

With a new administration focused on bringing needed change to the Nation, a new focus on consumer safety should be part of this change. During the Clinton administration, consumers had an effective advocate with a long record of commitment to protection in Ann Brown, chairman of the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. But staff cutbacks in the Food and Drug Administration and the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission have further undermined effective efforts to protect consumers. Bipartisan legislation has attempted to address these challenges, but more progress is needed.

Now is the time for action. The new administration can go a long way in restoring the trust of Americans in the safety of the products they use by restoring the Office of Consumer Affairs to its rightful place in the White House. I urge the administration to do so, and I ask that the editorial from the January 4 New York Times may be printed in the RECORD.

The editorial follows.

[From the New York Times, Jan. 4, 2009]

A VOICE FOR THE CONSUMER

The time has come to give the American consumer a much stronger voice in Washington. President-elect Barack Obama has already named what amounts to an energy and environmental czar in the White House, and America's beleaguered consumers deserve no less.

Mr. Obama should restore the White House Office of Consumer Affairs, which vanished during the Clinton years, and appoint a director who has both the president's ear and the authority to rebuild the consumer protection agencies that were undercut or hollowed out by the fiercely anti-regulatory Bush administration.

There is no shortage of agencies ostensibly designed to protect consumers. But without an emergency like killer spinach or lead in children's toys, the Bush administration has mostly failed to hear customers' complaints. The consumer safety net is simply far too weak.

The Food and Drug Administration has suffered cutbacks in expert personnel, and still relies too heavily on industry to police itself. Credit-card holders who have been subject to all kinds of Dickensian tricks and traps were finally told by the Federal Reserve that relief is in sight—in 2011. Not so long ago, there was only one official toy tester at the Consumer Product Safety Commission, and oversight generally was so weak that Congress was forced to step in with new protections, which still could be strengthened.

It will be up to the Obama administration to bring these agencies back to life. In part this means restoring the morale of government workers who have too often been stymied by the anti-regulators at the top. It will also mean stronger consumer protection policies and hiring more skilled people. It will mean giving one official responsibility for coordinating the entire apparatus.

Presidents Johnson and Carter both recognized the need for a strong person to do that job. Both chose Esther Peterson, who during about eight years in office pushed for then-radical ideas like nutritional labeling on food and truth in advertising. As the Reagan anti-government era began, the consumer protection job steadily lost clout until it was shuttered in the late 1990s.

During his campaign, Mr. Obama promised consumers that he would help them get a fairer deal. As the victims of lead toys and predatory lenders can attest, they certainly need one. Restoring the Office of Consumer Affairs and appointing a director as strong and capable as Mrs. Peterson would be an encouraging first step. •

ASSAULT WEAPONS BAN

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. President, in the 4 years since the federal ban on assault weapons was allowed to expire, hundreds of people in this country have died and been injured by previously banned weapons. The Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence report, "Assault Weapons: Massed Produced Mayhem," details the deaths of 165 people and the injury of 185 people by assault weapons since the ban expired. This includes the death and injury of 38 police officers. The simple fact is, our communities are less safe than they were 4 years ago.

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives described assault weapons in their Assault Weapons Profile as weapons "designed for rapid fire and close quarter shooting at human beings. That is why they were put together the way they were. You will not find these guns in a duck blind or at the Olympics. They are mass produced mayhem." Unlike semiautomatic hunting rifles, which are designed to be fired from the shoulder and rely on the accuracy of a precisely aimed projectile, assault weapons are designed to be fired at the hip and to maximize their ability to rapidly shoot multiple human targets.

The report also outlines the dangerous weapons race law enforcement officers have been forced to enter in an effort to counter the increasing likelihood that they will be confronted by a criminal wielding an assault weapon. In addition to the common criminal, assault weapons are highly attractive weapons for terrorists. The ease with which they can currently be purchased, combined with their designed ability to inflict as much damage as possible, make them ideal tools for conspiring terrorists. Just last year five men were arrested in New Jersey with a stockpile of assault weapons, while planning to attack the U.S. States Army base at Fort Dix.

Despite the overwhelming support of the law enforcement community, the ongoing threat of terrorism and bipartisan support in the Senate, the assault weapons ban was not allowed to expire. Now, 4 years later, 19 previously banned military-style assault weapons, some capable of firing up to 600 rounds per minute, are once again pervading our streets and neighborhoods. This Congress we must take up and pass sensible gun safety legislation, including reinstating the assault weapons ban.

