

time of the year, but it is also the turning point when the sun begins to shine more and more each day.

Together we offer our wish, our hope, and our prayers that the dreams that have carried us so far of peace on Earth, good will toward all may yet still come true.

THANKING STAFF

Before I yield the floor, I would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge the individuals in my now second year here in the Senate whom I have seen work incredibly hard, but very rarely get acknowledged, all of those who help us as we preside: the clerks, who keep all of the documentation that comes before the Senate moving; the Parliamentarians, who try to keep us in some degree of order as we move along the way; the party secretaries and their staffs, who do such a great job on informing us as to what is happening and to try to keep somewhat of a schedule in terms of our lives here in the Senate; to those in the cloakroom who also produce that service; to the pages who have done a great job.

It was a privilege to have the opportunity to talk to so many of them. I think they are going to carry their experiences here with them a lifetime, and I am sure that maybe we will see some of them in this Chamber in the future.

To all of those who make this institution the greatest democratic institution in the world operate the way it successfully operates, my deepest thanks, my best for the holiday season.

With that, I yield the floor.

ORDER OF PROCEDURE

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Alaska.

Mr. LEVIN. Would the Senator from Alaska yield for a unanimous consent request?

Ms. MURKOWSKI. Yes.

Mr. LEVIN. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that after the Senator from Alaska finishes, I understand the Senator from Pennsylvania would be recognized. I would then ask that I be the next Democrat to be recognized.

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

RECOGNIZING SENATE PAGES

Ms. MURKOWSKI. Madam President, I want to follow on the comments of my colleague from New Jersey in recognizing those who allow this body to function so efficiently and to also give special recognition to the pages.

Given the schedule they have, we are likely not going to be seeing much more of this particular group as they finish up for the holidays and their exams, and then move back to their respective States and their communities. But to all of you who have given so much to so many of us, to make our jobs a little bit easier, we thank you. Thank you very greatly. I believe this

is an episode in your life that you will long remember, and hopefully it will be a good and positive experience for all of you. Thank you for your contribution.

WELCOMING RETURNING TROOPS

Madam President, I note that in my hometown of Anchorage, AK, this afternoon, there is a wonderful celebration taking place. The 495th out of Fort Richardson has all come home. They have come home after 15 months being over in Iraq, doing incredible work under incredibly difficult situations.

We mourn the loss of those who are not home, who will not be home. But today in Anchorage, the community is coming together to say: Welcome back. Please let us know how we can support you and your families, not only at this holiday season, but throughout the year, and support you for all the support you have given us.

We take time during the holiday season to show our thanks, to show our appreciation to so many. But I wish to recognize the soldiers and the veterans from Alaska, from throughout the whole country, who have given so much and who continue to give so much. We want them to know their sacrifices in serving us, whether it be in Afghanistan or in Iraq, have not gone unnoticed. Their sacrifices have certainly not gone unnoticed by my fellow Alaskans.

When I was in Iraq earlier in the year, I had the pleasure of meeting with soldiers and guardsmen from Anchorage, Fairbanks, Seward, Soldotna, Eagle River, Slana, and Wasilla, all over the State. In hearing their stories and their commitment, you cannot help but feel proud as an American. I was certainly proud as an Alaskan. Every day I have Alaskans who write my office to praise the servicemen and the servicewomen who have returned and those who are still in combat. Sometimes it is a quick e-mail, saying: I support all of those who are serving, and other times they are very long, heartfelt letters praising our heroes and truly expressing a solidarity with them for the sacrifice they have made.

The fact that Alaska has the largest number of veterans per capita, I think says a lot about our State's character. Our Alaska veterans are some of the most exemplary in the Armed Forces. The 172nd Stryker Brigade out of Fairbanks was on tour in Iraq, and they were extended to 16 months. But when they were asked to give more, they remained strong, they remained proud. Last week, I received an e-mail from the former commander of the 172nd, and he sent along an article of an Iraqi, a young Iraqi girl who had been blind. Some of the soldiers in the 172nd had helped facilitate this young girl coming to the United States for eye surgery. This young child, this beautiful little Iraqi girl, is now able to see. She was given that gift of sight because of the caring and compassion of these soldiers.

