

big and broad bill that reflects the urgent and diverse issues and challenges they face. I am proud to support it.

I thank my colleagues on the Veterans' Affairs Committee who have approved many of the parts of this bill by unanimous vote or overwhelming bipartisan majorities. This cause should be truly bipartisan. Let's move forward and move America forward addressing the needs and challenges of its veterans as we have an obligation to do. We must keep faith with our veterans and leave no veterans behind.

I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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 President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. COONS). Without objection, it is so ordered.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Morning business is closed.

COMPREHENSIVE VETERANS HEALTH AND BENEFITS AND MILITARY RETIREMENT PAY RESTORATION ACT OF 2014—MOTION TO PROCEED

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will resume consideration of the motion to proceed to S. 1982 which the clerk will now report.

The bill clerk read as follows:

Motion to Proceed to Calendar No. 301 (S. 1982) a bill to improve the provision of medical services and benefits to veterans, and for other purposes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Vermont.

Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, let me thank Senators MURRAY, DURBIN, and BLUMENTHAL for their very thoughtful and important remarks regarding the needs of veterans and why it is absolutely imperative we pass this comprehensive veterans legislation. Let me also begin by thanking all of the members of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs for their very hard work in helping to craft what is not only an enormously important piece of legislation impacting the lives of millions of our veterans but is also, to a large degree, a bipartisan piece of legislation.

It is no secret that Congress today is extraordinarily partisan and, in fact, is largely dysfunctional. On major issue after major issue the American people are crying out to us and asking that we address the serious problems facing this country. Yet we are unable to do virtually anything. I hope—and I say this from the bottom of my heart, and as chairman of the Senate veterans committee—that at least on the issue of addressing their needs—the need to

protect and defend those veterans who have protected and defended us, those men and women who have put their lives on the line to protect this country—we can rise above the partisan rancor that we see down here on the floor every single day.

That is what the American people want us to do. Not only has the veterans community been clear on the need to pass this bill, but that is what the American people want us to do. They understand the sacrifices made by veterans and their families, and they want us to rise above the partisan acrimony the American people see every single day.

Let me be very clear, and let there be no misunderstanding about this. I have tried, as chairman of the committee, to do everything I can to bring forth legislation which includes provisions from Republicans and provisions from Democrats. My view is, and has been, that if there is a good idea that improves the lives of veterans—I don't care if there is an "R" attached to a Senator's name, a "D" or an "I," as in my case—let's bring forth that legislation.

The reality is, to the best of my knowledge, there are 26 separate provisions that Republican Members have authored or cosponsored—that is a lot—and some of them are very significant provisions. Further, perhaps most importantly, two of the most important parts of this comprehensive legislation are omnibus bills that were passed unanimously by the committee. So what we have done is brought ideas together in two of the most important provisions in this bill, with two separate omnibus bills passed unanimously by the committee. There are other provisions in the bill that were not passed unanimously but also passed with bipartisan support.

I also want to point out the two provisions that were not discussed at the committee level but have been passed almost unanimously by the Republican-controlled House of Representatives, and I believe have strong bipartisan support in the Senate. With almost unanimous votes, the House passed a provision that would solve a long-standing problem and enable the VA to enter into 27 major medical facility leases in 18 States and Puerto Rico. We have virtually that same language in our bill, and that was passed almost unanimously in the House. So I think that is a nonpartisan, bipartisan provision.

A second provision passed by the House with very broad support deals with ensuring that veterans can take full advantage of the post 9/11 GI bill and get in-State tuition in the State in which they currently live. That language I believe is identical in our bill.

So we have major provisions passed in the Republican House with almost unanimous support that are in this bill, and there are two omnibus provisions passed with unanimous support out of our committee, and we have other provisions passed with bipartisan support.

So while I am not here to say this is 100-percent bipartisan, because it is not, we have gone a very long way to do what has not been done very often here in the Senate, and that is to bring everybody's ideas together to pass something that is terribly important for our veterans.

The point I am trying to make here is that I happen to believe that virtually every Member of the Senate, regardless of their political point of view, does care about veterans. I say this especially about the members of the committee—the Veterans' Affairs Committee—who would not be on the committee if they didn't care about veterans. I believe that virtually every Member of the Senate wants to do the best they can for veterans. That is why I have worked so hard to do my best to make sure this bill is as bipartisan as it can be.

In my view, this is, in fact, a very good bill. But like any other piece of legislation, it can be made better. We have 50 States, we have Native American tribes, and we have all kinds of issues out there. There are 100 Senators here in this body who know their States, who know their issues. So let me be very clear in echoing what the majority leader said this morning, and that is he and I want to encourage every Member of the Senate—Democrat, Republican, and Independent—who has germane amendments dealing with veterans issues to please offer those amendments. Bring them to the floor.

My understanding is a number of amendments have already been offered by Democratic Senators and we have some amendments now that have been offered by Republican Senators. I understand Senator RUBIO and Senator COLLINS have offered amendments, as well as a number of Democrats. We look forward to more amendments coming to the floor so that we can have a serious discussion about those amendments.

I hope the one thing that will not happen is that, as we discuss this legislation, instead of having an honest debate about the needs of veterans, that this legislation becomes another forum for the same old partisan politics we have seen for years—the sort of partisan politics the American people are increasingly disgusted with. The American people understand that honest people have differences of opinion on the issues, but they do not want to see serious legislation being sabotaged because of political partisanship.

In my view, with regard to this veterans bill and the fact we have language in this bill which can improve the lives of millions of veterans and their families, I believe it would be extremely disrespectful to the men and women who have put their lives on the line to defend this country to use this piece of legislation dealing with veterans issues as nothing more than a political pawn for other issues that are totally extraneous to their needs.

I fully understand—no great secret here—that my Republican colleagues do not like the Affordable Care Act. They are entitled to their opinion. We have discussed this issue and this law over and over. I ask my Republican colleagues: Please, do not inject ObamaCare into the veterans debate. It has nothing to do with the needs of veterans.

I understand some of my Republican colleagues have strong feelings about sanctions in Iran. Clearly, this is an important issue. But it has nothing to do with the needs of veterans in this country. Please, do not inject the Iran sanctions issue into a debate on how we can improve the lives of veterans and their families.

I know there are strong feelings and disagreements about the wisdom or lack of wisdom of the Keystone Pipeline. I have my views on the issue. Other people have their views on the issue. But, frankly, the Keystone Pipeline has nothing to do with the needs of our veterans. And there are many other issues out there.

Let me at this point quote from a tweet that came out last night from the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America association, and this is what they say. This is the organization that represents the men and women who have fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is what they said last night:

The Senate should not get distracted while debating and voting on the vets bill. Iran sanctions, ObamaCare, et cetera, aren't relevant to S. 1982.

That is the issue we are debating today, and I absolutely agree with the IAVA on this issue. They also say in another tweet:

In 2013, veterans were not immune from gridlock in Washington. This year has to be different. We urge the Senate to pass this legislation.

As I mentioned yesterday, this legislation, in fact, has the support of virtually every veterans organization in the country, representing millions and millions of veterans, from the American Legion to the VFW, the DAV to the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, the Vietnam Veterans of America to the Disabled American Veterans and the Paralyzed Veterans of America. We have dozens of organizations that know how important this legislation is to their members.

So my plea to my colleagues is let's debate veterans' issues. If you have an idea to improve this bill, I welcome it. Let's have that debate. I do not believe this legislation is immune to improvement. We can improve it, but please do not inject extraneous issues in here for totally political reasons. I think that is unfair to the veterans of this country.

As the Presiding Officer well knows, on Veterans Day and Memorial Day, I—and I suspect every Member of the Senate—go out and speak to veterans. We express our deep respect for them and their families and the appreciation for all they have done for our country.

Today I hope we can keep faith with those promises. Let us focus on veterans' issues. Let us get the best bill we can. Let's not kill this bill because of the same old same old partisan situation we face.

I will take a few minutes to discuss why we have brought forth this legislation, which has been described as the most comprehensive piece of veterans legislation to have come before Congress in decades.

While in recent years the President and Congress have made good progress—I think the President's budgets have been good; I think Congress, in a bipartisan way, has done a good job in addressing many of the problems facing the veterans community—the truth is, and I hope everybody knows, we still have a very long way to go. Now I will discuss some of the outstanding issues this bill addresses.

I think anybody who has nursed a child or a parent who is ill or injured knows how difficult and stressful this is; how sometimes you have to stay up all night, how sometimes you have to stay with your patient 24 hours a day. I would like people to be thinking about what it means day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, to be taking care of those veterans who are severely disabled in war.

Think about, for a moment, what the stress is and how much of your own life you have given up to your loved ones, and there are tens of thousands of spouses who are now doing nursing and caring for veterans from World War II, from Korea, from Vietnam, from Iraq, from Afghanistan. That is what they are doing right now, and they are doing it because they love their husbands or their wives or their sons or daughters.

The very good news is in 2010 Congress passed legislation to develop a caregivers program for post-9/11 disabled vets. This was a huge step forward. What it said is for those men and women who came back from Iraq and Afghanistan, perhaps without legs, perhaps blind, perhaps without arms, perhaps ill in one way or another through PTSD or TBI, we were going to make sure their wives, their mothers, their sisters, their brothers, their children had the support they need to provide the kind of inhome nursing care those veterans need. This legislation has been very successful for post-9/11 veterans. I will give one example and there are obviously many.

One family who benefited from the VA's caregiver program is Ed and Karen Matayka. They live in my home State of Vermont. In 2010, Ed and Karen were deployed together as medics to Afghanistan with the Vermont Army National Guard, a National Guard of which many of us in Vermont are very proud. Just 2 days before Independence Day, the vehicle Ed was riding in was hit by an IED. The driver, Vermont's Ryan Grady, was killed. We remember that loss very well. Ed and three others were severely injured. Ed

lost one leg immediately, suffered a stroke and a severe spinal cord injury. Soon thereafter his other leg was amputated above the knee and he suffered yet another stroke.

After 3 years of rehabilitation, Ed was medically retired from the Army. Because of VA's caregiver program—a program we established in 2010 for post-9/11 veterans and their families—his wife Karen was able to separate from the Army as well as become her husband's full-time caregiver. Karen spends a significant amount of time every day caring for Ed. She helps Ed with personal care, fixing his meals, and all of his transportation, including to and from medical appointments. Karen has gone through the training program and receives a monthly stipend to help compensate for her loss of income.

I think that is the right thing to do. I am not sure there are too many Members in the Senate who don't think that is the right thing to do. Here is a guy who suffered terrible wounds. His wife is now giving up her career to care for him. Should we not help that family? I think we should. Thanks to this program Ed and Karen are able to continue their lives together in their home.

Another important point: What might the alternative be? Send Ed to a nursing home where he would be uncomfortable, not get the care of a loved one, and at great expense to the VA? So this saves us money and provides better care for our veterans. This is what we did in the post-9/11 caregiver bill. The problem is the bill only applies to post-9/11 veterans.

What I think should happen, what the veterans community thinks should happen, and what I believe the American people think should happen is we should expand that program to all veterans of all wars and their families. There are tens of thousands of family members today who are caring 24/7 for veterans wounded in World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and other wars. They deserve the same benefits the post-9/11 veterans families are now receiving. That important provision is in this legislation, and I hope my colleagues support it.

There is another important provision in this legislation. This is a very important and sensitive issue. There are some 2,300 veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan who, because of a variety of injuries, are unable to start the families they have wanted to start. Some injuries are spinal cord, some may be genital injuries, some just affect the reproductive organs, and they are no longer able to have babies. Many of these young men and women want to have babies, to raise their children, and, as much as they can, to have a normal family.

Right now the VA does not offer reproductive treatments to veterans, meaning the most seriously injured among them cannot access the treatment or care needed to start a family.

