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House of Representatives

The House met at 12:30 p.m. and was called to order by the Speaker pro tempore (Mrs. CAPITO).

DESIGNATION OF THE SPEAKER PRO TEMPORE

The SPEAKER pro tempore laid before the House the following communication from the Speaker:

WASHINGTON, DC,
January 29, 2002.

I hereby appoint the Honorable SHELLEY MOORE CAPITO to act as Speaker pro tempore on this day.

J. DENNIS HASTERT,
Speaker of the House of Representatives.

MESSAGE FROM THE SENATE

A message from the Senate by Mr. Monahan, one of its clerks, announced that the Senate has passed without amendment bills of the House of the following titles:

H.R. 400. An act to authorize the Secretary of the Interior to establish the Ronald Reagan Boyhood Home National Historic Site, and for other purposes.

H.R. 1913. An act to require the valuation of nontribal interest ownership of subsurface rights within the boundaries of the Acoma Indian Reservation, and for other purposes.

H.R. 1937. An act to authorize the Secretary of the Interior to engage in certain feasibility studies of water resource projects in the State of Washington.

MORNING HOUR DEBATES

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the order of the House of January 23, 2002, the Chair will now recognize Members from lists submitted by the majority and minority leaders for morning hour debates. The Chair will alternate recognition between the parties, with each party limited to not to exceed 30 minutes, and each Member except the majority leader, the minority leader or the minority whip limited to not to exceed 5 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. BROWN) for 5 minutes.

PRIVATIZATION OF MEDICARE

Mr. BROWN of Ohio. Madam Speaker, on Monday President Bush called the Medicare program old and tired. He said he wants to give seniors better options like those available in the private sector. He said he wants to overhaul Medicare. He wants to overhaul Medicare and privatize Medicare.

The President has every right to push his privatization agenda but not by co-opting an issue like prescription drug coverage, as emotional and important as it is, not by characterizing Medicare as a failed program so that he can justify his goal of privatizing it. Whether it is Social Security privatization or Medicare privatization, it is disingenuous of the administration to portray privatization as improving the system.

The retirement safety net was not put in place because liberals wanted to make the Federal Government bigger, nor should it be dismantled because conservatives want to make the Federal Government smaller. The safety net of Medicare was put in place because the private sector could not make a profit offering health insurance to seniors, so they stopped doing it. It was put in place because the values of this Nation are such that we believe Americans who helped build the Nation's unrivaled prosperity through their working years should not face financial uncertainty and hardship when they retire.

Pooling our resources into the public program we call Medicare is the best way to provide consistent, equitable, reliable health care benefits to our retirees. The stock market and the HMO industry may be good at many things, but alleviating uncertainty and providing health care are not two of them. Now the future of Social Security and Medicare are on the line.

The President says that seniors deserve better options in Medicare; that is why he favors privatization. Is Medicare inferior to the private insurance market? Would seniors be better off with a voucher that helps pay for coverage in an HMO?

Medicare is more reliable than private health plans. Medicare offers more choice than private health plans. Medicare operates more efficiently than private health plans. According to survey after survey, including a recent one from nonpartisan Commonwealth Fund, Medicare far outranks both employer-sponsored and individually purchased private insurance as a trusted source, a trusted source of health coverage. But the administration wants to give seniors more choice and better options in Medicare.

Is it better to have your choice of HMOs than to be able to choose your doctor under Medicare? Is it better to have your choice of HMOs than being able to choose your hospital under Medicare? Is it better to have your choice of HMOs than to be able to choose where any of your health care is delivered, from whomever you want, to the way regular, traditional government-sponsored Medicare fee for service works?

Medicare is a single plan that treats all beneficiaries equally, provides maximum choice and access for patients and doctors. Contrast that with the President's Medicare voucher program envisioned by the administration. Instead of being guaranteed access to needed health care services, seniors would be guaranteed access to a partial voucher for private health insurance.

Medicare guarantees full choice of physicians. Private HMOs advocated by the administration do not. Medicare guarantees full choice of any hospital. HMOs, privatized Medicare; privatized HMOs do not. It appears higher-income seniors could afford this voucher plan

because they could go and buy an additional decent plan. Lower-income enrollees would be relegated to restrictive alternatives.

In other words, when the President uses choice, it is really a code word for wealth. Some choice.

Again, Medicare is a single plan that treats all beneficiaries equally and provides maximum choice and maximum access for patients and doctors. We should not allow this administration or any administration to demonize Medicare, a program that served this Nation so well; nor should we permit this administration or any administration to use prescription drug coverage as the bait to lure us in this body to privatizing Medicare for our seniors.

Medicare coverage is not old and tired. It is one of the best programs government has ever put together. It is simply incomplete without a prescription drug benefit. That is the Medicare issue.

I hope the President will abandon his privatization agenda and work with us in this body to add a real prescription drug benefit for all seniors. We do not need to fight over perceived and fabricated problems in the current Medicare program. The system is not broken. It simply needs prescription drug coverage to add to the Medicare system. We need to address the real issue.

