

our offices and looked at it as often as I could. I was very impressed with my colleagues who came and talked about why it is so important that we not have an increase in the interest rate for student loans. I have been very happy with my Democratic colleagues who have come here and made such a profound case. But I listened also to what the Republicans had to say, and it is beyond my comprehension how they can come to the floor with a straight face and say what they have said. I have listened as my Republican colleagues have come to the Senate floor to blame Democrats for stalling legislation to keep college affordable for 7 million people throughout our great country. The claim is pretty rich considering that Republicans voted unanimously yesterday to filibuster this legislation. What is a filibuster? It is stopping us from going to the legislation.

Our bill would prevent 7 million students from paying \$1,000 more on their loans. With college already unaffordable for far too many young people, Democrats believe we should be doing all we can to provide access to higher education. That is what these student loans are all about.

Republicans have repeatedly claimed they support efforts to support legislation to keep loans from doubling this summer, but they sure have a funny way of showing it with this endless filibuster. Today, Republicans have said that Democrats should negotiate a way out of this stalemate—again, a very strange reasoning. It is hard to negotiate without a partner.

Every Tuesday after we do our weekly caucus meetings, I go to what we call the Ohio Clock. One of the reporters said: Your Republican colleague Senator McCONNELL said you should negotiate on this issue with Speaker BOEHNER.

Now, how do you like that one, that I, the leader in the Senate, should go to the Republican House and start negotiating with them? That is a strange, strange way of doing business.

The Republicans claim their only objection to our legislation is how it is paid for—by closing a tax loophole that allows wealthy Americans to dodge taxes they already owe. That is what we feel should happen. We don't believe it is a tax increase—just that people should pay what they are supposed to pay. They now have a way of avoiding taxes. Rich accountants and lawyers avoid it by claiming they are going to pay dividends and not ordinary income. It is not fair to everyone else.

So if the Republicans object to this, fine. Democrats are willing to consider alternative offsets. In fact, we are even willing to vote on the House Republicans' own proposed offset. Now, that is a doozy, the offset from the Republicans coming from the House, which takes away money for preventive care for virtually everybody. The leading causes of death in America are diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. They want to take away preventive pro-

grams to stop heart disease. And, as we know, there are programs now—mammograms, for example—that stop people from having to get too far behind with the dread of breast cancer. That is their offset. We strongly oppose that alternative, but we are willing to vote on it. We are not running from it. And once their proposal to slash programs that save money and lives fails on a floor vote—and it will fail—we Democrats are still willing to consider other options to pay for this legislation. My Republican colleagues on the other hand have refused to consider alternative ways to pay for a bill they claim they support.

So I say to my Republican colleagues, let us bring this bill to the floor. If Republicans are so interested in negotiating a solution, they should be willing to take that first step. Once the bill is on the floor, we can debate it, we can amend it with an offset on which both sides can agree. But until Republicans end their obstructionist filibuster, there is no path forward.

So for my Republican colleagues to come down here and say “we support this legislation,” I repeat, what a strange way of supporting this legislation.

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to a period of morning business, with Senators allowed to speak for up to 10 minutes each.

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

FLAG MAN LARRY ECKHARDT

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, I was in Tazewell County—which is in the area of Pekin, in East Peoria, IL—last week at the Veterans Administration Commission.

I talked to a number of vets from the Vietnam war and other conflicts. We talked about obvious questions: veterans' unemployment, what was happening with disability payments, education for veterans, topics that most vets are very concerned about. They face some pretty significant challenges, as we know.

We promise these men and women that if they put up their hand and swear that they will risk their life for America, we swear we will be there when they come home. It is that basic. We have to keep our word. As a nation, we have a sacred pledge to take care of veterans who serve. I take it very seriously—I think both parties do—and we should.

We also need to honor those who have lost their lives. Just a few weeks ago, we buried another soldier from that county. There was a huge turnout at the memorial service. One particular local resident was doing his part to honor our fallen heroes in an extraordinary way. I learned about him when I visited Tazewell County. He is

from Little York, IL, and he is known as the Flag Man.

Larry Eckhardt is not a veteran, and there are no servicemembers in his family. But in 2006, Larry Eckhardt attended a funeral for a soldier from his area who had died. He said, “There aren't enough flags here.” So on his own, Larry bought 150 American flags and started hauling them in his truck to military funerals all across my State. As he puts it, “I just honestly don't believe there's any such thing as too many flags for a soldier.”

Larry's inventory of 150 flags has grown to 2,200 flags, and he can line them up to 14 miles of a fallen soldier's final journey.

Traveling in his old 1999 Ford van, stripped down to one seat to make room for all the flags, he has now graced more than 80 funerals from Wisconsin to Kentucky and Iowa to Indiana and certainly in his home State of Illinois. Last year, Larry drove 40,000 miles with his flags to these funerals. He covers all the costs out of his own pocket and a couple donations from friends. When asked why he does it, he simply says, “It's my way of giving back.”

Larry rarely uses the word “I.” He is quick to praise all the volunteers—often organized by veterans organizations—who help him stake the flags in the ground along the funeral procession routes. “Without them,” he says, “I couldn't get them all done.”

In one instance over a long weekend, dozens of volunteers helped Larry install the 2,200 flags to honor a 23-year-old Army sergeant during his funeral. After the service, volunteers helped pack up the flags for the next stop. Volunteers ranged from kids as young as 3, assisting their parents, to an 83-year-old woman who wanted to help out in Orchardville, IL. When she was asked her reason for weathering the tough January Illinois cold to help, she said, “We can only bake so many tuna casseroles.”

This story is what America and the State of Illinois are all about. It is the common man, such as Larry Eckhardt, following his heart and taking the initiative to do something extraordinary for our fallen heroes, and it is about a community rising to the occasion to lend its support and honor those who deserve so much of our gratitude. Larry may have said it best when he humbly stated:

This is my feeble attempt to say thank you to every soldier who has ever served and fought to protect the freedoms that I have.

This speech on the floor of the Senate is my feeble attempt to say thanks to you, Larry, and the countless Americans just like you who step up and do their part to show our veterans how much their service means to each and every one of us. They embody the enduring spirit and values that make America great and they make me proud to serve in the Senate and humbled to represent my State of Illinois.

Thank you, Larry, and thanks to all the other Americans who are doing