

2006 in response to the lobbying scandals in Washington, one of our first witnesses was RICK SANTORUM, a longtime advocate of lobbying reform. When our reform legislation passed our Chamber overwhelmingly, Senator SANTORUM said the Senate “stepped up in a big way.” The Senate stepped up in large part because this person of high ideals was pushing it along.

Mr. President, in his farewell address, Senator SANTORUM stated that although he often disagreed—often vigorously—with many of his Senate colleagues on the issues, he never doubted the sincerity of their convictions. Staunch advocacy tempered with respect for the views of others is the hallmark of the Senate, and it is a central part of RICK SANTORUM’s legacy. I thank him for his service, and wish him and his family all the best in the future.

TRIBUTE TO SENATOR TALENT

Mr. President. As the 109th Congress draws to a close, I want to say thanks and farewell to one of its hardest-working and most dedicated members, Senator JIM TALENT of Missouri.

I have had the privilege of working with Senator TALENT as a member of the Armed Services Committee and its Seapower Subcommittee, which he has chaired.

Working with Senator TALENT has always been rewarding. He has been a prodigious Senator and brings to bear on defense issues both detailed knowledge and long-range vision. His final speech on the floor of the Senate displayed those qualities, as he surveyed the state of readiness and equipment in our national defense, and persuasively warned of the dangers of under-investment in personnel and material.

Senator TALENT’s focus on seapower issues may seem to go against type. Missouri does not spring readily to mind in a word-association test for “Navy” or “shipbuilding,” as Maine or Mississippi might. But the Senator from Missouri has been as dedicated to working through seapower issues as any coastal Senator.

Senator TALENT was a key player in settling on a dual-lead shipyard strategy for the *Zumwalt*-class DDG-1000 destroyers, formerly known as the DD(X). As a Senator from a shipbuilding State, I am naturally well pleased with this policy. But as a United States Senator, I also share Senator TALENT’s conviction that it is a wise national strategy to preserve shipbuilding capabilities in multiple locations. He has also been a leading voice in deliberations on the CGX ship class that will constitute our next generation of guided-missile cruisers.

Senator TALENT brought extraordinary intellectual gifts to the Senate. After distinguishing himself in undergraduate work at Washington University and in legal studies at the University of Chicago, he clerked for Judge Richard Posner of the Seventh Circuit and taught at the Washington University School of Law.

His academic prowess was reinforced with practical political experience. After winning a seat against long odds in the Missouri legislature, he established himself as a popular and respected political figure. Moving on to the U.S. House, he was an early and influential voice in the debate that ultimately led to a fundamental reform of Federal welfare law. This combined 16 years of legislative service served him well when he took his seat in the Senate.

Besides his dedication to chairing the Seapower Subcommittee, Senator TALENT has been a leading advocate for promoting alternative energy, for helping small businesses form associations to buy health insurance, and for expanding the Federal fight against sickle-cell blood disease. To these and other issues he brings a powerful combination of intellect, research, deliberation, and collegiality.

In November, Senator TALENT lost a close contest for reelection in a difficult campaign year. We cannot quarrel with the decision of the voters, but we can respectfully regret that the Senate will lose the benefit of JIM TALENT’s wise and gentlemanly presence. I join my colleagues in wishing him and his family well, and in expecting many more contributions to the public good from this man of many gifts and accomplishments.●

VETERANS BENEFITS, HEALTH-CARE, AND INFORMATION ACT OF 2006

● Mr. AKAKA. Mr. President, as ranking member of the Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, I urge my colleagues to support our veterans, current servicemembers, and their families by supporting S. 3421, an omnibus veterans measure entitled Veterans Benefits, Healthcare, and Information Technology Act of 2006.

This measure is a compromise agreement between the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs and the Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, and is based on several pieces of legislation. Like all compromises, no one got all he or she wanted, but in the end, I believe that it represents a good package of provisions. This legislation would improve and expand a wide variety of services to our veterans, and includes provisions relating to veterans benefits, health care, and information technology matters for the Department of Veterans Affairs. Of particular importance are provisions to enhance mental health and readjustment services for veterans returning to civilian life, to improve long-term care services for aging veterans, and to modify the State veterans’ home program.

