

But I will not live with it by agreeing to less than the amount of time that is needed to debate an issue about the future of our kids, our service personnel, the men and women who put on a uniform and risk their lives every day. I believe they should sit at the top of the list. And S. 1315 does not put them there. S. 1315 puts at the top of the list a new special pension program for people who have never had a service-connected injury.

I am as sympathetic to those who fall into the category of having helped us. I might mention again, the Filipinos who live in the United States who fought in the Philippines for us, we take care of; we have integrated them fully into the Veterans' Administration. They receive every service our veterans do. To those Filipinos who live in the Philippines who have service-connected injuries, we have made sure compensation is in this bill to take care of them.

But for those who do not have service-connected injuries, I cannot see where they fit at the top of the list of \$221 million and our kids go below it, as it relates to what they need for the severely disabled injuries they have been faced with.

I have a number of soldiers in North Carolina, at least they are stationed in North Carolina, that fall into this category. When we see Eric Edmundson's family spend \$47,000 on a van, and \$14,000 of that comes out-of-pocket, I have to ask: Where are our priorities? Where are the priorities of the Congress in defense of these kids? Well, they are in \$221 million getting ready to go to the Philippines. That is where they are. That is the debate we are going to have over the next several days. If it takes a week or if it takes a month, then we will have that debate. At some point, we will take a vote. I believe the American people will see the advantage, the need, to make sure the No. 1 priority is our kids in uniform, our veterans who come back who will be serviced by this very important piece of legislation.

I am committed to Chairman AKAKA that once we can dispose of the issue of this special pension, I am more than willing to vote for the rest of the bill because it is a good bill. It brings some needed benefits to our veterans.

It never should have been locked up for the length of period this was. But make no mistake about it, no matter how good a bill is, if you want to structure it in a way that debate does not flourish in the Senate, then we have done an injustice to the American people. The most deliberative body in the world is supposed to be one that you are not corralled into agreeing to a certain amount of time to debate on an issue; it is where everybody's voice is heard, it is where every bit of information about an issue can be presented. It is where charts can display what words cannot explain.

That is what the next several days will be about with S. 1315. I am con-

vinced that at the end of this process, not only will Members in this body be enlightened by what we are able to talk about, but the American people will be enlightened, and hopefully this body will vote, hopefully in the majority way, that the priority, the No. 1 priority is our men and women in uniform when they come home.

VETERANS BENEFITS ENHANCEMENT ACT OF 2007

Mr. AKAKA. Mr. President, I urge my colleagues to support consideration of S. 1315, as reported by the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, the proposed Veterans Benefits Enhancement Act of 2007. This is a comprehensive bill that would improve benefits and services for veterans, both young and old, and it should be debated and voted on.

I believe that a brief recap of how we came to seek cloture on this veterans bill would be helpful in assisting my colleagues in their deliberation on cloture.

Last June the committee held a markup during which the then-ranking member, the Senator from Idaho, offered an amendment that would have modified a provision of the bill relating to Filipino veterans of World War II. This amendment would have reduced the amount of pension that Filipino veterans residing in the Philippines would receive.

I stress that the amendment was not to eliminate pension benefits for these veterans from the bill entirely—it was merely to reduce the benefit in line with what the Senator from Idaho viewed as appropriate. I disagreed with his assessment and we debated the issue. Ultimately, his amendment was not adopted.

As that markup concluded, the Senator from Idaho noted that he intended to bring his amendment regarding the pension issue to the floor during consideration of S. 1315, a step I certainly understood and accepted.

The report on S. 1315 was filed in August and I expected that it would come to the floor in September. However, there was an unexpected change in the committee's Republican leadership in early September, with the Senator from Idaho being replaced by the Senator from North Carolina. I did not push for consideration of S. 1315 while the new ranking member took over the responsibilities of the position.

When in October, committee staff began, at my direction, to seek agreement for the bill to be brought to the floor, those efforts were not successful.

Later in the fall, despite his suggestion that there was need for debate, the former ranking member curiously objected to my attempt to gain unanimous consent to debate the bill. I wrote to my colleague in an attempt to find a middle ground between the level of pension benefits in the bill as reported, and the level that he had sought during the June markup.

On December 13, 2007, I received a letter from the former ranking member that indicated that he did not feel that we were far apart from finding a compromise on the bill, and that he looked forward to working with me to gain final passage.

However, my optimism was short-lived. On that same day, the majority staff received a counteroffer from the minority staff, on behalf of the committee's new ranking member, the Senator from North Carolina, which proposed to entirely eliminate pension benefits for Filipino veterans residing in the Philippines from the bill.

Shortly thereafter, I was surprised to learn that this counteroffer was embraced by the committee's former ranking member—rendering his offer to negotiate null and void.

Additional efforts earlier this year to find a compromise or, at a minimum, to enter into an agreement for debate, were again rejected.

Now, after over 7 months of obstruction in bringing this bill to the floor, we have to resort to a cloture vote on the motion to proceed to the bill, an action unprecedented in the history of the Veterans' Affairs Committee.

I am dismayed that, along with the Filipino veterans provisions included in the bill, a number of other worthy provisions have not been enacted because of obstruction by the minority.

Among other things, S. 1315, as reported, would: Establish a new program of insurance for service-connected veterans; expand eligibility for retroactive benefits from traumatic injury protection coverage under the Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance program; increase the maximum amount of veterans mortgage life insurance that a service-connected disabled veteran may purchase; recognize that individuals with severe burn injuries need specially adapted housing benefits; and extend for 2 years the monthly educational assistance allowance for apprenticeship or other on-the-job training.

This is by no means a comprehensive recitation of the 8 titles and 38 provisions that are in this omnibus legislation. However, I hope it gives our colleagues an overview of the types of benefits that servicemembers and veterans stand to gain by passage of this legislation.

I ask our colleagues to vote in favor of cloture so as to bring this measure to the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Republican whip.

SADDAM HUSSEIN AND AL-QAIDA

Mr. KYL. Mr. President, it has been commonplace for critics of the war in Iraq to minimize, if not actually dismiss entirely, the links between Saddam Hussein and terrorists generally and al-Qaida specifically. This is part of a systematic effort by some, especially now that there are irrefutable signs of progress from the military