

The U.S. Forces-Iraq flag was furled during a ceremony in Baghdad last Thursday signaling the official end to the American military presence in Iraq. While history will be the ultimate judge of our successes and failures, at this time, we are most thankful for the opportunity to welcome home our service members this holiday season.

I recall sitting in the Speaker's chair in the U.S. House when the Iraq war began. Since then, I have visited Iraq three times over the last eight years, meeting with our military men and women in the field. I have visited several military hospitals in Iraq, Germany and in the U.S. to thank the wounded for their service. Most profoundly, I have been privileged to represent a grateful nation in sharing with grieving families the loss of their loved ones in the line of duty.

During this season of hope, we not only thank our military personnel for their service, but we stand beside them as they come home and return to civilian life. May God bless them and their families, and may we never forget those who put their lives on the line to protect freedom at home and around the world.

Congress Passes Improved Defense Bill:

One way our nation can support our military is by ensuring that they have adequate equipment to perform their missions as effectively and as safely as possible.

Accordingly, last week the House and the Senate each passed the final version of the new defense budget, the fiscal year 2012 National Defense Authorization Act.

In addition to funding our military operations in Afghanistan and supporting our national defense programs, the new defense bill also invests in the quality of life of our military personnel. It boosts military pay and protects TRICARE from steep increases.

The final version of the defense authorization bill that passed Congress last week also clarified language in an earlier version that required military custody for foreign-born terrorists engaged in plots to attack the United States. This provision only applies to individuals who are part of, or have substantially supported, Al-Qaeda or associated forces and have participated in the

course of planning or carrying out an attack or attempted attack against the United States or its coalition partners.

It is vital that terrorists bent on waging war against American freedom be treated in accordance with laws governing enemy combatants, and not as common criminals. However, in response to concerns that the defense bill language did not specifically exclude American citizens from such detention, the new defense bill explicitly exempts U.S. citizens. No statute contained in this legislation infringes on any constitutional right to due process of any American citizen.

Additionally, the defense authorization bill prohibits the Secretary of Defense from using federal funds to transfer or release terrorist detainees at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, to the United States. However, it does require the Secretary of Defense to establish a review process to determine whether the continued detention of individuals detained at Guantanamo Bay is necessary to protect U.S. national security.

Focus on Jobs:

Alabama's unemployment rate fell by more than a half percent last month from 9.3 to 8.7 percent. This follows a drop of a half percent from September to October. Every county in Southwest Alabama saw a slight decrease in unemployment in November.

While these numbers are moving in the right direction, we all agree they are not nearly what they should be. As our state and national economy continues to struggle out of the effects of the worst recession since the Great Depression, the U.S. House has passed 28 separate bills to spur business growth and ultimately, more hiring. Unfortunately, none of these bills have been considered by the Senate. Nothing is more frustrating to me than to see so much effort in the House to aid our economy simply being ignored.

The most recent example is legislation passed last week in the House to extend the payroll tax cut for working Americans while also removing restrictions for the construction of a much-needed oil pipeline from Canada to the U.S. While the president also wants to see a continuation of the temporary payroll tax cut to give workers a break, both he and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid are opposed to the job-creating oil pipeline project, at least until after 2012. America needs both jobs and a more reliable source for energy than depending

upon unfriendly countries.

As the year nears an end, I am hopeful that Senator Reid and President Obama will work with the House to pass this important legislation to help existing workers, create new jobs and increase our access to affordable energy resources.

My staff and I work for you. If we can ever be of service, do not hesitate to call my office toll free at 1-800-288-8721.

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