Senator MURRAY, former chair of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, was on the floor yesterday speaking at great length about this important issue. I believe that if we send young people off to war and they become injured and if they want to start a family, we have to assist them in being able to do so. That provision is included in this legislation.

I will talk about another issue we deal with in this bill. Unfortunately, yesterday in discussion this provision was mischaracterized by some who spoke against it. This provision deals with expanding VA health care and making sure some, including some very vulnerable veterans who are today not eligible for VA health care, in fact become eligible.

Currently, VA uses an extremely complicated system to determine eligibility based on income for veterans without service-connected injuries, often what we call priority 8 veterans. The VA now determines income eligibility by looking at the income of an individual and his or her family county by county in each State. I don't know how many thousands of counties we have in the United States of America, but I will discuss what this means in the real world in terms of how the VA currently determines income eligibility.

My own State of Vermont is a small State—620,000 people. We are a rural State. There are just 14 counties. In Vermont, as throughout the country, each county has its own threshold for determining eligibility for priority group 8 veterans.

For a veteran living in Chittenden County, where I live, the threshold to enroll in the VA health care is less than \$48,000, but for a veteran living in Windham County, in the southern part of the State, the threshold is less than \$39,000. That is a difference of nearly \$9,000.

In the State of Georgia, there are 159 counties and nearly as many income thresholds. Imagine that. For a veteran living in Walton County, GA, the threshold is less than \$41,000. But if a veteran lives in Coffee County, the threshold is just over \$28,000. It may make sense to some people. It doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me.

In the State of Texas, there are 254 counties. For a veteran living in Brazoria County near Houston, the threshold is less than \$48,000. For a veteran living in Bee County, the threshold is less than \$31,000. That is a difference of over \$17,000. Frankly, this whole process does not make a lot of sense, and I know from personal experience it is totally confusing to veterans: Am I eligible for VA health care? It depends on which county you live in. It depends on which side of the road you live. This makes no sense at all.

This legislation simplifies the system. We establish a single income threshold for an entire State. So instead of having thousands of income thresholds, we have 50. It is true that

the threshold we use would be the highest in each State, therefore, making more veterans eligible for VA health care. In my view, this is exactly what we should be doing.

There may be some in the Senate who believe a veteran in a given State who earns all of \$28,000 a year should not be eligible for VA health care because he or she is "too rich." I respectfully disagree. VA provides high-quality, cost-effective health care. There are many veterans in this country struggling economically who want and need VA health care.

I should also add that these newly eligible veterans will pay a copayment just like all other currently eligible priority 8 veterans. Frankly, I would prefer those veterans receive high-quality care at the VA, rather than going into an emergency room at 10 times the cost when they become ill.

Let me reiterate. Unlike what some of my colleagues said yesterday, this important provision does not open VA health care to every veteran in America—and there are 22 million of them—nor does it open the floodgates, bringing in millions and millions of veterans.

I cannot give an estimate, nor can anybody else, how many will take advantage of this provision, but it will be a manageable number, largely because we make very clear—and this is an important point some of my colleagues apparently did not understand. We make it very clear in this legislation that the VA has 5 full years to fully implement this provision in a way that will not negatively impact current patient needs. So anyone who says it is going to open the floodgates for every veteran is not accurate, and that because all of these veterans are coming in we are going to diminish the quality of care for current veterans is not accurate. Let me reiterate this point, which is also in the bill. We understand that the highest priority—and we have talked to disabled American veterans about this issue—for VA health care is to take care of those veterans with service-connected problems. That is the case today and that will remain the case after this bill is passed tomorrow. Those with disabilities and those with service-connected problems will remain the highest priority.

This is a long discussion, and we could go on and on for hours about this. I am also on the health committee and I have studied this issue a little bit. There were some very harsh criticisms made yesterday about VA health care. The truth is that the Veterans' Administration runs 151 medical centers. They run some 900 community-based outreach clinics. They have hundreds of vet centers.

The VA is the largest integrated health care system in the United States of America. It employs hundreds of thousands of workers, doctors, nurses, technicians, you name it. Obviously no one has ever suggested that VA health care is perfect or that there

aren't problems within the system. I have talked to veterans in Vermont, and I have talked to veterans all over the country, and by and large there is very strong support for VA health care. These veterans understand that when they walk into a VA facility, the people who are there to treat them understand their problems, and many of the workers are veterans.

I think if you talk to the veterans community, they will tell you not that the VA does not have its share of problems, it certainly does, and not that we should not focus vigorously on improving the care at VA, but they will tell you by and large the care they are getting is good care.

The point I want to make is that before we eviscerate, as was the case yesterday, the Veterans Health Administration's health care system, let us remember today about what is going on in terms of health care in America. Let us understand that the VA is not the only health care system in this country which has problems.

Today, as a nation, we are the only major country on Earth that doesn't guarantee health care to all of its people as a right. Today there are tens of millions of people—even after the Affordable Care Act—who lack any health insurance.

Let's remember that 45,000 people—according to a Harvard study—die each year because they don't get to a doctor on time because they lack health insurance. Let us not forget that in the midst of high premiums, high copayments, and lack of insurance, the United States of America spends almost twice as much per person on health care as do the people of any other nation. Many of those other nations that spend a fraction of what we spend have better health care outcomes than we did in terms of life expectancy, infant mortality, and many other important outcomes.

I will also add that before we go about attacking, in a rather vicious way, the Veterans Health Administration's health care system, we should understand that according to a recent study that appeared in the *Journal of Patient Study* that between 210,000 and 400,040 people each year who go to the hospital for care suffer some type of preventable harm that contributes to their death. According to that study, that number would make medical errors the third leading cause of death in America behind heart disease and cancer.

THE PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator has used the hour of postcloture debate time.

MR. SANDERS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent for 5 additional minutes.

THE PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Without objection, it is so ordered.
The Senator from Vermont.

MR. SANDERS. My point in saying that is not to say that the VA health care system doesn't have its problems.

It is to say that we have problems in every health institution in America. That is what we have.

When you look at the VA—and I can go on and on—they are doing some cutting-edge work. If you look at health care technology and health care records, the VA has led the country in that direction.

There was a discussion yesterday—an absolutely correct discussion—about our concerns within the VA and outside of the VA and about overmedication of people who are dealing with pain problems. To the best of my knowledge, the VA is leading the country and doing cutting-edge work in complementary and alternative medicine with good results. They are saying that maybe we don't have to use all of this medication. Maybe we can use acupuncture, maybe we can use yoga, and maybe we can use meditation. They are doing that aggressively. By the way, this legislation expands those programs.

One of the crises in American health care today is our failure in terms of developing a strong primary health care system. Guess what. The VA has 900 primary health care facilities all over this country. The VA has women's health centers which deal with the specific needs of children.

I could go on and on about it. It is not fair to pick on the VA. They are vulnerable. Every problem they have is on the front pages of the newspapers.

I will never forget that a good friend of mine went into a hospital and died of an infection. It didn't make the front pages of the paper. That is happening all over America.

Yes, of course, we want to improve the VA health care system, but let us thank the hundreds of thousands of highly qualified and dedicated workers who are providing quality care to their patients.

Lastly, I want to say a word on something I feel very strongly about. I have always believed that dental care should be an integral part of health care as a nation and within the VA, and what this bill does for a first time, through a pilot project, is begin the process of opening dental care for nonservice-connected veterans.

There are a number of other provisions I will talk about later. Here is the bottom line: We owe more than we can ever pay back to people who sacrifice so much for this country. I think it is important that we pass this comprehensive legislation. I think it is terribly important that we have a serious debate about the serious issues facing the veterans community.

I look forward to my colleagues—Republican, Democrat, and Independent—bringing forth their ideas and amendments, but please do not disrespect those people who have sacrificed so much by killing this bill because of the same old politics we have struggled with for years. This is a veterans bill. Let's discuss veterans issues.

I yield the floor and thank my colleague for allowing me the extra 5 minutes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from North Carolina.

Mr. BURR. Mr. President, as Paul Harvey used to say on the radio: Now the rest of the story. We just heard a very glamorous description of bipartisanship and benefits that have been not provided equitably to veterans. What I would like to do is try and focus on reality and discuss what is actually in the bill, what is not in the bill, and what was the intent of Congress. What is the shape of the Veterans Administration?

I will start with one very important thing. My colleague pointed out that most of the veterans organizations support this bill. He is, in fact, correct. I will read from an editorial written by the CEO of Concerned Veterans of America. I won't read the whole thing and bore the President or those who listen, but he says:

But given the vast scope of this bill, we should be skeptical. In recent years, the VA, which will take on a wide range of expanded responsibilities should this bill become law, has come under fire for dysfunctional management and poor service to veterans. If the VA is already failing to meet its obligations to veterans, is it wise to extend its mission even further? Of course not. And while we need to restore the shortsighted cuts to the military pensions, there are more narrow ways to address these cuts, such as Sen. Kelly Ayotte's (R-N.H.) military pensions bill, S. 1977.

It's troubling that under this bill, VA services would be expanded far beyond veterans with combat injuries and service-connected disabilities, fundamentally changing the founding mission of VA. This will only flood the VA system with new claimants, many of whom would be better served by health coverage in the private insurance market.

Veterans seeking VA care already face wait times of months and even years; further expanding eligibility to veterans who would be better served by other healthcare options will only stretch the VA to its breaking point. There is also currently no cost estimate of this massive expansion.

Meanwhile, there is another compelling question of costs. Sanders has proposed shifting funding from the Pentagon's Overseas Contingency Operations to pay for these expanded veterans priorities. But taking funding from the men and women serving in Afghanistan and elsewhere is shortsighted and could otherwise endanger their lives. That approach will likely meet a chilly reception in the House of Representatives, and justifiably so.

This means that Sanders' \$30 billion bill would be paid for through the accumulation of additional debt. The CVA has been clear that Washington needs to "cut debt, not vets." With \$17 trillion in debt and massive annual deficits, our country faces a fiscal crisis of unparalleled scope. Now is not the time, in any federal department, to spend money we don't have.

To be sure, there's much to like in the Sanders bill. And if those components were presented as separate, smaller bills, as part of a carefully considered long-term strategy to reform the VA, hold leadership accountable and improve services to veterans, we would have no problem extending enthusiastic support.

As with so many bloated legislative projects in today's Washington, the overreaching and overpromising in this bill will only lead to disappointment and recriminations as the high costs and unanticipated

consequences are revealed. That will be followed by demands for an entirely new round of "comprehensive" reform, and the cycle will begin anew.

Congress should go back to the drawing board, assume a more modest approach and take up these proposals on an individual basis. That's the better path to achieving enduring and effective reform of, and accountability for, the services we provide to our veterans.

I point that out because he is a CEO of a veterans organization. Not all veterans organizations agree that more is necessarily better and that to blindly add to the system is not necessarily good.

My colleague mentioned that there was a 5-year implementation. I have the legislation right here. It is title 3, subtitle A. Expansion and improvements of benefits generally, requirements for enrollment in the patient enrollment system of the Department of Veterans Affairs of certain veterans eligible for enrollment by law but not currently permitted to enroll.

It goes through all the subsections and basically says the Secretary shall provide for the enrollment in the patient enrollment system of veterans specified in paragraph 2 by no later than December 31, 2014.

Well, in section 2, veterans with noncompensable service-connected disabilities rated as zero percent disabled who are not otherwise permitted to enroll in a system as of the date of enactment of the Comprehensive Veterans Health and Benefit Military Retirement Pay Restoration Act of 2014—under this section they do not have access to health insurance except through a health exchange.

My colleague sat on the floor and begged me not to talk about the Affordable Care Act. The Affordable Care Act is in his bill. It is referenced in his bill.

