

[From the Wall Street Journal]

MEDICARE TESTS OF COMPETITIVE BIDDING
RILE HMOs FEARING A DROP IN PAYMENTS

(By Laurie McGinley)

The health-care industry loves to say Medicare should act more like a business. But now that the program is trying to adopt private-sector strategies, many in the industry are squawking.

Consider Medicare's efforts to try out alternative payment schemes for health-maintenance organizations. Currently, HMOs are paid according to a complicated formula set by Congress. But the 1997 Balanced Budget Act directed Medicare to experiment with competitive bidding to see if it would be a cheaper, more efficient way of reimbursing HMOs for caring for the elderly.

As a first step, federal advisers to Medicare selected Phoenix and Kansas City as sites for pilot projects for competitive bidding. Under the plan, Medicare HMOs must submit bids indicating how much they would accept from the government for each patient. Even though the effort has barely started, one result is in: The HMOs are unhappy.

In Phoenix, where 40% of seniors are enrolled in HMOs, health plans and local officials have been demanding the project be delayed at least a year or killed outright. In Kansas City, where HMOs have a smaller chunk of the seniors' market, health plans have been unenthusiastic but less vocal. At a meeting in Detroit yesterday, federal advisers to Medicare rejected the Phoenix requests, but agreed to allow a delay of as long as three months, until next April, for implementing the pilot projects in the two cities.

In opposing the projects, the Phoenix health plans argue that the market already is highly competitive because senior citizens have a number of HMOs to choose from, all offering generous benefits. The competitive bidding process, they claim, would drive down their federal payments, forcing them to charge seniors premiums or reduce benefits. "We think our customers are being penalized and told, 'We will use you as an experiment in an effort to figure out how to continue to cut Medicare,'" says Gay Ann Williams, executive director of the Arizona Association of Health Plans.

A similar flap involves medical equipment. Currently, Medicare sets prices for a wide range of durable medical equipment, including wheelchairs and hospital beds. To simplify the byzantine system and save money, the program launched a competitive-bidding demonstration project in Polk County, Fla. Supplies are to be selected on price and quality.

But the Florida Association of Medical Equipment Services, an Orlando group that represents equipment suppliers, says the bidding process inevitably will reduce prices and hurt small suppliers. The group sued to block the effort but was recently rebuffed by a federal judge.

The Health Care Financing Administration, which runs Medicare, has long been urged by the health-care establishment, as well as Congress and health analysts, to become a savvy buyer. But the industry opposition to competitive bidding shows how hard it is to make fundamental changes in the federal health program for 39 million elderly and disabled. The Medicare system is due to run out of money by 2015, and both Congress and the Clinton administration are weighing alternatives to overhaul the program.

The bottom line, says Ira Loss, senior vice president at Washington Analysis, an equities-research firm, is that Medicare providers are "interested in the free market only if it means the government is getting away from bothering them. But when it

comes to the government actually forcing them to compete for business, they are unhappy about it."

HMO officials vehemently dispute that. Karen Ignagni, president of the American Association of Health Plans, which represents HMOs, says the government's bidding procedure is flawed—"a jury-rigged proposal masquerading as free-market competition." She says the bidding process isn't fair, because it doesn't include Medicare's traditional fee-for-service program, so the HMOs would bear the brunt of any payment reductions.

No matter what the fate of the pilot projects, HMO officials are determined to prevent competitive bidding from being used on a national scale. The industry says any reduction in payments to health plans will roil the HMO market, which already is grappling with reductions in federal reimbursements. Some believe the competitive bidding could cause more HMOs to drop out of Medicare. Instead, HMOs want Medicare to stop spending more on patients in the traditional fee-for-service program than on those in HMOs. Such a move, though, would force people in the traditional program to pay more for their care, Medicare officials say.

The contretemps is occurring even as there is widespread agreement that Medicare's reimbursement system is cumbersome. Some government studies, moreover, have suggested Medicare has overpaid HMOs and medical-equipment suppliers. "Who benefits from competitive bidding?" asks Robert Reischauer, a senior fellow with the Brookings Institution and a member of the advisory board on competitive bidding. "The taxpayer. But the taxpayer doesn't always have a voice in this."

In Phoenix where 158,000 senior citizens are enrolled in HMOs, the health plans have enlisted an array of allies, including the Chamber of Commerce, doctors and beneficiaries. They all believe the current system works fine: HMOs offer generous benefit packages that include prescription-drug coverage—and no supplemental premium.

