

Created by Congress in 1999, the Vets Corp had a slow start. While I believe that the new Vets Corp leadership is turning things around, there are some lingering concerns about the Vets Corp's funding and mission. I am hopeful that this legislation we are introducing today will help remedy these concerns. Under the terms of the legislation, the Vets Corp would be provided matching funds instead of a straight allocation. In addition, this bill would clarify the purpose of the organization as well as improve the structure of their advisory board.

Mr. President, I am proud to be a cosponsor of this bill. I applaud the hard work of Senators KERRY, SNOWE, TALENT, and their staffs in crafting this bipartisan bill. I hope my colleagues will support this bill and I urge its speedy passage.

VIOLENCE IN DARFUR

Mr. FEINGOLD. Mr. President, I am deeply troubled that violence in Darfur continues. It is disheartening to learn that the Government of Sudan continues to serve as an obstacle to the deployment of U.N. peacekeeping forces that could bolster the African Union Mission in Sudan, AMIS. While AMIS has conducted its mission to the best of its ability, it is clear that it has neither the resources nor the mandate to stop the violence that is affecting the lives of millions of innocent people. It remains critical that an international peacekeeping force be allowed to deploy to Darfur to augment the African Union Mission in Sudan and to establish a lasting and sustainable peace.

Peace in Darfur has been elusive, but it is not unattainable. The Government of Sudan must be a willing partner for peace; it must work with the international community to find an acceptable and expedient plan to introduce peacekeeping forces to that region. Until a more robust peacekeeping force can deploy to Darfur, it is important that the international community support continuing AMIS efforts there. Finally, parties to the conflict in Darfur must also abide by the recently agreed upon Darfur Peace Agreement, DPA, although it is apparent that this peace agreement is showing signs of strain.

Peace in Darfur is critical for establishing a lasting and comprehensive peace throughout Sudan and the region. That said, we must not ignore the continuing need to press for progress on the North-South Comprehensive Peace Agreement, CPA. The U.S. Government, with the international community and the United Nations, must continue to press for progress in implementing the CPA between the north and the south of Sudan. Unfortunately, well over a year from the signing of the CPA, it has become painfully clear that various important elements of the agreement have yet to be implemented, let alone completed. Key issues concerning land tenure rights, critical border agreements, oil revenue sharing,

and armed militias in southern Sudan have yet to be settled or addressed fully.

While much of the lack of progress relating to the CPA relates to the complexity of the peace agreement, much of it relates to the limited capacity of the Government of Southern Sudan, GOSS, to provide effective governance, services, and protection of its citizens. There remain serious obstacles to the establishment of a viable and strong GOSS, including a continuing lack of sufficient infrastructure throughout the south and sporadic violence that disrupts various parts of the region. The international community must continue its support of Sudan's CPA, which means addressing the capacity that parties to the agreement have to implement the agreement.

The U.S. Government and the international community need to be sustained, coordinated, and comprehensive. We cannot dismiss the significance of the linkages and impact that each of these agreements have on one another, nor their significance for developing a solid foundation for addressing conflict throughout the region. Successful implementation of both the CPA and DPA will provide significant benefits to all communities in Sudan and will set the stage for a new era of peace for the entire country and region.

NATIONAL VETERANS BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

Ms. SNOWE. The Veterans Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development Act of 1999 created the National Veterans Business Development Corporation—The Veterans Corporation—to address gaps in providing small business and entrepreneurship assistance to veterans and service-disabled veterans. These services are to be delivered through newly created, community-based veterans business resource centers, VBRCs. The legislation authorized Federal funding through fiscal year 2004, with the requirement that the Corporation “institute and implement a plan to raise private funds and become a self-sustaining corporation.”

While the Veterans Corporation's purpose and mission are well-intentioned, in practice, the Corporation has been unable to become self-sustaining and continues to rely on congressional appropriations. Furthermore, the Corporation's funding concerns have diminished its ability to create a vibrant national network of VBRCs. The Corporation's struggles have led it astray from the original intent of the law and hurt its delivery of services to our Nation's veterans. As such, my colleagues and I are introducing legislation to reauthorize the Veterans Corporation and to improve the direction of the Corporation as it works to serve veteran and service-disabled veteran entrepreneurs.

