May 25, 1999

Demagogy for the sake of partisan advantage will not serve the country well, nor will it produce the best legislative solution possible. We have the opportunity to rise above partisanship and do ourselves and our Nation proud. I appeal to all the Members not to let this opportunity slip away.

We have a responsible legislation and it is ready to go. It can be made better. Rushing it to the floor this week will not result in a better product in the long run. Let us come together, move forward and introduce the best legislation we can so that all Americans can take pride in how we respond.

THE FUTURE AMERICAN FLAG WILL HAVE 51 STARS

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mrs. MYRICK). Under the Speaker’s announced policy of January 19, 1999, the gentleman from Puerto Rico (Mr. ROMERO-BARCELO) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. ROMERO-BARCELO. Madam Speaker, when the House of Representatives debated legislation on Puerto Rico’s future and self-determination, opponents argued that Puerto Ricans had a different culture, too alien from the rest of the Nation to become a partner.

But they were wrong. The ones that are not mainstream are those that subscribe to a nativist mindset. Have they listened to the radio? Have they watched a ballgame? Have they checked out who is doing art for the Treasury Department, or have they read Time Magazine lately?

Last week’s cover of Time featured Puerto Rican pop star Ricky Martin, who boasts the number one song in America. The same article highlighted the president of the Mayaguez Institute of Technology.

Mr. SMITH of Michigan. Madam Speaker, I rise today to talk about an important issue for everyone in this country. It is social security. Everybody that is now receiving social security is concerned when Congress starts talking about changes in social security, because the fact is that one-third of the individuals that are now receiving social security depend on that social security check for 90 percent or more of their retirement income, a huge dependency. So it is easy to understand why seniors get nervous.

Everybody that is near retirement age is concerned, because they have planned their retirement and the fact is that social security is running out of money. The individuals under 55 years of age are the generation most at risk, because they may be asked to spend a lot more paying for the retirement benefits of those that retired before them.

This week we are going to discuss what has been called a lockbox for social security. It does not fix social security, but it provides that Congress promises not to spend the social security trust fund surpluses for other government programs. It is a good start, but make no mistake, it does nothing to change the fundamentals of the programs and fix social security in the long run.

Briefly, let me describe, what the problems of social security are. When we started the social security program in 1934, it was developed as a pay-as-you-go program, where existing current workers paid in their social security tax for the benefits of existing current retirees, so essentially no savings. The social security went in one week, and by the end of the week they were sent out in benefits to retirees.

The system worked very well in the early stages because there were 42 people working for every 1 retiree receiving social security benefits. By 1950, the number of people working went down to 17 people working, sending in their social security taxes for every one retiree. Today it is 3 people working, sending in their social security taxes, for every retiree.

The estimate is that by 2030, there are only going to be 2 people working. So what we are asking those 2 people to do, without changes in the social security structure, with changes in the system, we are asking those two workers to try to earn and produce enough for their families plus one retiree; almost impossible.

The Federal Government, since it continues to raise taxes, and it has raised social security taxes 36 times since 1976, more often than once a year. Today 75 percent of our workers pay more in the social security tax than they do in income tax.

But as government raised those taxes on workers, they took the extra money coming in above and beyond what was needed for benefits of retirees and the families and the disabled and they spent the money on other government programs.

What that has done is dig us a $700 billion IOU to future retirees that government, that Congress, that the President has no idea how to pay back.

I plead with my colleagues and, Madam Speaker, I plead with the American people to look at Social Security, look at how it is going to affect their lives and the future if Congress and the President is not willing to step up to the plate and deal with the serious problems of Social Security.

I have a proposal that I will be introducing in the next week that, provided we start slowing down some of the benefits for those high-income retirees and use some of that money for private individual accounts, to put that money into individual accounts so those individuals own that money, instead of Congress spending it on other programs.

Let me just finish by saying what tremendously complicated and should concern all of us in terms of how we deal with Social Security is a Supreme Court decision. In fact, two Supreme Court decisions. The Supreme Court has said there is no entitlement for Social Security benefits; that there is no relationship between the taxes we pay in and our right to receive any Social Security check when we retire. That means that the young generations, those under 55 years old, are completely dependent on future politicians deciding how much they might cut their benefits.

And just one last word, Madam Speaker. The longer we put this off, the more drastic the solution. Let us do it, let us get at it, and let us deal with it.

