

days. In 1997, the average number of days from nomination to confirmation rose dramatically yet again, and that was during the first year of a presidential term. From initial nomination to confirmation, the average time it took for Senate action on the 36 judges confirmed in 1997 broke the 200-day barrier for the first time in our history. It was 212 days. Unfortunately, that time is still growing and the average is still rising to the detriment of the administration of justice. Last year, in 1998, the Senate broke the record, again. The average time from nomination to confirmation for the 65 judges confirmed in 1998 was over 230 days.

At each step of the process, judicial nominations are being delayed and stalled. Judge Richard Paez, Justice Ronnie L. White, Judge William J. Hibbler and Timothy Dyk were each left on the Senate calendar without action when the Senate adjourned last October. Marsha Berzon, Matthew Kennelly and others were each denied a vote before the Judiciary Committee following a hearing. Helene N. White, Ronald M. Gould and Barry P. Goode, were among a total of 13 judicial nominees never accorded a hearing last year before the Judiciary Committee.

At the conclusion of the debate on the nomination of Merrick Garland to the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia, as 23 Republicans were preparing to vote against that exceptionally well-qualified nominee whose confirmation had been delayed 18 months, Senator HATCH said "playing politics with judges is unfair, and I am sick of it." I agree with him. I look forward to a return to the days when judicial nominations are treated with the respect and attention that they deserve.

It is my hope that we can start in the right spirit and move in the right direction by reporting out the nominations of Timothy Dyk to the Federal Circuit; Judge Richard Paez and Marsha L. Berzon to the Ninth Circuit; William J. Hibbler and Matthew F. Kennelly to the District Court for the Northern District of Illinois; and Ronnie L. White to the District Court for the Eastern District of Missouri. They have each already had confirmation hearings before the Senate Judiciary Committee. Four of the six have previously been reported favorably by the Committee. The Senate should act to confirm these six nominees before the end of the month.

We should proceed to confirmation hearings for Helene N. White, Ronald M. Gould, Barry P. Goode, Lynette Norton, Legrome D. Davis and Virginia Phillips. Each of these nominations has been before the Committee for more than nine months already. It is time for us to proceed.

With the continued commitment of all Senators we can make real progress

this year. We can help fill the long-standing vacancies that are plaguing the Federal judiciary and provide the resources needed to the administration of justice across the country.

#### VETERANS' ACCESS TO MEDICARE

Mr. BURNS. Mr. President, I am pleased to join Mr. JEFFORDS in co-sponsoring the Veterans' Equal Access to Medicare Act. This bill requires the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and the Secretary of Health and Human Services to create a demonstration program to allow Medicare-eligible veterans to receive their treatment at VA treatment facilities. This is a thoughtful approach to try to help our veterans, especially our elderly veterans, receive all of their treatments in one place. In the process, we hope to save money for the taxpayers and get greater benefits for our treatment dollars.

This is a voluntary program to establish 10 regional sites nationwide to provide this new service. This bill calls out several criteria for potential sites: one must be near a closed military base, one must be in a predominantly rural area, and no new buildings must be built as part of this program. I'm especially interested in the potential for Montana to be the rural site. We currently have veterans traveling hundreds of miles for their VA treatments. By establishing some type of joint VA/Medicare program, we create opportunities to expand access and improve continuity of medical care for Montana Veterans.

I'm encouraged by the awareness being raised in the VA recently for our State. The recent town meetings by the VA officials are just the beginning. My presence there was intended to show the VA how serious we take the necessity of improvement. We have to get better. My commitment through the coming months is to look for additional ways to ease communication between Montana Veterans and the Washington, D.C. establishment. We also need to increase the opportunities for Veterans to hear more about the future plans for Veterans' health care. Again, I'll be working on both of these topics this spring.

We owe our veterans a debt of service for their sacrifices for our country. The program in this bill is a great opportunity for us to be fiscally responsible while improving the care and treatment of a group of honored citizens. I strongly encourage my colleagues to support this bill.

#### SPACE TRANSPORTATION LOAN GUARANTEES

Mr. BURNS. Mr. President, I am pleased to join Mr. BREAUX in co-sponsoring the Commercial Space Transportation Cost Reduction Act. This is an appropriate extension of programs that

we have used to encourage other fledgling industries such as shipbuilding and rail. Through this legislation, we hope to build a commercially competitive launch industry here in America that brings the world's satellites to our doorstep for launch into orbit.

This bill sets up loan guarantee programs; not grant handouts, but loan guarantees to help encourage commercial investment in start-up space industries. We want to encourage anyone with an idea good enough to raise some start up funds to approach the financial market with some assurance that their request for business loans will be approved. By placing \$500 million in a NASA account in a guarantee program, we will leverage growth and investment to many times that. To encourage truly competitive ideas, we've placed a number of guidelines on this bill. We will only guarantee a maximum of 80% of the capitol required for a space vehicle construction project, the rest must be raised privately. Ten to twenty percent of the pool is set aside for small businesses, and we've specifically excluded the DoD launch vehicle development programs currently underway. There is a credit-worthiness requirement with specific loan criteria for being eligible for the loan. Finally, it guarantees the U.S. Government the best price for any launch system developed under this program. To make sure that no launch companies become dependent on this funding, we've provided for an expiration of this program in 10 years.

I'm especially interested in the potential benefit to Montana. Many start-up companies choose to locate in Western states where they have room to actively test their ideas and inventions. When combined with VentureStar's interest in Montana, this loan guarantee program could help develop a space technology region in our state that would attract high-tech companies with high-tech jobs. Montana already has a lot to offer, and I'm convinced that this program is one more way to give potential businesses a reason to make Montana their headquarters.

As seen this past summer, launching rockets is a risky business even for well-established companies. We need to find ways to encourage banks to qualitatively judge the overall risks and invest in creative new ways to get satellites into orbit. By providing loan guarantees to qualified companies, we can grow our capable domestic launch program into the world's choice for getting access to space. I strongly encourage my colleagues to support this bill.

#### MESSAGES FROM THE PRESIDENT

Messages from the President of the United States were communicated to the Senate by Mr. Williams, one of his secretaries.