

remember that issue. He failed to notify Congress. The laws we passed said they had to notify Congress 30 days in advance of any transfer of terrorists to any facility. His failure to adhere to the law he signed placed our Nation's security at great risk.

Let me just mention—I carry this with me. If people realize whom he turned loose, the Taliban Five—this is a statement that was made by the Taliban commander. His name is Mullah Khan. He was talking about Mohammad Fazl. Keep in mind he was arguably the most dangerous person—terrorist—who was being held in Gitmo. He said:

His return is like pouring 10,000 Taliban fighters into the battle on the side of jihad. Now the Taliban have the right lion to lead them in the final moment before victory in Afghanistan.

These are the kinds of people he is turning loose.

According to the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 29 percent of the detainees transferred out of Gitmo have either been confirmed or suspected of returning to the fight and killing Americans. That is how serious this is.

Gitmo is outside the sovereign territory of the United States, which means detainees held there do not have constitutional rights. But if we put them back in the United States, it is very likely they would have those rights.

I have a quote from former U.S. Attorney General Michael Mukasey, who said:

The question of what constitutional rights may apply to aliens in government custody is unsettled, but it is clear from existing jurisprudence that physical presence in the United States would be a significant, if not a decisive, factor.

I am also concerned about the security of the people here who would have to guard these terrorists.

Back when a Thomson, IL, prison was discussed—that was in 2009—Representative MARK KIRK—at that time he was in the House; that was before he was in the Senate—called the move “an unnecessary risk,” and other Illinois Members were concerned that the transfer of prisoners—some for trial and some for indefinite detention—could make the State a target for terrorists. MARK KIRK was then and is now correct that prisons holding these detainees will become magnets, and there is the very real possibility that these detainees would recruit more terrorists.

We have to keep in mind that a terrorist is not a criminal. A terrorist is someone who trains other people to be terrorists, and that is what we would be seeing happening in our courts.

FBI Director Robert Mueller said there is the very real possibility that Gitmo detainees will recruit more terrorists from among the Federal inmate population and continue Al Qaeda operations from outside the country.

I have been to Gitmo several times, as has the occupier of the chair. It is a

state-of-the-art facility that provides humane treatment for all detainees. When I was there, the biggest problem they had with the detainees was that they were overweight. They are all obese because they are eating so well. It is fully in compliance with the Geneva Convention and provides treatment and oversight that exceed any maximum security prison in the world, as tested by human rights organizations such as the Red Cross, Attorney General Holder, and an independent commission led by Admiral Walsh. It is a secure location away from population centers, and it has a \$12 million expeditionary legal complex. That is a courtroom. We can't use our courtrooms because of the confidentiality of information that is extracted from these individuals and used in the courtroom, so they use the expeditionary legal complex.

The last thing I would say is that it is clear that—and this comes from former CIA Director Leon Panetta. He was talking about the fact that our President—talking about the way they were able to get the bad guy, and what they have refused to understand is the information they extracted at Gitmo was used to actually capture Osama bin Laden.

Anyway, we don't want that to happen, we can't afford to let that happen, and we are going to do everything we can to keep the President from making that happen. This has become an obsession of his, and we are not going to let that happen.

BURUNDI

Lastly, I do want to mention that on this whole issue in Burundi right now, we have to understand in this country that there are other nations that have their own systems of government. They are the ones that have their elections. In this case, I happened to be there in Burundi when the court declared that the incumbent President, Nkurunziza, was qualified to run again, even though they have a term limit. The first term was not a complete term, so that didn't count, according to the court. For us to come in afterward and say “Well, we think the court was wrong, we don't think he is qualified to run, and we are going to withhold things from that country” is something we should not be doing in this country.

I can assure my colleagues that the six Members who went with me over there were all on the scene and agreed that Nkurunziza should be legitimately elected, and we should stay out of their business.

With that, I yield the floor.

RECESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate stands in recess until 2:15 p.m.

Thereupon, the Senate, at 1:39 p.m., recessed until 2:15 p.m. and reassembled when called to order by the Presiding Officer (Mr. PORTMAN).

DRIVE ACT—Continued

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the time until 2:45 p.m. is equally divided.

The Senator from Mississippi.

Mr. WICKER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to speak for 10 minutes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. WICKER. Mr. President, in a few moments we are going to vote on a motion to instruct the conferees on the highway bill. It will be a motion to instruct them not to proceed with a Federal mandate that would force these long double trailers called twin 33s on the 38 States where currently they are illegal.