In a recent letter to HCFA Administrator Nancy-Ann DeParle, the entire Arizona congressional delegation warned that competitive bidding "would only disrupt a market in which competition is already vigorous, costs are low and participation is high." The lawmakers have signaled they may block the project by legislation.

Such resistance irks those who believe Medicare badly needs to experiment with new cost-containment tools, including increased competition among health plans. Given the debate over Medicare, "this is the kind of demonstration that is directly relevant and should be conducted to give Congress information about what way the program should go," says Robert Berenson, a top HCFA official.

In 1996 and 1997, the HCFA was forced to abandon HMO bidding projects in Baltimore and Denver because of industry opposition.

Here's how competitive bidding would work: No matter what they bid, all HMOs would be permitted to take part in Medicare, as they generally are now. The government would then calculate a median of all the submitted bids and pay every HMO that amount. The health plans are worried that such a system would further reduce their reimbursements, forcing them to either charge a premium or reduce benefits, making them less competitive. HCFA officials say that benefits won't decline but acknowledge some patients may have to pay premiums for services they now get for free.

SCHOOL VIOLENCE AND GUN CONTROL

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 6, 1999, the gentlewoman from New York (Mrs. McCarthy) is recognized for 60 minutes as the designee of the minority leader.

Mrs. McCARTHY of New York. Mr. Speaker, I yield to the gentlewoman from Texas (Ms. JACKSON-LEE).

Ms. JACKSON-LEE of Texas. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentlewoman from New York for her leadership, and I am particularly delighted to join her this evening for a brief comment on a topic that we all have been confronting and as well to acknowledge the desire to continue to work with her and the women of this Congress along with our colleagues on something that has really touched the hearts and minds of most Americans. We say and we call it Littleton. Littleton, Colorado.

We first offer again, as we have done over the past couple of weeks, our deepest sympathy to that community. We are so appreciative of their resolve and their commitment to healing that community. But as well, we realize that, as Members of the United States Congress, as the highest legislative body of this Nation, we also know that they are asking us for answers and solutions.

So I join this evening to particularly support legislation dealing with gun safety. The gentlewoman from New York (Mrs. McCARTHY) has been very much a viable part of, over the years that she has been in Congress, and she likes to say she has been here only a short while, focusing on the need for gun safety.

So many of us have a role in this arena. I have taken the position that this is not a time to point fingers in opposite directions. Whose fault is it that two young men whose homes we believe were steady, who attended church, some were Members of the Boy Scouts, we understand were known members of their high school community, although we understand that they were in a group that may have been a little out of the ordinary, maybe a group in order to belong, but still we understand as well they were good students.

Yet, now we have 15 young people dead, some 40 that were injured, a valued and beloved teacher that was so admired lost his live, and the question is why.

I believe that there can be no more important agenda than moving forward on some of the legislative initiatives that have already been promoted. So I am supporting the proposed initiative by the President who has adopted much of the legislative initiatives of the gentlewoman from New York (Mrs. McCARTHY) as it relates to what I would like to call this evening gun safety, the common sense approach to answering the concerns of our children.

Why are they the concerns of our children? Because I have heard them

say it. Just last Friday in my district, I had a forum on the issue of school violence, "how do we help our children." I was joined by Secretary of Education Richard Riley.

We participated at Scarborough High School with an auditorium full of young people. I tell my colleagues they asked us pointed questions: Why can we not be safe? Why can we not have gun safety? Why do young people talk about each other? Why is there not someone in our schools, although we have good relationships with our teachers, why do guidance counselors have overloaded dockets and desks with issues dealing with paperwork and career counseling and we do not have people in place that can deal with our psychological and sociological needs? Why can we not have more peer-to-peer counseling and mentoring?

They ask these hard questions, and I believe we have to give them solutions. Why are there so many guns, 260 million guns here in America, more than the number of citizens here? Why are individual between 18 and 21 still able to purchase handguns? Why can we not in a package promote gun safety by passing the legislation that includes safety locks, that includes background checks, instant checks at gun shows, that takes the, if you will, loophole out of the numbers of assault weapons we still have because foreign manufacturers are able to present them?

