in America, 12 more, the same number killed at Columbine—12 more—because we will not take the initiative for gun safety.

Has this Congress reached such a point that we are under the thumb of the National Rifle Association and the gun lobby? That we would let those well dressed lobbyists down on K Street rule our agenda to the point where American families are being ignored? I hope not.

I hope when we remember in just a few days the anniversary of Columbine, families across America will take just a few minutes, get on the phone, and call their Congressman and their Senator and ask them one simple question: I just heard about Columbine; what have you done with your vote to make my kids safer in school since this tragedy? If citizens will call and ask that question, perhaps we will see a change of sentiment here on Capitol Hill.

I yield back the remainder of my time.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from California.

Mrs. BOXER. Mr. President, I ask to speak as in morning business.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator is recognized.

Mrs. BOXER. Mr. President, I thank once again the Senator from Illinois for his eloquence on the issue of sensible gun laws and add my voice to his plea that the Senate do what it is supposed to do, which is to bring out the juvenile justice bill with five sensible gun control measures, sensible measures that will reduce gun violence.

I thank the Senator from Rhode Island, Mr. REED, who is on the floor as well, for his very important sense-of-the-Senate Amendment to the budget resolution, which actually says it is the opinion of the Senate that we ought to be voting on those gun measures. It passed by a slim majority, but so far we have not seen any results.

GAS TAX REPEAL

Mrs. BOXER. Mr. President, the reason I take to the floor today is not only to underscore what Senator DURBIN has said but to say that while I think we should be doing this juvenile justice bill and passing the gun measures that lie within it, what we are doing today makes no sense at all, in my view, which is to cancel, if you will, the 4.3-cent Federal tax on a gallon of gasoline which, in the case of my State, if carried out over 2 years, would lose my State $1.7 billion in highway funds and transit moneys.

The people in my State are very smart. We are suffering from the highest gas prices in the United States, but we also understand the answer is not to use this as an excuse to slash highway funds, to begin drilling off the coast of California or to open up the Alaska Wildlife Refuge to drilling. People in my State understand we need an energy policy, not some kind of gimmickry that the other side is using to lash out at Vice President GORE and say he, in fact, wants higher gas taxes, which is just a made-up story.

What we need in this country is an energy policy. What does that mean? First, it means having a Department of Energy that comes forward with an energy policy for safe ways to produce energy in this Nation and ways to save energy.

What does the Republican Congress want to do? I think we can look over history if we want to find out. First, when they took over in 1994—they got sworn in in 1995—one of the first things they tried to do was eliminate the Department of Energy. That makes a lot of sense. We need an energy policy, so what is the first thing they do? Try to eliminate the Department of Energy? I have to say, Bill Richardson did a masterful job of going around the world convincing the producers of oil to do a better job, to increase their supply. But, if the Republicans had their way, there would be no Cabinet position because there would be no Department of Energy. So that is the first thing they did in order to have an ''energy policy.''

What else did they try to do? Every year, year in and year out since they took over, they have not provided adequate funding for alternative and renewable energy, which would lessen our dependence on foreign oil. This is shortsighted and it only means our dependence on foreign oil will increase. We need more investment in energy-efficient technologies, not less.

If you think I am just stating something that perhaps I cannot back up, let me give you the facts. On solar and renewable energy research and development, between the years 1996 and 2000, the Republicans have cut President Clinton's requests by 23.6 percent. On energy and conservation R&D, they have cut the President's requests 20.3 percent. Energy conservation grants, which are so important to encourage energy conservation—by the way, that is the best kind of energy policy, conservation; everybody wins. It costs the consumer less, and it destroys our environment less—they cut those grants by 25.4 percent. So the bottom line is they first wanted to do away with the Department of Energy. That was their program. Then they took the funding for energy efficiency and renewable energy and cut it by 22.2 percent.

How about this one? Our Secretary of Energy goes around the world and gets an increased oil supply of about 1.7 million barrels a day, which is excellent work—he did a good job. We could save 1 million barrels of oil a day if we increased the fuel economy of SUVs and light trucks to 27 miles per gallon. Now they are at about 20. We could save 1 million barrels of oil a day from that simple step. What happens around here? The Republicans, in 1995, put a rider on appropriation bills prohibiting the administration from raising fuel economy standards for SUVs and light trucks just to get it to 27 miles per gallon, which it is at now for cars.

