

Let me conclude by repeating Thomas Jefferson's warning:

We must not allow this abuse of fundamental constitutional rights to break up the very foundations of society.

Madam President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Wyoming.

HEALTH CARE

Mr. BARRASSO. Madam President, as I come to the floor today Americans all across the country are paying very close attention to the multiple scandals surrounding the Obama administration—one of the scandals my colleague and friend from Indiana has just so eloquently discussed.

We are seeing headlines all across the country. Today my hometown newspaper, the Casper Star Tribune, had the headline "Trio of Troubles" relating to the Obama administration.

What the American people are seeing from the Obama administration is a high level of incompetence and a very low level of transparency.

Here are just a few of the headlines today in the Washington Post: "Criminal Probe of IRS launched." "Criminal probe of IRS launched. Just below that, 'Leak Probe. Phone-records uproar ends Holder's respite.' That has to do with the Justice Department's secret gathering of records from the Associated Press.

Inside the paper, open it, and there is much more. "Media outlets condemn agency," "Justice Department, IRS scandals challenge Obama's civil liberties credibility."

Other articles in today's paper note the ongoing scandal over the administration's handling of the attack on our consulate in Benghazi. The Washington Post Fact Checker recently gave the President four Pinocchios for his attempt to mislead the public on the issue. The only reason they didn't give him five Pinocchios is you can't get five. Four is the highest rating you can get for misleading and inaccurate information.

Well, we need more details about the Benghazi coverup, the IRS targeting of conservatives, and the Justice Department's decision to monitor members of the media.

Today, though, I want to talk about another important story that raises serious questions about this administration's actions. Of course, I am referring to the abuse of power that I call "the Sebelius shakedown."

This scandal was first reported by the Washington Post on its front page last weekend. Here is the headline. "HHS asking firms for money for ObamaCare." The article goes on to say:

Health and Human Services Secretary, Kathleen Sebelius, has gone hat in hand to health industry officials, asking them to make large financial donations to help with the effort to implement President Obama's landmark health care law.

The article goes on to say:

Over the past 3 months, Sebelius has made multiple phone calls to health industry executives, to community organizations, and to church groups, and asked that they contribute whatever they can to nonprofit groups that are working to enroll uninsured Americans and increase awareness of the law.

Madam President, these are very serious allegations against the Secretary of Health and Human Services. The President's health care law is a disaster that threatens American jobs, threatens American paychecks, and threatens Americans' health care. Instead of facing the reality, though, Secretary Sebelius has called on the exact same companies she regulates—the companies she regulates—to make financial donations to organizations that are trying to make this awful law look better than it is.

Well, the Sebelius shakedown is outrageous. She is the Secretary of Health and Human Services for the country. She holds tremendous power and influence over these companies she regulates. Her words and her requests matter. One industry official with direct knowledge of the Secretary's funding request was quoted in the Washington Post as saying there was a clear insinuation by the administration that insurers should give financially to this effort.

This would be like your boss coming in and standing by your desk and then asking you how many boxes of Girl Scout cookies you plan to buy from the boss's daughter that year.

This kind of conflict of interest would be disturbing even if this were just a minor agency with limited power, but Health and Human Services is not a minor agency. It is one of the most powerful and influential bureaucracies in all of Washington. President Obama's health care law gave Secretary Sebelius unprecedented power to regulate a very large portion of the U.S. economy. She controls a budget of nearly \$1 trillion and oversees health care industries ranging from insurance companies to hospitals.

On top of that, Health and Human Services is currently negotiating with health plans to set premium rates. It is also setting up the government-run health care exchanges and confirming which companies will get to participate in those. That raises the stakes dramatically for these companies, and it puts a tremendous amount of pressure on them to keep the Secretary happy.

Private companies and other organizations should never be put in a position where they could fear for their future based upon their response to inappropriate requests from a member of the President's Cabinet. The American people should never have to wonder if their government is shaking down the very businesses they regulate.

At best, asking health care industry executives to donate money for the administration's health care law enrollment efforts is a blatant conflict of interest. At worst, the Secretary may

have violated the law by increasing Federal spending without congressional authorization. As Congress begins investigating Secretary Sebelius's actions, the American people deserve answers to a number of important questions.