All of this I think can be answered if we would join together, as the women of this House have demanded, and ask that we pass gun safety legislation before Father's Day. We asked the question prior to Mother's Day. We pleaded on behalf of the mothers of the deceased children, the mothers whose children died in Littleton, the mothers whose children have died in Pennsylvania, in Arkansas, in Mississippi and places where we cannot call because of gun violence, the numbers of inner city children who have died because of gun violence, the number of rural children who have died, suburban children. We know this is not a pointed issue toward one community.

Let me simply close by saying this, and I promised the gentlewoman that I will look forward to joining her in weeks to come with other Members of the Women's Caucus or Members of this body who are women who would like to join us as they were planning to do this evening, to talk about solutions, and then again let me qualify that, as we are talking, demand action.

Because I think all of us who are mothers, who are parents, who are just plain Americans have said to ourselves let us not one more morning rise up with the news of some tragic circumstance. We cannot answer the question, what have we done? I have made that commitment to myself on trying to design solutions.

I hope as we move toward the White House conference on mental health, I will be able to present to this body and to that summit a comprehensive omni-

bus bill on mental health services for children, the Give a Child a Chance Mental Health Prevention Act of 1999, which will speak to the issue of providing resources in our schools, of training mental health professionals in our schools that can detect early warning signs, that will provide incentives for school districts who are aware of the fact that children from K to 12 need good mental health services, sociological and psychological services, as well that we could have caught and helped a child like Eric Harris, even though he looked like the picture of health early on; and that we could have not only helped Eric but that we could have helped his family, that we could embrace a holistic approach to deal with the family concerns, why there was such a destructive sense on the part of this young man and the young man who was with him.

I hope that we will again answer these questions, not with the finger pointing, but with working together. That means the entertainment industry. They know what they are doing wrong. Are they showing relationships between families that are not humorous, joking, butthead commentary on how our family relationships are, or are we really seriously trying to bring family relationships together?

So to the gentlewoman from New York, it is certainly my honor and pleasure to say to her that I hope that we will be doing this again. But as we do it, let me qualify that in the remarks that I have heard her often say, we join together on this.

Mine was looking in the mirror and saying I do not want to see this image one more time in the mirror without being able to say we have some solutions and one saying, when are we going to fix this? We need to fix it now.

Mr. Speaker, I thank Congresswoman MCCARTHY for arranging this forum on the special order on school violence. I am honored to be joined here today by other Members of Congress who show a sincere concern and effort in eradicating school violence by addressing the mental well being of our youth.

I have been a strong advocate of more mental health services for children. Although, as a country, we often focus on children who are at risk for trouble or those children who are already troubled, all children need access to mental health services. It is estimated that two-thirds of all young people are not getting the mental health treatment they need.

In light of the recent events in Colorado and other violent school attacks from the past 18 months, our children need us to pay close attention to the early signs of mental disorders. We also need to provide services that screen and treat mental disorders in our children before it is too late.

Schools should be safe and secure places for all students, teachers and staff members. All children should be able to go to and from school without fearing for their safety.

According to news reports, these young suspects from Colorado were outcasts in the school community. During the shooting, the suspects reportedly said that they were "out for revenge" for having been made fun of last

year. This is truly a cry for help that was not heard in time.

When children's mental health needs are not met, young people often get caught in the child protection or juvenile justice system. Almost 60 percent of teenagers in juvenile detention have behavioral, mental or emotional disorders.

There are 13.7 million or 20 percent of America's children with diagnosable mental or emotional disorder. These disorders range from attention deficit disorder and depression to bipolar disorder and schizophrenia.

We all are aware of the great devastation that the lack of mental health services ahs on our young people. We must provide services that address diagnosable emotional or behavioral health disorders.

An adolescence is a confusing time for many young people, the adults that are a part of their lives—parents, teachers, counselors, coaches and others need to be keenly aware of changes in behavior or attitude that may indicate the possibility of poor mental health. We all need to pay close attention for any warning signs of trouble.

These warning signs include isolation, depression, alienation and hostility. Recognizing these signs is the first step to ensure that troubled youngsters get the attention they need early to address their mental health needs before it is too late.

Gun control is another measure we should explore to increase the safety of our children in schools. An average of 13 children die every day from gunfire in this country, and children are at a much greater risk of being the victims of a violent crime. This is Littleton, Colorado every day! This does not include close calls where guns were found in back-packs and in lunch bags.

We must pull together to protect the mental well being of our children so that they might live a healthy and productive life as citizens of our nation. I enthusiastically look forward to working with my friends to ensure a better tomorrow not only for the well being of our youth but also for the wellbeing of our nation. Again thank you for this opportunity to address this issue.

