

3/21/2005 This Week in Congress

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March 21, 2005

Dear Friend,

Welcome to "This Week in Congress." I hope you find it useful.

House Passes Legislation to Strengthen Fort Riley, Benefit Troops

On Wednesday, I supported House passage of legislation designed to provide support for our troops serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, for their families at home and for troops based in Fort Riley, Kansas. H.R. 1268, the Emergency Supplemental Wartime Appropriations Act, which passed the House 388 to 43, will provide for better armor, increased benefits to servicemembers' families and more support for the war on terrorism.

The legislation provides protective gear for soldiers operating in the field, including body armor and armored vehicles, electronic jammers to counter roadside bombs and stronger facilities to protect troops against indirect attacks. The legislation also increases the maximum Servicemember Group Life Insurance benefit from \$250,000 to \$400,000 and increases the amount of financial assistance for families of soldiers killed in combat from \$12,420 to \$100,000. Funds are also included in the legislation to train and equip Iraqi and Afghani armed forces.

Additionally, it provides \$22 million to Fort Riley for barracks in order to better mobilize and train forces. Recently, the Department of Defense announced that it would increase Fort Riley's strength by nearly 30 percent, moving in 9,300 troops, family members and new civilian workers with the Sixth Brigade, 25th Infantry Division. This legislation also authorizes \$63 million for preparation and construction of facilities to accommodate the Sixth Brigade.

Having this new brigade at Fort Riley will be a major boost for the post and the entire state. Fort Riley continues to be an integral part of our continued war on terror, and this funding will reaffirm the importance of the post to the mission of the Army.

Passing a Budget Protecting Kansas' Priorities

This week, the House passed a budget that was aimed at holding the line on spending with the goal of cutting the budget deficit in half by 2009. The time for fiscal discipline and accountability is long overdue in our nation's capital.

However, while I am supportive of efforts to reduce our national debt, I do not think that budget legislation should single out agriculture spending in a disproportionate way. My goal with this budget was to make certain that agriculture spending was treated fairly and that farmers and ranchers have a say in our budget process. While there is always room for improvement, I was happy that the House was able to restore several billion in cuts to the agriculture budget from the President's initial proposal.

The Senate passed their own version of the budget so now House and Senate negotiators will need to meet in order to iron out the differences. I will keep you updated as progress is made on this issue.

Meeting with President Bush to Discuss Social Security

On Wednesday, I joined a dozen of my colleagues in meeting with President Bush and Vice President Cheney at the White House to discuss with the President thoughts on Social Security. The president discussed the latest developments in Iraq and the potential for stability and democracy in that part of the world. The President also outlined his desire to work with Congress to improve Social Security and indicated that he had a strong desire to work closely with Congress in a bipartisan manner to strengthen the program. President Bush also reiterated his belief that personal accounts can contribute to the future of young workers and the solvency of the Social Security system.

I explained to President Bush the anxiety that many of Kansas' seniors have regarding personal accounts. I look forward to working with the president to find a solution to the prosperity of the social security program for today's and tomorrow's retirees. We must fulfill the promise that was made to our current generation of retirees, while strengthening the system so that it may be around for the next generation.

Honoring Vietnam Veteran, Darrell Loreg of Hays

On Saturday, I presented Darrell Loreg of Hays with his Purple Heart medal from his service in Vietnam. Members of the local chapter of the Vietnam Veterans of America, along with Mr. Loreg's wife, Janice, and their children, Theresa of Savannah, Missouri and Anthony of Hays, joined Mr. Loreg and me for the ceremony. I was pleased to correct this oversight and finally present Mr. Loreg with the medal that he earned and deserves.

Mr. Loreg volunteered to join the Army in 1967. He was initially trained at Fort Huachuca, Arizona as a mechanic and later at Fort Benning, Georgia for jump school. Following this training, in 1968, Loreg was sent to Vietnam for 13 months. He earned his Purple Heart on March 14, 1969, when he was injured during a mortar attack on his base camp.