Now, get this: The Affordable Care Act has been portrayed as the solution to the health care problem in America. Forget for a minute the fact that premiums have increased for practically everybody in America—90 percent have seen increases. The \$2,500 savings per family is a wish, a hope, and a dream.

My colleagues think so much of the Affordable Care Act that if the only choice for a veteran is the Affordable Care Act, then they can opt to go into the VA. If the Affordable Care Act and the exchange are so good, why would we want to shift them from something good into something that is questionable, based upon what the editorial said.

My colleague said the VA has the best health care system in the world. It does. The hospital system has been rated high practically every year it has been rated. I made the statement yesterday: Why would we take a system that is broken and stuff more people into it? Why wouldn't we focus the debate on how to reform the system?

This is one year's worth of inspector general reports on health care facilities, over 40 healthcare inspections reports that have been released by the inspector general. I can tell my colleagues what is in front of the VA. They can't even get their hands around their own inspector general's report. These are deaths of veterans. These are individuals who used somebody else's insulin pen. This is legionnaires disease. This is a system that drastically needs reform. This is not a Member of the Senate making an accusation, it is the inspector general of the Veterans' Administration and all of these reports from 12 months. Yet we are talking about a massive expansion of the Veterans' Administration, where the chairman says: Oh, they have 5 years to do it.

I am reading the legislation. There is no 5 years. There is a specified expansion of who is included in it, and it says the Secretary will do it by December 31, 2014. If the phase-in is there, then the chairman can come down and read me the language where it says 5 years. I am certainly not trying to mislead anybody, although I am trying to make sure we get the facts on the floor of what this legislation actually does.

The chairman talked about bipartisanship. He is correct. Quite a few of the bills in his package are my bills, and they passed out of committee with unanimous support. Incorporated in his bill are 143 provisions, 26 of which are Republican. I have never judged whether I liked the bill based upon how many of my proposals were in it or how many proposals from my side of the aisle were in it; I base it on what is in the bill. What are the policies? What is our intent? Do we accomplish that in the language of the legislation?

Let's look at it for just a minute. There are no reforms—zero. Zero reforms are in the bill. It is a massive expansion of individuals in the system. As a matter of fact, under this piece of legislation, the VA doesn't even support it. Let me read what the Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Health, Dr. Robert Jesse, said. He indicated that expanding enrollment of Priority 8 veterans "presents many potential complications and uncertain effects on VA's enrollment system." This is the individual in charge of health at the VA who says: I don't think this is a good idea.

So I guess the only mistake the chairman made was—he suggested that I was opposed to it, and he was accurate, but he didn't ever say the VA is opposed to this massive expansion.

He talked about the caregiver bill. I know something about it because I wrote it. We implemented it as a demonstration project. Why? Because Senator Akaka and I believed the VA was not in a position to absorb this massive program and to administer and implement it in an effective way. As a matter of fact, Senator Akaka said at the time—he was then the chair of the veterans' committee—he said there were

three reasons he was reluctant to—well, let me just say that when the caregivers program came up in debate on the Senate floor, Senator Akaka, then chair, noted that these benefits and services were not made available for all veterans for three reasons:

[O]ne, the needs and circumstances of the newest veterans in terms of injuries are different—different—from those of veterans from other eras; two, the family situation of the younger veterans is different from that of older veterans; and three, by targeting this initiative on a specific group of veterans, the likelihood of successful undertaking is enhanced.

I say to my colleagues, would the author of the caregivers program not be the first one to come to the floor and lobby for an expansion? I think the answer is yes. But would the author of the caregivers legislation want to wait until the system can handle it?

Do my colleagues realize that in two States in America, a veteran can file for caregiver status in one State and be denied and file the same application in another and be granted caregiver status? It happened in Colorado and Florida. How, in a system that is created to equally treat veterans, is that possible? Now we want to extend it to veterans of all eras. I would suggest to my colleagues that this is almost ludicrous to even think about.

I see quite a few Members here, and I am not going to take up but a couple more minutes. I want to make sure my colleagues understand that my opposition is not to veterans. My opposition is to proceeding with legislation that could hurt veterans, not help them. In this particular case, more is not necessarily better. As the CEO of Concerned Veterans of America stated, the right congressional action would be to stop, take a breath, and focus what is broken. Fix the system. Then have a debate about which veterans, if any, should be included in the VA delivery of care.

The chairman highlighted yesterday that incorporated in both his bill and my bill is a House provision that provides leases for 27 new VA outpatient facilities. He said: That is proof we have in the system enough facilities to handle the population. No, Mr. Chairman, that is not proof. Those 27 leases are for trying to make sure we have facilities to handle our current population within the VA. Those veterans who are driving over 2 hours for a primary care visit, those individuals whose transportation is their No. 1 issue—27 doesn't even get us up to taking care of today's population.

As I said yesterday, we have I know \$14 billion worth of construction that is currently underway in the VA; yet we appropriate \$1 billion a year. It will take us 14 years to build out the inventory we have today. But the legislation calls for an incredible increase in the size of the veterans population by December of 2014. We won't have any of those 27 facilities that would be legislated in this bill done by December 2014.

So I am going to urge my colleagues, as we move forward, let's not do anything to damage veterans. Let's not do anything to overwhelm the Veterans' Administration. Let's commit to work with them to reform the system. Let's listen to what they want and not put them in a situation where they are telling us: We don't want what you are proposing. Let's listen and let's apply common sense to legislation versus to just be focused on the cheers we receive from a few who are paid to represent folks in Washington.

The chairman said a number of times that this is about veterans. I can tell my colleagues it is a little bit more. It is about the American people. It is about my kids, our kids, our grandchildren. It is about what they inherit from us. They are going to inherit from us probably the most important thing: the obligation to keep our promise to veterans of all eras.

I think the decision we have to make as we debate this legislation is whether we are going to commit to a promise that is bigger than what our kids can fulfill, that costs more than our kids can afford, and that doesn't necessarily enhance the health care delivered to our veterans. If anything, today it would probably be detrimental to those who need it the most.

I thank the Presiding Officer for his patience. I thank my colleagues for their indulgence as they have patiently waited. This is way too big an issue to rush forward with. I look forward over the next several days to a real debate about the specifics in this bill and, more importantly, about what we should do as a Congress to help veterans and to help the Veterans' Administration.

I yield the floor.

THE PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Indiana.

MR. COATS. Mr. President, I did not come to speak on this bill, although I certainly appreciate the remarks of my colleague from North Carolina. I also see the chairman is here. I say to the chairman of the committee, I am only prepared to speak on a separate subject probably for 5 to 7 minutes.

As I said, I appreciate the comments of my colleague, particularly when we are dealing with veterans, their benefits, and health care in particular. We need to be very careful in terms of what we are doing so we do it the right way because we owe them all our Nation's gratitude for the sacrifices they have made. As veteran myself, I have some appreciation of that. My daughter married into a military family. Nevertheless, we need to be very careful how we go forward in making sure the care they get through the VA system is the very best care possible. My colleague has outlined a number of issues that need to be debated, and I dearly hope the majority leader will allow us the opportunity to not only debate but vote on the alternative which, in my opinion, addresses the issue in the very best way.

MEDICAL DEVICE TAXES

Today I come to speak about the President's visit to Minnesota. I wish it were Indiana. He is going there for the purpose, as stated, of discussing a new initiative—I think it is a transportation initiative—that he hopes will create jobs and stimulate economic growth. Clearly, that has been an ongoing challenge for this administration.

How ironic. How ironic to go to Minnesota, a State like my home State of Indiana, which has been one of the most negatively impacted by the excise taxes imposed upon one of its most dynamic job creators—the medical device industry. How ironic it is to go to Minnesota and talk about creating jobs and economic growth while at the same time promoting a provision that was incorporated in the Affordable Care Act that imposes an egregious excise tax on not the profits but on the sales receipts of medical device companies. It is simply an ObamaCare pay-for.

As I said, Indiana and Minnesota are homes to many of the country's largest medical device manufacturers. In fact, my State of Indiana exported more than \$9.7 billion in life science products in 2012, which includes medical devices. It is second in the country only to California in terms of exports of life science products. So it is very important to our State.

We have over 300 FDA-registered medical device manufacturers—some of them large, some of them small. They employ 20,000 Hoosiers directly, with an indirect support of nearly 30,000 more. So it is not a small thing for our State. It is one of the—and pardon the pun—cutting-edge industries, producing devices that improve the health of Americans and extend the life of Americans through some remarkable innovations. These companies have revolutionized the medical field with life-enhancing, as well as lifesaving, technology.

So what is the effect of this excise tax that has been imposed on these companies and this thriving industry?

Well, let me respond in a way that reflects what some Hoosiers have told me, as I travel across the State talking to these device employees and CEOs and manufacturers, learning what the impact of this tax is on their industry, which is so important to our country's economic growth.

One device manufacturer located in Warsaw, IN, develops and sells orthopedic implants for children but recently had to shelve two important projects simply because they had to get the money to pay the tax, so they could not put it into the research and development and innovation of their next products. I quote an employee of this company, who told my office: "The medical device excise tax inhibits us from developing more products that can reduce a wheelchair-bound child's discomfort or that can allow a kid to walk for the first time."

So there are real consequences here. Companies, many of which are innova-

tive, struggling to design that new product that can be life enhancing and life saving, have simply had to defer their product to pay the tax. They may not have made a penny in net profits. Many of these are startup companies, hoping to develop and get FDA approval for, the next new life-enhancing innovation. Yet they are not taxed on their net profits—and many are losing money initially in order to go through the tortuous and time-consuming process of getting FDA approval, which denies them getting their products out to the market for a long period of time; so most of them early on are not making any profit. But on the devices they are selling, every dollar that comes in is taxed, even though they have no net profits and, therefore, they have to take money out of research and development, out of capital equipment, out of employee compensation, in order to send the check to the government.

Cook Medical, which is located in Bloomington, IN, another Hoosier device manufacturer, was forced to table plans for a major expansion because of the device tax. In testimony before the Senate Budget Committee last year, Cook's medical chairman, Steve Ferguson, said this:

Cook has made the difficult decision that without repeal [of the medical device tax], we will move important new product lines outside of the U.S. Our previous plans to open up five new manufacturing facilities in American towns are now on hold as we use capital intended for these projects to pay the excise tax.

There are very real consequences here in terms of job creation and economic growth that are being inhibited. We are getting just the opposite. We are getting job-killing and deflated economic results as a result of this tax. And it is an egregious tax.

The Advanced Medical Technology Association recently conducted a survey of its members—they shared that with me earlier today—and found that the device tax forced manufacturers to let go of or avoid hiring 33,000 workers last year. Mr. President, that is 33,000 people who could have joined the workforce at wages which in my State are 56 percent higher than the average State wage. So these are good-paying jobs. They require good skills, but they are good-paying jobs. And it is an emerging series of products that can be exported around the world.

The survey also found that one-third of the respondents had to reduce their research and development as a result of the medical device tax.

In terms of investment dollars, three-quarters of the respondents said they had taken one or more of the following actions in response to the tax: They have either deferred or canceled capital investments; deferred or cancelled plans to open new facilities; reduced investment in startup companies; found it more difficult to raise capital, particularly among startup companies; and reduced or deferred increases in employee compensation.

There are negative results that come from taxing anything. But when you tax sales, when you tax on an excise basis, it has a compounding effect for startup companies, and even for established companies, in terms of what they are able to do in terms of hiring, in terms of plant expansion, in terms of research and development, in terms of innovation.

This is happening across the country. Minnesota and Indiana just happen to be two States that have been particularly hard hit. We ought to be encouraging these companies to continue their research and development. We should not be punishing them with an egregious tax which is simply a byproduct and the administration says: We have to find a pay-for for ObamaCare. Here is a prospering industry, so let's take some money from them—not on their profits—but let's just take money from them from their sales—an excise tax—so that we can apply it to ObamaCare.