This sounds like ''and a partridge in a pear tree.'' We have continual moves here: Eliminating the Department of Energy, providing in adequate funding for alternative and renewable energy, and riders prohibiting raising fuel economy for SUVs and light trucks.

Here is another one. We know when energy prices go up, it is very important that the President have the ability to tap the Strategic Petroleum Reserve. It is there when there is an emergency. It is very important that he have that power. The Republican Congress has failed to reauthorize the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, and without new reauthorization, no funds can be appropriated for the purchase of new oil for the reserve. So the reserve is not going to increase. That is very important.

This is four policies, all of which undermine an energy policy for this country to lead to U.S. independence from foreign oil: Eliminating the Department of Energy, providing inadequate funding for alternative and renewable energy, stopping us from increasing fuel efficiency for SUVs and light trucks, and failing to reauthorize the Strategic Petroleum Reserve.

What do they come up with today? Repealing the gas tax. That is not an energy policy; it is a disaster—$1.7 billion lost over 2 years to my State. It would hurt my State. The country as a whole would lose $18.8 billion from the measure that is going to come before us. I hope we will not get cloture so we do not take it up. The Senate, frankly, has expressed itself on the budget resolution against this shortsighted amendment.

This is not, however, the only thing my friends on the other side of the aisle are pushing. I mentioned in my opening statement drilling in the Arctic Wildlife Refuge. There is a big debate over that: Should we allow drilling in a wildlife refuge? I say we give this the commonsense test. When President Eisenhower set up this refuge, do you think he thought about oil drilling in a refuge for the most magnificent wildlife you could find? I do not think so. Just think about it. What kind of refuge is it, if you have oil drilling there, with the risk of spills and all the traffic that comes with it?

Some are again calling for drilling off the coast of California. I have to explain to my friends who think that is an energy policy that that would undermine California's economy because our tourism industry is dependent on a beautiful, magnificent coast. Our recreation industry is dependent on a beautiful, unspoiled coast. We should not use this spike in gas prices as an excuse to destroy the highway fund, to destroy the coast, to destroy a wildlife refuge. I think the American people can see through this. It does not an energy policy make, to repeal a tax which is earmarked for highways. It makes no sense whatsoever.

Here is another fact: Right now in America there are 68,000 barrels a day

being drilled and exported out of our country. While colleagues are talking about drilling in a refuge and drilling off the coast, we are exporting 68,000 barrels a day.

There are 1 million barrels a day wasted because they will not vote to increase the fuel efficiency standards for SUVs and light trucks. They vote down energy efficiency budget recommendations by this President. They do not give him the tools for increasing the quantity of gas or oil in the Strategic Petroleum Reserve. They turn a blind eye to the oil companies that are merging at a rapid rate. I was an economics major in college many years ago. I am the first one to admit that it was a long time ago. One thing I learned and which has not changed was that competition is important for the consumer. When we have less competition, the consumer suffers. We have seen merger after merger. Yet we do not hear anyone on that side of the aisle saying maybe it is time we put a moratorium on these mergers. On the other hand, they support these mergers, as far as I can tell. We need to impose a moratorium on these mergers.

Mergers are at a near frenzy. Shell and Texaco entered a joint venture, which is essentially a merger, in 1997. British Petroleum and Amoco merged shortly thereafter. Last year, Exxon and Mobile merged. BP/Amoco is currently attempting to acquire California-based ARCO. If one overlays gas prices with these mergers, it is straight up. It is common sense: Less competition, higher prices.

There are secret oil company documents that we know have been filed as part of the Federal Trade Commission's lawsuit to block the merger. Those secret documents ought to be made public. One can see, if one reads the filing, that the FTC has made explosive charges of oil price manipulation by BP. We know that a lot of BP's oil is being exported from this country. If we are going to allow this merger to take place, we should at least insist that oil stay here rather than stand up in this Chamber and say we are going to repeal the 4.3-cent-a-gallon tax which is going to destroy the highway trust fund. The people in my State are against this proposal.

Between 1973 and 1995, we banned the export of the Alaska North Slope crude. The GAO has said that lifting this export ban increased the price of crude by more than $1 a barrel.

We can create an energy policy that will result in the lowering of gas prices and, by the way, help the environment and clean up our air. What do we do around here? We do not do the long-range planning. We are not listening to the people who have studied this issue for years. We are turning a blind eye to these mergers which make prices skyrocket. We are not doing anything about stopping the exportation of Alaskan oil. We are not increasing the fuel economy standards.