The men and women who have sacrificed greatly for our nation's future deserve the honors that they have earned. Presenting this medal is important to demonstrate that America stands behind its veterans and is proud of them.

Working to Open Trade with Cuba

On Wednesday, the House Agriculture Committee held a hearing on the importance of Cuba as an export market. Annually, the U.S. exports over \$750 million a year to Cuba in agriculture goods, making it the twenty-third largest market in the world. This past February, I introduced legislation to clarify federal regulations for agriculture trade with Cuba.

Cuba is an important market for Kansas farmers. The current 40-year old U.S. policy toward Cuba has just not worked. Kansas farmers have sold thousands of metric tons of wheat and other commodities to the island-nation since 2000, when legislation I introduced became law. We must continue to expand our trade with them, not only to benefit American agriculture, but also to further the development of democracy in this communist nation.

Increasing Access to Kansas Colleges and Universities

On Tuesday, I attended a breakfast for Kansas TRIO programs. TRIO consists of three programs, Talent Search, Upward Bound and Student Support Services, all of which help low-income, first-generation college students find, attend and stay in college. I am proud to be a member of the Congressional TRIO Caucus, a group of Members of Congress committed to supporting TRIO programs and the students they serve. In attendance at the breakfast were students, teachers and administrators from Emporia State, Kansas State, University of Kansas, Wichita State and Barton County Community College.

I was glad to hear students share their success stories and spend time with teachers and administrators who are so dedicated to making success a reality.

Working to Keep Government Open and Accountable

This week, I became the first sponsor of H.R. 867, the Open Government Act. The legislation is designed to hold federal agencies more accountable to the media and members of the public who have filed Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. Currently, FOIA requests must be responded to within 20 days by agencies. The Open Government Act reduces this time to 10 days and imposes consequences for agencies that fail to meet the 10-day time limit.

The Open Government Act also broadens the definition of "news media" to include all types of news media, including smaller, non-traditional outlets. In addition, the legislation strengthens FOIA by closing loopholes, tightening time limits for government agencies and forcing agencies to respond to FOIA requests in a timely manner.

There is no question but that government must be open and accountable to the people it serves. The Freedom of Information Act is an essential part of providing a necessary check and balance on the federal government. This legislation will promote accountability, accessibility and openness in government. Over 30 national organizations from across the political spectrum support the Open Government Act, including the conservative Heritage Foundation, the American Library Association and the American Civil Liberties Union.

Building Stronger Communities

This week, I signed on to H.R. 341, known as the Community Services Block Grant Act (CSBGA). This legislation seeks to renew CSBGA, to extend programs that are funded by this program and allow local organizations to have the authority to set goals and tailor CSBGA programs to their communities' individual needs. Community Service Block Grant funds are used in Kansas to help low-income Kansans find resources for housing, child care, job training, and other life skills. These programs provide a valuable service in our communities, and I am glad to be a part of continuing this block grant program.

Celebrating National Ag Day and Farm Bureau

On Thursday, I celebrated National Ag Day to highlight the important role that agriculture plays in our daily lives. We must continue this way of life-a Kansas way of life-if our communities and country are to survive into the future.

Also this week, I was able to meet with over 170 Kansas Farm Bureau members who were in Washington, D.C. for their annual County Presidents visit. This meeting was a good opportunity to provide these Kansans with an agriculture update from Capitol Hill. Among the issues I discussed with folks were beef trade with Japan, the upcoming farm bill and the proposed agriculture budget and what that could mean for our farmers and ranchers.

Kansas Cities and Counties Meet in Washington, D.C.

This week, we also had a number of representatives from First District cities and counties in the office for their annual meetings. In the office from Emporia were Mayor Raymond Toso, Vice-Mayor Julie Johnson, City Commissioner Tom Myers and City Attorney Blaise Plummer to discuss homeland security funding, the president's budget, highway and justice department programs and funding for the Emporia Municipal Airport.