This Senator would observe that it is not often we get a chance to vote on a motion that will accomplish so much. We are going to get a chance in 30 minutes or so to vote on a motion that will save lives. It is a motion that would prohibit a Federal mandate, that supports small business, and that would save \$1.2 billion to \$1.8 billion per year in highway maintenance. It is a vote that is supported by an overwhelming majority of the American people. This is a rare opportunity for us to come together on a motion that does all of those things.

It is also a bipartisan motion to instruct. It will be sponsored by the Senator from California, Senator FEINSTEIN, and there will be bipartisan votes for the motion on both sides of the aisle.

Now, why are we here? The motion is here because it stems from an amendment in the Appropriations Committee to the Transportation appropriations bill, which would require every State to allow these twin 33-foot trailers on Federal highways. Currently some 12 States do allow them. They have a right to do that, and if they made a considered decision in their State legislatures and in consultation with their departments of transportation, then more power to them.

Well, 38 States say that these trucks are not safe and that these trucks are too long. They tell us they don't want them on the highways. I think we should respect that decision by these 38 States.

Who supports the Wicker-Feinstein motion to instruct the conferees? I go back to the point that this is a vote to save lives. Who says this? AAA, a respected nationwide organization that knows quite a bit about highway safety, says support the Wicker amendment. Don't mandate on 38 States something they don't want to do with these extra long trucks.

I would point out on this diagram the size of the average passenger car. Look how much longer this proposed twin 33 double rig with the tractor part on the front is. Frankly, the American people don't want to contend with these long double trailers on their roads.

The Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety say this isn't safe. A “yes” vote

on the Wicker-Feinstein motion would be a vote for safety.

The National Troopers Coalition—we ought to listen to them—say these trucks are not safe, and at the very least, there should be no mandate from Washington, DC. In the time remaining, I would suggest to Members and legislative staff back in their offices to call their local troopers in their various States and see what the troopers say about this. I will tell you that troopers in State after State say don't mandate these long trucks. Sheriff's associations say don't mandate these long trucks.

Chiefs of police say don't mandate these long, twin 33 double trailers. So you may ask yourself what a chief of police in a municipality has to do with this. Aren't we talking about interstate highways and big old Federal highways? Not true at all. I don't know about you, but in the place where I live, if something comes in by truck, they bring it right into town. So the chiefs of police say: We don't want these twin 33s on our two-lane streets; we don't want them on the two-lane highways. That would be the result of the mandate that is contained in the appropriations bill unless we turn that around.

Who else is opposed to mandating twin 33s on the 38 States that don't want them? The State trucking associations are opposed to this mandate. One would think that the truckers would be for this. After all, if you are a big enough trucking company and you have enough money, you can buy the truck, haul more, and make more money. That is the idea, but we need to bear in mind that most of the truckers in the United States are small business owners. Frankly, some of them have told me that if this mandate on all 50 States is passed, they are going out of business.

We have resolutions from the Mississippi Trucking Association, the Arizona Trucking Association, Louisiana Trucking Association, and we have an alliance of small business truckers from States that include Indiana, Texas, Tennessee, Nebraska, Louisiana, Maryland, Washington, Iowa, Mississippi, Arizona, Pennsylvania, Oregon, and Arkansas—and I can go on. Trucking companies and small truckers in all of these States are saying: Please don't put us out of business by having us try to compete with these large twin 33s.

I would submit to my colleagues that 20 minutes from now we are going to have a vote. This is the only opportunity that 100 Senators elected by the people of the 50 States will have to address this issue. This vote we are going to take in just a few moments will send a strong signal to the people in some office here on Capitol Hill, in some room on Capitol Hill, where they are devising the Omnibus appropriations bill. We need to send a strong signal to them that we don't want this mandate in the omnibus. We don't want the mandate in the highway bill.

We need a strong vote. This is a chance to vote on how we stand with small business in our States, with the troopers, the sheriffs, the chiefs of police, the trucking associations, and the advocates for highway safety.

I would urge my colleagues to thoroughly consider this in the next 20 or 25 minutes. When you come to vote, a "yes" vote will be a vote to avoid the Federal mandate. I urge my colleagues to join me on a bipartisan basis—and I believe they will join me on a bipartisan basis—in allowing the 38 States that opt out of this to continue to do so, making a stand for small business, for the States' decisionmaking, and for safety.