With that, I thank the gentlewoman from New York (Mrs. MCCARTHY) very much, and I look forward to working with her on this crisis that we have in America.

Mrs. MCCARTHY of New York. Mr. Speaker, I stand here tonight to talk about the violence in our schools. As the gentlewoman from Texas had pointed out, everyone is trying to put the blame on everybody else. I think there is enough blame to go around for everyone. But let us stop blaming and let us start looking for solutions.

Over the last year and a half, we have had three committee hearings and we have had two special hearings, and we started to look into the violence from our schools but also the violence in some of our young people. There were a lot of different factors: Mental health is something that we should be looking into, especially with our schools; our family issues that should be at home. We should be looking into those issues.

But in each and every shooting, 13 young people that die every single day, is one common factor; that is, the easy

access to guns. That is something that we can do. We can deal with all the other issues.

Today we held a hearing in the Committee on Education and the Workforce. Several students had been victims of school violence in Littleton, West Paducah, Springfield, Oregon showed great courage in coming to Congress to talk about their experiences through the shootings in their schools.

The one thing I heard from all of them was the pain, the pain that they are still suffering. That is a pain that I understand very deeply.

□ 2245

And I told one of the young men, even after the first anniversary, the pain does not get any easier. My family goes through the pain, and it will be 6 years this December. But that is why I came to Congress. I came to Congress to try to reduce gun violence in this country. I came to Congress so that hopefully other families would not have to go through what my family went through, and certainly the other members who I consider family now from the Long Island Railroad shooting.

People keep saying we cannot do something about this. I do not believe that. I believe we can do something. And I know I am hearing all the time that this is a slippery slope where I am just trying to take away guns. I have never said that. I do not care if someone owns a gun. But if they own a gun, I do believe they have a responsibility for that particular product, and I feel very deeply about that.

I have talked to many gun owners, women gun owners, men gun owners, and they are saying they realize that it is their product and they should take more responsibility for it. So I think if we take that premise and start to work on it, there are common sense solutions and I think it is something that we can work towards here.

What scares me the most about being here in Congress is sometimes they will do so many delaying techniques and, hopefully, it will go away. The sad truth is this is not going to go away. Here we are 5 weeks from the shooting in Colorado, and people are still talking about it. And I think this hit home the hardest because we have had so many school shootings and now parents are scared. Students are scared.

And when we ask our students what can we do, they come up with some really good solutions. One thing they do not want, they do not want their schools filled with metal detectors. Our schools are not meant to be prisons. It is not meant for our teachers to be under the atmosphere of possibly a young person having a gun. We know where those guns come from. A majority of them are legal. They come from home. It is up to the parents, the adults, to take responsibility that their child does not get a gun.

Our young people that are having mental health problems and have a bad

day, as a lot of teenagers do, commit too many suicides every single day. That is unacceptable. We can save those kids. The accidental deaths, we can save those kids. The homicides, we can save a lot of those kids.

I know that we cannot save every child. I wish we could. But that does not mean that we should not go forward to try and save as many young people as we can. We are the adults. We have the responsibility to make a difference in our children's lives, and to the point to where again this year I am praying that the schools close without another incident. We did that a year ago. And we have done nothing. Are we going to let this summer go by? Schools open again in September, and are we going to pray that another shooting does not start?

But, again, this is about the children every single day. That is where we cannot get lost on it. Thirteen children a day. That is a Littleton every single day. But it is a young child here and there and everywhere, and it does not make the papers. Or we have become so insensitized to the violence around us. We should never do that. We should see each other as the good human beings as we are in this country, and we should try to all work together.

I wish the NRA would work with me. I wish the NRA would come and say, okay, we have a problem. Let us try to come up with solutions. I know they do not like child safety locks, but they can save lives. There is responsibility on the adults that a gun does not get into someone's hand. This is a responsibility. We should be working together. The movie industry, we should be working together. Videos, we should be working together to come up with solutions.

But I think there is one thing that we have to point out. Our young people in this country are good kids. I have the pleasure of being with them a lot, working on community projects in my district, and I see this going around in the country: Our young people caring, going into nursing homes. Our young people caring, raising money for different organizations, whether it is breast cancer or Alzheimer's. They do not like this idea that we are blaming them and that they have no morals.