At the outset, I note my dissatisfaction with the undue haste with which the legislative package, the bill itself and the accompanying explanatory statement that my colleague, the committee chairman, Senator CRAIG, will include at the end of his remarks, was assembled.

Because of the way this legislation was negotiated, we were not able to reach final agreement on its contents until Wednesday morning, just two days ago. At that time, the chairman of the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee for the first time agreed to negotiate on a particular provision passed by the House relating to a construction project in South Carolina. As a consequence of his belated agreement to enter into discussions, we were able to arrive at a compromise, a result that we could have achieved in September.

Because the final agreement was reached so late in the session, staff of the two committees and from the two Offices of Legislative Counsel, worked many long hours trying to accomplish the nearly impossible task of assembling the bill, which is over 160 pages, and then drafting an explanatory statement on the legislation.

In the best of times, such a process can easily take a week or more. We were forced to try to do it all in just 2 days. It is near certainty that this haste has led to the inclusion of errors in both the legislation and the explanatory statement, errors which could have been caught and remedied had there been sufficient time. This is certainly no way to do our business and, to the extent it will be in our power, we will not legislate this way in the future.

That said, the bill is now before the Senate, and I will touch on some of the key provisions.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has been tasked with meeting the needs of those who serve in the military, with a particular emphasis on those injured during their service. A number of provisions in the compromise agreement are intended to help VA fulfill that obligation.

Often, the types of injuries endured in combat are invisible in nature. We must make sure that returning servicemembers receive the readjustment and mental health care services they need for a seamless reintegration to civilian life. Provisions in the compromise agreement seek to do just that by establishing VA systemwide guidelines for screening primary care patients for potential mental health issues, as well as appropriately training clinicians to carry out mental health consultations. Identifying the need for assistance is the first step; this measure also provides for the next step by ensuring that VA has the capacity to furnish mental health services at every VA community-based outpatient clinic.

Because veterans often seek readjustment counseling and other mental health care in their own communities, it is imperative that VA’s veterans centers are able to provide needed services. The compromise agreement contains provisions, derived from S. 716, legislation I introduced which cleared the Senate nearly a year ago, which would authorize resources needed by

veterans centers to carry out their long standing mission of helping veterans. These provisions would also help ensure that VA has sufficiently trained outreach workers to encourage veterans to seek assistance. Veterans centers provide veterans with a safe place to turn for readjustment counseling or assistance; they make over 100,000 referrals a year for benefits and VA medical services. In addition to providing counseling services to veterans, family members too can find solace at veterans centers. This legislation would clarify that parents of those servicemembers who have died would be eligible to receive bereavement counseling at veterans centers.

The compromise agreement also addresses the goal of encouraging and supporting alternatives to institutional long-term care. It includes provisions derived from S. 2753, a bill I introduced, that was designed to promote assistance to those who look after veterans, especially in noninstitutional, home-based settings. The relevant provision in the compromise agreement would authorize VA to carry out a pilot program to assist family members who care for their disabled loved ones. Caregivers, particularly those who live in rural and geographically remote areas, would receive a helping hand through services such as adult day care and respite care.

Furthermore, the compromise agreement seeks to ensure more appropriate payment for the cost of long-term care provided to certain seriously disabled veterans who are receiving care in State veterans' homes. In January 2006, the committee held field hearings in my home State of Hawaii. Tom Driskill, the president and CEO of Hawaii Health Systems Corporation, testified about the soon-to-be-built State home in Hilo. He said, "The synergy of a combined Federal and State funding of the home has been the catalyst for making this dream a reality." The adjustments this legislation would make to the current cost-sharing arrangement between VA and the States, which are derived from S. 2762, legislation I introduced, will help ensure high quality care in State homes not only in Hawaii, but across the entire Nation.

Currently, care is provided at no cost to the veteran when VA provides institutional, long-term care services to those with service-connected disabilities rated 70 percent or higher in a VA nursing home or a private nursing care facility with which VA contracts. However, when the care is provided in a State veterans' home, VA pays only a per diem to the State, which then may bill the veteran for the remaining costs. This measure would provide for the same payment to State veterans' homes that is provided to community nursing homes.

