

pump. They have blocked our efforts to help working families heat their homes. Senate Republicans have taken a similar hands-off approach to Iraq and Katrina. We still have done nothing to help the victims of Katrina. We have appropriated money. The majority leader says we should have somebody to make sure the money is spent right. We have begged for legislation to create a czar so this money can be spent wisely. No, no legislation in that regard. They won't allow us to bring it to the floor. The huddled masses we all saw on TV—I read the spokesperson for this administration, Bob Novak, in the Washington Post today, the columnist. He said it looks good in Louisiana, especially New Orleans: We just won't let the people come back. We will have the city about half of what it was before, and that will be great for Louisiana.

That is their response to this catastrophe. The people who needed the help the most have still gotten no help. And preparedness for avian flu, let's see what happens on that.

The best example, though, of the Republicans, the best example is the Defense authorization bill. We haven't done one. At a time of war, we have not done a Defense authorization bill. In that bill we have money for troops, for pay raises so that they will pay taxes, money for health care, for new equipment. Republicans refuse to bring it to the floor. We even agreed to 12 amendments, 12 amendments. The average number of amendments is about 150. We agreed to 12. The only real vote we have had on the Defense authorization bill was an amendment offered by the majority leader on Boy Scouts. Yet we don't have time for the Defense authorization bill. Why won't they let us go forward with the 12 amendments? Because one of the amendments calls for an independent, bipartisan commission to study what went wrong with Katrina. They will not let us do that. They are willing to bring down the whole Defense authorization bill because they know on that vehicle we have a right to offer an amendment. On the things they are bringing up now, the appropriations bills, we can't do it procedurally in the Senate. They do not want an independent, bipartisan commission to take a look at what went wrong with this administration's response to Katrina. You would think the administration would want this. But, no, they are fighting this, just as this President fought the 9/11 Commission.

I would hope that we would get someone like Senator McCAIN, who was the one who forced the issue on 9/11, to come forward. Let's have this as a bipartisan call for help, for review. From Defense authorization to Katrina relief, the Republican record is clear: Their plans for the future are bad. Instead of helping Americans, Republicans have decided to use the months ahead to make problems worse. For the next 5 weeks, Republicans have decided we should focus on cutting health care

funding for the sick and elderly, cutting education for students, cutting housing and food assistance, food stamps. That is part of the budget reconciliation. They want to cut food stamps. Republicans will be arguing that all this is justified in the name of fiscal discipline.

Now we have about 20 people who are running the House. With Congressman DELAY's problems, the Speaker has lost control of the House. We read in papers all over America today that the House is being run by 20 renegades who are telling him what to do. It appears he is listening, and he is going to do what they want. What are some of the things they want to do? Cut Medicaid even more, more tax cuts, forget about the people in Louisiana and Mississippi. The group that now runs the House of Representatives is arguing that all this is justified in the name of fiscal discipline, and these are the same people who have brought us the largest deficits and debt increases in this Nation's history. Remember when President Bush took office, some say there was a surplus over 10 years of \$7 trillion. That has all since gone. Now we are \$7 trillion in the hole. Some turnaround. These are the same people who voted for trillions in additional tax cuts and hundreds of billions for Iraq without batting an eye about the fact that none of this spending was offset.

The same people would like to move forward on another round of expensive tax breaks for the elite. America can do better than this. It is time for Congress to focus on the needs of the United States. The American people have concerns about a number of issues, and we have an obligation to address them. I know the majority leader would like to proceed with business as usual, but that is not what the American people expect or want. They aren't interested in more tax breaks for the rich or perks for big oil. They want us to come together and focus on real problems. We have 5 weeks before the next recess—that is Thanksgiving—and a host of issues to address, including energy prices, Katrina, preparedness for avian flu, and other disasters.

It is the pledge of the Democrats that we will not allow these issues to be swept under the rug. Democrats will do everything in our power to make sure these issues are addressed before we leave. On energy, we will fight to make sure the Senate takes real steps to help millions of families fill their tanks and heat their homes, like LIHEAP, like price gouging. On avian flu, we will continue to push the Senate to consider our comprehensive legislation so that our country has the tools and resources it needs to focus and confront this threat. With Katrina, we will make sure hundreds of thousands of victims are helped, not forgotten. Displaced families may no longer be front-page news, but that doesn't mean their needs are met. Thousands are still without health care and housing, and

we have an obligation to help. Energy costs, preparedness, Katrina relief—top priorities for the American people, and Democrats will fight to make sure they are the top priorities for the Senate as well. America must do better than what we have done.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. CORNYN). The Senator from Illinois.

Mr. DURBIN. My understanding is the Senate is now in morning business?

MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. If the Senator will allow, under the previous order, we are scheduled to go into a period for the transaction of morning business until 3 p.m. The time will be equally divided until 3 p.m.

