

nor have we seen evidence indicating that Iraq cooperated with al-Qaida in developing or carrying out attacks against the United States.

That is the report of the 9/11 Commission.

It doesn't end there. The Secretary of State was just recently on "Meet the Press." This was in the early days of this month. He said he "had seen nothing that makes a direct connection between Saddam Hussein and that awful regime and what happened on 9/11."

We have all kinds of evidence that al-Qaida was not linked to Iraq in the September 11 attacks or that Iraq was not a link to al-Qaida in the September 11 attacks. The evidence is overwhelming that al-Qaida, led by Osama bin Laden, led those attacks.

I believe deeply that our strategy must be to focus like a laser on those who attacked us. We ought not to allow ourselves to get diverted into this attack on Iraq. We have 10 times America's resources in Iraq as we have in Afghanistan.

We are 1106 days after the attacks on this country and the President has failed to do what he said he would do in holding al-Qaida and Osama bin Laden to account. Osama bin Laden is still at large. His top adviser, al-Zawahiri, is at large. This murderous ally of theirs beheaded an American yesterday, and we have diverted resources from the hunt from those monsters to go after Saddam Hussein in Iraq when the evidence is overwhelming that Iraq was not involved in the September 11 attack.

What doesn't add up here? What doesn't make sense? The Secretary of the Navy in the Reagan administration says we attacked the wrong target. I believe that is correct. We should have kept our focus on Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida and not have been diverted to Saddam Hussein and Iraq.

Let me say to my colleagues that there is additional evidence as well. Our own Intelligence Committee has made findings. For example, Conclusion 96 of the Senate Intelligence Committee says:

The Central Intelligence Agency's assessment that to date there was no evidence proving Iraqi complicity or assistance in an al-Qaida attack was reasonable and objective.

That is our Intelligence Committee led by Republicans on a bipartisan basis concluding there wasn't complicity by al-Qaida and Iraq, that there was not Iraqi complicity or assistance in an al-Qaida attack. Our Intelligence Committee concluded that was reasonable and objective.

Similarly, conclusion 93 says:

The Central Intelligence Agency reasonably assessed that there were likely several instances of contacts between Iraq and al-Qaida throughout the 1990s, but that these contacts did not add up to an established, formal relationship.

If we are going to be effective in this war on terror, we have to get the facts right. The facts are, al-Qaida attacked America, not Iraq. The facts are, we

are 1106 days after that attack, and Osama bin Laden and his chief lieutenants are still out there threatening America and Americans. This President diverted our attention and our resources from running down al-Qaida and Osama bin Laden to an attack on Iraq and Saddam Hussein. That was a mistake, and the sooner we admit to it and the sooner we get about the business of tracking down those who attacked us, the better off our country will be and the safer we will be. That is my strong, deep belief. Whoever wins this election, I believe we have to reorient the resources of America into going after those who attacked us. It was al-Qaida, not Iraq. It was al-Qaida, led by Osama bin Laden, not Iraq, led by Saddam Hussein. That is what our 9/11 Commission tells us. That is what the Secretary of State is saying. That is what the intelligence agencies are telling us. Yet this administration—this administration—made a series of decisions, profound decisions, decisions of enormous consequence, and diverted resources and attention from going after Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida to going after Saddam Hussein and Iraq.

I know many people believe, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that somehow Iraq was deeply involved in the September 11 attack. There is just no evidence to support that. My own conclusion was, and is, this was the wrong war at the wrong time. And the overriding obligation of those of us who are in a position to affect U.S. decisionmaking—the overriding obligation and responsibility that we have—is to defend this country and to do so effectively.

We know al-Qaida is plotting, right now, to again attack our country. We ought to focus like a laser on stopping them. We ought to focus like a laser on holding al-Qaida and Osama bin Laden to account. We should never have shifted our resources from the hunt for Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida leaders to the hunt for Saddam Hussein in Iraq. It was a mistake, and we have to be big enough to say it was a mistake and move on and remember who it was that attacked us and use the awesome resources of this country to go after those who are plotting to attack us again.

We have to get these facts right. We have to reduce the confusion out here, when a majority of the American people thinks Iraq was behind the attacks of September 11 and we know full well that is not the case.

The President and Vice President of the United States have a heavy responsibility. They are the leaders of this country. They are the leaders of the free world. They have an obligation, a solemn obligation, to make certain that the United States focuses on those who attacked us—not to confuse the issue, not to distract us from those who are responsible for the loss of nearly 3,000 American lives.

Mr. President, it is hard to talk about these things when you are just

weeks before an election and not have a political component to the debate and the discussion. But we, I believe, as a nation, need to have a full and vigorous debate on how we best defend this Nation. My strong belief is that we need to keep the focus on the people who attacked America on September 11, and it was al-Qaida, led by Osama bin Laden, not Iraq, led by Saddam Hussein. The evidence is overwhelming.

