

workplace, office place, their private defined benefit plan; and the second, of course, is from Social Security.

As we consider cutting benefits from the defined benefit plans, we are putting additional pressure on young Americans and middle-aged Americans who now see most of their assets tied up in defined contribution plans. The middle-income workers, the middle-aged workers of today, and the younger workers of today will face a future with less certainty and less security than other generations have enjoyed. That is another strong argument against using a progressive index to cut the one defined benefit plan most Americans can still count on—Social Security.

In addition, the President's price indexing proposal does not close the 75-year gap between promised Social Security benefits and the taxes expected to be paid into the system. It falls short by about 25 percent. Adding on private accounts would worsen Social Security solvency and increase the Federal debt enormously. If price indexed benefits were combined with private accounts, future generations would face the double burden of large cuts in their guaranteed Social Security benefits and paying down a much higher debt.

We all want to work with President Bush to promote a system of Social Security that is solvent, that will encourage savings throughout the United States. But we have to find a plan that works, that does not penalize, particularly, the middle-income Americans.

We have to also address not just the issue of Social Security but the issue of private pensions. We are seeing tremendous pressure on our private pension plans. When you have huge companies such as United Airlines trying to eliminate their pension obligations through the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation, that is a wakeup call. Twenty years ago, no one thought when they got a job at United they would have to worry about their pension. That would be the last thing on their minds. Today, United workers and many workers in many other fields worry desperately about their private pensions. We have to pay attention to that. I argue that is probably a more pressing problem than the solvency issues of Social Security.

We hope to work with the President to devise a system to ensure the solvency of Social Security but a system that does not unduly penalize working middle-class Americans. I hope we can do that. From my perspective, it is incumbent, of course, that we move away from the issue of private accounts that certainly makes the system less solvent and does not provide sufficient benefits, particularly for Americans 40 years and older, and that we move to looking at other issues. I hope we can do that. Our commitment should be to ensure we have a Social Security system that works for all Americans and provides that true sense of security:

People can count on it, it will be there, and it will be sufficient to support them when they are old.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. VITTER). The Senator from Illinois is recognized.

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, how much time is remaining in morning business?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. There is approximately 19 minutes remaining.

PRESIDENT BUSH'S SPEECH

Mr. DURBIN. Last night, President Bush stood in front of the soldiers of the 82nd Airborne and the members of the Special Forces and gave an important speech. Thankfully, he did not profess the unfounded optimism of Vice President CHENEY, who recently declared that the Iraqi insurgency was in "its last throes." Nor did he express the pessimistic view of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who said this last Sunday that this insurgency had an expected life of 5 to 12 years, adding he hoped the American troops could come home long before that.

In fact, Mr. Bush did not use the word "insurgency," although that is what is raging in Iraq. That insurgency is partially fueled and financed from outside groups. Those who come to Iraq to fight in this insurgency come from Saudi Arabia, Syria, and many other places. There is also a domestic war within Iraq against Americans and against many other Iraqis.

President Bush did not use the word "insurgency," but he did make at least six references to September 11. He said that he was drawing on the lessons of September 11. Well, on September 12, 2001, the day after the tragedy of September 11, virtually the whole world stood with the United States. One of the most important lessons I would draw from September 11 is that we can't afford to waste the support of friends and allies.

President Bush says he will not set a timetable. I understand that. I recognize the danger of posting a date and announcing that on that specific day, America will leave. But the fact is, the Iraqi people have their own timetable which they established. By August 15 of this year, they are charged with drawing up a constitution. By next February, they are to have adopted that constitution. These are clear deadlines, clear benchmarks. We do not need a timetable for withdrawal, but America needs a strategy for success with clear benchmarks.

The President announced nothing new last night. He repeated what he said before about the ultimate goal in Iraq of establishing democracy and bringing our troops home. He did not give any sign that he sees a need to change course.

In Iraq, 1,744 American soldiers have died in combat. Almost 13,000 have been grievously wounded. The insurgency continues. Insurgents are now

using more sophisticated roadside bombs that can even pierce our armored vehicles. Our troops have done everything we have asked of them, but for each insurgent they kill, another seems to spring up, either from the cities and towns of Iraq or slipping across the porous border. For every IED that our soldiers detect and destroy, another one seems to be planted in its place, sometimes within hours.

