

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

MORNING BUSINESS

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, there will now be a period of morning business for up to 60 minutes, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each, with the first 30 minutes under the control of the majority and the second 30 minutes under the control of the Republican leader or his designee.

The Senator from Washington is recognized.

VETERANS HEALTH CARE

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, I listened to the majority leader talk a few minutes ago about going out to do his morning exercise and hearing once again of nine soldiers who were killed today in Iraq and the heavy burden all of us have as we sit and listen to the debate about Iraq and how we should proceed and how we cannot ever forget the burden it places on so many families and will continue to be on so many families for years to come.

I have been out on this floor several times to talk about the administration's failure to care for our troops. I am sure it is not going to be my last time; in fact, I am positive it will not be my last time. I am going to keep talking about these men and women and their families who have been impacted so dramatically and what we are doing as a nation to make sure we are there for them every step of the way. Unfortunately, the list of failures is very long—too long. Recently, we heard about the obstacles of service men and women with traumatic brain injuries when they return home from battle. I have seen these men and women. I have watched what happens to them. It is not a couple of days. It is not a couple of months. It is a lifetime of dealing with a traumatic brain injury and how it impacts them, their families, their ability to be able to be productive, their family's ability to be able to put food on the table and continue to care for the person. It is a long-term cost. It is part of the cost of the war, and it is a burden we should all be sharing and as of yet have not been sharing.

We have heard about the shameful treatment of patients at Walter Reed Hospital. We have all felt so compassionate as we listened to these men and women and the squalid conditions they lived in. I am here to tell my colleagues, this is a syndrome, the "Walter Reed" syndrome. It is not just at Walter Reed. We are hearing from men and women across the country who have been impacted by this war and have been sort of the forgotten stepchildren of this war, left in a facility

somewhere, and their families are struggling every single day, every single minute to deal with these young men and women. Sometimes they are older. I have talked to men and women who are in their 50s who are members of the Guard and Reserve who have been impacted. Some are grandparents.

This morning the President announced that one of our former colleagues, Senator Bob Dole, will join with former Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala, who will cochair a panel to look into the problems at the Department of Defense and the veterans health care system. I am pleased the President finally, after 4 years, is putting an emphasis on this crisis. I think he has chosen two very well-qualified individuals to lead this panel, but I remain very concerned.

First of all, let me remind everybody that the President received recommendation after recommendation from panel after panel during this administration, and time and time again he refused to implement their suggestions or simply ignored them. We see that on the Senate floor today. We are out here debating the 9/11 Commission. They released their findings years ago. Few of them have been implemented. It has taken a shift in power from Republicans to Democrats to finally implement the 9/11 Commission recommendations.

Even more recently, the Iraq Study Group, another bipartisan, highly regarded commission, released its findings on a path forward in Iraq. The President applauded the members of the group, said they were great, but he has ignored their recommendations. Instead, he has left it up to us in Congress to try to bring a new direction to the war in Iraq.

So we are right, I believe, to be wary of this new step from the President—two good people, Bob Dole, Donna Shalala, and another highly regarded commission to look into this. I know those members will take their time and evaluate everything. But once they make their recommendations, my question to all of us is: What will the President do with them? The President knows how to talk the talk, but I am pretty worried he doesn't know how to walk the walk.

I am here this morning to say our troops don't need any more rhetoric. They do need a lot of action. That is why the Senate Democrats are determined to address these problems, not just at Walter Reed—of course at Walter Reed but beyond that—through comprehensive action aimed at taking care of the men and women who serve us from the battlefield all the way to their local VA and for a lifetime, if that is what it takes.

We need decisive action, not commission after commission and report after report that the President can simply choose to ignore. I hope this commission will, as well as the group actually who has been set up by Secretary Gates, who has responded, I believe, in

a strong manner, I hope they come forward with positive ideas that will benefit our troops. But I also promise to our troops, to our men and women, to our veterans, and to all their families that we in this body are not going to sit idly by and wait for another commission report or for this President to act.

Lost in the news coverage last week of this whole Walter Reed fiasco was a report on the President's failure to provide adequate mental health care for our Armed Forces. That report which was lost in all of this was a military psychologist-led task force, and they told us 30 percent of our troops meet standards for having a mental disorder, but less than half of them ever receive care. Thirty percent of the men and women we send to Iraq and Afghanistan come home with what is termed a mental disorder. Yet less than half of them ever receive care. The stories I hear from these troops and from their families and the people whom I talk to are heartbreaking.

My staff this past week spoke to one soldier who returned from his second tour in Iraq and is suffering from a severe case of post-traumatic stress disorder. He said that at his hospital, if you are not missing a limb, you are virtually invisible. If you are not missing a limb, you are virtually invisible. To me, that is appalling, and I fear that is not an isolated case. Sometimes those in need choose not to seek help, but for many of them, the ones who want and need mental health care or who their families know need mental health care and are trying to get them into the system, the services haven't been available.

Amazingly, only 40 percent of the Army and Navy's Active-Duty, licensed clinical psychologist positions are filled. Only 40 percent of them are even filled. The psychologists who are on staff report being worked to the bone and having a low motivation for work. I talked to a psychologist myself recently on a visit, and he told me he was doing the same thing he did during the Vietnam war, and he said to me: I don't know if I can do this anymore. These psychologists are worked to the bone and they are tired. They are tired because they see men and women who are not getting the care and they are worried they can't keep up—almost 4 years into this war, 4 years into this war. To me, this is so unacceptable.

It is unacceptable that there are severe staffing shortages in mental health care when men and women need help. An equally troubling conclusion of the report—that was lost last week because we are so focused on Walter Reed, but I think we need to focus on it—was that our National Guard and Reserve Forces are being particularly hit hard by the shortage in mental health care. We know that Guard and Reserve members come from some of our smallest communities, and they have sacrificed so much for this country. They have left loved ones and left