We need to refocus the efforts of the awesome American military on hunting down Osama bin Laden, on hunting down his chief allies and holding them to account. That is the best way to send a signal of American resolve and determination and American unwillingness to accept the vicious attack on our country.

Mr. President, I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Ms. STABENOW. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

There are time allocations that have been assigned for the remaining 27 minutes.

Ms. STABENOW. I ask unanimous consent for 15 minutes if there is time available. If not, I would appreciate it if the Chair could indicate who has been designated the time.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Minnesota has 10 minutes, and the Senator from Arkansas has 15 minutes of the time. There is 26 minutes remaining, but of those, 25 has been allocated.

Ms. STABENOW. It is my understanding, through staff, that Senator LINCOLN will not be coming to the floor at this time. So if there is no objection, I ask unanimous consent to use the time of the Senator from Arkansas. And if she comes to the floor, I will certainly yield to her.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

MEDICARE PREMIUM INCREASE

Ms. STABENOW. Mr. President, I rise to speak on the announcement of a dramatic increase in the Medicare Part B premium for seniors and the concern the people of Michigan have about trying to pay a 17.5-percent premium increase for next year. Just a day after President Bush touted his efforts to help our seniors and the disabled cope with increased medical expenses, his administration announced the largest premium increase in Medicare's history, dating back to 1965.

Unfortunately, nothing has been done about record increases in the cost of health care over the last 4 years. Now we see the largest premium increase, a 17.5-percent increase. We have

seen it consistently going up since 2001. It is time to say enough is enough.

Seniors are only going to see about a 3-percent increase in their Social Security cost of living. Yet the Part B premium comes directly out of that track. So instead of getting at least a 3-percent increase to help pay for food and the mortgage and utility bills, prescription drugs and so on, they will actually see a reduction of 14.5 percent in what they receive through Social Security.

This is absolutely unacceptable. Unfortunately, instead of helping, Congress and this administration have pushed through a Medicare plan about which CMS Administrator McClellan has acknowledged that about a sixth of this year's premium increase results from the billions that Medicare is paying private health plans to encourage them to offer private health insurance. So what we see are conscious decisions that we made that have caused this increase to be as high as it is. I believe they were the wrong decisions, the wrong choices.

It doesn't make sense and it is not fair that the millions of seniors who enjoy and want to stay in traditional Medicare—about 89 percent of seniors right now have chosen traditional Medicare over Medicare+Choice or being in an HMO—have to subsidize the big private health insurance companies and HMOs and the 11 percent of the seniors and disabled who have the ability or have the choice, even, to be in an HMO.

Moreover, we have heard time and time again that the private plans are less efficient than traditional Medicare. I have shown charts on the floor as we have debated the Medicare prescription drug bill. We have seen the Congressional Budget Office analysis. In fact, we heard it again last week when the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission reported that CMS pays Medicare private health plans an average of 107 percent of what it costs to care for the same beneficiaries under traditional fee-for-service programs.

At a time when we are looking at great concerns about the long-term solvency of Medicare, looking at these huge increases that have occurred for seniors related to the premiums for Medicare, we are hearing from the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission that CMS is paying private plans an average of 107 percent of what it costs to care for beneficiaries under traditional Medicare.

This makes absolutely no sense, no matter how you look at it. According to the report, Medicare payments to private plans cost 16 percent to 23 percent more than traditional plans. So, basically, we can be spending up to 23 percent more on the approach of privatizing Medicare. That is what it is; this is a strategy to privatize Medicare, which the majority of seniors have not asked for, they have not chosen, and they don't want; and the icing on the cake is it costs up to 23 percent more.

I ask, if HMOs are so much better and more efficient, why do they need the extra dollars? I am certainly not opposed to HMOs. I have participated in the past, as my mother has, when she was on Medicare and when Medicare HMO was available in our community. She got dropped, unfortunately, when they chose to leave. Certainly, this is not a discussion about whether HMOs provide an important service or quality service.

My concern is, within the context of Medicare, why, if they are so much better and more efficient, are we providing them more money? The debate on privatization was that somehow Medicare is going broke, the trust fund is going to run out of money; therefore, we have to privatize Medicare. And exactly the opposite result has occurred as we have begun to privatize Medicare. Premiums for seniors are going up faster than at any other time in our history. We hear from independent reports that it costs anywhere from 16 percent to 23 percent more to privatize Medicare than to keep it the way it is. With higher administrative costs, in fact, private plans are more costly than regular Medicare. So we are told they need subsidies because it costs more to administer them.