For starters, the American people would like to know who exactly the Secretary called. What did she ask? What specific legal authority permits the Secretary or any other HHS employee to solicit financial donations to implement the health care law? Which HHS officials participated in the decision to ask for these donations? Did anyone else at HHS ask for donations from outside groups and businesses? Did any other Obama administration officials make similar solicitations? What specific steps has Health and Human Services taken to ensure the Obama administration will not favor businesses and organizations that gave money or punish those that did not donate?

Secretary Sebelius had a history of questionable decisions even prior to her latest efforts to shake down the health industry. Back in September 2010, health insurance companies started informing their customers how much the President's health care law would increase the premiums of these individuals. So the Secretary responded by warning insurers the administration would be keeping track of their actions, and that some companies might be "excluded" from health insurance exchanges in 2014.

That was not an idle threat. Medicare's Chief Actuary had predicted in the future that essentially all Americans would buy health insurance through the government exchange. So the Secretary seemed to be threatening that any insurers telling customers the reason behind premium increases—which, of course, would be the President's health care law—could be put out of business.

Most recently, last fall the U.S. Office of Special Counsel concluded that Secretary Sebelius violated the Hatch Act. She did this when campaigning for President Obama when traveling on official government business. Federal workers who violate the Hatch Act are often fired, but Secretary Sebelius was not punished at all.

There are already enough concerns about how the President's health care law will harm the American people. We cannot afford unresolved questions about whether a Cabinet Secretary pressured businesses that she regulates to make donations.

A lot of media attention on these scandals has focused on the political fallout. The politics is not the real issue. The real issue is that the American people need to know their government is not a thug. The real interest of the American people is in knowing they have confidence that their government will act in the people's best interests, not just in President Obama's best interest.

The American people need confidence that the administration is not favoring or punishing the people it regulates based upon their support for the administration's pet causes.

When it comes to these disturbing allegations about Secretary Sebelius and all of the other recent scandals, the American people deserve to know what happened. Yesterday Secretary Sebelius had an opportunity to answer questions. She did not. Today, again Secretary Sebelius had an opportunity to answer questions. Again, according to press reports, she refused to do so.

The American people want answers. Members of the Congress want answers. There are many more questions to be asked.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Illinois.

Mr. DURBIN. I ask unanimous consent to speak as in morning business.

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

TRIBUTE TO SARAH NEIMEYER

Mr. DURBIN. Madam President, once in a while you are lucky enough to meet someone who is down to Earth but uncompromising in their idealism. I met someone just like that in the year 2007, and I hired her for my staff. It was a great decision.

For the better part of 6 years, Sarah Neimeyer has been a senior member of my staff, and this week she left my office for a new adventure which she started today, working with the new Secretary at the Department of the Interior. I am sorry to lose her, but I wish her well.

Sarah comes by her idealism honestly. She grew up in a family of progressives in rural Minnesota. Her dad practiced law and her mom raised honey bees and grew her own vegetables.

From her parents Sarah inherited progressive ideals, practical Midwestern values and a deep love of the land.

During college, she spent her summers leading canoe trips through the Boundary Waters Wilderness in northern Minnesota and Ontario, Canada.

Her first boss in the Senate was a dear friend and one of my personal heroes, Paul Wellstone. Sarah worked for Paul for 10 years. After he passed away, she left Capitol Hill and worked as an advocate for land conservation and wilderness preservation.

Illinois has benefited from Sarah's passion, her practicality and her incredibly hard work.

Lake Michigan is one of Illinois' most beloved treasures. As a member of my staff, Sarah has fought many battles to protect the Lake from threats from toxic dumping to invasive Asian carp.

She has worked alongside energy companies in Illinois that are cleaning up the way energy is produced.

Whenever safe water, clean air and healthy lands are at stake, you can be

pretty sure Sarah Neimeyer is close by. She is committed and tenacious. And she usually wins.

There is one cause which is even dearer to Sarah and that is her family—her husband, Joe Warren, and their teenage sons, Will and Harry. As accomplished as Sarah is in her professional life, if you ask her what she is proudest of, she will tell you in an instant: it's her boys.

Paul Wellstone had a great definition for politics. He used to say:

"In the last analysis, politics is not predictions and politics is not observations. Politics is what we do. Politics is what we do, politics is what we create, by what we work for, by what we hope for and what we dare to imagine."