There is an estimate that in Iraq today, unguarded, there are some 800,000 tons of ammunition and armament. It is a free market, a flea market, a bazaar of deadly weapons for insurgents and those who would use them against our troops. That is what our brave men and women are up against.

The streets are not safe for our troops. The streets are not safe for Iraqis. Without security, it is unlikely the Iraqis have much faith in a new government.

Unemployment levels in Iraq are as high as 50 percent. Without jobs, the Iraqis wonder what their future will be. More of the same is not good enough.

Our soldiers are doing everything right, everything that we ask of them. They are learning and adapting to the situation on the ground. Their Commander in Chief needs to do the same. We need benchmarks that will measure progress in security, reconstruction, governance, and international savings. And we need to ask ourselves, What do we do next if the benchmarks are not met?

Yesterday, a letter was sent by Senator CARL LEVIN and Senator SUSAN COLLINS to the President urging him to include in the speech an accountability of the Iraqi Government, saying that they must hold to their deadlines, they must understand that this is serious and that we are not going to stay there indefinitely. A New York Times editorial recently stated, "If the war is going according to plan, someone needs to rethink the plan." I believe they are right.

Finally, we also need to take better care of our soldiers when they come home. We are going to have an amendment in a few moments offered by Senator PATTY MURRAY of Washington. Make no mistake, she has been our leader in the Senate when it comes to funding for the Veterans' Administration. Time and again in the Committee on the Budget, with the budget resolution and with the supplemental appropriations, she has made the argument that there wasn't enough money in the VA to take care of our returning soldiers and veterans from other wars. She has been ignored, rejected, and criticized for standing up and saying the obvious—that we have a debt to our soldiers and our veterans.

Last week, Senator MURRAY was vindicated. The Veterans' Administration announced they made a gross miscalculation and were at least \$1 billion short in the money they need right now to provide quality health care to our soldiers and veterans.

Senator MURRAY has fought the good fight, and she will win that fight today. In fact, it is going to be interesting to see many from the other side of the aisle who were critical of her call for more money for the VA rushing to provide even greater sums so they can argue that they are on the side of the VA and the veterans.

This is the way it should end. This debate should end with Senator MURRAY's leadership creating a bipartisan coalition for the Veterans' Administration. This should have been a bipartisan issue from the start. She was a lonely voice and faced a lot of criticism for a long time. Today, she will be vindicated. More importantly, the veterans will receive the quality health care which they deserve. That means the newly returning veterans of Fallujah and Baghdad, many suffering terrible wounds in battle and some facing invisible wounds of post-traumatic stress disorder, will have a chance for the kind of treatment they deserve at the Veterans' Administration.

The administration, when it comes to the Veterans' Administration as well as waging the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, has not anticipated the real costs of war. We can do better. We owe these men and women who are fighting these battles and those who have fought in past wars not only our thoughts and prayers, we owe them our resources so they can wage this war successfully, come home safely, and return to their families and their lives.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Washington is recognized.

Mrs. MURRAY. How much time is left on our side?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. There is approximately 11½ minutes remaining.

Mrs. MURRAY. Would the Presiding Officer indicate when 1 minute remains.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

VETERANS' ADMINISTRATION SHORTFALL

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, I rise this morning to again talk about the situation facing our veterans. I thank my colleague from Illinois for his dedication to this issue and his tremendous work and support as we have tried to raise this issue for a number of months.

So all of my colleagues know, I came to the floor of the Senate early this year to talk about the situation facing those soldiers who have worked so honorably for this country in past wars and for those who are returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan today and the need to keep the promise that we gave to all of them that when they return we will provide them with the health care they need.

When I was in my State earlier this year, in January, I met with a number of the service organizations and the military to talk about reintegration,

to talk about what happens to our soldiers when they return home, to make sure they have the services available to them, and to make sure they are taken care of. Many in those meetings were deeply concerned that we would not have the facilities available for them. They told me of already long waiting lines at our veterans clinics and our VA hospitals. They told me of soldiers who could not get appointments for as many as 6 months or 3 years. They told me of a looming budget crisis.