Again, the whole point is to be more efficient, stretch the dollars farther, lower costs, so we can provide better prescription drug coverage for seniors and other kinds of preventive care they need, and that Medicare remains solvent and healthy for the future. Older Americans are staggering under the relentless increases in the cost of their health care and prescription drugs. We have all heard the stories. More older Americans will face harsh choices in meeting basic needs of health, food, housing, and paying utility bills. Meeting those challenges will be even more difficult as percentage increases in Medicare premiums greatly outpace the increases for Social Security. The increase will be especially painful because Social Security payments again are expected to rise less than 3 percent. I say "expected" because we don't know how much or how little Social Security payments will be yet.

Yet, this year, this administration decided to release the Medicare numbers the Friday right before Labor Day, right before the weekend when the news was focused on a hurricane. That is some holiday for millions of seniors who have labored their whole lives. We learned the OMB moved up the release of this huge increase by 6 weeks. In fact, we hear today in an article that the internal administration memo reveals that the unprecedented 17-percent increase in Medicare premiums seniors will pay in 2005 was scheduled for release October 22. It was scheduled for release on October 22, along with Social Security COLA payments.

Obviously, somebody looked at this and said: This is the largest increase in the history of the program. We want to make sure it is done as quietly as pos-

sible. So they chose the Friday before the Labor Day weekend, late in the afternoon, in the middle of a hurricane, to release the numbers.

OMB received the premium notice from HHS on September 1 and cleared it for release only 2 days later. As I said, for the last at least 10 years, they have done it in October along with Social Security.

We are not going to only talk about premium increases here today. We have the ability to do something about it. I am proud to be doing something about this, saying enough is enough; the portion of this that comes from privatizing Medicare needs to be removed and we need to put these premiums back in line with Social Security.

We know health care costs are going up for everyone—every family and every business. In a larger sense, we need to be addressing that as well, which we can do with the cost of prescription drugs. We can bring it to the floor and pass an effort to open the border and lower the costs in half by allowing pharmacists to do business safely with pharmacists in Canada and other places. There are other strategies. There are things we can do to address the broader issue of health care and we need to be doing them.

But while this is happening, we should not be saying to our seniors, saying to someone on Medicare, that instead of addressing these issues, we are going to require you to pay an extra-large increase because of a policy made here to privatize Medicare that, in the face of all evidence, shows the administrative costs are higher and the costs of providing the kinds of care are higher. We now have one more report saying that. In the face of all objective evidence, the Congress and the President have moved forward to want to privatize Medicare, anyway, saying it will lower prices, when in fact it has resulted in the largest premium increase for seniors and the disabled in the history of the Medicare Program.

I believe this is wrong. So I have introduced S. 2780, Keeping the Promise of Medicare Act, with 11 of my colleagues. My bill would cap the Part B premium at the same level as the cost-of-living adjustment so that seniors do not see real cuts in their Social Security benefits. In other words, we would at least keep seniors whole, moving in the right direction while we deal with these other issues, in terms of rising health care costs that need to be and must be addressed.

We need a sense of urgency about this issue. Health care is not optional. This is one of the most urgent issues a family addresses. It is the most urgent cost right now that businesses across the country are facing. Yet we do not see that sense of urgency, even though I know colleagues on both sides of the aisle have concerns, have knowledge about this, and want to see something happen. We can do better than that. We can do better for our seniors through

Medicare. We can do better for businesses that are desperately asking us for help. We can do better for our families, for every worker being asked to pay more for health care, or losing their job because the company cannot keep their health care plan and their jobs. There is more we can do, much more. I urge my colleagues to join with me in one step, S. 2780, Keeping the Promise of Medicare Act. We can, at minimum, start by saying to our seniors we are going to make sure you are not burdened with the costs of paying for these policies to privatize. We will keep you whole by capping this increase at the same level as the cost of living for Social Security. I hope we will vote on this bill before we leave and have the same sense of urgency about it that those paying their bills have every day.

I yield the floor.

Mr. DAYTON. Mr. President, I commend my colleague from Michigan. I am a proud cosponsor of her legislation. She has been a true champion for seniors and affordable prescription drugs, and she continues that leadership today.

IRAQ

Mr. DAYTON. Mr. President, yesterday Senator JOHN KERRY told the American people the truth about Iraq, the truth about the past, the truth about the present, and the truth about the future. President Bush, Vice President CHENEY, and other administration apologists complain he did not show enough optimism. Senator KERRY decided that honesty was more important than false optimism.

President Bush and Vice President CHENEY have not been honest about Iraq from the beginning. They have not been honest about Iraq with this Senate, not with the House, nor with the American people. JOHN KERRY gave us yesterday what we need: honesty about Iraq.