Mr. DURBIN. Could the Chair advise me how much time I would have under that understanding? Is it half of 35 minutes?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator is correct.

CONCERNS OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, I thank the Democratic leader for coming to the floor. We have all returned from our time back home. The Columbus Day recess gave us a chance to go back to our home States. I have run into Senators in the hallway. Senator CORNYN said: I was blazing across Texas. I know Senator REID was in Nevada. I was going across the State of Illinois. It is a good time. It is a good chance to see if some of the things we are talking about in Washington are really resonating and important to the families back home.

I sense, after having been around here for a while, where we spend a lot of time, the people back home scratch their heads and think: They are wasting time. It is all political talk and speeches. When are they going to talk about the things that really count?

I will tell you what I found really counts back home. I went to Wheaton, IL, and visited with Joel Gomez. Joel Gomez, a year and a half ago, was injured in Iraq as an American soldier and became a quadriplegic. Joel Gomez is a wonderful young man. This was the first time I had met him face to face. He lights up a room with his smile, and he is so engaging. He is in a hospital bed and cannot move. The people in the community and the veterans organizations have come together and built him a new home. They built it in 3 months. They broke all construction records. It is for his mother and father and himself. It cost over \$700,000. They put all of that into it to make sure that Joel Gomez can have a good life from this point forward.

I talked to his mom and dad and the people who are around him. I said: How is care at the veterans hospital for Joel? They are trying their best. Sometimes his condition is so challenging, they have to go to other places. But

they said: Senator, he is offered 16 hours of nursing care each week. Joel Gomez needs 24/7. He gets 16 hours from the Veterans' Administration. The rest comes from friends and family, other veterans and relatives who are giving money so Joel can have nursing care.

So when I come back here and join in the debate with Senator PATTY MURRAY and other Democrats and talking about the war in Iraq, I think of Joel Gomez. I think of the soldier who did what we asked of him, as so many hundreds of thousands have. He risked his life for America, has suffered a life-transforming injury, and now doesn't have the support of his Government that he should.

In terms of the priorities of America, when it comes to Iraq, I am glad the constitutional referendum took place, but I also think we have to look at the security needs of Iraq and the reality of Iraq today. One hundred fifty thousand American soldiers are there today. As Senator REID said, we have lost almost 2,000 of our best and bravest so far with no end in sight. So when we say to the administration, we are holding you accountable, we want to see this move forward so American troops can come home, I think that is our responsibility. We are not saying cut and run, retreat. We are saying: Tell us when the Iraqi army has improved to the point where it can take over for American soldiers.

Two weeks ago, Generals Casey and Abizaid came to Capitol Hill disclosing information to congress that had been classified for months. The information was this: There is only one battalion in the Iraqi army standing ready to fight independently, alone, today, out of 110. Four months ago there were three. They have gone downhill because of desertions, because of the infiltration of insurgents. The Iraqi army is not growing in strength, as we had planned it would, so we could come home. So when the Democratic side of the aisle holds the White House accountable, it is so that we can start bringing these soldiers home. So that Iraq can take control of its own future and security; and, secondly, to make sure, as well, that when we consider cuts in appropriations, we never cut the Veterans' Administration—never.

We made a solemn promise to these men and women. We said, If you will risk your life for America, we will stand by you when you come home. I think of Joel Gomez when I think about that.

Then I went up to Elgin and went to the local community center there and met with the United Way and a young woman named Sheila Balthazar. Sheila Balthazar and her 2-year-old son are from New Orleans. They were lucky. They were traveling when Hurricane Katrina hit and they managed to escape and made their way, with her father, up to Illinois to a community in Kane County. The community of Elgin embraced her—because they wanted to make her feel at home—finding a home

for her, finding a job for her, and taking care of her son.

I said, What about Government help in this situation? You have lost your home; you have lost everything you own. She said there hasn't been much if any in terms of Government assistance.

I thought to myself, we have appropriated \$60 billion, and yet when it comes right down to it, the people who are suffering turn to the best place one can turn, and that is the compassion and caring of their fellow Americans. But where is their Government? Where was our preparation? Where was our preparedness? We were told by this administration: We are ready, whatever the disaster might be. It did not happen. We saw those horrifying images on television as a reminder that it did not happen.

The one issue that kept coming back was the cost of energy. It was announced while I was home that even in the upper Midwest, northern Illinois, people can expect historically high natural gas heating bills. We rely on natural gas more than anything else. People in the Northeast use heating oil. They expect the average home to see an increase of \$200 or \$300 a month in their heating bills this approaching winter.

It shows us that what we passed and had signed into law a few weeks ago, the Energy bill, is not much of an energy bill. It did have some good provisions in it. I voted for the bill because it helped ethanol, biodiesel—alternative fuels—that I think move us in the right direction. But when we offered an amendment on the floor and said to the Senate, Shouldn't we as a nation accept as a challenge for every President—Democrat and Republican—from this day forward to reduce our dependence on foreign oil by at least 40 percent by the year 2020, the amendment was defeated on a partisan roll-call, Republicans voting no on energy independence for America by 2020.

