

trillion tax cut; watch what you are doing here and be careful, because this is not going to materialize, and if you do what you are talking about doing, it will pose significant dangers to the American economy.

The best way to assure economic growth and opportunity in this country's future is to decide that if we have surpluses—and I hope we do—we will commit first and foremost those budget surpluses to reducing our country's indebtedness. Again, if in tough times you run up the debt, in good times this country ought to be able to pay it down. That is the greatest gift to America's children, and that is also the surest way to long-term economic health, growth, and opportunities.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from North Carolina.

HURRICANE FLOYD

Mr. EDWARDS. Mr. President, few North Carolinians will forget September 16, 1999. Almost 1 year ago tomorrow, Hurricane Floyd dumped 20 inches on the State of North Carolina, eastern North Carolina, devastating and forever changing our State. Fifty-two North Carolinians were killed as a result of Hurricane Floyd; 66 counties, which is more than 70 percent of our State, were declared disaster areas. More than 60,000 homes were destroyed or damaged, and hundreds of businesses were forced to close or relocate. Farmers were faced with sometimes the most difficult circumstances they had ever faced in their lives, losing everything for which they had worked.

I have been to the floor many times over the course of the last year in an effort to secure relief for our Hurricane Floyd victims. I have worked closely with my colleagues, Senator HELMS from North Carolina and Members of our House delegation, to get help for our folks who are hurting so badly. I have emphasized over and over that what we do or sometimes what we don't do affects real people's lives, the people who often are in very difficult places—for example, the people who were devastated by Hurricane Floyd.

Last year, the Senate appropriated more than \$2 billion for FEMA's disaster relief account. Of that total, more than \$215 million was set aside for FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program. To this day, more than 2,000 homes in North Carolina have been purchased and families have moved out of harm's way, out of the flood zone. In fact, just yesterday I spoke with Brenda Johnson to tell her that her buyout had been approved. Brenda had been living in a small apartment for almost a year. Finally, she will now be able to move on. Along with the buyout money we appropriated last year, we also secured individual family grants and other disaster relief programs to help

people whose homes had been wiped out, people such as Edna Simmons of Greenville, NC.

Greenville was actually one of the hardest hit areas struck by Hurricane Floyd. Unfortunately, Edna's home was one of thousands that were overwhelmed by the flood. For days, Edna's home sat under more than 4½ feet of flood water. She lost everything, and she and her husband and her 6-year-old daughter had to start over. At first, they were able to move in with her mother. Then, with the help of her fellow church members, volunteers, using her own savings and a grant from FEMA, she was able to rebuild her home. Repairs are now in the final stages of her home. Now, more than a year after the rain drove them away, Edna and her family are finally on the verge of going back home.

This storm, however, did not just destroy homes; it also destroyed entire communities. The small town of Princeville is a great example. It was completely wiped out. Princeville residents lost their townhall; they lost their library, their police station, and their school. Of the 2,000 homes in Princeville, more than 1,000 were heavily damaged or destroyed. And Princeville residents are a very proud group. This is the first town in America that was established by freed slaves. Princeville's residents are working very hard to rebuild and preserve their historic town.

One year after the Princeville Montessori school was devastated by the floods, volunteers, State employees, students, and parents have rebuilt the school with the help of FEMA grants.

For all the successes we have had over the last year, there are still shortcomings in responding to this disaster. We have heard over and over—I and my staff—from worried and confused constituents, folks who had no idea where they were supposed to go.

Navigating the myriad programs that exist in the Federal Government to provide relief to hurricane victims is a time-consuming and sometimes very frustrating process. For example, there are Federal disaster programs within the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of Education, Small Business Administration, Department of Labor, Department of Energy—just to name a few. So it is very hard for folks whose lives and families have been devastated as a result of a natural disaster to know where it is they need to go to get the relief they need and deserve.

