

will, their own piece of this great Nation.

I am so very delighted that Wade and Shalina Gibson spent their time yesterday along with the rest of us bending and lifting and pulling and nailing and placing what we call styrofoam boards, the blue boards, and working alongside of so many different people.

I think their work answers the question, because I would not even want to address it but I have heard people say, is the Habitat for Humanity giving people something?

Mr. Speaker, first of all, I believe in giving to those who are in need. It is our challenge to help the least of our brothers and sisters. But let us set the record straight. Habitat for Humanity is a project where those who receive the benefits of this housing are right in there with the rest of them. They are there toiling and building and lifting. We in this Nation should not be so big that we cannot give to those who are in need. But in this instance the Gibson family and so many other families, the Beck family and so many that I could not call, were there working hard in order to ensure a better quality of life for their children.

Mr. Speaker, let me also thank the many corporate sponsors in my area. The Sakowitz area in the 18th Congressional District where I worked all day yesterday was an area that had been undeveloped and had been run down. How gratifying now that we will have homeowners with their own grass in the front yard and in the backyard, maybe a basketball court, the ability to go to the neighborhood park with their families, a community that will be developed and enriched because of their involvement. I want to thank those corporate sponsors for their support, and I want to thank this Nation and thank President Carter and the founders of Habitat for Humanity.

Mr. Speaker, let me simply say, it was the best thing that I have seen in a long, long while. It was the true spirit of America. It makes me proud to be an American. And, yes, Mr. Speaker, we began it on Flag Day. I hope that we will see many more opportunities like that.

I rise to acknowledge the miracles wrought by Habitat for Humanity in my district, throughout this week.

Through the efforts of Former-President Jimmy and Mrs. Cater, the Founders of Habitat for Humanity, and 6000 miracle-working volunteers, 100 homes will be built for needy families this week in the City of Houston. The volunteers come from places like Arizona, Indiana, California and Pennsylvania.

President Carter, before the building began, mentioned that we were "destined in Houston to see a miracle, one that [we] will never forget". He was 100% correct.

I witnessed one of those miracles. For the better part of the day, yesterday, I and a few friends worked on the soon-to-be-home of the Gibson Family.

The Gibson Family is not unlike many families in the City of Houston. They have two children, both girls, under the age of ten, and an-

other on the way. For the past few years, they have lived in a small apartment in a dilapidated building, the whole while, looking for ways that they could better their living situation. Like many families, they searched for options that would keep them from having to send their hard-earned money to the landlord every month, knowing that they would never own a piece of that property. How pleased we were that they were able to be part of the Carter Project located on Sakowitz Street in my 18th congressional district in Houston.

When Wade and Shalina Gibson heard about the possibility that they could own their own home, through Habitat for Humanity, they took all of the necessary steps to ensure their candidacy. Needless to say, they were ecstatic to receive the news that their application had been approved.

Unlike many of the underprivileged families in Houston, the Gibson Family got their chance to better their status through homeownership. It would take a lot of elbow-grease and hard work, but they were more than happy to do it. They have worked hard for the opportunity to pay a mortgage instead of a rent bill. They have worked hard to own part of the American Dream. I was honored to work along side of them in helping to build their home. I will never be the same. I saw a miracle truly happening.

I worked along-side Wade and Shalina yesterday. Although the work was strenuous, especially under the hot sun, it was joyful and exhilarating. Shalina's passion for carpentry was particularly zealous, and occasionally, because she is pregnant, we had to force her to take short breaks. Colleagues, I hope that we can all adopt some of the Gibson work-ethic.

The Gibson home will be a modest one. However, it will be cherished, by the parents, by their children, and eventually, by their grandchildren.

You see, the Gibson home is a labor of love. Its foundation is poured from the concrete of community unity. Its walls are crafted by the goodwill and generosity of the human spirit. Its ceiling, and the ceiling for the Gibson Family, is limitless.

I congratulate them, and the 99 other families who will be receiving homes through the Habitat for Humanity Program this week. I congratulate President Carter, and his army of miracle-workers, for their fantastic efforts to bring hope to a community that desperately needs it.