Mr. President, I understand we are going to move to a vote at 2:45 p.m.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. That is correct.

Mr. WICKER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the remaining time while we are in quorum calls be divided equally between the parties.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. WICKER. I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mrs. BOXER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mrs. BOXER. Mr. President, we are about to vote on whether we want to go to conference with our Transportation bill that passed this body with well over 60 votes in July. We have been pushing hard—Senators on both sides of the aisle—to move the House toward a situation where we can finally go to conference and reconcile the two bills. We are at that point, and I certainly hope we get a very solid vote.

I am also hopeful the Wicker-Feinstein motion does succeed, and I certainly will try my best to raise it in the conference. We still have about 1.5 million unemployed construction workers since the recession. We have seen terrific job growth, but we know it hasn't hit all the sectors, so this is an extremely important bill.

Also, we know that thousands in businesses rely on a robust highway trust fund. Whether it is the granite people, the cement people, they are all for going to conference. Whether it is the international association of machinists or it is the labor union, the chamber of commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers, it is a rare and glorious occasion to see everybody come together and say: Let's get a bill.

We want to have a robust bill. We don't want to have a bill that is business as usual and this is why—we have 60,000 bridges that are deficient. They were not built with the kinds of traffic they are now withstanding in mind, so we must have this vote to go to conference.

I thank the majority leader, Senator MCCONNELL, for his work and the Democratic leader, Senator REID. I also extend my thanks to Senator CANTWELL, who worked so hard with other Senators on this side to get Ex-Im included in this bill. We will have the Export-Import reauthorization in this bill.

I am very excited to get to conference. My goal is just to put it on the table, to bring to that conference the bipartisan spirit we had when we did this bill in the Senate. When I thank both the majority leader and the Democratic leader, it is because they put strong people on this conference. I think it is going to be a strong conference. We have a lot of similarities. Somebody who looked at both bills said the House bill is about 90 percent similar to the Senate bill. This is a good thing. This means we don't have to take our time because the trust fund, the authorization runs out very soon, right before Thanksgiving. So it is a good moment for the Senate.

I think we showed leadership on both sides of the aisle on getting this bill done. We continue to work well together, both leaders have sent strong conferees to the conference. I know our staffs are already speaking, and I am hopeful we get a strong vote, which I think we are going to have in a few minutes. Am I correct it is about 3 minutes from that vote?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. That is correct.

Mrs. BOXER. All right. So in 3 minutes I hope we have a solid vote to take our bill to conference with the House, where I will work very closely with Chairman SHUSTER and the rest.

The last point I make is I read that Congressman DEFAZIO—who is our Democratic ranking member in the House T&I Committee—has had a very serious eye situation and had to go for emergency surgery. I wish to say my heart is with him. He is a very important person in terms of weighing in on the transportation needs. I will work with him, I will speak with him, and I am very hopeful that although he may not be present—I hope he will be present for the conference—if he is not, I wish to reassure him that we will take his concerns into this conference.

I am looking forward to a strong vote.

I yield the floor.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to yield back all time and proceed.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, all time is yielded back.

CLOTURE MOTION

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Pursuant to rule XXII, the Chair lays before the Senate the pending cloture motion, which the clerk will state.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

CLOTURE MOTION

We, the undersigned Senators, in accordance with the provisions of rule XXII of the Standing Rules of the Senate, do hereby move to bring to a close debate on the motion to disagree to the amendment of the

House, agree to the request from the House for a conference, and authorize the Presiding Officer to appoint conferees with respect to H.R. 22.

Mitch McConnell, Mike Rounds, Lamar Alexander, Johnny Isakson, Deb Fischer, John Cornyn, Chuck Grassley, Thad Cochran, Joni Ernst, Cory Gardner, John Thune, Daniel Coats, Orrin G. Hatch, John Barrasso, James M. Inhofe, Thom Tillis, Roy Blunt.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. By unanimous consent, the mandatory quorum call has been waived.

The question is, Is it the sense of the Senate that debate on the motion to disagree to the amendment of the House, agree to the request from the House for a conference, and authorize the Presiding Officer to appoint conferees with respect to H.R. 22 shall be brought to a close?

The yeas and nays are mandatory under the rule.

The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk called the roll.