This compromise agreement also includes a provision from a bill I introduced, S. 1537, that would authorize VA to designate at least two Multiple Sclerosis Centers of Excellence and six Par-

kinson's Disease Research, Education and Clinical Centers. VA centers of excellence have been the model of innovation in the delivery of highly specialized health care and research for chronic disease in the veteran population. Providing a statutory basis for these centers will ensure continued research and development of progressive treatments to help reduce symptoms and improve the quality of life for veterans battling with these neurological diseases. This provision is especially significant as it will be part of Congressman LANE EVANS' legislative legacy, as ranking member of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs. It is fitting that we pay tribute to his service through this measure. I thank my good friend and colleague for his leadership on this issue and for his service to our great Nation, as a marine and in Congress.

The compromise agreement includes a provision that would allow VA to extend its State Cemetery Grants Program to tribal organizations. This change, derived from my bill, S. 2659, would allow for the establishment, expansion, and improvement of veterans cemeteries on trust lands. If enacted, it will enable veterans living on trust lands to have an option for burial much closer to their family members and other loved ones.

Another provision in the compromise would authorize VA to provide home loan guarantees to veterans who want to use their home loan eligibility to purchase stock in a cooperative housing corporation. Under current law, VA is authorized to guarantee loans for eligible veterans and their survivors to build or buy a home, including residential condominiums. In many large cities, housing cooperatives make up a large percentage of available affordable housing. This provision, derived originally from legislation introduced by Senator SCHUMER, would give veterans greater housing choice by allowing them to use their hard-earned benefits to buy shares in a housing cooperative.

In response to the concerns of some individuals, the provisions in the compromise agreement related to allowing veterans and other claimants to hire attorneys to represent them before VA have been modified from what originally passed the Senate earlier this year, so as to allow individuals to hire attorneys only after a notice of disagreement has been filed in a case. This change should result in there being no impact on the claims adjudication system until after VA renders its first final decision. Currently, veterans are prohibited from retaining counsel until after the Board of Veterans' Appeals renders a final decision.

Additionally, I am pleased that we were able to reach a compromise on information security matters. I remain committed to ensuring that VA takes aggressive action to protect our veterans' personal information, and in the event of a data breach, that they provide the affected veterans with appro-

priate identity and credit protection services.

I also express my satisfaction at our success in maintaining the provisions in current law which prohibit the use of appropriated VA health care funds for conducting public and private cost comparison studies. This prohibition protects veterans by precluding the use of scarce health care dollars for other purposes and protects VA employees from efforts to privatize their duties.

This legislation is appropriate and needed at a time when our servicemembers are in harm's way. We must always remember the sacrifices that our servicemembers, both past and present, have made on behalf of this great Nation, and we must do our part to respond to their service by remaining strong in our support of veterans services.

I am proud that our committee continues its tradition of bipartisanship. The effort that produced the final version of this legislation, vital to the continued provision of quality health care and benefits to our Nation's veterans, is just the latest example of that spirit. I thank Senator CRAIG for his leadership and for his cooperation and assistance. I also thank the staff of the majority, especially Bill Cahill, Jon Towers, Amanda Meredith, Helen Walker, and Lupe Wissel, as well as those on the Democratic staff, Kim Lipsky, Alexandra Sardegna, Dahlia Melendrez, Ted Pusey, Michelle Moreno, and Bill Brew for their hard work on this legislation.

At this time, Mr. President, I would like to take the opportunity to wish my warmest aloha to Senator JIM JEFFORDS, who is retiring after 32 years in Congress. The Committee on Veterans' Affairs will be losing one of its finest and most esteemed members. A veteran himself, Senator JEFFORDS has been a strong voice and advocate for veterans. I thank Senator JEFFORDS for his service. He will truly be missed.

I urge my colleagues to support this compromise agreement on behalf of America's veterans and their families.●

RETIREMENT OF ANTHONY J. ZAGAMI

● Mr. STEVENS. Mr. President, a well-respected public servant will soon retire after 40 years of outstanding service to our Government and the American people.

Anthony J. "Tony" Zagami first came to Capitol Hill in 1965, at the age of 13, to serve as a page in the United States Senate. Several years later, Tony returned as an assistant to the Secretary of the Senate. I was the whip for the Republican party at the time, and in this capacity, it was my privilege to work closely with Tony and the Secretary. Tony also spent 9 years as the general counsel to the Joint Committee on Printing, which I was ranking member of from 1987 to 1992.

Tony left the halls of Congress in 1990 to become general counsel at the U.S.