Essentially, what they are doing is taking money from a program that works and puts people back to work and generates taxes the right way and transferring that money to a program that is in distress, has turned out to be a job killer, according to studies and a number of agencies that have looked at this, and is very much in a state of confusion and disarray right now among the American people.

So you take some money from something that works and you give it to something that does not work. What kind of rationale is that? And how can the President go to Minnesota and say: I am here to stimulate growth and create jobs, while his very own policy has done just the opposite?

The senior Senator from Minnesota, Ms. KLOBUCHAR, and I chair the Senate Medical Technology Caucus. We have been able to pull together a bipartisan effort to increase awareness of these unique issues but also to achieve a vote, which is hard to do around here. During the budget we had the so-called vote-arama. Republicans and Democrats got to offer any amendment we wanted. It is not binding law, but it sets the stage and illustrates the Senate's stance on particular topics.

On this one 79 out of 100 U.S. Senators—Republicans and Democrats; that is 45 Republicans and 34 Democrats—voted for repeal of the medical device tax. So this is not a Republican standing here challenging the President of another party or Members across the aisle saying: We are asking you to support this Republican issue. This is a bipartisan issue. Almost as many Democrats as Republicans support this. But yet the majority leader has refused to allow this to come to an actual vote, which would put it into passage—because the House has already supported and passed this—and be sent to the President for his signature.

So I guess what I am asking here today is that the majority leader at

least allow us the opportunity to go forward with a vote, where it would then, I suspect it would pass, be sent to the President. If he really wants to create jobs and stimulate the economy, we have living proof of something that will do it.

I do not know how the President today can go to a State and say: I am here to stimulate the economy and provide for new jobs and at the same time have in place a majority leader who will not allow us a vote on it. We all want to enact measures here that will get our country growing again and will get people back to work. In an area where we are providing life-enhancing and lifesaving medical technology, it is particularly important.

So my plea, as I finish here, is I urge the majority leader and I urge the President—if they are serious about encouraging economic growth, spurring job creation, and improving health care—to support the repeal of this unfair and destructive tax of medical devices.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Ms. HIRONO). The Senator from Delaware.

Mr. COONS. Madam President, I yield 45 minutes of my hour under closure to Senator SANDERS, chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The time is so yielded.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. SANDERS. I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

Mr. SANDERS. Madam President, earlier this afternoon I spoke about the many important provisions in this veterans bill that came out of the Veterans' Affairs Committee: the fact that we worked as hard as we could to make it bipartisan, the fact that there are many provisions in this bill that came from Republican Members, and the fact that some other provisions in this bill were passed unanimously by the House of Representatives, indicating very strong bipartisan support.

But what I also said is that while I believe the American people understand the full cost of war and understand the sacrifices made by veterans and their families, what they also believe is that when we have a piece of legislation—an important piece of legislation—on the floor dealing with the needs of millions and millions of veterans and their families—whether it is health care; whether it is dental care; whether it is sexual assault and how we address that issue; whether it is the fact that over 2,000 veterans have lost their ability to have kids and what we can do to make it possible for them to have children; whether it is the fact that we have tens of thousands of fami-

lies in this country where loved ones are taking care of disabled vets, need some support, and we have a need to expand the caregivers act; whether it is the fact that we have some young people who are eligible to use the post-9/11 GI bill but are unable to do it because they cannot get in-State tuition; whether it is the issue of advanced appropriations and making sure we never again find ourselves in the position that we did a few months ago, where the government was shut down and where disabled veterans were 1 week or 10 days away from losing the checks they are dependent upon, I think there is widespread support in America for that bill, for the understanding that we do owe the men and women who put their lives on the line to defend us a debt of gratitude that can never be fully paid.

But we have to do our best. We have to make life as good as we can for those who were injured in war. We have to protect the hundreds of thousands who came back from Iraq and Afghanistan with PTSD or traumatic brain injury. But whatever one may think of the bill—whether you like the bill, don't like the bill, think it is too expensive or think we should have done more—the one thing most Americans understand is that it is totally absurd to be bringing forth extraneous issues into a debate on veterans needs in order to kill the bill.

I say to my colleagues exactly what the majority leader said this morning. If you have amendments dealing with veterans issues, we welcome them. We have a number of Democrats who have come forward with amendments. We have some Republicans who have come forward with amendments. We welcome amendments that are relevant and germane to the needs of veterans. What we do not welcome are extraneous amendments that are designed only—only—for partisan, political reasons, exactly the process that the American people are disgusted with today.

Interestingly enough, that is my view. I mentioned earlier today that the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America sent out a tweet yesterday, and the folks who served us in Iraq and Afghanistan said: The Senate should not get distracted while debating and voting on the veterans bill. Iran sanctions, ObamaCare, et cetera, aren't relevant to S. 1982—which is the veterans bill we are dealing with today.

The Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America said: Focus on veterans' issues, which is a very simple request and the one that should be heeded.

But today, a little while ago, we heard from the largest veterans' association in America; that is, the American Legion, which represents 2.4 million members. The American Legion is the largest veterans' organization in this country. I suspect they have chapters. I know they are strong in Vermont. I suspect they are strong in Hawaii and strong all over this country.

American Legion National Commander Daniel M. Dellinger said today:

Iran is a serious issue that Congress needs to address, but it cannot be tied to S. 1982, which is extremely important as our Nation prepares to welcome millions of U.S. military service men and women home from war. This comprehensive bill aims to help veterans find good jobs, get the health care they need, and make in-State tuition rates applicable to all who use their GI bill benefits. This legislation is about supporting veterans, pure and simple. The Senate can debate various aspects of it, and that is understandable, but it cannot lose focus on the matter at hand: helping military personnel make their transition to veteran life and ensuring that those who served their Nation in uniform receive the benefits they earned and deserve. We can deal with Iran—or any other issue unrelated specifically to veterans—with separate legislation.

I think Commander Dellinger hit the nail right on the head. What he is saying is, fine, we can debate Iran at some point; we can debate ObamaCare, which has been going on day after day after day. We can do anything we want to do, but this is a bill that deals with veterans' issues.

I thank the American Legion not only for their support—they along with virtually every other veterans organization in this country supports this legislation: the VFW, DAV, Vietnam Vets, Iraq-Afghanistan Veterans of America, and dozens of organizations—but I thank the American Legion in particular for their statement in making it clear that our job is to debate a veterans bill, not kill this bill because of an extraneous issue such as Iran sanctions.

I wish to say one other word before I proceed to my main remarks. My colleague from North Carolina quoted from a group called the Concerned Veterans of America. In support of our legislation, we have the largest veterans organization in America, the second largest, third largest, fourth largest, the fifth largest, the sixth largest, and all the way down the line—many millions of Americans. Apparently supporting his position is a group called the Concerned Veterans for America. I don't mean to be personal, but this is just a simple fact that people should understand. This organization, according to the Washington Post, is significantly supported by Charles and David Koch—the Koch brothers. We are going to be running into the Koch brothers on every piece of legislation where there is some group out there that they fund, and in this case it is the Concerned Veterans of America.

I talked earlier about the many important provisions in the bill dealing with reproductive issues, the belief the Federal Government and the VA should assist those men and women who have lost their ability to have kids. We have talked about caregivers and all that, and I want to just touch on a couple more issues at this moment.

I have believed for a very long time that dental care should be regarded as a part of health care. I think we make a mistake as a nation saying this is

health care and this is dental care. Our legislation, for the first time, begins the process of providing dental care to nonservice-connected members through a significant pilot project. I have the feeling once we do this we will see veterans from all over the country who are dealing with long-term dental problems availing themselves of this service. It is the right thing to do and something I think we should be doing.

Another provision in this bill deals with the COLA issue for military retirees. I think everybody here is familiar with the fact that in the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013 it reduced by 1 percent annually the cost-of-living adjustments for military retirees until age 62.

The good news is the House and Senate recently passed legislation completely rescinding those cuts and the President has signed that bill. That is the good news. The bad news is those cuts continue to exist for those who join the military after January 2014, and I know the veterans organizations are concerned about that. I am concerned about that. I think that is wrong, and our legislation corrects that. So if one is talking about cuts to military retiree COLAs, we end it, pure and simple. Those COLA cuts will no longer exist if this bill is passed.

As I mentioned earlier, this legislation addresses the issue of the benefits backlog. There is great concern among all Members of the Senate that veterans are forced to wait much too long to get their claims processed. What this legislation does is support VA's ongoing efforts to end the backlog and would make needed improvements to the claims system. Again, this is the result of some bipartisan efforts.

Secretary Eric Shinseki of the VA, as he moves the claims system from paper into an electronic system, has advanced the very ambitious goal of making sure that every claim filed by a veteran will be processed in 125 days at 98 percent accuracy. That is a very ambitious goal, and the language we have is going to hold the VA accountable and make sure we reach this very ambitious goal.

I gather there may be differences of opinion on this view, but another provision in our bill deals with the educational needs of servicemembers and making sure they get a fair shot at attaining their educational goals without incurring an additional financial burden, which is what the post-9/11 GI bill was all about. That bill has been enormously successful. There are certain problems remaining in it and we address these problems.

Given the nature of our Armed Forces, servicemembers have little to no say as to where they serve and where they reside during military service. Thus, when transitioning servicemembers consider what educational institution they want to attend, many of them choose a school in a State other than their home State or the State where they previously served. I have

heard from too many veterans that many of these public educational institutions consider them out-of-State students. Given that the post-9/11 GI bill only covers in-State tuition and fees for public educational institutions, these veterans are left to cover the differences in cost between the in-State tuition rate and the out-of-State tuition rate. In some States that difference can be more than \$20,000 a year.

That is certainly not what the purpose of the 9/11 GI bill was about. As a result, many of our Nation's veterans must use loans to cover this difference and, in the process, become indebted with large school loans that will take them years to pay off.

My office has heard from a number of veterans and veterans organizations about this problem. We heard from Skye Barclay, who lived in Florida prior to joining the U.S. Marine Corps in 2006. After serving her country, Skye decided to remain with her family in North Carolina so her husband could finish serving his military obligations. Less than 1 year later, they moved to Skye's hometown in Florida to transition back to civilian life and finish their college education.

Skye and her husband changed their residency, immediately started renting a home, and ensured her car registration was up-to-date. However, the school she chose to attend could not consider either of these veterans as in-State students. As a result, they were forced to pay an additional \$2,000 out-of-pocket each semester. Due to the additional financial burden, Skye and her husband were unable to afford daycare for their daughter and instead have to juggle two demanding schedules, with one of them attending school in the morning and the other late afternoon.

The bottom line is that we passed a post-9/11 GI bill which is working incredibly well. Over 1 million veterans and their family members have used this program. It is very important for higher education in America, and I think we should support our veterans who move to another State and make sure they get in-State tuition.

Let me conclude my remarks at this point, though I will be back later to reiterate the major point I wish to make. We can play the same old politics. My Republican colleagues can defeat this bill because of some extraneous matters in it. I think that is incredibly disrespectful to the veterans community that has sacrificed so much. That is not just my view; that is what the American Legion believes and what the American Legion says: Discuss veterans issues in a veterans bill. The Iraq-Afghanistan Veterans of America say the same.

So we may have disagreements on this bill. People may choose to vote against it for whatever reason. People may offer amendments that we would love to see—some of them may be good, some not so good—but let us respect those folks who have given so much to this country. Let us not demean the

veterans community by killing this bill because of something to do with Iran sanctions. That has nothing to do with veterans' needs.