BLAIR NOMINATION

Mr. FEINGOLD. Mr. President, I support the nomination of ADM Dennis

Blair to be Director of National Intelligence. I do so as a strong supporter of intelligence reform and in the belief that Admiral Blair brings not only a keen understanding of the current challenges to interagency cooperation but an enthusiasm for reform. I am also encouraged by his consistent and repeated commitments to keep the congressional intelligence committees fully and currently informed, and his desire to end the stonewalling conducted by the Bush administration. The confirmation process has raised a number of issues of concern that I believe have been adequately addressed, although it is my hope and expectation that Admiral Blair, if confirmed, will work with me and other members of the committee on these, as well as other important matters.

Admiral Blair has committed to ending the Bush administration practice of hiding programs such as the CIA detention program and the President's warrantless wiretapping program from the full committee and has said that these programs "were less effective and did not have sufficient legal and constitutional foundations because the intelligence committees were prevented from carrying out their oversight responsibilities." He has also committed to breaking down the stovepiping of oversight whereby Intelligence Committee members are denied access to important Department of Defense activities. These commitments are a critical first step in ensuring effective oversight and in reestablishing a collaborative relationship between our two branches of Government.

While I was disappointed with Admiral Blair's refusal, at his hearing, to characterize waterboarding as torture, I am confident that he will carry out President Obama's Executive order prohibiting "enhanced interrogation techniques." I am also assured by his statement that "the United States must not render or otherwise transfer anyone to a country unless we have credible assurances that they will not be subject to torture or other unacceptable treatment."

His statements on privacy, civil liberties and checks and balances have also been reassuring. He has expressed concern about the U.S. Government's accumulation of detailed private information on U.S. citizens. He has reaffirmed that FISA is the "only legal authority for conducting surveillance within the United States for intelligence purposes." He told me at his hearing that he would submit intelligence programs to the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel at the outset, so that they are conducted under clear legal authorities. And, more generally, he has stated that he sees it has his responsibility to "make clear that protecting the privacy and civil liberties of Americans is as important as gathering intelligence." I do have concerns about his statement that he supports immunity for companies that allegedly cooperated with

President Bush's illegal warrantless wiretapping program and will urge him to reconsider his position once he is more familiar with the program.

I have found Admiral Blair to be very forthcoming with regard to reform. He clearly understands the importance not only of integrating the intelligence community but of developing coherent strategies that bring the intelligence community together with other departments of the U.S. Government, as well as budgets that reflect those strategies. These efforts have been central to my work in the Intelligence Committee, as I sought—through legislation and classified letters—to obtain interagency counterterrorism and other national security strategies from the Bush administration. I am confident that Admiral Blair will work to change this longstanding gap in our strategic capabilities. I am also reassured by his statement, at his confirmation hearing, that he agrees with the need to bring together the ways the U.S. Government obtains information, through the IC as well as through diplomatic reporting and other nonclandestine means. This critical priority was the subject of legislation introduced last year by Senator Hagel and myself and passed by the Intelligence Committee, and I will continue working to enact that bill.

A related issue is the need to ensure that Department of Defense intelligence activities are conducted under the policies of the DNI and under chief of mission authorities. In this regard, Admiral Blair has not indicated any new policy positions. On the other hand, he has stated that he understands the importance of “a coherent and coordinated approach to foreign governments and intelligence services” and has promised to “act quickly to put in place procedures to accomplish the directed alignment of foreign intelligence and counterintelligence agreements and to institutionalize it for the future.” This is a critical issue, and I look forward to working closely with Admiral Blair, should he be confirmed, as well as other members of the administration.

Another issue on which I expect to work with Admiral Blair, should he be confirmed, is human rights. I have, and no doubt will continue to have, disagreements with him about U.S. engagement with the Indonesian military, notwithstanding the lack of accountability for human rights abuses. While Admiral Blair has helped clarify his role when he was at Pacific Command, those substantive differences remain. Going forward, I am encouraged by his statement that the intelligence community “needs to emphasize in its relationships around the world that the United States respects and seeks to advance respect for human rights and that IC agencies do not condone behavior that violates this core American value.” I expect to work with Admiral Blair to ensure that that message is conveyed convincingly.

Finally, I have raised concerns about Admiral Blair's past conflicts of interest. He has acknowledged mistakes, including his failure to seek counsel before deciding not to recuse himself. I have asked him whether he would seek counsel in the future, including of ethics officers, and he has assured me that he would.