Paul Wellstone was right. That is politics at its finest. That is the kind of public service Sarah Neimeyer has performed for me and for the people of Illinois for the last nearly 6 years and I am grateful to her.

I want to thank Joe, Will and Harry, first of all, for sharing Sarah with us. And I want to thank Sarah for helping to protect and preserve some of my State and our Nation's greatest natural treasures.

I wish her continued joy and success as she gets back on the "green bus" to begin her next professional challenge.

CONTINUING GUN VIOLENCE

Mr. DURBIN. I rise to talk about the continuing toll of gun violence on America and my home State of Illinois. For several months now, New York Times columnist Joe Nocera has published what he calls "The Gun Report." It is a daily compilation of stories about shootings across America. This report, posted online on the New York Times Web site, is startling.

It is one thing when you hear the dry numbers about 87 Americans killed, 200 wounded every day by gun violence, but Joe Nocera's report goes beyond the numbers. It shares some of the details from the news reports of these shootings.

For example, Mr. Nocera's report for Monday describes shootings that took place over this last weekend. The tally of shootings in America goes on to fill 19 paragraphs. Let me read just some of the descriptions of the shootings that took place over this last weekend right here in our beloved country:

A 12-year-old boy was accidentally shot in the face by his 11-year-old friend Friday morning in Camden, NJ.

Two Minneapolis, Minn. police officers were shot and wounded at a traffic stop in the Uptown district Friday afternoon.

Avery Williams, 22, and Jamario Troutman, 24, died and a third man is in serious condition after a Friday afternoon shooting in West Palm Beach, Fla.

Tamara Logan, 44, teacher's aide was shot multiple times in the head area outside McKinley Elementary School in east Erie, Pa., Friday morning.

46-Year-old Bruce Byrd shot and killed his wife, 44-year-old Stephanie Byrd, and then turned the gun on himself in a Lawrenceville, Pa. home Friday.

Those are just a few of the shootings that were reported on Friday. There are dozens more stories from Saturday and Sunday, including a fatal road rage shooting in Arkansas; a convicted felon who shot and killed his son in Missouri; four people found shot to death in a home in Waynesville, NC; and at least 19 people shot during a Mother's Day parade in New Orleans.

Sadly, there were multiple shootings from my home State of Illinois in Mr. Nocera's report, including a Saturday night shooting in Rockford and at least nine people shot over the weekend in the Chicago area, three of them fatally.

It is hard to read Mr. Nocera's report and not feel that something is terribly wrong with this level of gun violence. Have we heard it so often that we reach the point it has no impact? I think most Americans will look at this report and agree that we should take steps to reduce this massive toll of gun violence.

Several weeks ago, on April 17, on this floor of the Senate, we fell short of the 60 votes needed to break a Republican filibuster. It was a filibuster against commonsense gun reform and gun safety. We did not get 60 votes for commonsense steps such as closing gaps in the gun background check system and cracking down on straw purchasers who supply criminals and gangs with guns.

JOE MANCHIN is a Senator from West Virginia. He is a Democrat. He may be one of the most conservative Democrats on the floor of the Senate. PATRICK TOOMEY is a Republican from Pennsylvania, arguably the most conservative Republican on the floor of the Senate. JOE MANCHIN and PATRICK TOOMEY, a Democrat and Republican, sat down and said: Can we find some way to reduce gun violence in America in a bipartisan way? Two conservatives? Two gun owners? And they did.

They came up with a proposal that would call for universal background checks. Today up to 40 percent of the guns sold in America are sold to people not subject to a background check. How important is that? What if you got on an airplane and before it took off the flight attendant said: Welcome to this flight. We want you to know that 60 percent of you have gone through TSA screening to see if you are carrying a weapon or bomb; 40 percent we did not check. Would you get on the airplane? Would you want your family on that airplane?

That is the situation in America today when it comes to the sale of firearms. So JOE MANCHIN and PATRICK TOOMEY said let's close the problems we have, the gaps in the law, and make sure everyone, virtually everyone is subject to a background check, particularly those who buy guns through newspapers or over the Internet. Let's make sure those who go to gun shows to buy guns, that at least we check their background.

Why do we want to check? The law says you have a right under the Second