I hope we continue to have a vigorous debate on this piece of legislation. I see my friend from Florida is on the floor. People may want to vote for it. That is good. They may want to vote against it. Fine. But let us not play the same old politics which so disgusts the American people.

With that, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. COONS). The Senator from Florida.

Mr. RUBIO. Mr. President, I would like to inquire as to the pending business before the Senate. Is it the veterans bill, the motion to proceed?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. It is indeed the motion to proceed to S. 1982.

Mr. RUBIO. Mr. President, I appreciate this opportunity to address a number of matters of great concern. There might be, but I don't know of any State that has a greater presence of veterans within it than Florida, certainly per capita. We have a huge military presence in our State and a large number of veterans.

I have commented to people, by the way, that in my time in the Senate, which is now about 3 years and 2 months, a substantial percentage of the calls we get to our office are from veterans regarding veterans' issues. I have a veteran in my family—my brother—who has recently encountered some bureaucratic hurdles he is trying to overcome in terms of getting service from the VA. So these are relevant matters that are of great importance.

I am glad the Senate is on the debate. I am glad we have proceeded to have this debate. It is an important one, and I do hope I will have an opportunity to offer an amendment I have relevant to the bill that involves and gives the opportunity for the Secretary who oversees this Department to be able to hire and fire, particularly to hold accountable mid- and higher level officials within the Veterans' Administration who are not doing their jobs and are contributing to this backlog.

I can tell you that in Central Florida we have a veterans hospital that has been well over budget and has timeliness issues and it needs to be addressed. I think that is a veterans' issue that has extraordinary bipartisan consensus. So my hope is we will be able to address it and we will have an amendment process that allows these ideas to be brought forth. From what I heard from the Senator commenting just a few moments ago, he welcomes amendments. So I hope I will have an opportunity to offer that.

I know as part of this debate the issue of Iran sanctions has been raised. I don't think it is rare to have issues that perhaps are not directly on point to a bill offered in debate, particularly when getting into a debate on an issue that has been so difficult. That is part of the problem with the Iran sanctions issue.

I understand when someone files a bill, the managers have worked hard on it, and the last thing they want is for it to be slowed down because of debate on another topic that is not directly on topic. I understand that concern. I do. But on the other hand, I hope Members will understand that part of the frustration has been the inability to even get a debate on what truly is an extraordinarily important issue.

For those here watching and those at home watching and those who may see this later, let me take a moment to briefly discuss what is at stake. I briefly discussed this a few weeks ago, but I wanted to take this opportunity to do so again.

Here is the issue: Iran, a few years ago, began developing a nuclear processing capability. What that basically means is they take uranium, for example, and they reprocess it to a certain level. You need to have a certain level of reprocessing in order to, for example, provide domestic energy for nuclear energy plants. Many countries in the world have nuclear energy, but only a handful actually process it themselves. Most decide to buy it already processed from abroad.

We have agreements and arrangements with countries all over the planet that do that. Only a handful actually retain the capacity to reprocess it or to enrich uranium or reprocess plutonium. So when we see a country announce they are going to invest money, time, and energy in developing a reprocessing or an enrichment capability, that raises red flags, and here is why. Because while you only need a certain level of enrichment to be able to provide nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, and a little bit higher level in order to use it for medical isotopes, the exact same scientists, the exact same machines, the exact same facilities are the exact same ones that can also reprocess or enrich to an even higher level to use in a weapon.

The story of Iran has been, over the last few years, to increase their enrichment and reprocessing capabilities. That in and of itself raises red flags. Adding to that uncertainty and concern about it has been the fact they have tried to hide most of this. Consistently, Iran has been found to have secret development projects ongoing that they only admit to once they are discovered. They take a tremendous amount of effort to hide it from the world. That begins to raise red flags, because if it is truly just a peaceful program, there would be no reason to hide it or to hide their capabilities. But Iran has consistently hidden them.

There is even more reason to be concerned. In addition to increasing their capacity to enrich and reprocess, Iran is also developing long-range missile capabilities. A long-range missile—basically a missile that can fly from Iran 1,000 miles, 1,500 miles, 2,000 miles, 3,000 miles—costs a lot of money to develop. It takes a lot of time to develop.

You don't spend time or money developing those capabilities for purely

conventional purposes or for defensive purposes. Usually when you undergo those efforts to develop that kind of capability, it is because you want to have the opportunity to one day put a nuclear warhead on one of those rockets.

So that is the story of Iran: massive expansion in their enrichment and reprocessing capabilities; secret enrichment programs which they try to hide from the world; and the development of long-range missile capabilities. Add to it that we are not dealing with the government of Belgium, Japan, South Korea, or any other responsible government on the planet; we are dealing with a government that actively uses terrorism all over the world as an active element of its foreign policy. They are involved in supporting various terrorist elements around the country, not just in the Middle East. Open-source reporting revealed that just a couple years ago they were involved in a plot to assassinate a foreign ambassador in Washington, DC—not in the Middle East somewhere but here. They have an active cyber capability designed to attack, disrupt, and create acts of terror online. They have been implicated, for example, in the bombing of a Jewish center in Argentina. There are few, if any, countries in the world that more actively support terrorism than the Government of Iran.

So this is with whom we are dealing. As a result, the international community, through the United Nations, imposed sanctions. Not only did they impose sanctions, they imposed the requirement that they immediately suspend and stop all enrichment and reprocessing capabilities. We can imagine why the neighbors of Iran are concerned. It is not just Israel that is concerned. Ask the Saudis, ask the Turks, ask any number of the other countries in the region.

Recently, the President and this administration have begun to undertake conversations with Iran about this program. Their hope is that we can get Iran to a place where we can lock them in; where they, in exchange for the loosening of these sanctions, agree not to do certain things.

I don't know of anyone here who would not love to wake up to the news tomorrow that the Supreme Leader in Iran has decided to abandon the reprocessing and enrichment capability and to truly show that all he is interested in is domestic energy for peaceful purposes. The problem is that is not what is happening. I believe what is happening is the United States, through the State Department and this administration, de facto, is already—but if not, is on the verge of—agreeing to allow Iran to keep in place its enrichment and reprocessing capabilities, and I will explain why this is a problem.

If that capability is still there, if they retain all the facilities necessary for enrichment and reprocessing, even if they agree to limit it to a certain level for now, at any point in time in the future they can ratchet it back up

and can go on to develop a weapon. In fact, unfortunately, the design for a weapon is the easiest part of all this. The hardest part is reaching the technological capability to enrich uranium to a certain point to weaponize it.

If we allow them to keep all the equipment, all the technology, all their scientists, all the infrastructure in place, then at any point in the future when they decide it is time for a weapon, they can break out and do that. And I would submit that the evidence is strong that this is exactly what their strategy is.

I don't think, I know for a fact that the mandate given to those negotiators on behalf of Iran and the Supreme Leader was the following: Do whatever you can to get these sanctions lifted off our shoulders, but do not agree to anything that is irreversible.

Put yourself in their position. If you want to retain the option to one day be able to enrich and then build a weapon, you are probably willing to take one step back by agreeing to suspend enrichment only to a certain level in exchange for the lifting of these sanctions, knowing that at some point—in 2 years, 3 years, or 4 years—when the world is distracted by something else, when something else is going on around the planet, you can then decide to come up with any excuse to build a weapon.

One of the reasons I know that is their strategy is because it is exactly what the North Koreans did. The playbook has already been written. They would engage in these ongoing negotiations, on again, off again, all designed to buy time.

Why does a government like Iran need or want a nuclear weapon? And they do. It is pretty straightforward.

No. 1, because of deep historical reasons, they desire to become the dominant power in the Middle East, to drive not just the United States but other nations out of the region and diminish everyone's influence at their expense.

The other is because they view a weapon as the ultimate insurance policy. They don't want to be the next Muammar Qadhafi; they want to be North Korea so they can now act with impunity, so they can do anything they want against us or anyone in the world because no one could possibly attack them because they have nuclear weapons.

I have heard stories about, well, we will know; we will be able to see this happening before it happens and do something about it. But look at Pakistan and India, which was a surprise to everybody, particularly India's capabilities. It is not outside the realm of the reasonable to believe that at some point one day we will wake up to the news that Iran has detonated a device and proven their capability. In fact, I have zero doubt in my mind that this is where they want to go.

What I find offensive in this whole conversation is the notion by some in the administration that anyone who

feels this way or anyone who has doubts or skepticism about these negotiations is warmongering.

I actually think the failure to impose sanctions now will inevitably place a future President—perhaps even this one—with a very difficult decision to make, and that will be whether to go in and take military action to stunt or stall their weapons program because, make no mistake, a lot of damage has already been done. A lot of damage has already been done to the sanctions that were already in place. There is already growing evidence that the amount of revenue coming into Iran, the amount of business dealings coming into Iran just simply on this talk about the interim deal has truly spiked.

We also see it in their comments. The leaders of Iran—from the President, to the Supreme Leader, to the chief negotiator—are not just bragging in Iran; they are bragging all over the world that they have agreed to nothing and the West has capitulated.

What we were told by the State Department is, well, that is only for domestic consumption; they are just saying that to be popular at home and to appease the radicals within Iran.

By the way, the term “radical” is an interesting term when applied to Iran. All the leaders in Iran are radical; it is just degrees of radicalism.

But to get back to the point I was making, we hear the comments they make in Iran—bragging how they have won, how they snookered the West, how they agreed to nothing, how everything they were doing before is going to move forward—and we are told: Just ignore that. They are just saying that for domestic political considerations.

That is not true. In fact, the Supreme Leader himself, the Ayatollah, has announced that these talks are going to lead to nowhere. He is not going to interfere, but they are going nowhere.

This is a transparent effort. All you have to do is open your eyes and see what they are doing. All they are doing is buying time. All they are doing is looking to relieve as many sanctions as possible without giving up anything they can do in the future or are doing now. For a deal such as this to work, you have to rely on all sorts of verification systems with a government that has made a specialty out of hiding their intentions and programs in the past.

The reason we see the push for the additional sanctions to be put in place is because at least 59 of us in the Senate—and I suspect many more who haven't lent their names to this effort yet—recognize that we cannot afford to be wrong about this because a nuclear Iran would be one of the worst developments in the world in a very long time.

In addition to being able to hold the region hostage, in addition to now being able to act with impunity—they don't have a weapon now, and they try to assassinate Ambassadors in Washington, DC. Imagine what they think

they can get away with if they do have a weapon.

Beyond that, think about the risk it poses to our allies in that region, and think about this: Think about the reaction of other countries in the region to the news. The Saudis are not going to stand by and watch Iran develop a nuclear capability and not have one of their own. So I submit a nuclear Iran isn't just one more country joining the nuclear weapons club; it can be as many as two or three more countries eventually joining the nuclear weapons club in the most unstable region in the world, a place that has only had conflict, I don't know, for 5,000 years. This is what we are on the verge of here.

I appreciate the work diplomats working in the State Department do. There is a role for diplomacy in the world, and the good news is that we can negotiate agreements with most of the countries on this planet. But I think diplomacy also requires us to understand its limitations. It is very difficult to negotiate settlements and agreements with governments and individuals who don't ever feel bound by them, who see them as one-way streets, who see them as tactics and vehicles to buy time. That is what we are dealing with.

The other part we forget is that in some parts of the world and with some governments on this planet, the language of diplomacy is viewed as a language of weakness. It becomes an invitation to become aggressive or miscalculated.

I don't know of anyone in this body who is looking to get into another war or armed conflict. That is not what Americans are all about. If we look at the story of the conflicts we have been engaged in, almost all of them involved a reluctant nation having to get involved for geopolitical purposes, because we were trying to stem the growth of communism, because we were attacked in Pearl Harbor. That is not who we are. That is not who we have ever been. Americans aren't into that. What we want to do is live happy lives and raise our families in peace. We want to be able to sell to and buy from other countries. We want a peaceful world we can partner with for business and culture.