IDAHOANS SPEAK OUT ON HIGH ENERGY PRICES

Mr. CRAPO. Mr. President, in mid-June, I asked Idahoans to share with me how high energy prices are affecting their lives, and they responded by the hundreds. The stories, numbering well over 1,200, are heartbreaking and touching. While energy prices have dropped in recent weeks, the concerns expressed remain very relevant. To respect the efforts of those who took the opportunity to share their thoughts, I am submitting every e-mail sent to me through an address set up specifically for this purpose to the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD. This is not an issue that will be easily resolved, but it is one that deserves immediate and serious attention, and Idahoans deserve to be heard. Their stories not only detail their struggles to meet everyday expenses, but also have suggestions and recommendations as to what Congress can do now to tackle this problem and find solutions that last beyond today. I ask unanimous consent to have today's letters printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

I am a single, 55-year-old female. I commute Monday through Friday to Boise for work. Currently it costs me approximately one week's pay check (take home pay) per month, just to put gas in the car to make the commute. Needless, to say, by the time rent, utilities, and gas are paid, this leaves very little for anything else—including groceries. Weekends? Unless it is one trip to the grocery store, the car and I sit at home out of necessity, not by choice. Now that summer is here, I do not even have the option of walking to places in downtown Caldwell, as I cannot manage the heat. I guess I have officially become one of the working poor.

CYNDI, Caldwell.

Hi Mike, I had sent you two times about what is going on with coal to liquid and I receive no reply; what gives?

As long as we do not have the technology for hydrogen fuel cars and batteries are not good enough yet, we are still dependant on fossil fuels. Do something constructive and start pushing for coal to liquid. This is the only way, at this time to solve our energy crisis, as I mentioned before, the process is almost identical to cracking oil, clean diesel and all the other chemicals, except for gasoline.

I want an answer from you about this subject and no generic answer.

ED, Sandpoint.

Thank you for asking us Idahoans on how the gas prices are affecting our lives. I was unable to do a vacation trip to the coast, due to the high prices of gas. Instead of costing \$25 to fill my tank; it now takes about \$75 to fill it up. I now fill up every time it goes to

a half of a tank. I have to decide if I am going to put gas in my car or groceries that I need. I do not do much now, just go back and forth to work and pretty much nothing else. I cannot believe how things have gotten out of hand. Everything has gone up within the last 6 months. I have a home and do not want to risk losing [it]. I have been at my job for the past 8 years and have not gotten any type of raise in the last 4 years. My father is on a limited income, and he cannot afford to put gas in his vehicle, he just barely makes ends meet now. I take him to the grocery store and take him on his errands, when he needs to go somewhere. Thank you for taking the time to ask us how we are doing here in Idaho.

PATRICIA, Meridian.

I find it empowering that you are involving the people that are so affected by the recent hikes in energy costs, in this case, the price of fuel. I know that I share the pain of trying to keep up with every American that has to depend on gas and diesel to make it to work to survive and, due to inevitable geography, visit loved ones throughout the U.S. I must drive a full-sized truck and trailer to make a living and filling it up yesterday was \$124.40. That will last four or five days depending on mileage. My wife commutes from Caldwell to Payette, and even with a new Subaru that gets good mileage, has to fill up every five days as well as a new high price of \$650. This is very difficult. Progressing with a plan to save a little money, perhaps work on a much-needed retirement someday has taken a back burner to simply making it to work. Conservatively, we spend around \$560 a month in fuel prices. We do indeed need to find a solution, perhaps in house drilling . . . I am not sure.

With further concern, both of our fathers are 71 and 74 years old and in failing health. Both lives have been full and, as we all know, the inevitable is upon us. Rising fuel prices make it that much more difficult to see them. This is a long list of complaints which I do not like to do, but this is the voice of a country in desperate need. Thank you for this opportunity, may we work together.

HOWARD.

I want to get the attention of Congress. You people need to listen to these letters from Senator Crapo. Who are you representing? I do not believe the Constitution has “We, the special interest groups” in it. We, “The People” want to drill for oil on our own soil, use hydroelectric power, solar power, wind power, nuclear power, any power that is available to us in this country.

We the people are hurting. Do not you guys get it? We are the United States of America! We can accomplish anything. We the people are powerful, resourceful, proud of this land we call America! Remove the road blocks so this innovation can happen.

I am not the only frustrated citizen out there. Congress is supposed to represent the people of this nation. [But it seems that they are so disconnected, it is scary. I think Congress should get the same Social Security plan and insurance plan (or lack thereof) we get. Then things might change. You just do not realize how much this rise in gas and food prices are hurting Americans. I wish we the people could vote on this issue. I think you would see a different outcome. We would immediately be drilling for oil on our own soil and finding innovative ways to create our own power. We need to remove the handcuffs that government has put on companies so this innovation could begin. America has always been independent. What happened?

Even if the roadblocks were removed today, it is going to take time to get these