Although the Veterans Corporation has fallen on hard times, its vision of

assisting veterans with their business needs is still admirable. In fact, according to the Small Business Administration, about 22 percent of veterans were either purchasing or starting a new business or considering doing so in 2004. Moreover, almost 72 percent of these new veteran entrepreneurs planned to employ at least one person at the outset of their new venture. Supporting veterans' small business needs has become increasingly important as soldiers begin to return from continuing U.S. military operations worldwide.

I have worked hard to put the Veterans Corporation on the track to success and to support the veteran entrepreneurs and veteran-owned small businesses that it serves. I have led efforts to ensure proper oversight of the Corporation, as well as assisted the Corporation through appropriate legislative action.

As Chair of the Senate Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship, I requested a Government Accountability Office, GAO, study, released in August 2004, to ensure that the Veterans Corporation was meeting its responsibilities and the needs of our Nation's veterans. The GAO report concluded that the Veterans Corporation faced a number of challenges in achieving self-sufficiency, noting that dramatically lower-than-expected revenues delayed the estimated date for achieving self-sustaining operations from fiscal year 2004 to fiscal year 2009. The GAO was also concerned with the Corporation's distinction as a government corporation, as determined by the Office of Management and Budget and the Department of Justice. This determination subjected the Corporation to numerous agency requirements and drained significant resources away from serving veterans. Again, this designation inhibited the Corporation's ability to become self-sustaining.

In the fall of 2004, I introduced emergency legislation that was passed into law to clarify the Corporation's status as a “quasi-private entity,” not a “government corporation.” At the time, this legislation relieved the 12-employee Corporation from burdensome Federal agency reporting requirements.

Following the enactment of this legislation, many of my colleagues and I encouraged the Corporation to work hard to get its fiscal house in order and to focus on reaching out to veterans in local communities, particularly through VBRCs. Unfortunately, the Corporation's most recent efforts to become self-sustaining have yielded insufficient results. Furthermore, since its inception, the Corporation has only succeeded in establishing four VBRCs. Therefore, it is appropriate to restructure the corporation to meet the original intent of the law and to better serve our veteran entrepreneurs.

I would like to thank Senators KERRY, TALENT, and AKAKA for working together with me to craft the bipartisan "Veterans Corporation Reauthorization Act of 2006." We believe that this bill will clarify current law directing the Veterans Corporation, improve the Corporation's services to veterans by stressing the need to create VBRCs, and protecting the American taxpayer by ensuring that the Corporation meets its self-sustaining requirement.

More specifically, this legislation will focus the Corporation's purpose and mission to emphasize establishing a national network of information and assistance centers for use by veterans and the public.

This bill would strictly guide the Corporation's ability to access public funds. Although the legislation would reauthorize funding at \$2 million for fiscal year 2007–fiscal year 2009, the funds would be directed through the Small Business Administration's Office of Veterans' Business Development. These funds would only be allocated to the Corporation if it first matches those funds on a dollar-for-dollar basis. Any funds not expended would revert back to the Treasury. Furthermore, there is a provision that restricts the amount of revenue the Corporation can raise from fee-for-service tools or direct charge, to the veteran receiving services.

Our legislation also reinforces current law by requiring that the Veterans Corporation must develop a plan to become self-sustaining and would add the requirement that the Corporation include an independent audit in its annual report to Congress, and includes a GAO audit to ensure review and compliance.

Finally, the legislation will postpone the transfer of duties from the SBA's Advisory Committee on Veterans Business Affairs to the Corporation, and improve notification of the Corporation's services to veterans and transitioning service members.

VOTING RIGHTS ACT REAUTHORIZATION

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, There are few things as critical to our Nation, and to American citizenship, as voting. Like the rights guaranteed by the first amendment, the right to vote is fundamental because it secures the effective exercise of all other rights. As people are able to register, vote, and elect candidates of their choice, their interests and rights get attention. The very legitimacy of our democratic Government is dependent on the access all Americans have to the electoral process.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 transformed the landscape of political inclusion. As amended, the act contains important provisions for language assistance. Section 203, added as part of the second reauthorization of the Voting Rights in 1975, broadened this land-

scape by allowing millions more American citizens to participate fully in our democracy. Section 203, which requires bilingual voting assistance for certain language minority groups, was enacted to remove obstacles to voting posed by illiteracy and lack of bilingual language assistance resulting in large measure from unequal educational opportunities available to minorities. These provisions helped overcome discriminatory barriers which limited access to the political process for language minority groups and resulted in low turnout and registration. Along with section 4(f)(4), section 203 has led to extraordinary gains in representation and participation made by Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans.