AID FOR AFGHANISTAN

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the order of the House of January 23, 2002, the gentleman from California (Mr. ROHRABACHER) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. ROHRABACHER. Madam Speaker, Hamid Karzai, the chairman of the interim government of Afghanistan, is in Washington, DC; and his visit reminds us of the debt that we owe to the Afghan people. It was the Afghan freedom fighters who fought the Soviet Union and defeated the Soviet Union; and it was the Afghan freedom fighters that fought with us to defeat bin Laden and the Taliban.

After the Afghan people fought and defeated the Red Army, which was in occupation of their country, something that left their beautiful country in ruins and in a shamble, we simply walked away from them in 1990. Then during the Clinton years we covertly supported the Taliban. Many of us noted that and opposed it at the time, but what appeared to be covert, or at least acquiescence, covert support or acquiescence to the Taliban continued through the Clinton administration. Many United States officials in the executive branch during the 1990s, who had no complaint about Taliban rule of Afghanistan back then, since September 11, of course, have postured themselves in a totally different way. Well, today, we have another chance.

At this time we must do what is right by the Afghan people. Any vacuum created by our unwillingness as we did in the 1990s to meet the urgent humanitarian needs of the people of Afghanistan will be filled by powers that are hostile to the United States. For example, Iran currently is pledging 50 percent more reconstruction aid than the United States. And this year only $27 million has been scheduled to be spent on mine-clearing operations in Afghanistan. And let me add there are 8 million mines in Afghanistan. Many of them were given to the people of Afghanistan during the war against the Russians, and we did not even help them dig up the landmines that we gave them. And now we are having a paltry $27 million being spent on clearing those landmines as hundreds of Afghan people still blow their legs off, little children, every year. And we have yet to outline a major program that will give the poverty-stricken people of Afghanistan, the farmers there, an incentive not to grow opium, which ends up as heroin on the streets of the United States.

But most important, we must assist the Afghan people in creating a stable democratic government. Let us not forget that Mr. Karzai is heading a temporary administration which ends in June. At that time, tribal leaders will determine what kind of government they will have in what they call loya jirga.

There is only one Afghan today who I feel, and it looks like my understanding of this having followed it for 10 to 15 years now, there is only one Afghan who has the personal prestige and credibility and, yes, the affection of his people to bring all the ethnic groups of Afghanistan together. That man is King Zahir Shah, who has offered to return in March to Afghanistan; and he has recently made it clear to me that his object in coming back to Afghanistan is to develop and to build a democratic and free government for his people.

We must not permit ourselves in haste, in our haste to extract ourselves from that region to commit the same mistakes that lead to the fanaticism and tyranny in Afghanistan in the 1990s and the loss of so many American lives in New York on September 11. We have a chance now to do what is right by the Afghan people who fought and bled in a way that certainly helped the United States in defeating the Soviet Union and bringing about a more peaceful world and prosperous United States, and in the past few months have fought side by side. They are the ones who fought with our Special Forces to defeat the Taliban and to end the reign of bin Laden and his terrorists in Afghanistan.

We owe it to do what is right by them now. I call on my colleagues to join me in seeing that we are providing the assistance needed to rebuild the country of Afghanistan so the people there can live in peace and prosper.

OPEN SOCIETY WITH SECURITY ACT

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the order of the House of January 23, 2002, the gentlewoman from the District of Columbia (Ms. NORTON) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Ms. NORTON. Madam Speaker, the House and the Senate are poised this evening to receive the State of the Union Message. Unavoidably and justifiably it will be about war. I certainly hope it will also be about the continuing faltering economy. But there is an issue that probably will not be on the Presidential and congressional agenda and needs to be. It is in our face. It is very visible, but it is beneath the radar.

I will soon be introducing a bill called the Open Society With Security Act that would establish a 21-member commission. I will be inviting members in a Dear Colleague soon to co-sponsor the bill. The commission would simply look at how we can make the unprecedented accommodation between security against dangerous global terrorism on the one hand and the maintenance of an open and free society on the other. This is a truly difficult problem.

We are doing it on an ad hoc basis because we have had to. It is too serious to be left to ad hoc nonplanning, however, and we clearly do not know how to do it. Nobody knows how to do it because nobody has ever had to do it. The Presidential commission would provide a vehicle to put the best minds in this society to work on a problem that free societies have never had to confront before. We see some of the evidence before us every time we go outside this building, barricades and shut-downs; and, of course, there are on-again off-again alerts. There are all kinds of invasion of privacy that also are occurring.

We need to systematically think through these difficult and troubling problems. They were first visible here. But now they are in every part of the country because the country has been attacked and the country has responded. The country deserves some guidance from a Presidential commission. The commission, of course, would have security experts and law enforcement experts and military experts. But this is about security and democracy and freedom. So we would also have on the commission architects and city planners and historians and sociologists and engineers and artists, etc. Put them all at the table. Let them thrash it out and advise us. Security is too important in an open, free society to be left to security people.

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In the aftermath of September 11 and the anthrax scares, we can surely see that we are in danger of waking up one morning and finding that the society has closed in around us, and that we never even noticed until they closed us down.