But I also think it is important to understand that when mistakes are made in foreign policy, it is a lot harder to reverse than when they are made in domestic policies. If we pass a bad tax bill, we can always come back and pass a new one. If we make a mistake—as this body did by passing ObamaCare—we can always come back and repeal it. If we make a mistake in domestic policy, we can always come back and reverse it somehow. It is not the same in foreign policy. Once there is a nuclearized, weaponized Iran, it will be quite difficult to undo, and so are all the things it will lead to.

Let me also say that additional sanctions are no guarantee that they will never get a weapon, but it changes the

cost-benefit analysis. It tests their pain threshold economically. It forces them to make a decision about whether they want to continue to be isolated from the world economically and whether weaponizing is worth it.

If you put in place an interim agreement or a final one that allows them to retain the capability to enrich in the future, they will build a weapon. That is not a matter of opinion; in my mind, that is a matter of fact. Maybe this President won't be here by the time that happens, but someone is going to have to deal with that, and it is not just the President; our country is going to have to deal with that. I at a minimum want to be on record today as making that point because if, God forbid, that day should ever come, I want it to be clearly understood that I, along with my colleagues, warned against it.

By the way, I think this opposition to additional sanctions is part of a pattern of flawed foreign policy decisions on behalf of this administration, one that has largely been built on the false assumption that our problems in the world were caused by an America that was too engaged, too involved, too opinionated, was providing too much leadership and direction, when, in fact, the opposite is now true.

Many of the conflicts happening around the world today are a result of the chaos left by this administration's unclear foreign policy. Many of our allies openly question—and I can tell you from my travels that privately they strongly question—whether America's assurances remain viable and whether we can continue to be relied upon in the agreements we have made in the past to provide collective security for ourselves and our allies.

When you leave a vacuum, it is going to be filled. What it is being filled by right now are some of the most tyrannical governments on the planet. Look at what happened with Moscow over the last 5 years. Moscow viewed the whole reset strategy of the United States under this President not as an opportunity to engage us but as an opportunity to try to get an upper hand on us.

Look at what has happened in the Asia-Pacific region where the Chinese regional ambitions to drive the U.S. out have grown exponentially, as have their capabilities. Meanwhile, our partners in the region, while they welcome the rhetoric of a pivot, question whether we will have the capability to carry it out.

Certainly in the Middle East an incoherent foreign policy with regard to Syria left open an ungoverned space where foreign jihadists have poured into that country and have now basically converted entire parts of Syria as the premier operational space for global jihadists to train and operate.

Now Iran. The situation in Iran, to use a colloquial term, is freaking out all the other countries in that region who have no illusions about who Iran

truly is. They know exactly who these people are, and they are baffled at how the most powerful and informed government on the planet doesn't realize what they realized a long time ago—that you are not dealing with a responsible government here with Iran. You are dealing with a nation that openly supports terrorism as a tool of statecraft, that openly has shown that they want to develop a nuclear weapons capability so they can become untouchable and the dominant power in that region.

If we don't put in place a mechanism for additional sanctions to take place, I submit that the negotiation that is going on with the Iranians will become irrelevant. By that point, even if you wanted to impose more sanctions, it would be impossible to do because so many other countries will have re-engaged with commercial transactions with Iran. You are not going to be able to put this genie back in the bottle, and the genie is already halfway out.

I hope we will take this more seriously, but at a minimum I ask this: Why can't we vote on it? If we are wrong, debate us on it. But why can't we vote on it? Since when has the Senate become a place run by one person on a matter of this importance and magnitude? Since when has the Senate become controlled by one person's opinion?

Are you telling me that the people of Florida who I represent do not deserve the right to be represented and heard as much as the people of Nevada or any other State? Are you saying that on an issue of this importance, one individual should have the power to basically say we will have no debate when 59 Members of this body—in a place where it is tough to get 51 votes on anything—have expressed the strong opinion that they favor this?

Why can't we have this debate? Isn't that what the Senate was designed to be, a place where the great issues of our time could be debated and flushed out before the eyes of the American public and the world?

What we are consistently told is we can't have this debate and we're not going to do it. Why? Why can't we debate this? This is important. Its implications will be felt by people long after we are no longer here. I hope more attention is paid to this.

Let me just say that I understand the frustration. A piece of legislation is filed on behalf of veterans, and the Iran issue comes up. But we are running out of time. This is the only mechanism that exists to have this debate.

I would argue that it actually is relevant because it is our men and women in uniform we are going to turn to—when this thing ends up the way I know it will—and ask them to take care of this problem.

If in the end these negotiations fail, and I tragically have to say they are destined to fail, and Iran retains their enrichment capability and eventually develops a nuclear weapon, it is the

men and women in uniform of these United States—our sons, our daughters, our neighbors, our friends, our mothers, our brothers, our sisters, and our fathers—whom we will ask, as we always do, to go solve the problem for us. But if we put in place sanctions that clearly articulate and lay out the price they will have to pay to continue with these ambitions, we may be able to delay that, and even prevent it; otherwise, that day will come. This piper will be paid, and I hope the price will not be so high. I fear that is where we are headed. We are on the verge of making an extraordinary geopolitical blunder that will be very difficult to undo or reverse once it is already made.

All we are asking is to have a vote on this issue. This matters enough to the American people. This matters enough to the safety and future of our children and future generations. This matters enough to the world. It deserves a full debate, and it deserves a vote.

If you are against it, you can vote against it. If you are against it, you can debate against it. We want to hear their arguments and thoughts. Why can't we vote on it? It deserves a vote. It is that important.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Ms. BALDWIN). The Senator from Texas.

Mr. CRUZ. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent to speak as if in morning business.

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

Mr. CRUZ. Madam President, I rise to commend the words of my esteemed colleague, the junior Senator from Florida, who has just spoken powerfully about the threats facing our Nation. On Monday evening he spoke powerfully on the Senate floor about the brutal human rights abuses that have been endemic in communist Cuba over the past 50 years, and the sad reality that Cuba is playing a leading role in the repression of the opposition protests that are currently taking place in Venezuela.

I commend the sentiments of the Senator from Florida, and I offer a few additional thoughts of my own on this important topic.

Brave Venezuelan protesters persist in crowding the streets in Caracas, San Cristobal, Merida, and Valencia despite the detention, torture, and murder of their compatriots in recent days. They are not alone. They have been joined by darker figures, representatives of Hezbollah, Iran, and Cuba, all of whom have a vested interest in propping up the increasingly authoritarian socialist regime of Nicolas Maduro. The appearance of the Iranians, and their Hezbollah agents in Venezuela, is concerning, but it should not be surprising.

Iran has long maintained one of its largest embassies in Caracas, where it has been able to exploit the Venezuelan financial system to evade the international sanctions that—up until a few

weeks ago—were placing a real burden on Iran's economy.

Now that the administration has eased the sanctions on Iran, Iran is in a significantly stronger position. Not only have they received the first \$500 million in unfrozen assets, but they have also reaped considerable collateral benefit.

Iranian President Rouhani recently tweeted: "You are witness to how foreign firms are visiting our country; 117 political delegations have come here."

The Dutch ambassador to Iran tweeted in mid-January that he participated in "speeddate sessions to meet business[es] interested in Iran."

China has emerged as Iran's top trading partner with nonoil trade hitting \$13 billion over the past 10 months, according to Iranian media.

According to documents seen by Reuters, Iran has signed a deal to sell Iraq arms and ammunition worth \$195 million—a move that would break the U.N. embargo on weapons sales by Tehran.

What could a reenriched Iran offer Venezuela, given that the joint plan of action that has enabled this economic detente has done nothing to reverse their nuclear program. The answer is chilling. The longstanding commercial ties between Iran and Venezuela, not to mention their mutual hatred for the United States, raise the specter that should Iran acquire nuclear weapons technology, it might be inclined to share it with Venezuela, which would then act as a surrogate threat to the United States in our own hemisphere.

We need to act immediately to reimpose sanctions on Iran and stand unequivocally against Iran acquiring nuclear weapons capability. I am sorry to say there is one reason—and one reason only—that we have not done so, and that is because the senior Senator from Nevada has been single-handedly blocking the Senate from voting on a bipartisan bill on Iranian sanctions. Given the broad bipartisan support in both Chambers, both the senior Senator from Nevada and the rest of the Democratic leadership need to be held accountable for this obstruction and standing in the way of defending U.S. national security interests and standing in the way of defending our friend and ally, the Nation of Israel.

As alarming as the increasing collaboration is between Iran and Venezuela, there is no country that has a greater stake in preserving the status quo in Venezuela than communist Cuba. Over the 15 years of Hugo Chavez's rule, Venezuela and Cuba have engaged in a mutually parasitic relationship in which Venezuela has exported free oil to Cuba and imported the repressive apparatus of a police state that Raul and Fidel Castro have carefully nurtured other the last 50 years.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1992, many former Soviet satellites have moved towards freedom and prosperity promised by closer ties

to the West—some even joining the historic NATO alliance. But Cuba, tragically, has remained mired in the communist past in no small part because Chavez provided the economic lifeline that sustained the Castro brothers' brutal oppression.

While some hoped that after Raul Castro replaced his brother in 2008, a new era of moderation might dawn, the opposite has occurred. Despite minor cosmetic reforms largely targeted toward beguiling the Western media rather than helping the Cuban people, the Castros have consolidated their control of the island with a significant uptick in human rights abuses.

Last year I had the opportunity to visit and interview two Cuban dissidents to help provide a forum for them to tell their stories. They described the oppression as "Putinismo." That said it was following the strategy of Russia's President Putin, appearing on the outside to make cosmetic reforms while brutally repressing the people at home. That is what is happening in Cuba.

The Castro playbook includes targeting family members of the opposition, brutal attacks and even murder, as well as keeping inexorable control over communications in and out of Cuba.

An American citizen, Alan Gross, was thrown into prison in 2009 for the crime of handing out cell phones to Havana's Jewish population. Alan Gross should be released, and the United States should be calling for Alan Gross's release.

In a tip to the information age, heavy Internet censorship, among the most repressive on the planet, blankets the island to preempt the spontaneous organization facilitated by social media.

First Chavez, and now Maduro, have learned these lessons well under the tutelage of agents from the Cuban intelligence services, and their work has been on grim display during the protests that have taken place this month. The death toll is now at 13, and climbing, as police bullets have taken the lives of not only activists, but of students, innocent bystanders, and even a beauty queen.

Maduro's agents have also borrowed the tried-and-true Castro tradition of summarily detaining opposition leaders, including Leopoldo Lopez who helped organize the protests. But Mr. Lopez's real crime has been to propose an alternative to the socialist catastrophe into which Chavez and Maduro have plunged this once prosperous nation, and to suggest that real economic freedom is the only path out of the rampant inflation and chronic shortages that are making life in Venezuela intolerable.

Recent polling by Gallup reveals a dramatic shift in Venezuelans' attitude toward the economy, as the socialist policies continue to depress growth and to worsen the lives of hard-working Venezuelans. In 2012, just a couple of

years ago, 22 percent of the population thought the economy was getting worse and 41 percent thought it was getting better. In 2013, those numbers reversed, with 62 percent believing it was getting worse while only 12 percent believed it was getting better. These numbers suggest there has been a sea change in how the majority of Venezuelans see their situation. These protests are different, and it is little wonder that so many have taken to the streets to demand something better.

America should stand with the protesters. America should stand on the side of freedom. America has a tradition for centuries of presenting a clarion voice for freedom because every heart yearns to be free across the globe, and the United States should unapologetically defend freedom.