When I heard that, I talked to other organizations across the country and realized that we were, indeed, facing a tremendous shortfall at the VA. That is why in the Committee on the Budget I offered an amendment to increase the funding for VA. It was rejected by those on the majority side by an almost party-line vote. That is why, throughout the appropriations process and then on the emergency supplemental, I continued to come to the Senate to say that this is a looming crisis that we need to deal with.

In the Senate, I offered an amendment for \$1.98 billion for an emergency supplemental, saying this is critical. Our soldiers are not getting the care they need. I was defeated on that amendment on an almost party-line vote because of the letter sent by the Secretary of VA to KAY BAILEY HUTCHISON, the Senator who is the chairman of the Subcommittee on Military Construction, saying they do not indicate a dire emergency. He said:

I can assure you that the VA does not need emergency supplemental funds in fiscal year 2005 to continue to provide the timely quality service that is always our goal.

Based on that letter, many on the other side voted against my amendment because they believed the Secretary was being honest with them. Well, I continue to raise this specter saying we are going to face a crisis. Even several weeks ago, in a Committee on Veterans' Affairs hearing, the Secretary of the VA came before our committee and once again said there is no budget crisis.

Well, last Thursday, finally the truth came out. The VA told us they were well over \$1 billion short in funding for this year. What was their solution? Their solution was to go back into this year's appropriations that have already been approved by this body, for which we already have the money flowing to construction and maintenance projects throughout the country—these are projects for seismic upgrades in our VA facilities, for asbestos abatement, for hazardous waste cleanup, for clinics that are being built where contracts are already let—and the VA is saying: We are going to take money away from those projects.

We cannot allow that to happen. These contracts are already being let. These facilities already need the maintenance. It has already been deferred for 2 years. We cannot go back to our States and tell these clinics: Gee, sorry. There was a mistake made at

the VA. They didn't do the calculations correctly. You are not going to get the services.

That is not the promise we made to our men and women when we sent them overseas. We said we will be there. We said we will be there. That is a promise we need to keep now, as we face this budget crisis.

We looked at the VA and said, "How could you make such a mistake?" particularly when I was raising the specter of this for the past 6 months and knew from the ground, knew from looking at the VA's own numbers, that they were going to be facing this crisis.

Yesterday, Secretary Nicholson came before the Committee on Veterans' Affairs and said they had assumed that only 25,000 veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan would seek care at the VA in this fiscal year. Instead, what they have seen is 103,000 veterans already—already. And, as we know, many are still there, many more are to go, many more to be returning.

So the Committee on Veterans' Affairs was basing their calculations on 2002 numbers rather than saying, as we all know, that we are at war, that over a million men and women have been sent to Iraq and Afghanistan. They are in what the generals call a 360-degree war, meaning there are intense times for each one of those soldiers, 24/7, knowing, when they return, they will need help for mental health care and post-traumatic stress disorder. The VA never took that into account. They never looked at the world of what was happening and said: We are going to have increased costs for Veterans Affairs because we have more veterans returning.

So I find it appalling that the VA, the VA Secretary, and those who are required to be giving us honest numbers failed to look past their own desks and recognize what all of us throughout the country know; that is, we have a high number of veterans returning who need both physical care and mental health care. It is our job to appropriate the money to take care of them.

So where are we today? Senator BYRD and I and others on this side are offering an amendment on the Interior appropriations bill that we will be debating later this afternoon to add, again, \$1.42 billion as an emergency supplemental to provide the funding for this year. I am very proud of the Members of this Senate who have stood time and again to say we need to be there for our soldiers who are returning from war, and we need to do it responsibly.

Senator CRAIG, the chairman of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, told me, when we were on the floor debating this during the supplemental, when he used Secretary Nicholson's letter to justify voting no against my amendment, that if he was proved wrong, he would be out here to work with me to provide the funds.

I commend Senator CRAIG and Senator KAY BAILEY HUTCHISON for coming to the plate now and saying we need to