

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

Mr. MURKOWSKI. Mr. President, I hope much of Monday and Tuesday morning will be designated for debate on the gas tax issue.

With that in mind, I announce the next rollcall vote will occur at 2:15 on Tuesday.

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. MURKOWSKI. I now ask consent there be a period for the transaction of morning business, with Members permitted to speak for up to 10 minutes each.

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

STRAIGHT TALK ON SOCIAL SECURITY ACT

Mr. McCAIN. Mr. President, I would like to take this opportunity to once again remind my colleagues of the very precarious financial condition of the entire Social Security system and the urgent need for a serious, bipartisan effort to reform and revitalize this cornerstone of many Americans' retirement planning.

The only way to achieve real reform of the Social Security system is to work together in a bipartisan manner. It's time to abandon the irresponsible game of playing partisan politics with Social Security. Democrats will have to stop using the issue to scare seniors into voting against Republicans. Republicans will have to resist using Social Security revenues to finance tax cuts. And both parties must stop raiding the Trust Funds to waste retirement dollars on more government spending. We must face up to our responsibilities, not as Republicans or Democrats, but as elected representatives of the American people with a common obligation to protect their interests.

We have an obligation to ensure that Social Security benefits are paid as promised, without putting an unfair burden on today's workers.

We also have an obligation to talk straight with working Americans about the true financial status of the Social Security program. This means providing each worker with honest information about the financial status of the Social Security program including the real value of their personal retirement benefits.

Under the current system, hard working Americans—young and old—are not receiving straight, honest information regarding the actual financial status of the Social Security program including how much it is receiving in payroll taxes and how much is needed to give promised benefits to seniors. This includes clearly telling Americans exactly when the program will no longer have sufficient funds for paying full benefits.

Furthermore, we must begin providing working Americans with accu-

rate, easy to understand information regarding the average rate of return they can expect to receive from Social Security as compared to the amount of taxes an individual pays into the program. It is only fair to be straight with everyone and let them know the true facts about how much they will pay in payroll taxes and what the limited return will be on their contributions.

It is time for us to talk straight to Americans about Social Security and begin working together in a bipartisan fashion to make the necessary changes to strengthen and save the nation's retirement program for the seniors of today and tomorrow.

DEMOCRACY IN TAIWAN

Mr. AKAKA. Mr. President, on March 18th the people of Taiwan elected Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) leaders Chen Shui-bian, former mayor of Taipei, to be President, and Annette Lu to be Vice-President of Taiwan.

This was an historic vote, representing the first recorded, peaceful transfer of power in any Chinese political system in 5,000 years. A free and fair vote by 80 percent of the electorate occurred without violence with a military that remained in the barracks.

It was a vote with implications not only for the people on Taiwan but also for China and the United States.

First, the vote represented a rejection by a majority of the voters of the traditional ruling Kuomintang Party (KMT) and a vote in favor of political reform and change in Taiwan. There was a clear desire by the people to cleanse the political system that they viewed as corrupt. That the DPP could win a national election after having only been formed in 1986 indicates the maturity of the political system, as well as the deep desire for change.

The first steps by President-elect Chen Shui-bian indicate the political sophistication of Taiwan's future leaders. He made conciliatory statements towards China, stating that he would avoid declaring independence and emphasizing that "the people's top priority is peaceful cross-strait relations" while declaring his willingness to "negotiate cross-strait air travel, trade and investment, peace agreements, and military conference-building measures with the mainland." He has offered to meet with China's leaders, even to travel to Beijing. His party is now considering dropping its pro-independence policy in its party platform.

He has nominated the current Kuomintang Defense Minister, Tang Fei, to be his Premier. General Tang was born in China. And in another step towards reform both major parties have reached an agreement to reduce the powers of the National Assembly and to strengthen those of the Legislative Yuan, the nation's parliament.

The breath of fresh air blowing through Taiwan has not been matched in Beijing. In the run-up to the election the only wind out of China was the

fierce breath of threats. Central Military Commission Vice-Chairman General Zhang and Vice Premier Qian Qichen both declared that "Taiwan independence means war." A People's Liberation Army publication stated that "the PLA is determined to liberate Taiwan. If they meet hard resistance, then they can choose to use weapons of mass destruction, like neutron bombs."

