

Leadership. Character. Commitment.

U.S. Senator Robert C. Byrd

Remarks by Senator Byrd

February 01, 2004

Fighting for Working Families

I am deeply honored to have been selected to receive the "Senator Paul D. Wellstone Award" from the United Steelworkers of America. Having spent over 50 years in the United States Senate, I have served with hundreds of Senators, and I can tell you that Paul Wellstone was the genuine article. He was authentic. He was a Senator whose heart was in the right place -- with those of us who are vocal and committed advocates for America's working men and women: the farmer; the miner; and the American steelworker. The son of Russian immigrants, he worked tirelessly to promote ideals that are important to you and to me, to all working Americans.

Paul Wellstone shared my strong belief that the Bush Administration's decision to initiate a preemptive strike against Iraq was a serious mistake. He took a courageous stand against it, and we continue to learn how right he was to do so.

Just this last week, we heard Dr. David Kay, the former top U.S. weapons inspector in Iraq, state unequivocally that the entire premise of the Administration's *causus belli* was a sham. Dr. Kay confirmed what many of us believed from the start: that Saddam Hussein's WMD programs did not present an imminent threat to the United States.

Senator Wellstone died on October 25, 2002, in a plane crash on the Minnesota Iron Range, where he was flying to attend the funeral of Frank Rukavina – a former steelworker. In a television ad that was set to begin airing that same day, Paul made a statement that still resonates deeply with all of us here today. He said, "I don't represent the big oil companies, I don't represent the big pharmaceutical companies, I don't represent the Enrons of this world. But, you know what? They already have great representation in Washington. It's the rest of our people that need it." How right he was.

My friends, the challenges faced by working Americans has never been greater. Those challenges are exacerbated by an Administration that has no understanding of the needs of working families. The Bush Administration, which is ever eager to feed at the trough of corporate largesse, does so at the expense of America's working families. We know where George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, and Karl Rove pitch their tents. Not in our camp.

Not in our camp, where America's hard-working families need accessible health care and seniors live in desperate need of affordable prescription drugs;

Not in our camp, where workers are losing their pensions while corporate CEOs earn millions for simply putting on a tie, pulling up their socks, and making campaign contributions to the Committee to Reelect George Bush;

Not in our camp, where these same CEOs are moving their companies overseas to "outsource" American jobs; and

Not in our camp, where American steelworkers who have worked a lifetime are seeing their economic security shattered when U.S. steel companies are driven into bankruptcy by dumped and unfairly subsidized imports blessed by the WTO.

On October 27, 2000, standing before hundreds of steelworkers in West Virginia, with Weirton Steel Corporation in the background, then-vice presidential candidate Dick Cheney pledged to help the U.S. steel industry. According to the Associated Press account, Mr. Cheney explicitly vowed to the steelworkers in attendance there, that, "We will never lie to you. If our trading partners violate our trading laws, we will respond swiftly and firmly." That was prior to the 2000 election, when Mr. Bush and Mr. Cheney needed West Virginia's five key electoral votes.

For a short time after the election, the Administration remembered its words. It imposed Section 201 tariffs on imported foreign steel. But for only a short time. Then, the White House developed amnesia. Its promise to America's steelworkers was mysteriously forgotten. Faced with the mere "threat" of retaliation from the European Community, the President cowered and then caved: he lifted the Section 201 tariffs 16 months prior to their scheduled termination. Ambassador Zoellick said the tariffs had served their purpose. But the politically independent, quasi-judicial International Trade Commission said the tariffs were still needed to help the industry restructure.

Mr. Cheney in 2000 had promised that the Bush White House would "Stand Up For Steel." Apparently the concern expressed by the Bush White House for the U.S. steel industry was lip service and nothing more.

Let's examine a few more facts.

Only a few days before Christmas, I received reports that the Administration was about to add insult to injury. It was attempting to rescind funds from the Emergency Steel Loan Guarantee Program. I helped to enact this program in 1999, to help U.S. steel companies in financial distress obtain capital to retool and create jobs. Now, however, the White House is attempting to abolish the program and any jobs it would create.

Alarmed by this ham-handed, additional attempt by the Bush Administration to cripple American steel, on December 22, 2003, I contacted the Comptroller General of the United States. I asked him whether the Bush White House could legitimately rescind funds from this critical jobs program. On January 15, the Comptroller General of the United States responded by advising me that the Bush Administration has absolutely no legal authority to rescind any funds from the Emergency Steel Loan Guarantee Program.

These are the facts.

If that weren't enough, the Bush Administration's Fiscal Year 2004 budget called for the repeal of the Continued Dumping and Subsidy Offset Act (CDSOA), also known as the Byrd Amendment. Because of this trade law, millions of dollars have been distributed to deserving U.S. companies and workers across the nation. But the Bush Administration wants to take this law off the books and pretend it never existed.

So, less than three years after Dick Cheney's vow to help America's steelworkers, the White House is taking an axe to at least three critical lifelines that were created specifically to assist America's steel industry and its workers. Because the White House refuses to do anything to protect them; I am doing everything I can to save them.

On December 9, 2003, I introduced a bill to reinstate the Section 201 tariffs for their full term, through March 2005. On January 22, 2004, the Senate passed the fiscal year 2004 omnibus appropriations conference report, which includes – over White House objections – a provision I included which provides a two-year extension of the Emergency Steel Loan Guarantee Program. It also includes – over White House objections – language I included that directs the Bush Administration to defend and protect the

Byrd Amendment. The White House is now claiming that this language, passed by both houses of Congress, is simply "advisory."

These are the facts.

When the Bush-Cheney ticket needed West Virginia's votes in 2000, it pledged to help America's steelworkers. The Bush White House might have forgotten the promises it made to the U.S. steel industry back then, but I won't forget them. And I don't think you will forget them, either.

I grew up, the son of a coal miner, in Southern West Virginia. I worked as a gas station attendant, a produce salesman, a meat cutter, and a welder. I have met kings and queens, presidents and prime ministers, and famous people from around the world. But I stand here today among some of the greatest people on Earth. You, and people just like you, who get up and go to work everyday, are the people who make this world run. This Administration doesn't seem to know that. But Paul Wellstone knew that. Our work for you, fighting for your causes, is among the most important things that Paul Wellstone and I had in common.

He was not a fair-weather Senator. Nor am I. Those who make promises at election time and then change their tune later; those who offer short-term fixes to your long-term problems -- they do not have your best interests at heart. And they are not worthy of your support.

Paul Wellstone stood up for steel. He stood up for the people of this country. He did what was right. The Bush Administration rolled over. They counted the names on their "wealthy contributor list" and turned their back on steel.

You honor me today. Again, I thank you for presenting this award to me.