Hispanic-American populations have been one of the primary minority language groups to benefit from the protections of the bilingual provisions of the Voting Rights Act. For example, effective implementation of the bilingual provisions in San Diego County, CA, helped increase voter registration by more than 20 percent. And voter turnout among Hispanic Americans in New Mexico rose 26 percent between 2000 and 2004 after television and radio spots were aired in districts with Spanish-educated listeners about voter registration and absentee ballots. Yet more needs to be done. Historically, Hispanic Americans have low voter turnout and less than 1 percent of all elected offices in the United States are held by Hispanic Americans.

I was troubled during the immigration debate that the rhetoric of some Members of the Senate appeared to be anti-Hispanic in supporting the adoption of an English language amendment. Senator SALAZAR and I wrote to the President following up on this provision. We asked whether the President will continue to implement the language outreach policies of President Clinton's Executive Order No. 13166. A prompt and straightforward affirmative answer would have gone a long way. Sadly, we have received no response from this White House. I have, however, raised the matter when the opportunity presented itself with the Secretary of Commerce and the Attorney General and both have assured me that the Bush administration will continue to adhere to the outreach efforts of the Clinton Executive order.

I understand why those efforts to amend the immigration bill to make English the official or national language provoked a reaction and seemed mean-spirited to so many. It elicited the extraordinary May 19 letter from the League of United Latin American Citizens, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, the National Association of Latino Elected Officials Educational Fund, the National Council of La Raza and the National Puerto Rican Coalition and from a larger coalition of interested parties from 96 national and local organizations.

Until that vote, in our previous 230 years we had not found it necessary or

wise to adopt English as our official or national language. I believe it was in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania that the State legislature shortly after the Revolutionary War authorized official publication of Pennsylvania's laws in German as well as English to serve the German-speaking population of that State. We have been a confident Nation unafraid to hear expressions in a variety of languages and willing to reach out to all within our borders. That tradition is reflected in section 203 of the Voting Rights Act and in President Clinton's Executive Order No. 13166. It is an honorable and just tradition.

We demean our history and our welcoming tradition when we disparage languages other than English and those who speak them. I have spoken about our including Latin phrases on our official seal and the many States that include mottos and phrases in Latin, French and Spanish on their State flags. We need not fear other languages. We would do better to do more to encourage and assist those who wish to be citizens to learn English, but we should recognize English, as Senator SALAZAR's amendment suggested, as our common and unifying language.

I hope that the President will join with us to protect language minority voters. As a presidential candidate, then-Governor Bush told a New Hampshire audience in September 1999, "English-only would mean to people 'me, not you.'" As the Washington Times noted recently:

Mr. Bush speaks some Spanish and occasionally peppers speeches and conversations with words and phrases from the language. Speaking to a group of adults taking civics lessons yesterday at the Catholic Charities-operated Juan Diego Center, he lapsed into Spanish. Asked whether Mr. Bush planned to drop Spanish from his stump speeches, a White House spokeswoman said she does not expect that to happen.

The White House, government agencies and a number of Senators include Spanish language outreach on their official government websites. I am glad that they do. Ironically, some who pushed most strongly for some variant of English-only treatment in the immigration bill have bent our rules to address the Senate in Spanish.

We have been engaged in a contentious debate about immigrants who are not yet citizens, which is unfortunate. I wish we could join together to pass fair and comprehensive immigration reform. But the issue related to section 203 and section 4(f)4 of the Voting Rights Act affects American citizens. These provisions provide assistance to Native Americans and indigenous peoples, who speak languages which preceded the first English speakers on this continent. These are citizens who are trying to vote but many of them are struggling with the English language due to disparities in education and the incremental process of learning. It is imperative that all citizens be able to exercise their rights as citizens, particularly a right as fundamental as the