He was not alone in the last few days. I salute my Republican colleagues—five of them—for their honesty about the situation in Iraq. It cannot be easy to tell the American people the truth and to stand up to an administration of their own party which is not telling the truth. They are remarkable American patriots who recognize, as Senator ROBERT C. BYRD, the great senior Senator from West Virginia, has reminded us, that we serve with Presidents of the United States, not under them.

We are elected separately to serve independently and to exercise our own best judgments about what is best for our respective States and for our United States.

Listen to what five of our Republican Senators have said recently. One said that President Bush's rosy pronouncements about the situation in Iraq "are not as straight as we would want them to be."

Another stated:

A crisp, sharp analysis of our policies is required.

A third, upon noting that of the \$18.5 billion Congress appropriated for Iraq's reconstruction a year ago, only \$1 billion has been expended, called this "the incompetence in the administration."

A fourth Republican Senator stated the other day that he may not vote for President Bush in November, to which another Republican Senator replied:

What I like about him is that he can be a Republican Senator and, at the same time, he is unsure about our Republican President. He is a breath of fresh air in politics.

As he is. And we need also a breath of fresh air in the White House, along with fresh words of truth which we received yesterday from Senator KERRY.

The response of the Bush White House to these honest assessments by Senator KERRY and by our Republican Senate colleagues has been to attack them and blame everyone else. President Truman said when he was President, "The buck stops here." With this President, it is "the blame starts here"—blame those who opposed this war from the beginning, as I did; blame those who question his bungling of the running of Iraq after our courageous Armed Forces won the country in 3 weeks and still die daily because Iraqis will not take responsibility for their own country. And now he blames his political opponent for telling the American people the truth about Iraq, the truth that he has consistently withheld.

I am not clear exactly about what we are supposed to be optimistic. Certainly not the report of the President's own National Intelligence Council which, according to an Associated Press story last week, "presented President Bush this summer with three pessimistic scenarios regarding the security situation in Iraq, including the possibility of a civil war there before the end of 2005.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that this article be printed in the RECORD at the conclusion of my remarks.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

(See exhibit 1.)

Mr. DAYTON. Mr. President, how are we to view the continuing violence in Iraq, the murders of American soldiers as they stand guard in a country that its own citizens are unwilling or unable to guard for themselves, or the American citizens hired to work there who are being kidnapped and beheaded? Tell the 138,000 American soldiers who are courageously serving their country, risking and some losing their lives, and wondering when are they coming home. I say to those who tell patriotic dissenters that they are not supporting our troops—the printable part is, if you want to support our troops, bring them home alive soon, not in 10 or 20 years, as Senator MCCAIN has recently predicted.

Make Iraqis protect and defend their own country. That is what people do in a democracy. That is what people do in

any form of stable national government: They impose law and order in their own cities. They provide public safety on their own highways. They defend their own national borders.

Over a year ago, in August of 2003, the Bush administration claimed that 95 percent of Iraq was peacefully occupied and operating normally. Now we see daily reports that violence is spreading and becoming more murderous. The Iraqi Prime Minister claims that "foreign terrorists are still pouring in," a common cry to rally Americans behind the fallacy that their sons and daughters must die in Najev and Baghdad so we will not die in New York and Boston. He says more troops are needed to win. Following the party line, he says: We need more participation from other countries.

We needed more participation from other countries 2 years ago when Congress was stamped as part of the 2002 midterm election strategy to vote a blank check for warmaking based on completely false information from the Bush administration, including the President and the Vice President themselves.

We needed more participation from other countries when the United States and Great Britain bilaterally invaded Iraq in 2003. Or when the operation of that country failed to begin 3 weeks later. We need it now. Now that President Bush has made a mess of the situation in Iraq, are there any international volunteers?

How about participation from the people of Iraq against the supposedly "5,000 to 10,000" insurgents, 95 percent of whom we are told are Iraqis who do not like the presence of the United States there. On paper, we were told over almost a year ago by the Secretary of Defense that there were 206,000 Iraqi militia and army military personnel who were being trained or had been trained—206,000 we were told. Last week, the Secretary of Defense admits that only half of that number have actually been trained.

We are told that less than \$1 billion of the \$5 billion that Congress appropriated 1 year ago for security training has been expended. And that is why the Republican chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee said over the weekend that this is the incompetence of this administration. The buck stops there.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that I may have 2 minutes to complete my remarks.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Democratic time remains—3 minutes 43 seconds.

Mr. DAYTON. I ask that I may have 2 minutes of that time to complete my remarks.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. DAYTON. Mr. President, the buck stops in the White House. The blame starts there and it ends there. Senator JOHN KERRY is not responsible