Mr. CORNYN. The following Senators are necessarily absent: the Senator from Idaho (Mr. CRAPO), the Senator from Texas (Mr. CRUZ), the Senator from Colorado (Mr. GARDNER), the Senator from South Carolina (Mr. GRAHAM), the Senator from Nevada (Mr. HELLER), the Senator from Wisconsin (Mr. JOHNSON), the Senator from Kentucky (Mr. PAUL), the Senator from Florida (Mr. RUBIO), and the Senator from Louisiana (Mr. VITTER).

Further, if present and voting, the Senator from Nevada (Mr. HELLER) would have voted "yea" and the Senator from Louisiana (Mr. VITTER) would have voted "yea."

Mr. DURBIN. I announce that the Senator from Vermont (Mr. LEAHY) and the Senator from Virginia (Mr. WARNER) are necessarily absent.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. LANKFORD). Are there any other Senators in the Chamber desiring to vote?

The yeas and nays resulted—yeas 82, nays 7, as follows:

[Rollcall Vote No. 303 Leg.]

YEAS—82

Alexander	Ernst	Murphy
Ayotte	Feinstein	Murray
Baldwin	Fischer	Nelson
Barrasso	Franken	Peters
Bennet	Gillibrand	Portman
Blumenthal	Grassley	Reed
Blunt	Hatch	Reid
Booker	Heinrich	Roberts
Boozman	Heitkamp	Rounds
Boxer	Hirono	Sanders
Brown	Hoeben	Schatz
Burr	Inhofe	Schumer
Cantwell	Isakson	Scott
Capito	Kaine	Sessions
Cardin	King	Shaheen
Carper	Kirk	Stabenow
Casey	Klobuchar	Sullivan
Cassidy	Lankford	Tester
Coats	Manchin	Thune
Cochran	Markey	Tillis
Collins	McCain	Toomey
Coons	McCaskill	Udall
Cornyn	McConnell	Warren
Cotton	Menendez	Whitehouse
Daines	Merkley	Wicker
Donnelly	Mikulski	Wyden
Durbin	Moran	
Enzi	Murkowski	

NAYS—7

Corker	Perdue	Shelby
Flake	Risch	
Lee	Sasse	

NOT VOTING—11

Crapo	Heller	Rubio
Cruz	Johnson	Vitter
Gardner	Leahy	Warner
Graham	Paul	

The PRESIDING OFFICER. On this vote, the yeas are 82, the nays are 7.

Three-fifths of the Senators duly chosen and sworn having voted in the affirmative, the motion is agreed to.

Under the previous order, the compound motion is agreed to.

The Senator from Mississippi.

MOTION TO INSTRUCT

Mr. WICKER. Mr. President, I have a motion to instruct at the desk.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the motion.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

The Senator from Mississippi [Mr. WICKER] moves that the managers on the part of the Senate at the conference on the disagreeing votes of the two Houses on the Senate amendment to the bill H.R. 22 be instructed to insist upon the inclusion of the following section in title XXXII:

SEC. 32. TRUCK TRACTOR-SEMITRAILER-TRAILER COMBINATION LENGTH LIMITATION.

The Secretary may promulgate a rule to increase the minimum length limitation that a State may prescribe for a truck tractor-semitrailer-trailer combination under section 3111(b)(1)(A) of title 49, United States Code, from 28 feet to 33 feet if the Secretary makes a statistically significant finding, based on the final Comprehensive Truck Size and Weight Limits Study required under section 32801 of the Commercial Motor Vehicle Safety Enhancement Act of 2012 (title II of division C of Public Law 112-141), that such increase would not have a net negative impact on public safety.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Mississippi.

Mr. WICKER. Mr. President, I understand I have 2 minutes. I will speak briefly and then yield to Senator FEINSTEIN.

This is what this is about, these twin 33 double trailers, which are longer than is legal in 38 States. The question is whether we as a Senate, we as a Congress, we as a Federal Government, are going to mandate on the 38 States that don't allow these to allow them on their roads at any rate. So a "yes" vote would be a vote against the Federal mandate.

When do you get in one fell swoop an opportunity to vote—a vote that will save lives, a vote to prevent a Federal mandate, a vote for small business, a vote to save \$1.2 to \$1.8 billion a year in highway maintenance, and a vote supported by the overwhelming majority of the people?

Vote yes not to mandate this on the States.

I yield the floor to the Senator from California.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from California.