Since the election, there has been some diminishment of the intensity of the attacks but Beijing remains consistent in its criticism and insistence on Taiwanese concessions. Last week, at a conference on Taiwan in Washington organized by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, PLA Senior Colonel Luo Yuan observed that "if you no longer acknowledge you are Chinese and sell off Chinese national interests, the Chinese government will definitely punish this national traitor. [. . .] Once the Taiwan independence provokes an impasse, then we have no choice but the use of blood to uphold the authority." China's official Xinhua News Agency has commented that "Lee Teng-hui's ignominious fate proves that all those who engage in 'Taiwan independence' and splittism and try resorting to trickery to hoodwink the world will come to no good end. The wages of sin is death." Vice Premier Qian has insisted that there can be no negotiations with Chen or his envoys unless he accepts the principle that Taiwan is part of China and commits to negotiating only over the modalities of reunification.

The quandary China finds itself now in is typified by the Beijing waiter, quoted in a recent Washington Post article, who commented as he watched news of the Taiwan elections, "their lives are better than ours, economically and politically. They have more freedom. They can elect their leaders."

One of the first actions by the Taiwanese political parties was to reform its political structure by reducing the role of the National Assembly sending another powerful signal to the Mainland where its hand-picked, 2,978 strong, National People's Congress delegate just met for stage-managed debates.

China's leaders have been struggling to earn the degree of legitimacy through economic reform alone and through the continued use of force to suppress dissent that Taiwan's leaders have earned at the ballot box through the exercise of free speech and free trade. No longer can China's leaders look across the Straits and see a mirror of themselves in Taiwan's former exiled rulers.

Instead they see an example of a political system which evolved in a few short years from totalitarian rule to a democracy. Martial law rule ended in Taiwan in 1987. A new legislature was elected in 1992. There were presidential elections in 1996, local elections in 1997 and 1998, and a second presidential election in 2000.

China's Deputy Chief of Mission in Washington Liu Xiaoming described Taiwan's presidential election as "a local election in an area of China." Yet, even if his description is accepted, it demonstrates how far the rest of China has to go: in China, a germinating democracy has not progressed beyond the stage of local village elections. Municipal or national elections have yet to be held.

As President Clinton so succinctly observed, "the election provides a fresh opportunity for both sides to reach out and resolve their differences through dialogue."

Ironically, it is China, which had urged Taiwan to adopt direct trade, postal, and telecommunications links while Taiwan under President Lee rejected such direct ties, that now rejects President-elect Chen's offers to institute direct contacts.

There apparently is the perception even inside China that their policy needs to be changed. One official was quoted over the weekend as saying, "we are painting ourselves into a corner. We are tough when we should be soft and passive when we should be taking the initiative."

Yet, even as Taiwan has grown apart from China, it has also grown closer. It has invested \$24 billion in China and China now accounts for 23 percent of all Taiwanese exports. Taiwan's and China's economic progress have become mutually self-sustaining.

As a result, we should not be painting China into a corner now. As it attempts to come to terms with the new realities in Taiwan, we should be taking steps to welcome China into a greater, more responsible role in the international system. A critical step in that regard is granting China Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR). This critical vote in the U.S. Congress promises to open up China's markets to greater competition and more goods from the West. PNTR does not mean that China will be a democracy, nor does it mean instant benefits for the American economy, but it is a step towards integrating China into the new world community.

Shortly after China joins the World Trade Organization, Taiwan will join. This is the third new reality with which American policymakers must contend. Taiwan has changed. It is not the single-party dictatorship which it was when the Taiwan Relations Act or the three communiques were promulgated. It is a vibrant democracy with a strong economy. It has long clamored to be allowed to play a more active role in the world community by providing assistance to international aid organizations or in UN Specialized Agencies. Can a new role be found for the Taiwan of today in tomorrow's world? Finding one may well be the key if China and Taiwan are to resolve their differences and achieve conciliation.

VETERANS

Mr. BURNS. Mr. President, I rise today to add my name as a co-sponsor of Senate Bill 1810, "Veterans Claims and Appeals Procedures Clarification and Improvement Act."