I happen to think that this country has a lot of morals. And I meet those people on a daily basis. Do we have problems with some? It is a very small percentage. Do they sometimes make our lives miserable? Yes, they do. But that does not mean we should do a blanket cover and say the whole country is like that.

I think if anyone ever looks around and sees how we responded to the people of Oklahoma when they had the tornadoes, this is a caring country. We are there for each other. And that is how we can solve the problems of the gun violence in this country, by all of us coming together and coming up with common sense solutions. It is something I believe in. I certainly talk to enough people about it.

What scares me again, though, is the silence that we might hear in this Congress. We cannot have silence any longer. We have to do something. The American people are demanding that we do something. But, unfortunately, unless the American people send their message, their voices here to Congress, that is the only way we are going to get something done.

I have asked the Speaker of the House to meet with me, I have not heard from him, to talk about my proposals on how to reduce gun violence in this country. But I am very encouraged. This evening he did a press conference and started to talk about maybe we should find common sense ground to stop the gun violence in this country. That to me is encouraging. That means a door is open. That means we can try and work together.

As long as I am here in Congress, I will work as hard as I can to reduce gun violence in this country, my goal going back 5 years ago, when I promised my son that I would try to make sure that no family would go through what we went through. And my son has gotten married now and his life is going on, and he just had a son in November. That means I am a new grandmother. So I have got to work a little bit harder because I want my son to feel safe, but I want my grandson to certainly live in a safe country. And I know that if we work together, we can do it.

I know a lot of people are very shocked sometimes on the statistics, and I do not particularly care to read statistics because I think it dries over. But I do not think people realize, as I said earlier, 13 children die at the hand of a gun; 28 children die and teenagers are murdered; 1,309 children in teenage suicides; 468 children in their teens accidentally die from shootings. That is every single year, every single year.

One of our recent congressional testimonies demonstrates the need for Federal legislation on kids and guns. An angry child who has access to a gun will use it because it is there and it is in that child's hands. "I realize that gun control is a complex issue in our country, but I also know that guns represent the single greatest threat to educators and to schoolchildren." That was by Scott Pollard, National Association of School Psychologists.

This is a testimony before the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Youth and Families, United States House of Representatives, on my Committee on Education and the Workforce on March 11, 1999:

"An international comparison of 26 industrial countries found that the firearm death rate for U.S. children younger than 15 years old was nearly 12 times higher than any of the children in any of the other 25 countries combined." That came from the Centers for Disease Control.

"We need better information on how our children get guns. That is why the Children's Gun Violence Prevention

Act expands our Federal program for tracing guns used in juvenile crime. Research should be expanded on gun markets to educate the flow of firearms from the legitimate sector to the hands of minors and criminals and how this flow might effectively be reduced."

A few years ago up in Boston in what they called the "Boston Project," they started tracing guns that were used in juvenile homicides and juvenile crimes. Once they started tracing these guns to the illegal gun dealers, they were able to have for 40 months, 40 months, not one child died because we got rid of the illegal guns and we educated our adults.

Now, if we can do that in Boston, why can we not do that across this country? Where I come from in New York, it is very hard to get a gun legally. They have to go through a background check, but eventually they will get it. The problem with New York is all the guns that come into our State are illegal guns, they are guns that we have no control over. What are we supposed to do? Put up a barbed wire fence around New York because we decide that we are going to try to make it safer? And it has made a difference and it has made a big difference, but there is more that we can do.

As a nurse, we hear that homicide rates are down, and thank God they are. What no one is talking about is what it is costing our health care system for those that are surviving. I know the medical care that my son received and still continues to receive and will have to receive for the rest of his life is costing this government a lot of money.

We have four young people in Littleton, Colorado, still in the hospital with spinal cord injuries because of the shootings. The health care that they are going to need. The estimates of health care due to gun violence in this country is almost up to \$20 billion a year. \$20 billion a year. Could we not take that money and put it back into our health care system? Could we not put that towards our educational system? It would help so many of us.

We have an obligation here in Congress. It should not be a battle between Republicans and Democrats. It should be something that we should be working out together and to do the right thing as far as our children and the safety of our children. This is not a slippery road. This is not somewhere we are trying to take away the right of someone to own a gun, but we are asking for responsibility.

Mr. Speaker, I plan on being here as much as I can to talk about this subject. There is one more thing that I will ask. The American people have to get involved in this debate and they have to, if they want to change, their voices have to be heard here, and our Congressmen and certainly our Senators need to hear from all Americans.