In from the Salina Airport Authority were Tim Rogers, Gerald Cook of the Salina Area Chamber of Commerce and Dennis Kuhlman, Dean of K-State Salina, Dr. Charles Reagan, Associate to the President, K-State who were in to discuss future improvements for the Salina Municipal Airport including hangar and apron repairs. During the meeting, the group presented me with a picture of Virgin Atlantic's GlobalFlyer on its final approach to the Salina airport.

Abilene City Manager Mark Arbuthnot, and City Commissioners John Zutavern and Devin Karraker were in to discuss homeland security issues, housing and infrastructure needs with the arrival of a new division at Fort Riley and the World War II memorial at the Eisenhower Presidential Library.

In the office from the City of Hutchinson were Mayor Brad Dillon and City Attorney Carolyn Patterson, who discussed a number of issues facing the Hutchinson community, including the downtown Streetscape Project, Cow Creek Restoration and groundwater remediation.

Phillipsburg High School Students Complete Annual Trip

Since first being elected to Congress in 1997, I have enjoyed my annual visits from Barbara Dennis and her students from northwest Kansas. This year was no different. On Wednesday, I joined Barbara and almost 90 high school students from the Kensington, Logan, Smith Center and Phillipsburg areas for their visit to our nation's capital. Following their visit to Washington, D.C., Barbara takes the students to New York City, where she tours museums, Broadway shows and ice-skating in Rockefeller Center.

This trip provides an excellent and educational trip for these young Kansans, and I am proud of the work of Barbara and her tireless volunteers who make this happen each year.

In the Office

Among those visiting my Washington, D.C. office this week were Smoky Hill Education Service Center representatives Rita Cook and Larry Patrick of Salina. They were in to discuss funding for the center. Bonnie Baker and Joe Gingrich of Hutchinson were in with the Ecumenical Advocacy Gathering for Peace and Justice to discuss helping vulnerable populations and ending hunger issues. Also in the office was Dr. Richard Lochamy of Junction City, on behalf of the Geary County Community Hospital. Dr. Lochamy was in Washington, D.C. this week to be honored as the Kansas Physician of the Year.

Karl Sprague of Great Bend, Connie Vogts of Satanta, Jill Vincent of Iola, Carla Voran of Paola and Jodi Mackey of Topeka were in on behalf of the Kansas Foods Service to discuss child nutrition issues. Also in the office were Kent Romaine of Great Bend, Bill Wiley of Lyndon, Terry Reschke of Hiawatha and Dennis Hupe and Kenlon Johannes from Topeka, with the Kansas Soybean Association to discuss renewable fuel issues and biodiesel. Barth Crouch of Salina was in from Pheasants Forever to discuss the upcoming farm bill, as was Ken McCauley, a farmer from White Cloud. Matt Jackson was in from Junction City with the Kansas State Council of Fire Fighters to discuss medical coverage for firefighters and public safety concerns.

Attorney General Phill Kline stopped by the office this week while he was in Washington, D.C. for meetings.

Neil, Evan and Myrna Neaderhiser of Miltonvale were also in the office. Neil is temporarily stationed at the Pentagon, and Evan and Myrna were visiting. Dr. Rick Nida from Emporia State University was in to meet with representatives from the Veterans Administration to discuss developing curriculum about Veterans' Day.

In for a tour of the U.S. Capitol this week were Salina Mayor Monte Shadwick and his wife Janelle and their children,

Sam, Will and Tom. Also in for a tour was Bonnie Baker of Hutchinson, Greg and Kay Hainer and children Rachel and Kelsie of Dodge City, Bill Maddy and his daughter Hannah of Ellinwood and Valeria Romine and her son Chad of Great Bend, along with Mitch and Susan Nickerson of Hays. Students visiting the office this week were Jolaine Fowler from Elkhart in with Congressional Youth Leadership Council and Cassandra Edgerton of Salina, Kelsey Fowler of Emporia, Jamie Kratky of Wilson, Angela Landis of Brookville, Lacey Ninemire of Lenora and Jacob Perkinson who were in on behalf of Presidential Classroom.

Very truly yours,

Jerry