Another story was shared with me by the former commander. He noted that on December 12, SGT Gregory Williams from the 172nd was presented with the Distinguished Service Cross, the second highest award for valor, for his actions while in combat in Baghdad. Despite being injured himself when their vehicle was struck by a bomb, Sergeant Williams was able to return fire and help a wounded comrade to safety. To date, there have only been eight Distinguished Service Crosses awarded since the war began in 2001. So we are very proud of SGT Gregory Williams.

We say that we do things a little bit differently in Alaska. We enjoy doing things a little differently. There was one Alaskan marine who was over in Iraq. He discovered that he had some hidden talents he did not imagine. His innovative approach to searching out insurgents earned him a Marine Corps Commendation Medal. SGT Aaron A. Henehan led his squad to search out and detain 18 black list or high-value insurgents while in his third tour in Iraq. He is an adventurous young man. Sergeant Henehan was barely out of high school and was anxious to see the world when he first thought of signing up to serve his country. September 11 and the outbreak of war did not cause his decision to waiver an inch.

Sergeant Henehan deployed in April of 2003 and spent his first tour in the town of Babylon. He served his country well. Like many who fought alongside him, he began to learn the undercurrents, the inner workings of Iraqi society. He returned for a second tour to Husaybah, near Iraq's border with Syria in August of 2004. At that time Husaybah was a dangerous town.

Sergeant Henehan served his second tour in Iraq with distinction, but still he felt he needed to do more. Before deploying for his third and final tour in February of 2006, he told his friends and his family back home that he wanted to make a difference in Iraq, a sentiment many American soldiers and guardsmen share. He spent a lot of time between his second and his third tours thinking about what he might be able to do differently, how he could learn from his experiences in the two deployments prior, and how he might be able to achieve a better result.

Combining his Marine training with information he learned from a retired Los Angeles police officer who was deployed to Iraq to teach the troops urban tactics, Sergeant Henehan approached his third tour with what he referred to as a beat cop mentality. He wanted to approach the problem of rounding up insurgents as if he were a native of the area. He spent his free time studying the tribal history and the geography of Husaybah for hours at a time. The ability to put his plan in motion, Sergeant Henehan says, was made possible in part by Operation Steel Curtain, which had cleared Husaybah block by block, and set up outposts called "firm bases" throughout the city.

So upon returning for his third tour, Sergeant Henehan immediately noticed that after this push, while not always willing to openly support the coalition forces, Iraqis felt safe enough to give him tips on where the insurgents were hiding. This change in mentality, coupled with Sergeant Henehan's knowledge of family and tribal connections, allowed him to determine which people to ask about each of the 18 high-value insurgents he located. He knew exactly who would be willing to tip him off about a social rival or historic foe.

Traveling with an interpreter, Sergeant Henehan had a talent for remembering names and personal details. He took every opportunity he could to talk with locals and learn about the town's social organizations and tribal boundaries, often returning several times to talk with the same families to gain their trust. He would bring with him candy, good humor, even doctors. He would knock on the doors and politely ask to chat. Entire families opened up to him. Sometimes it would start with a toy given to a child, sometimes it was a heartfelt conversation with a shopkeeper. The response he got astonished everyone, including the insurgents hiding out in the town.

The 12 marines in his squad called him a fair but tough leader with whom they felt very safe. His intense and proactive preparation for the more than 80 combat missions which he led and his personal attention to each of his 12 soldier's well-being gave them a sense of security. They, too, noted how his relaxed Alaskan exterior quickly helped earn him the respect of the townspeople.

Even more remarkably, Sergeant Henehan's reputation for being fair and caring allowed him to detain all 18 high-value insurgents without any real violence. These 18 also led him to their associates, significantly disrupting insurgent operations in that part of Al Anbar Province.

Sergeant Henehan remained behind after his unit returned to the States to train new troops about how he had learned to wage urban warfare while gaining the trust of the townspeople. The downturn in violence in Al Anbar can be linked perhaps in part to his efforts and the efforts of those like him.

Sergeant Henehan is currently attending a California community college and plans to transfer to a larger State school after completing his distribution credits. He wants to major in computer games and even talks of one day creating video games that more accurately portray what war in the modern era is like. He has already begun organizing photographs from his three tours to use as backdrops. Clearly, his talent for careful planning and his desire to share his knowledge and experiences with others did not leave with his donning of civilian clothes.

I wish him the best in all of his future endeavors, just as I wish the best for all Alaskan veterans and those now serving.