I pledge my loyal support to Habitat for Humanity and the people that make it work—the volunteers. I ask that my colleagues do the same. These people truly embody the best of the human spirit, and I applaud their heroic efforts.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from New York (Mr. BOEHLERT) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. BOEHLERT addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from California (Ms. MILLENDER-McDONALD) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Ms. MILLENDER-McDONALD addressed the House. Her remarks will

appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

#### RETINAL DEGENERATIVE DISEASES

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentlewoman from Florida (Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. The gift of sight, Mr. Speaker, is one of our most precious. For those of us who are fortunate to have healthy eyesight, we often fail to recognize that there are those who suffer from debilitating diseases that impair their vision and that oftentimes may lead to complete blindness.

Retinal degenerative diseases are a group of diseases that affect the eye's innermost layer. They are inherited, the hereditary pattern varying from family to family.

The most common forms of the diseases are macular degeneration, which is the leading cause of blindness among seniors, retinitis pigmentosa, and Usher's syndrome.

Retinitis pigmentosa is an inherited disease that is usually diagnosed at childhood and is characterized by an increasing loss of peripheral vision. Usher's syndrome is also inherited and is accompanied by varying degrees of deafness and the development of retinitis pigmentosa. Macular degeneration is thought to be caused by a combination of genetic and environmental factors and is characterized by a loss of central vision.

These diseases can be detected in routine eye exams; however, they are fairly difficult to diagnose in their early stages. Retinal degenerative diseases cause a loss of vision due to loss of light-sensing photoreceptor cells in the retina. They are responsible for the loss of sight of over 6 million Americans across our country. These diseases unfortunately have no treatment and no cure.

Last Wednesday, along with the Foundation Fighting Blindness and a very special family from my congressional district, the Lidsky family, we held a congressional briefing on retinal degenerative diseases. Three of the four Lidsky children, and they are the children of Carlos and Betty Lidsky, have been affected by retinal degenerative diseases. One of these wonderful children, Isaac, spoke at this briefing and detailed to us how he has been affected by this disease. Isaac, who aspires to be an attorney just like his father one day soon, has big dreams. One of them is to find a cure for this disease that is responsible for slowly taking away his eyesight.

Isaac and his sisters, Doria and Ilana, who also have this challenge, reminded us that this disease has overwhelming effects on the lives of those who are afflicted. He also reminded us about the bravery and the perseverance of the human spirit. He is not letting this disease conquer his dreams nor his hopes of someday very soon finding a cure.

My colleagues and I also had the opportunity to meet Patrick Leahy, a young 25-year-old Maryland native who works in the office of Senator FRED THOMPSON. Patrick is afflicted with Leibers, one of the forms of retinitis pigmentosa.

Regardless of the debilitating effects of these groups of diseases that Patrick and Isaac are afflicted with, they are both successful young men who make us proud of their accomplishments and of their unwavering optimism.

I would like to thank Isaac, Doria, Ilana, Patrick and all Americans who are dealing every day with these diseases. We want to offer them additional hope for a future in which we can soon eradicate retinal degenerative diseases.

Research scientists at the Foundation Fighting Blindness are making significant and exciting advances in the fight against retinal degenerative diseases. The most solid advances have been in the discovery of several new genes whose mutations cause retinal degenerations. These discoveries are critical, because they allow us to come closer to understanding the causes of these diseases and how one day doctors will be able to repair these genetic mutations.

There have been significant discoveries in the areas of molecular engineering and gene therapy. There have been significant advances made in the lab with vectors which are modified viruses that transport normal replacement genes into cells to help them function. This past year, there was significant improvement in the new generation of vectors which have the potential of being safer and more effective.

In the area of retinal transplantations, animals tested in labs with pigment cell transplantation proved that such procedures can effectively delay the degenerative process.

These tests must now be taken to the clinical trial level where we can find out their effectiveness on humans. This is why it is very critical to promote educational research.

Our prayers are with the Lidsky family and with all of those who are similarly affected.

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The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. SCARBOROUGH) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. SCARBOROUGH addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

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The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Washington (Mrs. LINDA SMITH) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mrs. LINDA SMITH of Washington addressed the House. Her remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

#### SPEAKER'S ACTION WITH RESPECT TO U.S. POLICY IN MIDDLE EAST COMES UNDER ATTACK

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 7, 1997, the gentleman from Wisconsin (Mr. OBEY) is recognized for 60 minutes as the designee of the minority leader.

