

Bowles-Simpson proposal and put it into language that works, make it work. So we have been at it for a long time. We have had our ups and downs. One of our members left, then came back. It is a tough assignment. It is not easy. Sometimes emotions run high because there are things of great value and importance that are being discussed.

Something happened this morning that was perhaps historic. We took our plan, which still is short of completion, and we invited every Member of the Senate—Democrats and Republicans—to come listen to a description of the plan. If I am not mistaken—and Senator WARNER is here—it was 49 Senators who came. There were no fist-fights and no swearing. Instead, Democratic and Republican Senators sat in that room—49 of them—and listened to the outline of this proposal from this group of 6 and came out with a positive feeling—not all of them. I am not suggesting they all signed up. I would not expect that to happen. But it is significant at this moment in our history that so many felt positive toward what we were doing. I hope we can take it to another level.

In the meantime, we have an important responsibility. We need to extend the debt ceiling. We cannot compromise the whole faith and credit score of the United States. We cannot let interest rates go up and raise our debt. We cannot let interest rates go up and kill the recovery that is taking place in this economy by killing jobs. We need to do our part here and solve this problem on a bipartisan basis. I hope we can fold into that, as a critical element, a plan to move forward in dealing with our debt.

Senator REID, the Democratic majority leader, and Senator MCCONNELL, the Republican minority leader, are working together. America should take heart that they are trying to find a way through a difficult political challenge. The clock is running, and we have to get it done.

Today, we have a largely empty Chamber, as we prepare for a debate on a Republican alternative, which I will oppose and speak against, and I will tell you why. It is not going to pass. We know that. But we have said to Republicans: We will give you your chance to make your case. That is all any of us can ask in the Senate. My plea to the Republican side of the aisle is, let's do this in a time-efficient manner. Let's not waste time. Let's try to get to a good, healthy debate and a vote and move to extend the debt ceiling on a bipartisan basis. If we don't and if the rating agencies which downgraded us last week come back and hit us again, it will hurt this economy and the families and businesses that count on us to make the right and important decisions on a timely basis.

I urge my colleagues on the Republican side, wage a spirited debate on what you believe in, and we will too, but let's not draw this out for days and

weeks. We have to get down to business.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. WEBB). The junior Senator from Virginia is recognized.

Mr. WARNER. Mr. President, I commend my colleague, the Senator from Illinois, for his comments. I affirm his sentiments.

We have two problems in front of us right now—one intermediate problem: raising the debt ceiling. If we have a downgrade in our debt, there will be a tax increase on every American family, every American business, in the cost of higher interest rates. We have to get that raised, which is something I have been advocating for over a year.

We have to take a second step—to put into place the long-term deficit reduction plan. The Senator from Illinois and I and others have been working on this. The Senator from Georgia and I started this over a year ago. We had I believe virtually half of the Senate who came and said it is not perfect, but this makes sense as a way to move forward. We have to do our jobs.

I particularly thank the Senator from Illinois, who has worked so hard on preserving the safety net in these discussions.

Some of my colleagues on the Republican side have recognized that we have to sort through a way to reform our Tax Code in a meaningful way. These are acts of political courage, and I commend them both.

With that, I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

BUDGET NEGOTIATIONS

Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, the issue that is under discussion in Washington on deficit reduction is of enormous consequence. It will impact not only our generation but the decisions reached will impact our children and our grandchildren and the future of our country. It is terribly important the American people become engaged in this debate. I fear if they do not, if we leave the discussions totally to folks inside the beltway, the results will be a disaster for tens of millions of working families, for the elderly, for the sick, for the children, for the environment, and for the future of our Nation.

So my plea today is for the American people to get heavily involved, to get on the phone and call their Senators and their Members of Congress to demand not that the budget deal that is reached is a big deal or a small deal or a medium-sized deal but that the budget agreement that is reached is a fair deal—one that reflects the values of

our country, one that understands what is going on in the economy today, and one that addresses the issue of how we got into this horrendous deficit situation in the first place.