Mrs. FEINSTEIN. Mr. President, if we look at that, that is 91 feet with the twin 33s and the cab, 91 feet of truck.

Thirty-eight States do not want that in their States. This bill overwhelms that. We had an amendment in the Appropriations Committee that would prevent that. It was a tie vote.

Senator WICKER and I ask you, please don't force States to do this before the safety work is done by the Secretary. We have 4,000 people killed every year from these trucks in all kinds of horrific accidents—and they are not as long as this one. These trucks would not only be on the freeways, but they would be in the villages, the towns, and the cities as well.

I hope you will support this motion to instruct to protect the 38 States and say: Before you do this, do the safety investigations and tell us these trucks are safe.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there time taken in opposition?

If not, the question is on agreeing to the motion.

Mr. WICKER. I ask for the yeas and nays.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there a sufficient second?

There appears to be a sufficient second.

The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk called the roll.

Mr. CORNYN. The following Senators are necessarily absent: the Senator from Idaho (Mr. CRAPO), the Senator from Texas (Mr. CRUZ), the Senator from Colorado (Mr. GARDNER), the Senator from South Carolina (Mr. GRAHAM), the Senator from Nevada (Mr. HELLER), the Senator from Oklahoma (Mr. INHOFE), the Senator from Wisconsin (Mr. JOHNSON), the Senator from Kentucky (Mr. PAUL), the Senator from Florida (Mr. RUBIO), and the Senator from Louisiana (Mr. VITTER).

Further, if present and voting, the Senator from Louisiana (Mr. VITTER) would have voted "yea."

Mr. DURBIN. I announce that the Senator from California (Mrs. BOXER), the Senator from Vermont (Mr. LEAHY), and the Senator from Virginia (Mr. WARNER) are necessarily absent.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Are there any other Senators in the Chamber desiring to vote?

The result was announced—yeas 56, nays 31, as follows:

[Rollcall Vote No. 304 Leg.]

YEAS—56

Baldwin	Franken	Perdue
Bennet	Gillibrand	Peters
Blumenthal	Grassley	Portman
Booker	Heinrich	Reed
Brown	Hirono	Reid
Burr	Isakson	Sanders
Cantwell	Kaine	Sasse
Cardin	King	Schatz
Carper	Klobuchar	Schumer
Casey	Manchin	Shaheen
Coats	Markey	Stabenow
Cochran	McCain	Tillis
Coons	McCaskill	Toomey
Donnelly	Menendez	Udall
Durbin	Merkley	Warren
Ernst	Mikulski	Whitehouse
Feinstein	Murphy	Wicker
Fischer	Murray	Wyden
Flake	Nelson	

NAYS—31

Alexander	Daines	Risch
Ayotte	Enzi	Roberts
Barrasso	Hatch	Rounds
Blunt	Heitkamp	Scott
Boozman	Hoeven	Sessions
Capito	Kirk	Shelby
Cassidy	Lankford	Sullivan
Collins	Lee	Tester
Corker	McConnell	Thune
Cornyn	Moran	
Cotton	Murkowski	

NOT VOTING—13

Boxer	Heller	Rubio
Crapo	Inhofe	Vitter
Cruz	Johnson	Warner
Gardner	Leahy	
Graham	Paul	

The motion was agreed to.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Connecticut.

MOTION TO INSTRUCT

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, I have a motion to instruct at the desk.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the motion.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

The Senator from Connecticut [Mr. BLUMENTHAL] moves that the managers on the part of the Senate at the conference on the disagreeing votes of the two Houses on the House amendment to the bill H.R. 22 be instructed to insist upon the inclusion of the rail safety provisions contained in the amendment passed by the Senate on July 30, 2015, including the authorization of grants for the installation of positive train control.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. There will be 4 minutes of debate equally divided.

The Senator from Connecticut is recognized.

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, in recent years all of our constituents have seen a scourge in rail accidents. There have been similar accidents all around the country. This motion insists that the Senate's provisions be included in this conference and in what comes out of the conference committee, including the authorization of grants for the installation of positive train control.

This summer, with the leadership of the committee chairman, Senator THUNE, and the ranking member, BILL NELSON, who are both champions of rail safety, in this instance it resulted in some very key reforms, and the Senate passed the DRIVE Act which is not perfect—troublesome in some highway safety elements—but forward thinking on rail safety. It includes funding for PTC, redundant signal protection, improved inspection practices, and a followup on the FRA's deep dive investigation. Along with cameras and grade crossing, these provisions help to advance the cause of rail safety.