Now take a look at where we are. We are still heavily dependent on foreign oil, still finding our economy at the mercy of the OPEC cartel and others who run prices up as high as they can. What is even worse, we are finding that the big oil companies are making obscene profits at the expense of individuals and families and businesses across America.

The top four big oil companies in America in the first 6 months of this year reported \$40 billion in profits, record-breaking profits. So as we stick that nozzle into the gas tank and look at those numbers rolling, trust me, a small part may be going to Saudi Arabia, but the biggest part of it is not going to the man who owns the gas station, it is going to that oil company that owns the gas station: \$40 billion in new profits, windfall profits that consumers are paying across America. We will see it with heating bills this winter, and we are going to see it as well with the pressure on airlines for the cost of jet fuel.

The obvious question is this: What will this Congress do about it? Before we leave in 5 weeks, will we do anything? Will we make a move now to establish a goal of energy independence by the year 2020? Will we set up a strategic gasoline and jet fuel reserve so that when we have these price spikes, the President has a tool he can use to reduce these costs? Will we hold the oil companies accountable for these windfall profits, \$40 billion, that have come at the expense of average Americans over the last 6 months?

You can understand that the President and Vice President, because of their business backgrounds, are not excited about these ideas, but the American people expect us to do something. The Democrats have come forward with specific proposals dealing with energy. The Republican side has said, Let business continue as usual. Let these billions of dollars continue.

Then I ran into a friend of mine in Springfield with whom I have worked for years. We talked about credit card debt. He said he understood that his credit card company by the end of the year was going to do something that could hurt his family. I said, What is that? He said they are going to increase the minimum amount you can pay each month on your balance from 2 percent to 4 percent. He said: I am not sure I can keep up with it.

I thought to myself: If you can't pay off 4 percent of your credit card balance each month, how can you ever get ahead of the game? The interest they are going to charge you is going to eat up 4 percent—2 percent at least. And if you are not paying down that principal and still charging away, how are you ever going to get out from under?

The reason why that is especially appropriate to mention today is because today is the first day of the new bankruptcy law in America. The Republican leadership here points with pride to the fact that they put in a new bankruptcy law.

The most basic question one can ask in Washington when people say they want a law passed is, Who wants it passed and why? This bankruptcy reform bill was the darling and pet project of the financial institutions and credit card companies of America for almost 10 years. Why did they want to change the bankruptcy law? Because this individual I mentioned in Springfield and others who become so heavily indebted to credit card companies sometimes reach a breaking point. The one thing that pushes them over the edge more than anything is medical bills uncovered by their health insurance. When these medical bills come crashing on them, some are forced into the bankruptcy court.

Other things can happen—a death in the family, a divorce, a loss of a job. But the No. 1 reason people go to bankruptcy court is because of medical bills. So this bankruptcy reform which we passed—I voted against it—with a majority in the Senate will make it

more difficult for individuals with medical debt forced into bankruptcy to discharge their debt. In other words, at the end of this legal proceeding in bankruptcy, they are still in debt. They walk out the door with the debts all over again. The credit card debt and medical debt is still there.

So, of course, the financial institutions and credit card companies couldn't be happier. If you can't get out from under this debt, they will get more money from you, they will harass you for years and months to come. That is the idea of breakthrough legislation by the Republican leadership in the Senate.

From my point of view, it does not help the average person in America. It puts an unreasonable burden on people who are struggling to survive as each year we see fewer and fewer people with health insurance, as each year the Republicans resist efforts to increase the minimum wage in this country so people who get up and go to work every day can make enough money to get by. As the number of impoverished people in America continues to grow each year, we end up making it more difficult to go to bankruptcy court and get out from under that debt, even if that debt is caused by medical bills.

That, to me, is not the people's agenda, it is not America's agenda, and it does not reflect what I found when I returned to Illinois. The people I represent believe America can do better. We can do a lot better. We can have an energy policy that moves us toward independence and gives us some way to deal with these obscene profits by the oil companies that are dragging our economy down, as well as family budgets. We can do better in Iraq by establishing standards of accountability for this administration: How many Iraqi soldiers are going to be prepared to fight, and how soon can American soldiers come home? What is the progress on reconstructing Iraq? There is less electricity in Iraq now than when we invaded. There is less potable water available. There is a 50-percent unemployment rate and less oil production than at the time of the invasion.

We need to hold this administration and the Iraqi Government accountable so our American soldiers can come home successfully with their mission truly accomplished.