When we talk about a fair deal, one has to understand what the American economy is today, and that is that we have a middle class that is collapsing; we have poverty increasing; and we have a growing gap between the very wealthiest people in our country and everybody else. To my mind, at a time when the rich are doing phenomenally well, when corporate profits are extremely high, when the effective tax rate for the wealthy is the lowest in modern history, and when we have many corporations making billions of dollars in profits and paying nothing in taxes, it would be immoral and bad economic policy to move toward a deficit-reduction approach which balances the budget on the backs of working families, the elderly, the sick, and the poor, and that does not ask the wealthiest people or the largest corporations to contribute one nickel to deficit reduction. That would be absolutely wrong.

Mr. President, one of the areas that concerns me very much is that in the midst of all of this deficit-reduction talk, seemingly out of nowhere comes the idea we must make major cuts in Social Security benefits. That is absolutely wrong for a number of reasons.

No. 1, Social Security has not contributed one nickel toward our deficit. The Social Security trust fund has a \$2.6 trillion surplus. Social Security can pay out every benefit owed to every eligible American for the next 25 years. So it is wrong, wrong, wrong to make significant cuts in Social Security a part of deficit reduction. It is wrong because Social Security hasn't contributed to the deficit; it is wrong because President Obama specifically campaigned against any cuts toward Social Security; and it is wrong because cutting Social Security would hurt in a very significant way millions of the most vulnerable people in our country.

There is a discussion going on about moving toward a so-called Chained CPI, which would be used to determine Social Security's annual COLA—a new formulation on the COLA. Let me be very clear. When I was in the House, I introduced bipartisan legislation to strengthen the Social Security COLA because I believed then, and I believe now, the current COLA is inadequate and unfair to seniors because it does not take into account the high cost of health care and prescription drugs.

In my view, the current COLA formulation understates what seniors and disabled vets should be getting. What some are proposing in terms of moving toward a Chained CPI would be to move us in exactly the wrong direction. It would not adequately reflect the purchasing needs of seniors but, in fact, would underestimate those needs.

The Social Security Administration's Chief Actuary estimates the effects of

the so-called Chained CPI would be that beneficiaries who retire at age 65 and receive average benefits would get \$560 less a year at age 75 than they would under current law. Around here \$560 may not seem like a lot of money. But if you are 75 years of age and are bringing in \$14,000 or \$16,000 a year, and you are trying to pay for prescription drugs or health care, \$560 is, in fact, a lot of money. Worse, if we moved toward that Chained CPI, Social Security benefits, by the time a senior reached 85, he or she would receive \$1,000 less a year, which would be a 6.5-percent cut in their benefits.

So we are in an unusual moment in that the people who helped cause this recession—the greedy people on Wall Street whose recklessness, whose greed, whose illegal behavior drove us into this recession—are not being asked to contribute one nickel toward deficit reduction. They were bailed out by the American people, and in many respects they are now doing better than they did before the Wall Street crash.

Many here are saying, my Republicans friends especially: No, Wall Street CEOs making tens of millions a year, who helped cause this recession, do not have to contribute one penny toward deficit reduction. But if you are an 85-year-old senior citizen who is struggling to take care of basic necessities, well, my goodness, we are going to have to do deficit reduction on your back.

That is not what America is supposed to be about, and that is not what the American people want. Poll after poll suggests the American people believe we should move toward deficit reduction based on the concept of shared sacrifice; that we are all in this together.

Even if you are a millionaire and you make a whole lot of campaign contributions, and, yes, if you are a billionaire and you have lobbyists running all over Capitol Hill, you know what. You are going to have to help us with deficit reduction. And, yes, given the fact that we have major corporation after major corporation—oil companies and Wall Street—making billions of dollars in profits and in some cases paying nothing in taxes, guess what. We are going to do away with those loopholes so they start contributing toward deficit reduction. Given the fact we have tripled military funding since 1997, yes, we are going to have to make some cuts in military spending.