Maduro appears to understand the threat of his people demanding freedom, but the unprecedented scale of his crackdown on the protesters has largely been masked from the rest of the world by a heavy veil of Internet and media censorship designed to simultaneously disable the opposition and to mask the scale of their oppression from the outside world. Some ingenious remedies have emerged, including Austin, TX's, own Zello—a direct messaging service that allows members to communicate freely either privately with individuals or over open channels that can support hundreds of thousands of users. Despite the best efforts of the Venezuelan censors to block access to Zello, the company has nimbly developed patches and work-arounds to maintain service to the some 600,000 Venezuelans who have downloaded the app since the protests began.

Zello is a shining example of how we can use our technological advantage to support those fighting for economic and political freedom across the globe, recalling our proud tradition of Radio Free Europe during the Cold War. Can my colleagues imagine apps such as Zello spreading to millions of Cubans, to millions of Iranians, to millions of Chinese, providing them the tools to directly speak out for freedom? We have other ways of supporting those advocating for a more free and prosperous Venezuela, such as supporting the sort of liberal economic reforms Mr. Lopez has proposed.

Given the remarkable natural resources Venezuela has enjoyed, it is ridiculous—it is tragic—that the economy has been so mismanaged that citizens face a chronic shortage of basic necessities. But this situation is not inevitable, and the United States is uniquely poised to help. For the United States, Canada, and now Mexico, democratic, market-oriented energy production has been the foundation of what we are beginning to call the American energy renaissance—and there is no reason that Venezuela could not reap these benefits if they reverse the socialist policies that have destroyed their economy.

In this event the United States could help Venezuela reach its full energy po-

tential by offering a bilateral investment treaty that would cover the energy sector. Such an arrangement would protect American companies eager to invest in Venezuela and, at the same time, modernize facilities and increase production of crude—which, I might add, can be refined at the CITGO facilities in Corpus Christi, TX—resulting in gasoline and other refined petroleum products that can be sold on the open market for the benefit of the Venezuelan people, not given to Cuba to prop up the Castros. Which is the better deal for the Venezuelan people: having them receive the benefits of the bounty God has given that country in the open market, receive freedom, receive material blessings, or have instead their oil given to Castro to fuel the repressive policies that are inflicting misery on so many millions?

This is a dangerous and unsettling moment for Venezuela, but it is also a moment of great opportunity. Almost exactly 1 year ago, the Obama administration had a chance to push strongly for reform in Venezuela, when Chavez was on his deathbed. Instead, the Obama administration opted not to rock the boat, in the hopes that Chavez's hand-picked successor would prove more susceptible to diplomatic outreach, that he might not follow Chavez. These hopes are apparently evergreen, as just yesterday a State Department spokeswoman announced that they were open to closer engagement with the Maduro regime, saying: "We have indicated, and have indicated for months, our openness to develop a more constructive relationship with Venezuela"

Negotiating with tyrants and bullies doesn't work. The notion that our State Department could at this moment extend yet another olive branch to Caracas is exactly backward. This is the moment to point out that Maduro's abuse of his fellow citizens is intolerable to the United States; that if he wants better relations with us, he should start by listening to the demands of his own people. He should immediately and unconditionally release Leopoldo Lopez, who is being held as a hostage at the mercy of an authoritarian state. He should lift the cloud of censorship that he is using to isolate Venezuelans from each other and from the rest of the world, and the United States should do all it can to help the people of Venezuela as they choose a different path—a path of freedom and prosperity that will return this one-time enemy to their traditional role of our partner and friend. That is where the Venezuelan people want to be, and it is only their brutal leadership that is preventing it.

This is a time for American leadership to speak in defense of freedom. This is a time for the President of the United States to unequivocally stand against oppression, against totalitarianism, and for the desire of the Venezuelan people to be free and prosperous. That would benefit them, it

would benefit us, and it would benefit the world.

Madam President, I yield the floor, and I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

Mr. CORNYN. Madam President, I wish to say something about the Iran sanctions legislation that is contained in the alternative bill of which Senator BURR has been the chief architect. First I wish to speak briefly on what is happening in the Ukraine. Late last year, the country's increasingly autocratic President, Viktor Yanukovich, refused to sign a trade agreement with the European Union after coming under strong pressure from Russian leader Vladimir Putin. His refusal to sign the trade deal, coupled with the government's persistent attacks on democracy and civil liberties, as well as growing fears of Moscow's effort to turn Ukraine into a puppet state, sparked massive street protests in the capital city of Kiev. When the government responded with violence, the situation rapidly spiraled out of control until eventually President Yanukovich was expelled from office and forced to flee.

It has been almost a decade since Ukraine's Orange Revolution captured the attention and spirits of freedom lovers across the globe. Now the country is once again at a crossroads. The decisions that are made in the days and weeks that lie ahead will determine whether Ukraine is allowed to flourish as a pro-Western democracy or it is forced to languish in corruption and authoritarianism as a Russian satellite.

It is time for the President of the United States—the Commander in Chief, President Obama—to remind the world where America stands in the ongoing battle between democracy and dictatorship. It is time for him to rethink the so-called reset policy that has done nothing but embolden Vladimir Putin and discourage Russian human rights activists. It is time for the President to make absolutely clear that Russian meddling in the sovereign affairs of Ukraine is absolutely unacceptable.

As for Putin himself, it is time people everywhere see him for what he really is: a brutal thug who epitomizes corruption, repression, and dictatorship.

Turning to another important issue, which is what is happening in Iran, just a few months ago, after years of mounting sanctions and economic pressures, it appeared the West had finally gotten the Iranian dictatorship's attention and it was literally on the ropes. But then, for some reason, we chose to let them off the hook and to throw

them a lifeline and to give up some of the very best leverage we had obtained over the course of years for minor concessions and hollow promises.

While the Obama administration is still trumpeting the November 2013 Iranian nuclear agreement as a diplomatic watershed, I remain deeply skeptical and concerned that we threw an economic lifeline to the world's leading state sponsor of international terrorism, even though the ayatollahs have shown no real willingness to abandon their decades-long quest for a nuclear weapon. Of course, were Iran to achieve a nuclear weapon, there would be a nuclear arms race in the Middle East, dramatically destabilizing that already very volatile region of the world.

So given that reality, along with Iran's well-documented record of duplicity, I have joined with 58 other of my Senate colleagues—Republicans and Democrats alike—in sponsoring new sanctions legislation. We have been ably led by the Senator from Illinois Mr. KIRK and other leaders. It is something called the Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act that would take effect if and only if Tehran violated the Geneva agreement.

In other words, this is a backstop to the negotiations that Secretary Kerry has had and that the President has pointed to, but amazingly the Obama administration has taken the very bizarre position that the Democrats who are supporting this legislation—this backstop legislation that would do nothing to undermine the negotiations between the Secretary of State and other nations in the region—the President is now urging Democrats to stop supporting this important piece of backstop legislation, even though a commanding majority of the Senate has indicated their support for it.

In fact, the President has gone so far as to promise a veto of this legislation if it reaches his desk. Of course, it is not true, as the President argues, that this legislation would effectively sabotage the Geneva deal. In truth and in fact, what it would do is provide, as I said, a backstop but reinforce what the President and Secretary Kerry are so proud of in terms of what they have already negotiated. If Iran follows through, then this sanctions legislation would be of little force and effect.

I am not sure I understand the administration's concern. After all, if the administration thinks Iran will follow through on its Geneva commitments—something I am personally skeptical of—but if the President thinks they will follow through, then there is nothing to worry about. But if the administration believes that Iran will fail to honor those commitments, then it never should have made the deal in the first place and it should have welcomed this amendment, this piece of legislation, this backstop sanctions legislation that would buttress what they have negotiated.

I believe today what I have believed for many years—that our only hope for

a peaceful resolution of the Iranian nuclear crisis is to combine tough sanctions with the credible threat of military action. That is the only thing that will bring the ayatollahs to the table, and that is why we need to vote on new sanctions as soon as possible, preferably this week, to demonstrate that there will be serious consequences if Iran fails to uphold the Geneva deal or if it tries to delay indefinitely a final agreement.

I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

Mr. GRAHAM. Madam President, I would like to be recognized for 10 minutes, if I could.

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

Mr. GRAHAM. Madam President, thank you. If the Presiding Officer would let me know when the 10 minutes expire, I would appreciate it.

I wish to rise in support of Senator BURR's alternative to Senator SANDERS' veterans bill. We are having a contest here about how best to help veterans. There is a lot of bipartisan agreement over the substance of the bill. The real difference is how to pay for it, but there is one key difference. In Senator BURR's alternative, we have the Iranian sanctions bill. I believe it is imperative for this body, the Senate, to speak on sanctions against Iran before it is too late. I hate the fact that we have lost our bipartisan approach to this topic.

We have been together for a very long time as Republicans and Democrats. We have had 16 rounds of sanctions since 1987, 9 U.N. Security Council resolutions since 2006 demanding the full and sustained suspension of all uranium enrichment-related and reprocessing activities and full cooperation with the IAEA.

The United Nations, the Congress, in an overwhelming bipartisan fashion, have been imposing sanctions in speaking to the threat we all face from the Iranian nuclear program. Unfortunately, the bipartisanship has come apart in terms of whether we should have another vote. The bipartisan bill that would reauthorize sanctions at the end of the 6-month negotiating period has 59 cosponsors, 17 Democrats.

We believe desperately—at least I do—that the sanctions that have been so effective in bringing the Iranians to the table are literally falling apart, and I will have some evidence to show that.

But here is what Senator REID, the majority leader, said on November 21, 2013:

I am a strong supporter of our Iran sanctions regime and believe that the current

sanctions have brought Iran to the negotiating table.

I believe we must do everything possible to stop Iran from getting nuclear weapons capability, which would threaten Israel and the national security of our great country.

The Obama administration is in the midst of negotiations with the Iranians that are designed to end their nuclear weapons program. We all strongly support these negotiations and hope they will succeed, and we want them to produce the strongest possible agreement.

However, we are also aware of the possibility the Iranians could keep negotiations from succeeding. I hope that won't happen, but the Senate must be prepared to move forward with a new bipartisan Iran sanctions bill when the Senate returns after the Thanksgiving recess. I am committed to do just that.

I will support a bill that would broaden the scope of our current petroleum sanctions, place limitations on trade with strategic sectors of the Iranian economy that support its nuclear ambitions, as well as pursue those that divert goods to Iran.

While I support the administration's diplomatic efforts, I believe we need to leave our legislative options open to act on a new bipartisan sanctions bill in December, shortly after we return.

The challenge of the majority leader was to find a bipartisan bill that could speak anew to sanctions. We are able to do that. Senator MENENDEZ has been absolutely terrific, along with Senator KIRK, in making sure that sanctions have worked. The Obama administration deserves a lot of credit for keeping the sanctions regime together and getting Iranians to the table.

But the interim agreement that has been entered into between the P5+1 and the Iranians quite frankly is well short of what we need. My goal, and I think the body's goal—at least I hope—would be to dismantle the plutonium-producing reactor that the Iranians are building; not just stop its construction, but dismantle it; take the highly enriched uranium that exists in Iran today and move it out of the country so it cannot be used for a dirty bomb or any other purposes.

This is what the U.N. resolutions have called for, removing the highly enriched uranium that exists in great number from Iran to the international community so it can be controlled; and, last but not most importantly is to dismantle their enrichment capability. If the Iranians truly want a peaceful nuclear power program, I am all for that. I do not care if the Russians are jointly with us, that we build a nuclear powerplant in Iran to help them with commercial nuclear power. We just need to control the fuel cycle. There are 15 countries that have nuclear power programs that do not enrich uranium, Mexico and Canada being two, South Korea being another.