MEDICARE REIMBURSEMENT

Ms. MURKOWSKI. Madam President, I wish to take a few moments to speak on the issue of Medicare reimbursements for physicians, particularly those in rural and frontier States. We have moved forward a temporary fix of Medicare reimbursement for physicians, essentially for 6 months. I wish to speak to the issue for Alaska and other rural parts of the country.

In Alaska, many of our Medicare beneficiaries, even without this potential 10-percent reimbursement cut, lack the ability to see a primary care physician unless they have the means somehow to pay out of pocket for doctor visits. Without congressional action on a long-term strategy—longer than 6 months—to increase Medicare reimbursements, these cuts threaten access to care as fewer and fewer doctors are able to afford seeing Medicare patients. An American Medical Association survey shows that 60 percent of physicians reported they would be forced to limit the number of new Medicare patients they treat if the impending reimbursement cuts go through.

I get so many calls on a daily basis from seniors asking me to fix Medicare. They want to be able to continue to see their doctor. I know I am not the only Member who receives these calls. It is unfortunate, but America's seniors every year are thrust in the middle of this Medicare reimbursement debate out of fear that they are going to lose their health care provider to Medicare cuts.

In 2003, with great fanfare, we provided a Medicare prescription drug benefit. At that time, I asked the question: We can have a wonderful drug benefit, but what good is the benefit if there is no physician to write the prescription?

The Presiding Officer knows how big a State it is; she has had the opportunity to come for a visit. We are bigger than California, Texas, and Montana combined. "Rural" in Alaska has a new meaning. The physician shortage crisis in Alaska has been magnified because of our geography, distance, and size.

What many people might not realize is what is happening to our population. We have always been viewed as a young pioneering State where the average age is the early 20s and predominantly male—a wilderness image. But we have grown and matured. Our elderly population is the fastest growing senior population per capita in the Nation behind Nevada. That is a statistic which would surprise many people.

The Mat-Su Valley, an area just north of Anchorage, is the fifth fastest growing region among seniors nationally. Yet, think about that statistic and compare it with what is happening with our physician ratio. Alaska has the sixth lowest ratio of physicians to population in the United States. Outside of the Anchorage area, our ratio of physicians to population is the worst in the Nation.

To put it into context, we had a field hearing the first part of the year to understand how bad the situation is as far as access to care. To reach the national average of physician-to-patient ratio, Alaska needs a net increase of 980 physicians statewide or 49 more physicians per year. I go into some of these hospitals, VA clinics, and community health centers. They have been waiting years trying to find not only doctors but all within the medical profession, whether it is outpatient therapists all the way up to cardiologists. Fairbanks, our second largest city, got its first cardiologist this year.

According to the Anchorage Daily News, our largest newspaper, it costs 65 cents on the dollar to care for a patient in Alaska, and yet Medicare only reimburses 22 to 35 cents on the dollar. In addition to low reimbursement, we have other factors that drive the cost up. We have higher salaries, a higher cost of living, higher equipment costs, and higher transportation costs. Higher energy costs add to that.

We had a field hearing earlier in the year and had an individual testify before the committee. He was later quoted in the Anchorage Daily News:

The costs [to practice] were so exorbitant and the fees for reimbursement were so low for Medicare patients, at the end of the day I could actually owe money for working a ten-hour day.

The sustained growth rate formula which has been in place since 1997 calls for nearly 40 percent in cuts over the next 8 years, even as practice expenses continue to increase. So how do we expect to entice more physicians to practice and care for our seniors, our veterans, if we threaten to cut Medicare reimbursements every year?

We know the time for Congress to act is now. I ask my colleagues, those on the Finance Committee, let's work on legislation that will provide a long-term reimbursement fix to ensure continuous care for the elderly, who may otherwise be left without access to care in the neediest of times. This is something we all must work to advance.

TRIBUTE TO SENATOR TRENT LOTT

Ms. MURKOWSKI. Madam President, yesterday was a day of tribute to one of our colleagues, a gentleman who has served his State and this country admirably for many years. I have not had the privilege to serve in the Senate with our colleague for as long a period as many of those who spoke yesterday, but I think we know it doesn't take long to realize how important has been the contribution of the Senator from Mississippi to this institution. I listened yesterday to so many of the kind words. I heard repeated time after time: statesman, leader of an institution, truly a statesman.

We all know of TRENT LOTT's tremendous dedication to the institution that is Congress, 34 years of public service between the House and Senate, his creation of the whip organization in the