Sometimes, the assistance just doesn't come quickly enough. One example is Bobby Carraway, who owned a restaurant in Kinston NC, near the Neuse River. The river flooded, and his restaurant sat under more than 3 feet of water for many days. He lost his entire business. But with the help of his landlord, who let up on the rent, and

his food suppliers, who told him he could pay when he could, neighbors who helped him clean up his business, and a large chunk of his own personal savings, he was able to reopen his restaurant.

Today, one year after Hurricane Floyd threatened to take his livelihood, Bobby is still waiting for the Small Business Administration to approve his loan. He should not have to wait so long, and residents such as Edna should not have to navigate through these confusing Federal and State programs, especially when they are dealing with devastation to family and emotional trauma caused by natural disasters such as Hurricane Floyd.

The biggest lesson we have learned from this storm is that the Federal, State, and local responses to disasters have to be better coordinated and must be more efficient.

Senator STEVENS from Alaska and I cochair the Natural Hazards Disaster Caucus. Seventeen Senators have joined us. Our goal is to provide concrete steps that Federal, State, and local programs can work together to protect our residents, provide a more efficient response, and mitigate the cost and destruction of future disasters.

The Government can't make people whole again after a disaster, but we can, and should, be prepared to do all we can to help people get back on their feet.

We have made great strides in our recovery in North Carolina, but we still have a long way to go. Most Federal officials agree it will be another 2 years before eastern North Carolina has completely recovered. Today, hundreds of people will mark the anniversary of Hurricane Floyd in their FEMA trailers, where they live. We are facing a rental housing shortfall of about 4,000 units, and thousands of victims are facing many years of debt as a result of this disaster.

I am grateful to the Senate for including \$50 million for North Carolina for the USDA's Community Facilities Grant Program in the Agriculture appropriations bill. This money will make a real difference in a town such as Farmville, which needs help rebuilding its fire station.

I also want to take this opportunity to thank FEMA Director James Lee Witt and his entire agency for their dedication to helping those who simply could not help themselves.

Governor Jim Hunt has worked tirelessly to help the residents of our State. Most importantly, I want to take this opportunity to thank the people of North Carolina—the thousands of volunteers who, over the course of the last year, have responded heroically to the damage done and the devastation done to their neighbors and friends.

It has been a long year, and we still have a lot of work left to do. Hurricane

Floyd's victims were innocent people, regular working people who have done nothing wrong but had everything taken from them as a result of this natural disaster. They deserve our continued support and dedication as they attempt to rebuild their homes and their lives.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

Mr. GRAMS. Mr. President, thank you very much.

Mr. President, what is the order of business before the Senate?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The pending business is H.R. 4444.

Mr. GRAMS. I would like to speak as in morning business for up to 10 minutes.

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

Mr. GRAMS. I thank the Chair.

REPEAL OF THE MARRIAGE PENALTY

Mr. GRAMS. Mr. President, I wanted to take time before leaving for the weekend to be here to express my strong disappointment with President Clinton and his Democratic allies in the Congress who have once again denied millions of American couples marriage penalty relief.

On August 5, President Clinton vetoed the Marriage Tax Penalty Relief Reconciliation Act. This week, due to strong opposition from some of our Democrat colleagues, the House fell 16 votes short of the number needed to override the President's veto, thus letting down 22 million American couples, including 550,000 couples from my state of Minnesota.

These hard-working Americans are penalized, on average, \$1,500 per year simply because they are married. This \$32 billion annual tax burden is extremely unfair to these working men and women.

Washington is taking this money from American couples at a time when it doesn't need the money as much as these families do. This money could be used for savings for their children's education, for daycare, for tutors, for braces, for a new washer/dryer, for a family vacation, or for a down payment on a car.

For President Clinton and his Democrat allies in the Congress to deny working men and women this desperately needed tax relief is not only wrong, it is a disgrace.

It is shameful that their spending appetite is growing bigger each year and

faster than the incomes of American workers and all of the people across this country who simply choose to get married, start a family, to begin their lives together, and at the altar they have the IRS standing with them.