The House has done nothing. The House bill is completely and abjectly lacking on rail safety, and therefore this motion instructs our conferees to insist on the Senate's provisions. I know that our conferees will be extremely sympathetic and supportive, but in order to simply to express our views, I ask unanimous consent that this measure be approved and that the motion be taken on a voice vote.

I ask unanimous consent that all remaining time be yielded back.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Without objection, it is so ordered.

The question occurs on agreeing to the motion.

The motion was agreed to.

The Presiding Officer appointed Mr. INHOFE, Mr. THUNE, Mr. HATCH, Ms. MURKOWSKI, Mrs. FISCHER, Mr. BARRASSO, Mr. CORNYN, Mrs. BOXER, Mr. BROWN, Mr. NELSON, Mr. WYDEN, Mr. DURBIN, and Mr. SCHUMER conferees on the part of the Senate.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Missouri.

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. BLUNT. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate be in a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. BLUNT. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that I be allowed to speak for up to 15 minutes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

VETERANS DAY AND LEGISLATION SUPPORTING OUR VETERANS AND TROOPS

Mr. BLUNT. Mr. President, I am honored to represent nearly 500,000 Missouri veterans in the Senate. Tomorrow, on Veterans Day, we pause to reflect on the countless contributions and sacrifices that the men and women who serve in uniform and have served in uniform have made to our country. I hope we will all use this opportunity to recommit ourselves not only to appreciate their service but to be sure that the commitments our government has made to them are commitments that we move forward on and that they are commitments that we look at the time, place, and the veterans being served and decide when they need to be changed. I think one of the things we have done in the last year to create more choices and more competition for veterans is an important step in that direction.

When I introduced the Excellence in Mental Health Act with Senator STABENOW, one of our biggest support groups for that act, which not only would treat behavioral health care like all other health care but would also create more opportunities to access behavioral health care, were the younger veterans. The Iraq and Iran veterans and the veterans from Afghanistan wanted to have more choices and were big supporters of not just traditional VA services but other services as well.

I am pleased that the bill today steps forward in important ways and does things for veterans. The bill we just voted on, the Military Construction and Veterans Affairs appropriations bill, actually reached a record level of funding for veterans services. It increases veterans services by \$7.9 billion

over last year's levels, and it appropriates \$1 billion more than the President asked for.

It was also a bipartisan vote for lots of reasons. There should be no more of a bipartisan cause among all the funding bills than a bill that takes care of veterans and provides the facilities for those who are serving and for their families' needs. This is an important matter for us to address, and this is a great week for us to do it.

This bill provides specific funding for women veterans. I was at a women's veterans clinic in St. Louis recently. This bill includes additional care for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. It provides treatment for the kinds of traumatic brain injuries that veterans often leave the military with today, which they did not have post-9/11 and post the cowardly devices that are used to attack our people in the service.

It increases veterans funding in areas such as health care, benefit claims processing, medical research, and technology upgrades. It also includes funding for construction and renovation of projects that ensure military readiness and improve the quality of life for military families.

As GEN Ray Odierno, the recently retired Chief of Staff of the Army, has said, our military families are the strength of the military. Senator GILLIBRAND and I recently introduced a bill—The Military Families Stability Act—that allows us to do new things. It allows families for educational or professional reasons to stay longer or leave earlier, depending on when the person serving gets transferred. If there is a month of school left or a professional matter that the spouse needs to be a part of and needs to finish a job quickly or go to a job early, why wouldn't we want to allow that to happen through legislation? This legislation looks at military families' needs, among the other things it looks at.

Because of the dissatisfaction that many of our veterans appropriately have with the Veterans' Administration, this bill includes necessary reforms such as protection for whistleblowers, the kind of protection that construction oversight managers need, and it assesses some new measures for construction oversight so that we don't have these facilities costing more than they should cost.

Frankly, if we look at competitive alternatives that veterans should have available to them, it is probably a good time to think about how we could make that program work better—rather than to continue to invest more money in facilities that they have to drive by—with better locations to get to that would give them that choice.

This bill has been ready for months now. I was disappointed the Democrats blocked consideration of this bill earlier this year, but I am pleased that we finally got to a bill that everybody could vote for. It actually shows how shortsighted the lack of willingness was to let us do our work, to bring this