I thank the Chair.

Mr. President, I am honored to serve

as an original co-sponsor of the Soldiers’,

Sailors’, Airmen’s, and Marines’

Bill of Rights Act of 1999 in the name

of the hundreds of thousands of men

and women trained to deter, fight, and

win our wars.

I also thank Senators WARNER, ALLARD,

LEVIN, and CLELAND for their bipartisan

support of the legislation’s

universal 4.8 percent pay raise and

thrift savings proposals as well as the

constructive amendments on G.I. bill

reform incorporated in the committee reported

version of the bill.

The Bill of Rights Act legalizes the

concept that military personnel should

receive the same retirement benefits

based not on the arbitrary factor of

when they joined, but on the timeless

standard of willingness to sacrifice.

It is notable, therefore, that the Senate’s

opening legislation of the year increases

soldier pay for the first time in

a generation and strips away the layers

of unfairness in a military retirement

system based solely on the date of

entry rather than the length of service.

Unlike the current arrangement, which

is more generous to active duty personnel

who started working before 1986,

our proposal of benefits and bonuses offers

the same retirement package to all

men and women in uniform who build a

military career of at least 20 years.

Today, we also commit ourselves to a

comprehensive pay raise of 4.8 percent—

the largest since 1982—that narrows

the gap between military and civilian

salaries.

We commit ourselves, as Secretary

Cohen did last month in recommending

salary increases for noncommissioned

and mid-grade commissioned officers,

to retention and promotion bonuses

that reward the skills of 21st century

war fighters.

We commit ourselves for the first

time ever to making long-term savings

plans available to uniformed service

members so that they can build a foundation

for family security.

We commit ourselves to increases the

monthly G.I. benefit for Service people

who serve at least for 2 years while

eliminating the punitive $1,200 entry

fee for young men and women who

want to take advantage of a college

education under this historic program.

And we commit ourselves to financial

independence for the junior enlisted

ranks by making available a special

subsistence allowance of $180 per

month as an alternative to food stamp

subsidies. This provision will remove

from the welfare rolls an estimated

11,900 military personnel in the lowest

pay grades.

Beginning last September and continuing

through the new year, the committee

constructed a public record of

the financial and operational strains

that our military people have endured

in recent times.

We found that the total value of the

Army’s retirement package had eroded

by 25 percent since 1986. We also found

that inadequate pay left the Navy

short of 7,000 sailors, the Air Force

short of 2,000 pilots, and the Marine

Corps short of combat engineers by a

threshold of 30 percent.

Last month, General Henry Shelton,

the nation’s senior official in uniform,

told the Armed Services Committee

that ‘‘reforming military retirement

remains the Joint Chiefs highest priority.’’

Echoing General Shelton, the Air

Force Chief of Staff told the committee

that ‘‘restoring the retirement system

as a retention incentive is our top priority.’’

The Commandant of the Marine

Corps told the committee that ‘‘unit

commanders routinely cite dissatisfaction

with . . . retirement . . . as one

of the foremost reasons for separation.’’

And the Chief of Naval Operations

told the Committee that ‘‘pay and retirement

benefits rank among our sailors’

top dissatisfiers.’’

As the chairwoman of the Armed

Services Seapower Subcommittee, I

must report that inadequate pay has

directly strained our maritime Special

Operations forces—famously known as

the Navy SEALS.

The SEALS conduct vital intelligence-

gathering and enemy infiltration

activities in advance of, or as an

alternative to, higher risk conventional

military campaigns. Intense

training schedules and exciting missions

have traditionally held SEAL recruitment

and retention levels traditionally

exceed those for most other

naval components by between 20 and 30

percent.

But today, the SEAL re-enlistment

rate exceeds that for the rest of the

Service by only 2 percent. The SEALS

now face an overall shortfall of 300

men, and the senior enlisted member of

the organization told the San Diego

Tribune last week that while morale

was still high, the pay was too low.

Beyond the SEALS, Mr. President,

the Navy struggles with skilled personnel

shortages throughout the Service.

Thirty-five percent of naval aviators

elect to take retention bonuses while

the Pentagon’s goal in this area stands

at 50 percent. Enlisted retention overall

has decreased 6 to 8 percent below

normal requirements.

Finally, the most acute turnover

rates faced by our sailors come from

the ranks of those who lead them: the

mid-level officers who command our

surface ships and submarines.

The Bill of Rights Act responds in an

aggressive way to these disturbing developments.

With this law, we declare

that while Congress cannot equalize

the financial benefits of all Armed

Services and private sector jobs, it can

devise compensation plans upholding

the value of military careers regardless

of the state of the economy.

It’s fair to ask, Mr. President, why

the Joint Chiefs did not identify problems

like a ballistic missile strike from

North Korea or Iraq’s chemical weapons

as more serious threats to military

preparedness than pay levels or retirement

benefits.

The answer rests with a fundamental

but overlooked fact: only people can

deliver the capabilities to protect

America and her interests overseas. We

must therefore ensure that the military’s

pay and retirement policies provide

strong retention incentives to

skilled and motivated troops.

Military strength not only comes

from adequate spending on technology

and hardware. It also comes from compensation

packages that inspire officers

and enlisted personnel alike to remain

in service with fair pay and to anticipate

a secure retirement with a fair

pension.

Because the Soldiers’, Sailors’, Airmen’s,

and Marines’ Bill of Rights Act

of 1999 recognizes the critical human

dimension of defense preparedness, I

urge the Senate’s enthusiastic support

for this bill.

I yield the floor.