and abuse is almost completely lacking in the Gingrich plan that Congress is considering. The \$270 billion in cuts, which was so harsh on beneficiaries and hospitals, contained a pathetically low amount for fighting fraud and abuse.

We must have zero tolerance for those who willfully cheat the Medicare system—zero. Ultimately, they are stealing money from ordinary Americans, average American families. They are stealing money away from seniors, people like Ethel Ostheller, who depend upon Medicare to help make ends meet. They are also stealing money from millions of Americans who are working today and deserve to know that Medicare will be there when it is time for all of them to retire.

In the weeks ahead, I intend to come forward with proposals to get tough on Medicare fraud. I look forward to working with a number of my colleagues, both Democrats and Republicans, to find commonsense solutions to this very serious problem.

Thank you, Mr. President.

ACTION TAKEN ON H.R. 497 VITIATED

Mr. BAUCUS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the action just taken on the second reading of H.R. 497 be vitiated.

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

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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 President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

The Senator from North Dakota is recognized.

Mr. DORGAN. I thank the Chair.

(The remarks of Mr. DORGAN pertaining to the introduction of S. 1597 are located in today's RECORD under "Statements on Introduced Bills and Joint Resolutions.")

SEARCHING FOR PROSPERITY

Mr. GRAMS. Mr. President, when Minnesotans gather to talk about the issues that matter to them most, as they did on Tuesday at their precinct caucuses, there is a common theme that weaves between nearly all of them, especially when they are speaking directly from their hearts.

They are looking for a better life.

They want a good job that pays a decent wage. They want to put enough food on the table. They want a strong roof over their heads, for many, a place they can call their own.

And after the bills have been paid, they would like a little extra at the end of the month to squirrel away in a savings account.

The most striking truth about seeking that better life is that most folks aren't doing it just for themselves. They are pursuing it for their children, too, in the hopes of offering them the best opportunities for success.

In other words, they are searching for prosperity.

It is interesting that prosperity and the struggle to achieve it has spread across the Nation to become a major theme of the 1996 presidential campaigns. The media have just begun to focus on the troubles facing working people, and the stagnating wages and high taxes that have pushed prosperity out of reach for many middle-class families.

But where have the media been? Working families have been feeling the pinch for a long time.

"Our economy is the healthiest it has been in three decades," announced President Clinton in his State of the Union Address.

Is it really? There is plenty of evidence to the contrary—and four areas are especially troublesome:

First, the economy itself has dropped to a sluggish pace. The Federal Government released new numbers just last week confirming that economic growth has slowed to a trickle, up by only nine-tenths of a percent during the last 3 months of 1995.

Second, job growth has slowed as well, to about half the rate we'd expect to see in a normal recovery.

The U.S. Labor Department says that pay and benefit increases last year saw their lowest climb in about 14 years, since the Government first began tracking these statistics.

They could, in fact, be the leanest increases since before World War II, an unfortunate trend analysts say could easily continue.

Third, wages continue to slip as Americans take home fewer and fewer dollars.

Real weekly earnings for an average worker dropped three-tenths of a percent in 1995. That means families are taking home almost \$800 a year less than they did before President Clinton was elected in 1992.

That is \$800 they no longer have to spend on necessities such as groceries, medical expenses, or insurance.

Fourth, while the economy is slowing down, taxes have accelerated.

Americans have never paid a higher percentage of their income in taxes than they are paying today.

In 1950, an average worker paid about 2 percent of his earnings to support our Federal Government. Today, an average family sends 25 percent or more of its earnings to Washington, and that does not include the additional tax burden once State and local taxes are heaped on top of that.

Now if the economy itself was not blocking the road toward prosperity,

the record high taxes alone would have done it. Together, they have proven to be a lethal combination for American families and American workers.

None of this will come as any surprise to middle-class, working Americans.

After all, they are the ones paying the taxes at the same time they watch their paychecks shrink.

But they can find some comfort in the fact that it is their anxieties—that is, the anxieties of parents hoping to eke out a better life for themselves and their children in the face of tremendous obstacles—that will perhaps become the defining issues of the 1996 elections.

It all comes down to economic growth, income, and jobs.

We know what is blocking the way, but how did the roadblock get there in the first place?

Do you remember the prank we used to pull when we were kids, when we would attach a dollar bill to the end of a fishing line and plant it in the middle of a sidewalk?

As soon as someone spied the bill and reached down to grab it, we would yank on the string, moving that dollar out of reach and leaving the poor victim embarrassed and empty-handed.

That is what the Clinton administration is doing to the middle class. They tempt working Americans with a dollar bill and the prosperity it represents, but they yank it away just as soon as somebody begins to get close to it.

Rather than offering opportunities for success, the Government has allowed working people to become trapped between falling incomes and rising taxes. Whatever you call it—the "middle-class squeeze" or the "Clinton crunch"—it is cheating the middle class out of their hard-earned dollars.

Just look at your paycheck, look at your tax forms, look at what you are paying for government, who is spending your money, and how they are spending it. In most cases, the bureaucrats have your credit card and are spending it, I believe, without any real accountability.

It should make Americans angry that much of the money they work so hard for is being wasted on programs that do not work, or plainly just cost too much.

Unfortunately, past discussions about issues like wage stagnation and economic growth have too often centered around the minimum wage or corporate profits, and that is not what working men and women care about, though.

They are interested in their net income—what is left after you take out Federal taxes, State taxes, payroll taxes. And under the Clinton administration, there has been less and less left over in your pay envelope, thanks in part to the President's tax increases and the Federal mandates that are sapping the precious resources of our job providers, businesses have been forced to keep wages lower.

They would like to invest their dollars improving salaries and benefits, but any additional dollars that might have been available to improve the lives of employees have been confiscated by the Federal Government.