CONGRESS OWES AMERICAN PUBLIC LEGISLATION ON GUN SAFETY PRIOR TO MEMORIAL DAY RECESS

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mrs. MYRICK). Under the Speaker’s announced policy of January 19, 1999, the gentleman from Puerto Rico (Mr. ROMERO-BARCELO) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Ms. DELAURO. Madam Speaker, I listened to the Speaker of the House this morning tell us that we cannot pass gun safety legislation in this body before we leave for the Memorial Day break for vacation. We owe it to the American people, the American families, to move on this legislation before we go home. We need to work on the people’s timetable and not on the congressional timetable.
To delay this issue is politics. That is what this is about.

We have 13 children in the United States who die every single day because of gun violence. If this is not an emergency, I do not know what is an emergency. This House of Representatives has risen to occasions where there have been crises in this country. We can move on a dime. We can pass legislation in 24 hours or less if we have the will to do it.

The juvenile justice bill has been sitting in committee for the last 3 to 4 weeks. It is a bipartisan piece of legislation. It can be passed in a heartbeat if we have the will to do it. We have to pass gun safety legislation in our country if we are going to meet the pleas and the cries of American families today.

I saw a grandmother yesterday in my district in Connecticut. She lives in Connecticut, her family is in Indiana. And she said to me, "Ms. DeLauro, when you go back, please pass gun safety legislation. My two grandchildren were evacuated from their schools just last week." And I am not the only one who is hearing the plea of the American public. Let us do what is responsible, let us respond to American families.

Last week the other Chamber did the right thing. They passed common-sense gun safety legislation. The House of Representatives this week has that opportunity. Let us take up this legislation and pass fair and sensible measures that we, in fact, know will save lives.

There are some who want to wait until mid-June. I say we have waited too long. We have done nothing despite repeated tragedies in our schools, and yet, I defy you to try to have common-sense approaches that will make a difference in reducing gun violence in this country. We, in fact, know that it will make a difference.

There are about six times that I have taken to the well of this Chamber after tragic shootings, not to try to take advantage of them, but thinking that for a moment there might be an opportunity that this would touch the conscience of the people who control what the Members of this body will be able to vote upon.

Nine times since I have been in Congress there have been multiple shooting deaths on school campuses around this country. One of them, tragically, was in my State of Oregon. I do not want to know how anybody who looks in the eyes of the families who have suffered this tragedy, who have looked in their souls to realize that we have taken steps in this Congress to deal with things like auto safety, yet we will not take the same simple approach to try to make a difference to reduce the carnage from gun violence for young people.

The concept of a livable community, from where I sit, is what the Federal Government is about. It ought to be a partnership with State governments, local governments, with the local communities, school districts, to try to make sure that when children go out the door in the morning that they are safe, that the family is economically secure and they are healthy.

Gun violence has a wrenching impact on all three of those factors. The economic costs are staggering, costing billions of dollars each year for the thousands who are dead and maimed, victims of gun violence.

In the last Congress we pleaded just to act on the child access protection legislation. Give us a chance to vote on it. Fifteen States have enacted it, including the State of Florida, the home State of the Chair of the Subcommittee on Violence, and it has made a difference in terms of making children safer.

I would think that, at a minimum, the Members of this body ought to come forward and demand that we vote at least on the three elements that are in the Senate legislation, pass those things out today, make that progress real; then we can come back after the recess and deal with the Speaker's more deliberative approach on a longer-term range.

We have legislation introduced by the gentlewoman from New York (Mrs. McCarthy) that a number of people on both sides of the aisle, Republicans and Democrats, people of conscience, have signed that could be the vehicle that would deal comprehensively with these concerns.

I have legislation that I will be advancing that deals with making sure that the Product Safety Commission spends as much attention with real guns as it does with toy guns; that we would extend the prohibition against criminals having access to weapons under the Brady bill to others who have demonstrated a consistent pattern of violent behavior. This is overwhelmingly supported by the American public.

And last, but not least, that the Federal Government become a leader in personalizing guns to make sure that, for example, they cannot be used, the law enforcement service revolvers cannot be used against that man or woman in uniform. The Federal Government has a chance to make a huge difference in advancing this technology.

I find it a little ironic that the Speaker takes to the well of this Chamber urging caution and arguing against extraneous riders when we just passed an absolute abomination of a spending bill that was supposedly for the defense of our troops in Kosovo and, instead, included everything from reindeer to mining regulations. When it comes to special interests, we are willing to make exceptions, but not when it comes to our children.

I think our children ought to be the special interests. We ought to come forward with comprehensive legislation and we ought to do it now.

RECESS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to clause 12 of rule I, the Chair declares the House in recess until 10 a.m. Accordingly, at 9 o'clock and 27 minutes a.m., the House stood in recess until 10 a.m.