We are taking the short view and trying to make political points by saying: If we take away that 4.3-cent-a-gallon tax, it is going to solve our gas price problem. That is not the answer. The American people are smart. They see this for what it is: A political ploy; it does not do anything; it robs our States of needed money for highways while they keep cutting back the funds the President requests for energy efficiency.

I stand here as someone who has been involved in energy efficiency issues since I was a county supervisor in the seventies. That is when we had those long lines because gas prices were high and people were scared. By the way, that is when the American car companies lost their market share because it was the foreign carmakers that were making the fuel-efficient cars. Why don't we learn from history? Why don't we do the right thing instead of this short-term idea that makes no sense at all, that will only hurt our environment, will hurt our people, will hurt our ability to build the highways we need in the future, and absolutely does nothing about lessening our dependence on foreign oil.

I am very pleased I had this opportunity to speak because I think this issue is clearly one of the most important we can consider.

My last point is, half of our trade deficit is due to imported oil. What is reducing the gas tax 4.3 cents a gallon going to do to lessen our dependence on foreign oil? Zero. Nothing. Nada. Let's do something that is going to help our balance of trade, that is going to help our environment, that is going to help our economy, and that is going to help our people.

I thank the Chair.

Several Senators addressed the Chair.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Rhode Island. The Chair inquires how much time the Senator from Rhode Island will use.

Mr. REED. Somewhere between 5 and 7 minutes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Rhode Island is recognized.

Mr. MURKOWSKI. Mr. President, I remind the Chair, ordinarily we go back and forth.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Rhode Island has been here waiting, so the Chair decided to recognize him.

Mr. MURKOWSKI. Mr. President, who controls time on this side?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senator from Alaska, or his designee, is to be recognized for up to 75 minutes.

Mr. MURKOWSKI. I thank the Chair.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Rhode Island.

COMMONSENSE GUN CONTROL MEASURES

Mr. REED. Mr. President, last week, by a bipartisan vote of 53–47, the Senate adopted the Reed amendment to the budget resolution calling on the conference committee on the juvenile justice bill to submit a report by April 20 of this year, which is the 1-year anniversary of the tragedy at Columbine High School, and include in that report commonsense gun control provisions which this Senate passed last May.

These provisions include an amendment that child safety locks be sold with all handguns; an amendment to close the gun show loopholes so a complete background check can be done on all purchasers at gun shows; a ban on the importation of high-capacity ammunition clips; and a ban on juvenile possession of semi-automatic assault weapons.

We adopted the Reed amendment, sponsored by many and supported by 53 Senators, because we wanted to send a message to the leadership of the House and Senate that America has waited too long for us to respond to the tragedy at Columbine High School, too long to respond to the pervasive floodtide of gun violence that every day kills 12 American children.

We have been down this road before. In 1993 and 1994, after a long legislative battle, we were able to pass the Brady law and the assault weapons ban over the objections of the gun lobby and their allies in Congress. Since 1993, we have seen a 20 percent reduction in crime in the United States. Gun crimes in particular fell 37 percent between 1993 and 1998.

No one can claim the Brady law or the assault weapons ban alone was the cause of this decline. There are other factors. We also know that preventing 500,000 felons, fugitives, and other prohibited purchasers from easily obtaining firearms has made a significant contribution to that reduction in gun violence.

The American people were with us when we passed those commonsense gun initiatives in 1993 and 1994, and they are with us today. Eighty-nine percent of Americans favor requiring a background check on all sales at gun shows. A similar percentage, 89 percent, favors requiring child safety locks be sold with all handguns.

Unfortunately, the gun lobby and its allies in Congress are trying to hide behind a claim there is inaction in enforcement, arguing that we need tougher enforcement, not new gun laws.

We agree, we need good, strong enforcement of our gun laws. We need additional resources devoted to this task. That is why we support the President's request for substantial new resources for gun law enforcement, including 1,000 new prosecutors, 500 new ATF agents and inspectors, an expansion of the Project Exile program to toughen sentences for gun crimes, and new ballistics testing procedures. We need all these things.

But the gun lobby presents us with a false choice between tougher enforcement or more legislation. The American people know we need both. You cannot enforce a loophole. We need legislation to close these loopholes so our