Mr. OBEY. Mr. Speaker, I have great reverence for this House and great respect for the office of the Speakership. It is, after all, the third highest office in the land, and despite partisan attachment, the Speaker, as the leader of the legislative branch of government, serves as a symbolic representative of every Member. The manner in which he fulfills that role reflects, like it or not, on all of us.

That is why I must express great regret about the recent action of Speaker GINGRICH with respect to U.S. policy in the Middle East. In my view, this represents the most reckless and destructive undermining of an American peace effort that I have ever seen.

Mr. Speaker, I have been closely involved with U.S. policy toward the Middle East since 1974, when I first began my service on the Subcommittee on Foreign Operations of the Committee on Appropriations. From 1984 until 1994, I chaired that subcommittee. I think it is fair to say that during that time, every effort by any American President to pull Arabs and Israel toward peace was supported on a bipartisan basis by our subcommittee and by the Congress as a whole.

When President Carter, at great political risk to himself, pressured both the Egyptian and Israeli Governments to reach an agreement at Camp David, the Congress supported his action. When President Reagan and Secretary Shultz withheld debt restructuring from Israel until its government adopted economic reforms that were a necessary precondition for bringing rampant inflation under control, the Congress supported that tough medicine in a bipartisan fashion, and that enabled us to provide some crucial help to stabilize Israel's economy.

When President Bush courageously withheld loan guarantees from Israel until Israeli policy on West Bank settlements no longer conflicted with long-standing American policy, those of us in positions of responsibility supported him, and the peace process moved forward.

The historic ceremony that celebrated the Oslo Accords reached between Mr. Arafat, representing the Palestinians, and Prime Minister Rabin, representing the State of Israel and hosted by President Clinton, would never have occurred if it had not been for President Bush's courage.

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Since that time the road to peace in the Middle East has been harmed because of foot dragging by the Syrian government, because of vicious terror-

ist activities by Palestinian extremists, the sometimes disingenuous actions of the Palestinian leadership and, most of all, because of the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin by a rabid anti-peace Israeli citizen. The collapse of that peace process would have grave implications for every party in the Middle East. It also would have grave consequences for the United States, for our security, for our world influence and even for the safety of our citizens at home and abroad.

Recognizing that fact after much patient hand holding with both sides, President Clinton, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Assistant Secretary Martin Indyk and our tireless Mideast negotiator, Ambassador Dennis Ross, presented to both sides their best assessment of what interim steps needed to be taken to keep the peace process from collapsing. At that point the Speaker of this House took a number of actions, the result of which clearly undercut and undermined U.S. peace making efforts in the region and raised the risk of catastrophe.

First, the Speaker described America's Secretary of State as being an agent of the Palestinians in negotiations. He then attacked President Clinton for turning America into a bully in the peace process because the President, acting as an honest broker between the parties, has courageously and frankly spelled out to both sides the best assessment by our negotiators of what minimum actions would be required to keep the Oslo process alive.

The United States is not today and has never been a bully in the Middle East process. Quite the contrary. It has been an incredibly generous benefactor. The United States has provided Israel with \$75 billion in direct U.S. assistance and \$10 billion in loan guarantees. Sixty-five billion dollars of that has been provided since 1977, and those numbers do not count various other packages of assistance that this Congress has provided through less direct and less obvious means. Under President Clinton alone Israel has received \$18.7 billion in direct aid and \$8 billion in loan guarantees plus a number of additional valuable items. For that kind of money the President has not just the right, but an obligation, to provide leadership toward a peace settlement especially when we have been invited by both sides to do so.

Now a letter from the Speaker alleges that the administration's, quote, strong-arm tactics send a clear symbol to supporters of terrorism that the murderous actions are an effective tool in forcing concessions from Israel, end quote. In my view that kind of rhetoric completely ignores the facts and in my view is the worst kind of excess. President Clinton's record in fighting terrorism is exquisitely clear, strong and consistent, especially in the Mideast. In 1996, after a horrible series of attacks in March, President Clinton traveled to Israel and along with 20 other world leaders vowed to renew the fight