I was proud to support the inclusion of Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland into NATO. I am also supportive of the aspiration of others to join that Alliance and to make the democratic and budgetary reforms necessary to bolster their candidacy.

I am proud that seven other nations, including Bulgaria and Romania, are candidates for membership.

By deploying U.S. forces to new locations to the East or South of Germany, to nations that enjoy new or prospective membership in NATO, we would demonstrate our firm commitment to those countries.

Doing so would also reflect new geopolitical realities: first, we have cooperative and constructive relations with Russia, and secondly, points to the south of Europe will continue to require more of our attention.

As Secretary Rumsfeld has noted, while ties between the people of Germany and America remain strong, on a governmental level, our bilateral relations are increasingly out of sync.

I couldn't agree more.

Well before Mr. Schroeder began his attacks on President Bush and before the incessant German criticism of the administration's efforts to combat terrorism and the threat posed by Iraq—Germany had imposed increasing and burdensome restrictions on the way the U.S. military could maneuver and train in Germany.

Basing and operating costs in Germany one of the most industrialized and rich nations of Europe are high. Though start-up costs of relocating some U.S. forces to countries such as Poland or Romania might be high, over time such relocation would present savings.

Some Eastern or Southern European countries would be keen to host U.S. forces, either permanently or on a rotating basis.

They would welcome a U.S. military presence for the strategic and political dividends involved, and not least for the positive economic impact that this would entail. They would welcome us in the spirit of friendship.

In particular, I think the administration should strongly consider redeploying NATO forces to Poland, Romania and Bulgaria. Poland has bases and training grounds well-suited for U.S. military training, while Romania and Bulgaria are both in the process of upgrading their bases under the terms of their NATO membership.

Operating with fewer restrictions than on German bases will allow American troops to train more effectively, thus maintaining military readiness at the highest possible level.

Redeployment of U.S. forces to Romania and/or Bulgaria would ease strategic pressure on Turkey, a vital American ally.

With its location near the center of the world's least stable regions, we should not leave Ankara to stand as the sole pressure point when the U.S. projects forces eastward and southward from Europe.

Someday the political situation might force even a generally friendly Turkish government to resist America using Turkey as a staging point. American bases in Bulgaria and Romania would shift some of the burden from this hard-pressed American friend.

Likewise, bases in Bulgaria and Romania would provide the Turks, who will remain key partners in the new era, the diplomatic cover to continue to assist the U.S.

Nations that have escaped the yoke of communism in Central and Southern Europe have been among the most active and outspoken supporters of U.S. policy particularly the global war on terrorism and U.S. efforts to contain Iraq and North Korea.

Perhaps that is because these nations, unlike their continental neighbors to the West, know what it is like to live without security, freedom and democracy.

As we move forward on this critical issue, Congress should authorize and the Administration should thoroughly study, the military and financial implications of European redeployment.

It is also an issue to broach with the Russian Federation, as it may require renegotiation of the Treaty Conventional Armed Forces in Europe. We must emphasize that it is not directed at Moscow but rather can form the basis of a closer NATO-Russia relationship.

I would note that a few days ago, Senators SHELBY, BUNNING, ALLARD, COLLINS, SESSIONS, BROWNBACK, MCCAIN, KYL, HUTCHINSON, CRAIG, ENSIGN, SANTORUM, WARNER and I sent a letter to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld requesting that the Department of Defense undertake an immediate study of U.S. bases in Europe that should be geared to U.S. national interests.

We asked that issues considered in such a study include, but not be limited to: force structure, length of deployment, infrastructure, dependents and dependent housing and services, and costs regardless of category.

I believe that was a good first step toward thinking about the issue of deployment of our forces in Europe. I think that we should do more on this issue and I will work towards that end.

THE MEDICARE INCENTIVE PAYMENT PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT ACT OF 2003

Mr. THOMAS. Madam President, I am pleased to introduce S. 379, the Medicare Incentive Payment Program Improvement Act of 2003, with my distinguished colleague, Senator BINGAMAN. This legislation makes important improvements to the current Medicare Incentive Payment (MIP) Program. These refinements will go a long way in ensuring eligible rural physicians receive the Medicare bonus payment to which they are entitled.

The Medicare Incentive Payment Program was created in 1987 under the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act to serve as an incentive tool to recruit physicians to practice in Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs) by providing a 10 percent Medicare bonus payment. There are approximately 2,800 federally designated HPSA's—75 percent of which are located in rural areas. In my State of Wyoming, over half of the counties are designated as a Health Professional Shortage Area and have a difficult time recruiting physicians.

Unfortunately, this well-intended program has not worked well due to the burden if places on providers. Under the current MIP programmatic structure, physicians are required to determine if the patient encounter occurred in designated underserved areas, they must attach a code modifier to the billing claim and must undergo a stringent audit. Additionally, there is evidence that many physicians who would be eligible are not even aware of the program.

The legislation we are introducing today alleviates the administrative burden on rural physicians by requiring Medicare carriers to determine eligibility. The Medicare Incentive Payment Program Improvement Act of 2003 also requires the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to establish a MIP education program for providers and establishes ongoing analysis of the MIP program's ability to improve access to physician services for Medicare beneficiaries.

All physicians are struggling with last year's Medicare payment reduction of 5.4 percent and with the possibility of another 4.4 percent reduction on March 1 of this year. These payment cuts combined with an ever-increasing regulatory burden to participate in the Medicare program and escalating medical malpractice premiums have begun to impact senors' access to care. As rural providers tend to be disproportionately impacted by Medicare payment cuts, it has never been more important to ensure that the few rural physician incentive programs that exist have a positive effect on the stability of our rural health care delivery system. I strongly urge all my Senate colleagues interested in rural health to cosponsor the Medicare Incentive Payment Improvement Act of 2003

CONSERVATION SECURITY PROGRAM

Mr. HARKIN. Mr. President, I came to Congress in 1975 and served in the House until 1984, when I was elected to the Senate. As a member of the House Agriculture Committee and later the Senate Agriculture Committee I have always known the importance of agriculture conservation. My home State of Iowa is rich in agriculture and also rich in the tradition of conservation.

But even in Iowa, we recognize the need for more conservation. For decades we had cost-share money available for producers through the Agriculture Conservation Program. But, it was not