Let me conclude by simply saying: Yes, we have to reduce our deficit and deal with our national debt. But the issue is not a big deal or a small deal, the issue must be a fair deal—one which protects Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, the needs of working families, and a deficit-reduction approach which asks the wealthiest people and the largest corporations to also participate in deficit reduction.

With that, Mr. President, I yield the floor.

RECESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will stand in recess until 2:15 p.m.

Thereupon, at 12:30 p.m., the Senate recessed until 2:15 p.m., and reassembled when called to order by the Presiding Officer (Mr. WEBB).

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Illinois.

Mr. KIRK. Mr. President, I would suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. JOHNSON of South Dakota. I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Morning business is now closed.

MILITARY CONSTRUCTION AND VETERANS AFFAIRS AND RELATED AGENCIES APPROPRIATIONS ACT, 2012

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will resume consideration of H.R. 2055, which the clerk will report.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (H.R. 2055) making appropriations for military construction, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and related agencies for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2012, and for other purposes.

Pending:

Coburn (for McCain) amendment No. 553, to eliminate the additional amount of \$10,000,000, not included in the President's budget request for fiscal year 2012, appropriated for the Department of Defense for planning and design for the Energy Conservation Investment Program.

Johnson (SD) modified amendment No. 556, of a perfecting nature.

Mr. JOHNSON of South Dakota. Mr. President, as we begin our third day of debate on the Military Construction-VA appropriations bill, I would like to encourage my colleagues to file any amendments they may have as soon as possible, as we would like to begin disposing of amendments in short order. While we are waiting, I would like to take a few moments to talk about the VA portion of this bill.

The bill totals \$58.6 billion in discretionary spending for the VA in fiscal year 2012. Additionally, the bill contains \$52.5 billion in advance appropriations for health care for our vets. One of the very few funding increases above the budget request contained in this bill is for VA medical research. As every Senator knows, the unique combat situations in Afghanistan and Iraq have left many vets suffering significant injuries, including PTSD and TBI. We have a moral responsibility to take care of those who have put their lives

on the line to defend our Nation and it would be shortsighted to cut funding for critical research designed to improve medical outcomes from injuries suffered on the battlefield.

Over the last several years, tremendous progress has been made by the Department in reducing the number of homeless vets. According to the VA, in 2005 an estimated 195,000 vets experienced homelessness on any given night. Today that figure is down to 75,600. Progress is being made and this bill continues those efforts.

The bill also includes funding for the VA to transform from a Department heavily dependent on paper to a modern agency that leverages technology to shorten the time vets have to wait for services. The funds contained in this bill are necessary for the VA to deploy its automated claims processing system on time.

These are only a few highlights of the VA title of the Military Construction-VA appropriations bill. As I have mentioned from the outset, this bill is a result of a bipartisan effort. Again, I urge my colleagues to file any amendments they may have so that we can continue to make progress in moving this bill toward final passage.

I yield the floor and note the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. JOHNSON of South Dakota. I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

Mr. JOHNSON of South Dakota. I ask unanimous consent that Senator COLLINS be added as a cosponsor to amendment No. 556.

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

Mr. WEBB. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. FRANKEN). Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. WEBB. Mr. President, I wish to begin by expressing my appreciation for the remarks of the Senator from South Dakota about the need to help our veterans, particularly those who have been serving in these recent endeavors. I wish to express my personal appreciation once again for the service his own son has given our country during this period, and to the service of the Senator from Illinois, the ranking Republican on this bill, as well as to my own son for having served as an enlisted marine and infantryman in Ramadi, Iraq, through some of the worst fighting of that war.

I rise today to discuss two amendments Senator WARNER and I have filed to this particular bill. Each relates to the Navy's proposal to homeport a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier at Naval Station Mayport in Florida by 2019.

One amendment would eliminate funding of nearly \$15 million for a Navy