Recent court decisions have made it more difficult for veterans to get their rightful assistance from the Veterans Administration, VA, and to develop their claims. This bill will clearly lay out the rules of how the VA will assist veterans with these claims. This bill will remove many of the barriers now standing in the way of veterans gathering information from many different sources to make their claim "well-grounded."

Right now, many veterans who have filed claims with the Department of Veterans Affairs must wait for months and, in some cases, even years for the claims to be decided. This creates a hardship on our veterans who have served our country with pride. In my state of Montana, I have seen veterans wait five to 10 years for their claim and the necessary appeals to make it through this bureaucratic system. Over the past few years, I have seen my veterans' casework increase due to veterans having problems in obtaining information that the VA previously provided.

My President, can you imagine a homeless veteran finding out that they must call this federal agency or write to this private hospital to obtain his or her own information for a claim? Often, many veterans just give up when they face these many bureaucratic obstacles. They fall though the cracks of a system that is fast becoming a legal nightmare and a system that was supposed to be there for them when they came home. Why? It is because the Department of Veterans Affairs has ceased being helpful to the veterans in the development of their claims.

We must honor our commitment to our veterans and ensure the VA is being as helpful as possible to all veterans. This bill will do just that. I urge my colleagues to support this bill and bring an end to the nightmare that America's veterans are having with the present system.

THE VERY BAD DEBT BOXSCORE

Mr. HELMS. Mr. President, at the close of business yesterday, Thursday, April 6, 2000, the Federal debt stood at \$5,762,301,865,002.06 (Five trillion, seven hundred sixty-two billion, three hundred one million, eight hundred sixty-five thousand, two dollars and six cents).

One year ago, April 6, 1999, the Federal debt stood at \$5,665,194,000,000 (Five trillion, six hundred sixty-five billion, one hundred ninety-four million).

Five years ago, April 6, 1995, the Federal debt stood at \$4,872,968,000,000 (Four trillion, eight hundred seventy-two billion, nine hundred sixty-eight million).

Ten years ago, April 6, 1990, the Federal debt stood at \$3,092,513,000,000 (Three trillion, ninety-two billion, five hundred thirteen million) which reflects a doubling of the debt—an increase of almost \$3 trillion—\$2,669,788,865,002.06 (Two trillion, six hundred sixty-nine billion, seven hundred eighty-eight million, eight hundred sixty-five thousand, two dollars and six cents) during the past 10 years.

ADDITIONAL STATEMENTS

TRIBUTE TO THE HONORABLE VINCENT A. BIFFERATO

• Mr. BIDEN. On March 31st, hundreds of people gathered in a lobby of the courthouse in Wilmington, Delaware. The focal point of the dignified but unassuming room is an information desk, with a big board behind it that's used to post the daily schedule for Delaware's Superior Court. It is, quite literally, where the Court meets the public, and it was the ideal—and perhaps the only—place for this particular occasion, a reception honoring Judge Vincent A. Bifferato as he retired following 32 years on Superior Court, a total of 36 years of public service.

"Biff," as Judge Bifferato is universally known outside of the courtroom, is not the type for a country-club send-off. Part of it is roots. His father, born in Italy and never having had an education himself, always said he knew his son would go to college, and got to see his son sworn in as a member of the Delaware Bar. Biff remembers his father on that day, sitting in the front row, crying; "To him," Biff says, "it was the American dream."

And Biff knew, as his life since he became a lawyer has proved, that there is a second chapter to any true American dream story. It's the chapter written after you get there, the story of what you do with power and status once you've got them. And the truth is, it's the part of the story that matters most.

What Biff has done in his position as a judge is to combine the forceful exercise of authority and the vigorous application of the law with an uncommon sense of compassion for and responsibility to the people he was there to serve. He had never forgotten what drew him to public service in the first place—the opportunity to help people who need government, people who need someone on their side in order to have a chance. And he has never let those of us around him forget it either, always reminding colleagues and students—and anyone else who might need to be reminded—of our particular obligation to the least powerful of our fellow citizens.

Biff's concern for how people treat each other is, in fact, the hallmark of his character. In his courtroom, small-town lawyers from one-person firms knew they stood on equal footing with heavy-hitters from the big city. Litigants and witnesses were treated with