Since 1969, our tax laws have punished married couples. There are more than 60 provisions in the tax code that penalize working American couples by pushing them into a higher tax bracket, punishing them because of their decision to be joined in holy matrimony.

This was not the intention of Congress when it separated tax schedules for married and unmarried people. It also runs contrary to our often-stated desire to strengthen the institution of the family in America a desire that was reaffirmed with the enactment of my \$500 per child tax credit legislation.

The family has been, and will continue to be, the bedrock of our society. Strong families make strong communities; strong communities make for a strong America. We all agree that this marriage penalty tax treats married couples unfairly.

President Clinton himself agrees that the marriage penalty is unfair. He has said that. He believes the marriage penalty tax is unfair, but he vetoed a bill that, by the way, was a compromise, calling into question his resolve to reverse this inequity that he called unfair. But evidently the President believes it is more important for Washington to collect unfair taxes than it is to give tax breaks to working Americans. He uses any and all excuses he can find to keep as many dollars as possible coming into the Government's coffers. Even at a time of huge surpluses, he refuses to let American couples keep a little bit more of their own money.

We are not even talking tax cuts; all we are talking about is tax overcharges that should be returned. If you overpay a bill, you expect to get your change back. If you go to McDonald's and the meal is \$5 and you give them \$10, you expect to get your change back—or for any kind of a transaction. In this transaction, you should be able to expect to get your money back. On a marriage penalty which is unfair, you should at least be able to get your refund. But despite the rhetoric of this administration suggesting otherwise, the Clinton and Gore administration and its Democratic allies in Congress are not serious about correcting this unfair tax penalty.

Out of eight budgets the Clinton/Gore administration proposed, only one included a tiny bit of relief for married couples. Their paltry marriage penalty relief means millions of couples would not receive the tax relief they want and need. In fact, the President's plan was less than 25 percent of the plan that was sent to him, which would mean that out of 100 couples, he would say 75 married couples don't deserve

tax relief even though they are unfairly taxed. A minor, paltry tax relief was proposed by this administration.

Today, families pay more in taxes than they do for food, clothing, and shelter combined. Something is wrong when parents work more to provide for the government than they do for their own families. It is time for the government to contribute to the strengthening of the family, rather than aiding its breakdown.

There is no legitimate policy reason to continue punishing millions of American couples through this unfair marriage penalty.

By denying Americans marriage penalty tax relief, President Clinton and his Democrat allies in the Congress have shown that they care less about working couples who are struggling to raise families. They care more about dumping money into Washington's coffers. By continuing this bad tax policy that discourages marriage, they will force millions of married couples to pay more taxes to support a big government rather than being able to provide better for American families.

By denying Americans marriage penalty tax relief, President Clinton and his Democrat allies in Congress have chosen to continue to discriminate against working women. Since more and more women work today, their added incomes drive their households into higher tax brackets unfairly, reducing their take-home pay.

By denying Americans marriage penalty tax relief, President Clinton and his Democrat allies in Congress have done harm to the minority, low-income families whom they claim to help, because the marriage penalty hits lower-income working families hardest.

This is not a tax cut for the rich, as this administration always loves to say. Anytime there is any tax relief out there, it is always somehow for the rich. But this hits hard-working, middle-class, middle-income families.

In fact, President Clinton has denied relief for couples at the bottom end of the income scale who incur penalties. As a result of the marriage penalty, they paid nearly \$800 in additional taxes, which represents 8 percent of their income.

So what about that? This is not tax relief for the rich.

By denying Americans marriage penalty tax relief, President Clinton and his Democrat allies in Congress have undermined the family the institution that is the foundation of our society by discouraging women from marriage, or even leading some married couples to get friendly divorces.

This is just plain wrong.

To President Clinton and Vice President GORE, I would consider asking you once again to put aside the election-year politics and reconsider your veto on our marriage penalty tax relief that would help millions of couples live the