Even when job providers find the means to offer wage and benefit increases, tax hikes mean families do not see much of a difference in their paychecks after it is done.

And so family incomes—the amount of dollars they have left to spend on food, transportation, clothing, housing, et cetera—have actually dropped every year of the Clinton Presidency.

A Government-mandated increase in the minimum wage is not the only solution—although many argue that is all we have to do and many problems would be cured—because low wages alone are not the problem.

The Clinton administration simply cannot stop spending, and requiring more and more tax dollars to feed that spending, taking away most of the money that could be used for better salaries, or new jobs.

If the Government would reform itself, if it would curb its spending and cut taxes, middle-class families would not need a hike in the minimum wage or risk losing their jobs because of it.

In our current economic climate, it is the working folks who have the most to lose. The wealthy do not need our help. The poor already have the safety net of welfare and the hundreds of Federal programs it opens up to them. But who is watching out for the working people? They are the ones being squeezed.

Yet the Clinton administration just does not get it, despite all the talk from the White House about the need to reform Government and balance the budget.

Just last week, President Clinton requested an additional \$8 billion from Congress for increased domestic discretionary spending.

How can you go on national television one week to declare that “the era of big Government is over,” and then come to Congress just a few weeks later, hat in hand, asking for another 8 billion dollars’ worth of even bigger Federal Government?

Where do we get the money—higher taxes, or borrow it and make our kids pay?

My colleagues on the other side of the aisle still do not get it, either.

They staked out a new agenda of their own last week as part of a campaign to portray themselves as the soul of the working class. Incredibly, their proposal includes more job-killing taxes on the Nation’s job providers.

That, of course, comes after they spent months trying to delay and derail our efforts to balance the budget and offer meaningful tax relief to American families.

Republicans have put on the table a balanced budget, welfare reform and Medicare reform. But who has stood in the way of getting that passed so the

American people can begin to enjoy the benefits? It has been the Democratic leaders in this Congress and the President who have kept that from happening.

Mr. President, too many years of big Government have proven it: more taxes, more spending, more regulations, and more Government programs will not lead to more jobs and higher pay. We will never tax our way to prosperity or spend our way to economic success.

Unlike those Johnny-come-latelys in the White House and here on Capitol Hill who talk a good game about serving the middle class but never step up to the plate on their behalf, the taxpayers’ agenda Republicans are fighting for has always been focused on the working class.

We have heard their calls for tax relief—and we delivered.

We have heard their calls for opening the economy to more jobs, better paying jobs—and we delivered.

We have heard their calls for balancing the budget and putting an end to the legacy of debt we have imposed on our children and grandchildren—and we delivered.

We have heard the pleas of working Americans who ask for nothing more than a chance to reach prosperity—and again we delivered.

In the name of America’s working class, we shipped each one of those proposals to the White House—and the President sent each of them back stamped “Return to Sender.”

Mr. President, the balanced budget passed by this Congress, with its tax cuts and incentives to help stimulate growth and create jobs, is the best way we can help average Americans troubled by an economy that is heading down.

We agree that the key to creating economic prosperity and good jobs is a healthy business climate.

We understand that those jobs can help instill independence and dignity, and create more opportunities for anyone trying to get ahead.

And we know that the key to empowering families to reach that better life, however they may define it, is to cut taxes and let them keep more of their own dollars.

Mr. President, for the working-class people of this Nation who have built their own success and today lead the lives they have always wanted, prosperity is not defined by the size of their last Federal handout or how much something they got for nothing.

It is oftentimes about building something out of nothing, which, after all, is the definition of the American dream.

I urge the President to put aside the election-year politicking and take a real stand on the side of the working class by working with Congress to right the economic wrongs created by his administration.

It is not too late to give prosperity a chance, but it would be irresponsible to

make Americans wait until the November elections have come and gone before we really try.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Wyoming is recognized to speak for up to 30 minutes.

FRESHMAN FOCUS

Mr. THOMAS. Mr. President, you will be relieved to know I will not take 30 minutes. I have shared it with my friend from Minnesota.

Mr. President, the freshman focus has been in here now for a couple of days, talking about the economy and talking about ways that we can strengthen American families, strengthen the economy, strengthen wages, strengthen jobs. The interesting part of it is that is what we have been talking about here for the last year. That is what we have been talking about when we talk about balancing the budget, when we talk about regulatory reform, when we talk about tax relief. Unfortunately, I think in our communications too often the perception is that we are talking about those things because they are what is in our mind—tax relief and balancing the budget. We really ought to be talking about the benefits of those things. That is why we are doing it.

We are balancing the budget for a result, and one of the results, of course, is the fiscal and moral responsibility to pay for what we are using and not to put onto our children and grandchildren a \$5 trillion debt, \$260-billion-a-year interest payment, a lifetime interest payment for a youngster born today of \$180,000. We really ought to be talking about that.

Our friends on the other side of the aisle stood up yesterday and said, “We want to start talking about the economy. We want to start the conversation.”

Excuse me? That is what we have been talking about for a year. That is the very thing that the Democrats have blocked all year long—a balanced budget, help to create jobs, tax reform, so that people will invest money in the economy and create jobs so families have more money in their pockets to spend. That is what we are talking about, jobs and wages and an economy that grows.

Unfortunately, we have not always had the information. The President, I think, maybe this year, has said our economy has been the healthiest it has been in three decades. I am sorry, Mr. President, but maybe you need to look at some of the information that comes from your agencies.

Employment data: Unemployment rose from 5.6 to 5.8 in January. The healthiest economy in 30 years? Not for workers. Increases in workers’ wages and benefits are the lowest in 14 years. After accounting for inflation, the rise in wages is an abysmal 0.3 percent. At least part of it is the fact that the economy has grown more slowly in the