We also need to see accountability when it comes to health care in America. This is a topic that neither the President nor leaders in Congress are willing to talk about in public, and it is the No. 1 issue. When I sat down with the Chamber of Commerce in Elgin, IL, and asked the gathering of business leaders, if you had to rank the top three issues facing your business today as a challenge, how many of you would put the cost of health insurance in the top three? Every single hand went up.

What are we doing about that in Washington? The answer is absolutely nothing. While people are making a handsome profit as providers and insur-

ance companies and HMOs, we are doing nothing to help the average American.

We had a hearing on the Medicare prescription drug bill in Chicago with Congresswoman SCHAKOWSKY. I feel sorry for the seniors of this country. I am glad they have a benefit coming their way, but it couldn't have been more complicated. In an effort to protect the profits of pharmaceutical companies, we would not let Medicare offer—simply offer—one plan for all seniors across America, a plan that could compete by bulk purchases and discounts in lowering the price of drugs. No way. The pharmaceutical companies opposed it, and they, of course, rule the roost when it comes to Capitol Hill. They get what they want. As a result, we have the jumbled mess of bureaucracy and redtape that our seniors have to go through to try to figure out what this Medicare prescription drug benefit is all about.

We should have done a lot better for our seniors than this Medicare prescription drug bill. It is not as good as America can do. I think we have an obligation to do better.

In the weeks ahead, the 5 weeks when we are scheduled to adjourn, I hope we rise to the challenge on a bipartisan basis. I hope the Republican leadership looks to the real issues facing America: energy, dealing with the Katrina crisis with a truly independent nonpartisan commission, and making certain we have accountability with what is happening in the war in Iraq. That will move the Senate forward and move America forward.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. CORNYN). The assistant majority leader.

HONORING OUR ARMED FORCES

SERGEANT MICHAEL DUANE ACKLIN II

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask the Senate to pause for a moment today in loving memory and honor of Sergeant Michael Duane Acklin II.

Sergeant Acklin of Louisville, KY, served with the First Battalion, 320th Field Artillery, 101st Airborne Division. Nearly 2 years ago, he gave his life in defense of our country in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul. He was 25 years old and had served in the Army for 5 years.

On November 15, 2003, Sergeant Acklin was on an evening patrol over Mosul in a Blackhawk helicopter, and his team was responding to an ambush of a squad of American soldiers on the ground. As the helicopter hovered above the fight, a second helicopter, which had also come to help, was struck by a rocket-propelled grenade.

That helicopter lost control and hit Sergeant Acklin's aircraft, cutting off the tail rotor of Sergeant Acklin's helicopter. Both helicopters lost control and crashed, killing 17 soldiers. Sergeant Acklin was one of them. It was the largest loss of American lives during a single incident in Iraq at the time.

Sergeant Acklin was buried in Louisville at the Zachary Taylor National Cemetery, named for America's 12th President who is also laid to rest there. For his valor, Sergeant Acklin was awarded the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart. During his service, he also received the Global War on Terrorism Service Medal and the Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal.

Michael attended Butler High School and then Western High School, where he graduated in 1996. After graduation, he worked as a bus boy, a cook, and at several other temporary jobs, but none gave Michael the challenge or the fulfillment that he was looking for. Then he began to see the Army as a way to focus his life and spirit.

Michael's family has a long and distinguished career of military service. His grandfather, Eugene Acklin, his great-grandfather, Fred Bible, and three of his cousins have all served in either the Army or Air Force. In fact, before making his decision to enlist, Michael spoke with one of those cousins, Curtis Luckett Jr., an Army veteran. Michael also sought the advice of his father's cousin, LTC Charles Mitchell, Jr., a career military officer who gave him a personal perspective on Army life. However, Michael made his decision to join the Army in his own way.

A devout Christian, Michael enlisted in the Army in the summer of 1998, after hearing, according to what he told his family later, what he could describe only as the voice of God. In hopes of following God's calling, Michael had a friend drive him to a nearby Army recruiting station, and he signed up. He felt this was to be his path into adulthood. His father applauded his decision, and his mother hoped it would provide him the direction he was seeking.

While he found basic training tough, Michael embraced the discipline the Army provided him, and he successfully completed his training and emerged with a greater awareness of his strengths and talents. Early-morning wake-up calls at 4:30 and ceaseless drills gave Michael a new sense of commitment and confidence. He was made a recruit leader, and after training to use large artillery pieces, he was assigned to the 101st Airborne Division based in Fort Campbell, KY, not too far from his home back in Louisville.

Sergeant Acklin was a part of the initial wave of forces sent to liberate Iraq in March 2003. The 101st Airborne took the lead, as it always does whenever our country calls, and Michael and his unit were charged with providing cover fire in support of our troops.

After the fall of Saddam Hussein's tyrannical regime, Michael's unit built schools, cleared streets, and tracked down suspected terrorists. He commanded five other men, and made sure they wrote their families back home often.