

country, they want to know in Baghdad, are we going to support them? They know how tough this is. They know how many more of them are going to die. They know their life is at risk. They know this is an incredibly difficult undertaking, and they are wondering why, when they pick up the papers back home, it is not being stated that way. It is being treated as if this is over. The American people deserve to be leveled with.

Everyone here knows, whether we say another year or 10, whether it is 75,000 troops or 160,000, whether it is \$1 billion or \$20 billion or \$40 billion, we all know it is a lot more than any of us are telling the American people.

It is time, as one of my Republican colleagues said, to tell the truth. I am not suggesting the President is lying. He is not. I am suggesting the American people do not have any idea what we have signed them on to. We had better tell them.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Michigan.

#### SENATOR STROM THURMOND

Ms. STABENOW. Mr. President, I take a moment to send my thoughts and prayers to the family of Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, a man of a remarkable career who made his mark in the permanent history books of the Senate and the country. I know he will be remembered at the funeral next week that many colleagues will be attending. We send our thoughts and prayers to his family at what I am sure is a difficult time as they face this loss.

#### PRESCRIPTION DRUG AND MEDICARE IMPROVEMENT ACT

Ms. STABENOW. Mr. President, last night's vote on the Medicare prescription drug bill is one of the toughest votes I have cast since becoming Senator in 2001.

As the people of Michigan know, I made the issue of adding a prescription drug benefit to Medicare one of the centerpieces of my 2000 campaign. I told Michiganians that if they sent me to the Senate, I would fight to add a meaningful prescription drug benefit to Medicare. I also said I would do everything within my power to lower prescription drug prices for everyone.

For years, I have crisis-crossed Michigan and listened to seniors who desperately need help with paying for their medicines. I have heard from middle class, retired people who have had to cut pills in half because they could not afford to pay for their full prescriptions. I have gone with seniors to Canada where they could actually afford to buy American-made prescription drugs because they cost so much less north of the border.

Since 2001, I have sponsored and cosponsored bills that would provide a comprehensive prescription drug ben-

efit in Medicare and lower prices for all Americans. These are the goals that I have fought for and have spoken out for on this Senate floor time and time again.

Specifically, I have cosponsored S. 7, a bill that would provide a meaningful Medicare prescription benefit. And I have co-sponsored bills to open the border to Canada to allow families to purchase low-cost, F.D.A.-approved drugs made in the U.S. that have been sold in Canada for half the price or less.

I have co-sponsored legislation creating more competition to lower prices by allowing more generics, or unadvertised brands on the market and helping States set up bulk purchasing programs to lower prices for those without health insurance to help pay for their prescription drugs.

I have particularly focused on lowering prices for all Americans because the soaring cost of prescription drugs is hurting all of us.

When a brand-name prescription drug goes up in price three times the rate of inflation, everyone is affected by that. It hurts our seniors, many of whom must pay for prescriptions directly out of their pockets. It harms our businesses by dramatically increasing their health care costs. The average small business has seen their health care premiums double in the last 5 years. This affects our ability to grow and to provide new jobs.

The bill that the Senate passed last night only accomplishes some of my goals. It has its strengths and weaknesses. It is a step in the right direction, but only a beginning step.

On a positive note, this bill establishes an outpatient prescription drug benefit for all seniors for the first time since the entire program was created in 1965.

Currently, Medicare only covers prescription drugs for those who are in the hospital. As we all know, this has been a seniors challenge for our seniors.

Unfortunately, the benefit is confusing and will vary depending upon decisions made by insurance companies, but at least this bill establishes for the first time that there should be a benefit.

The bill provides a benefit for low income seniors who make less than 160 percent of poverty. Married couples earning less than \$19,392 per year will receive a comprehensive prescription drug plan. This will help approximately 350,000 seniors in Michigan. Again, this is a step in the right direction.

This bill also provides a catastrophic benefit for seniors who have extraordinary prescription drug bills each year. For some seniors, it is not uncommon for them to have monthly prescription drug bills of over \$1,000 per month or \$12,000 per year. This bill has a catastrophic cap at \$5,800 per year. After \$5,800, seniors would only have to pay 10 percent of additional out-of-pocket costs in one year. This is a positive step.

This bill also includes several improvements in payments for Medicare

providers. Since 1997, many Medicare providers have been underpaid and have been forced to make difficult decisions regarding serving new Medicare patients. Specifically, this bill provides increased payments for rural providers such as hospitals, ambulance services, and home health agencies. This is important to the people of Michigan.

The bill also makes great strides in helping to lower prescription drug prices for all Americans. For the first time, we have closed loopholes in our drug laws that have allowed brand name drug makers to keep lower cost generic drugs off the market. This bill will mean that there will be more competition between similar drugs and thus lower prices for families, for businesses, and for everyone using prescription drugs. This is a positive aspect that I have been fighting for, for the last 2½ years.

It also includes a provision that I have long championed that will allow pharmacies and families to purchase lower priced prescription drugs from Canada. In some cases, the same drugs that are sold in Canada can cost up to 50, 60, or 70 percent less than they cost here in the U.S. That makes absolutely no sense.

Regrettably, opponents of this type of free market competition attached a provision that allows the Secretary of Health and Human Services to stop its implementation. I hope that HHS Secretary Tommy Thompson will not block it and allow U.S. citizens to get lower priced, FDA approved, American made prescription drugs from Canada.

Unfortunately, this bill has serious drawbacks as well which is why it has been such a difficult situation for me. The Republican Congress, along with the President, has not been willing to allocate enough funding to provide a comprehensive benefit to most of our middle class seniors.

They arbitrarily picked a figure of \$400 billion in total spending for 10 years even though we know that it would take twice that amount to provide American seniors with the same kind of prescription drug coverage that we in the Congress enjoy. Why was that decision made? I have always said this is a question of values and priorities.

Which is more important, or more effective, putting money in people's pockets and improving the quality of life for Americans, another trillion dollar tax cut for the privileged few, or meaningful prescription drug benefit that will help our seniors and their families afford live saving medicine and put money back in people's pockets through lower prescription drug prices.

The answer to that question, I believe, is very clear. Unfortunately, misplaced priorities have resulted in a prescription drug plan that is much less than American families need and deserve.

There are many short-comings in this plan that I will continue to do everything in my power to correct.