CONSTITUENT CONCERNS

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. SIMPSON). Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 6, 1999, the gentleman from Colorado (Mr. SCHAFFER) is recognized for half of the remaining time until midnight tonight, approximately 32 minutes.

Mr. SCHAFFER. Mr. Speaker, I want to let the Chamber know and all of my colleagues that this special order is one that I secure every week on behalf of the majority, and so I would invite other Members who would like to run down to the floor here for the last 32 minutes to come join us on the floor.

But I want to also mention and refer to a constituent of mine. Her name is Jessika, Jessika Fretwell. She introduced me to Flat Stanley. I got a picture of Flat Stanley here. She faxed the photo, a drawing of Flat Stanley. There is a letter that comes with it, and I would like to read that briefly. She wrote to me.

She said, "In school we read a book about a boy who got mashed by a bulletin board. His name is Flat Stanley. He wanted to go on a trip, so his family folded him up and mailed him to California. I am mailing Flat Stanley to you. Please take him somewhere and write me back telling me where he went. If you have pictures or postcards, please send them too. I will take Flat Stanley back to school and share his adventure with my class. Thank you for helping me with this project. I wish I could fold myself up and visit you. Love, Jessika." And Jessika spells her name with a "K."

So there is Flat Stanley for Jessika. He is on the floor of the United States House of Representatives tonight, and we are proud to have him join us.

□ 2300

I am also pleased to be joined by my good friend and colleague from the great State of Arizona who is here to speak with us tonight. Many of our constituents write to us, not just Jessika but several others. We are here on the floor this evening to refer to some of the comments that have been raised by many of our constituents. We have received so many phone calls and letters in the last few days on the matters of taxes, on Kosovo, on environmental-related topics. I am just curious what kind of things the gentleman from Arizona is hearing about over the weekend and today from his constituents.

Mr. HAYWORTH. Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Colorado for yielding. I am pleased that Flat Stanley joins us on the floor tonight. Usually people leave out the "L" when they describe me, although I am working on the diet.

In all sincerity and seriousness, echoing the comments, though not in complete agreement with my friend from New York who spoke on the floor here earlier, even tonight as we speak, Mr. Speaker, a group of concerned citizens making up a citizens committee on ju-

venile violence meets in the Sixth Congressional District of Arizona. The committee includes clergymen, school administrators and former school administrators, current educators, teachers in the classroom, students in the classroom and parents together as they take a look at the Sixth District of Arizona.

If there is one difference that typifies the two schools of thought here in the House of Representatives, it is that our friends on the left tend to look to Washington for solutions and put a trust in the Washington bureaucracy. I believe if given a choice between Washington bureaucrats and the people at home, I would choose the people at home. It is in that spirit that our friends meet, not as Republicans or Democrats but as Americans concerned looking for practical solutions to the problems they face.

I think we would all concur that one thing we learn in our time here, whether it is through letters that we receive, and I have a few tonight, or through town hall meetings or just in our everyday lives when we return home to our district, I think we are all impressed and reimpresed with the fact that the people whom we serve in our respective districts have a lot of good ideas, and so it is the intent of our citizens committee on juvenile violence to take a look at the vexing problems that have plagued us and the recent tragedies at hand.

I might also point out that I continue to receive e-mail, phone calls, faxes and letters concerning the extraordinary and disturbing transfer of technology and nuclear espionage carried on by the Red Chinese in this country. Indeed, there are those in my district who have said that it is as if we are living in a real-life Allen Drury novel, that there are those in this city and on the editorial boards or in the assignment editor chairs of various television networks who steadfastly refuse to take a look at the serious problems we have. Yet through investigative reports, such as those by Bill Gertz of the Washington Times and the new book that has been produced, the partial title being "Betrayal" which details what sadly has transpired and, according to the author, how some in the current administration have undermined our national security, that continues to be a main concern. And, of course, again the topic to which we always return is the notion of this government serving the people rather than the people serving the government. We have seen a disturbing reversal, if you will, in this century in terms of the fact that this government, it would seem, both in attitude and in the action of reaching into the pockets of hardworking Americans seems to ask for more and more and ask working Americans to get by with less and less.

I received a letter from my friend Ryan in Apache Junction, Arizona, just on the border of Maricopa and Pinal Counties there at the foot of the beautiful Superstition Mountains.