The point I am trying to make here is if you leave enrichment capability intact in Iran, the only thing preventing their abuse of that capability would be a bunch of U.N. inspectors. We tried this with North Korea. We provided foreign aid and economic aid and food assistance to control their nu-

clear ambitions. Well, they took the money and now they have nuclear weapons. The U.N. failed to stop the desire of the North Koreans to develop a nuclear weapon.

That type of approach is not going to work in Iran. Israel is not going to allow their fate to be determined by a bunch of U.N. inspectors. If that is the only thing between the Iranian ayatollahs and nuclear weapons is a bunch of U.N. inspectors, Israel will not stand for that, nor should we.

So when the Iranians demand the right to enrich, that tells you all you need to know about their ambitions. If they want a peaceful nuclear power program, they certainly can have it. We need to control the fuel cycle.

The interim deal has not dismantled any centrifuges. They have unplugged a few, but all of them exist, the 16,000 to 18,000 of them. Here is what the Iranian Government has been openly saying about the interim deal:

The iceberg of sanctions is melting while our centrifuges are also still working. This is our greatest achievement.

This is the head of the Iranian nuclear agency. The Foreign Minister said:

The White House tries to portray it is basically a dismantling of Iran's nuclear program. We are not dismantling any centrifuges, we're not dismantling any equipment, we're simply not producing, not enriching over 5 percent.

Pretty clear. This is the President of Iran, Mr. Rouhani, on CNN.

So there will be no destruction of centrifuges—of existing centrifuges?

No. No, not at all.

Another statement, another tweet:

Our relationship with the world is based on Iran's nation's interest. In Geneva agreement, world powers surrendered to Iran's national will.

You could say this is all bluster for domestic consumption. But just keep listening to what I have to tell you. The Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister said of the interconnections between networks of centrifuges that have been used to enrich uranium to 20 percent, so that they can enrich only to 5 percent: "These interconnections can be removed in a day and connected again in a day."

So you are not dismantling anything. You are unplugging it. They can plug it right back in. Here is what has happened, the President of Iran again:

We have struck the first blow to the illegal sanctions, in the fields of insurance, shipping, the banking system, foodstuffs and medicine and exports of petrochemical materials.

You are witness to how foreign firms are visiting our country; 117 political delegations have come here: France, Turkey, Georgia, Ireland, Tunisia, Kazakhstan, China, Italy, India, Austria, and Sweden.

The French Chamber of Commerce hosted a delegation to Iran after the interim deal. The International Monetary Fund says the Iranian economy could turn around due to the interim agreement. Prospects for 2014 and 2015 have improved with the agreement.

They are getting a stronger economy. The interim deal has done nothing, in my view, to dismantle their nuclear program that is a threat to us and Israel.

India's oil imports from Iran more than doubled in January from a month earlier. China has emerged as Iran's top trading partner, with nonoil trade hitting \$13 billion over the past 10 months. U.S. aerospace companies are talking about selling them parts. Thirteen major international companies have said in recent weeks they aim to reenter the Iranian marketplace over the next several months.

The value of their currency has appreciated about 25 percent. Inflation has been reduced substantially. In other words, the interim deal is beginning to revive the Iranian economy that was crippled by sanctions. The international community is lining up to do business in Iran. The sanctions against Iran are crumbling before our eyes, and the Iranians are openly bragging about this.

The only way to turn this around is to pass another piece of legislation that says, we will give the 6-month period of negotiations time to develop, but at the end of the 6 months, if we have not achieved a satisfactory result of dismantling their nuclear program, the sanctions will continue at a greater pace.

Without that threat, without that friction, we are going to get a very bad outcome here. The administration says that new sanctions will scuttle the deal and lead to war. I could not disagree more. The lack of threat of sanctions, the dismantling of sanctions, the crumbling of sanctions is going to lead to conflict. I do believe that if this body reinforced that we were serious about sanctions until the program gets to where the world thinks it should be, then we would be reinforcing our negotiating position.

So to my Democratic colleagues and Democratic leadership, I am urging you, please, to let this bipartisan bill go forward, if not in the Burr alternative, bring it up as a separate piece of legislation. Let's act now while we still can. I am hopeful we can avoid a conflict with the Iranians. But the only way to do that—I ask unanimous consent for 5 more minutes.

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

Mr. GRAHAM. The only way to do that is to make the Iranians understand that they are never going to have prosperity and peace until they comply with the will of the international community, which is give them a peaceful nuclear power program, not a weapons capability. Rather than us bending to their will, they need to bend to ours, simply because a disaster is in the making if Iran comes out of this negotiation with their nuclear capability intact.

If you allow the Iranians to enrich uranium, that is the final deal, where they still have an enrichment capability, theoretically controlled by the

U.N., every Sunni Arab state will want an enrichment program of their own, and you have destroyed nonproliferation in the Mideast.

I say again, if this final agreement allows enrichment at any level by the Iranians, Sunni Arab states are going to go down the same road. Then we are marching toward Armageddon, I fear. The last thing in the world we want to do is allow the Iranians to enrich, telling our allies they cannot. That will lead to proliferation of enrichment throughout the Mideast, and you are one step away from a weapon.

If you had to make a list of countries based on the behavior that you should not trust with enriching uranium, Iran would be at the top. For the last 30 years they have sown destruction throughout the world, a state sponsor of terrorism. They have killed our troops in Iraq; they are supplying weapons to the enemies of Israel; they have been up to just generally no good. Why in the world we would give them this capability I cannot envision.

So the sanctions are crumbling. We see it before our eyes. The threat of military force against the regime I think has been diminished after the debacle in Syria. Do you really think the Iranians believe after the Syrian debacle that we mean it when we say we would use military force as a last resort? I do not want a military engagement against the Iranians. I just want their nuclear ambitions to end and give them a nuclear powerplant that is controlled to produce power and not make a bomb.

The Israelis will not live under the threat of a nuclear-armed Iran. They will not allow this program to stay intact, unlike North Korea, where the South Koreans and the Japanese did not feel they needed a nuclear program to counter the North Koreans.

The Mideast is different. The Sunni Arabs will not be comfortable with an enrichment capability given to the Iranians. Israel will never accept this, because it is a threat to the Jewish state unlike any other. So I will urge the body, before it is too late, to take the earliest opportunity to pass the bipartisan legislation that would reimpose sanctions if the agreement does not reach a satisfactory conclusion in the next 6 months.

We have 59 cosponsors. If we had a vote, I am confident we could get an overwhelming vote. It would be the right thing to send to the Iranians. It would tell the Western World: Slow down. The idea of giving this 6 months to continue at the pace it is going, it would be impossible to reconstruct sanctions if we do not do it now. Six months from now, if the deal falls apart, President Obama says he would impose sanctions in 24 hours. By then, the regime will have been broken. Western Europe will have been basically out of the game; they have a different view of this than we do. So the idea you can wait for 6 months and the damage not be done, I think is unreal-

istic. You can see where the world is headed. Sanctions as a viable control device seems to be in everybody's rear-view mirror unless the Congress acts, and acts decisively.

What I hope we can do, in a bipartisan fashion, is let our allies and the Iranians know that sanctions are going to be in place as long as the nuclear threat continues to exist. I hope the President will reinforce to the Iranians: Whatever problem I had in Syria, I do not have with you.

I hope the Congress could send a message to the Iranians that we do not want a conflict, but we see your nuclear ambitions as a threat to our way of life. While we may be confused about what to do in Syria, we are not confused about the Iranian nuclear program. We want a peaceful resolution. Sanctions have to be in place until we get the right answer. But if everything else fails, then we are ready to do what is necessary as a nation as a last resort to use military force. I say that understanding the consequences of military force. It would not be a pleasant task. But in a war between us and Iran, we win, they lose. They have a small navy, a small air force. I do not want war with anyone. But if my options are to use military force to stop the Iranians from getting a nuclear weapon, I am picking use of military force. Because if they get a nuclear weapon, then the whole Mideast goes down the wrong road. You would open Pandora's box to attack the Iranians. They could do some damage to us, but it would not last long. They lose, we win. If they get a nuclear capability, you have created a nuclear arms race in the Mideast and you will empty Pandora's box and put Israel in an impossible spot.

So, my colleagues, we have a chance here to turn history around before it is too late. But the way we are moving regarding this negotiation with Iran and the outcome, I have never been more worried about. I do not want to allow the last best chance to stop the Iranian nuclear program to be lost through inaction.

If we misread where Iran is actually going, it will be a mistake for the ages.

I am urging the majority leader, if not on this bill, as soon as possible, to allow the bipartisan Iranian sanction legislation to come to the floor for debate and a vote. I think it can change history before it is too late.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

Mr. BOOZMAN. Madam President, I stand here as someone who is very interested in our Nation's veterans. We owe the men and women who stood in defense of our Nation the care and services they deserve for the sacrifices they have made for our country.

My dad served in the Air Force for over 20 years, and his service and sacrifice is in no small part why I am a Member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, and previously the House Veterans' Affairs Committee. I requested to be a member of the Veterans' Affairs Committees in both Chambers because we made a commitment to take care of those who put their lives on the line for our safety and ideals, and I believe in carrying out the promise.

During my days as a Member of the House of Representatives, my mom would routinely ask me when I would see her: What have you done for our veterans lately? I was happy to talk about the programs and services we promoted, supported, and passed—and certainly in a very bipartisan way. There is a long list of accomplishments of which we can be very proud, from modernizing the GI bill so our veterans can get the education they need to succeed in life after the military, to helping our veterans pursue their dreams of owning a business, to improving the medical services our veterans need for the wounds they have suffered while serving our country.

Unfortunately, problems exist. In my Arkansas office—and I think this is true of most congressional offices—we have a number of dedicated staffers. In fact, we have three dedicated staffers who handle veterans-related issues. They help cut through the redtape of the Department of Veterans Affairs to get the care and attention our veterans have earned. Last year, more than 40 percent of the assistance we provided to Arkansans that involved Federal agencies focused on veterans' issues.

Increasing funding doesn't necessarily mean we will have better outcomes. Take for instance the claims backlog. This is a huge problem impacting hundreds of thousands of veterans nationwide. Even some of the simplest claims are stuck in the process. Since 2009, the number of claims pending for over 1 year has grown, despite a 40 percent increase in the VA's budget. The most recent statistics for the Little Rock VA Regional Office showed 7,663 total claims are pending. Nearly 54 percent have been in the process for more than 125 days. The regional office averages nearly 217 days to complete a claim.

Thanks to the hard work and commitment of Arkansans who work at the VA, we are making progress on the backlog at the Little Rock office, but there is still work to be done for our veterans. Take, for instance, the retired lieutenant colonel in Arkansas who is eligible for benefits he earned for his service in the military. He is not receiving the correct pay. The Defense Finance and Accounting Service approved his paperwork in August and sent it to the VA. It has been 6 months and still no decision has been made. This is an easy case, and it simply shouldn't take that long.

Retired CSM Richard Green lives in Sherwood and has already received his

retirement benefits, but he filed for benefits for his wife the month after they married in October 2012. It took 16 months to process that paperwork—much longer than he was used to during active military service when this sort of paperwork was fixed within one or two paychecks. Every part of the claims process is overwhelmed and bogged down.

Paul Cupp from Fort Smith, AR, has been working on his VA appeal since 2009. He was happy to get part of it approved in 2013, after 4 years of waiting. However, months later, he is still waiting for his rating to get updated and to see the actual benefits from that decision.

And the widows of our veterans are not exempt from this backlog. One Arkansan in her seventies has been working on her claim since 2005, and is still awaiting a decision on appeal. Nine years is certainly unacceptable.

Instead of fixing the existing challenges our veterans are facing through fully implementing what we have committed ourselves to, increasing accountability and improving efficiency, some of my colleagues think the best way to tackle this is by expanding programs and increasing the responsibility of the VA. The problem is we are putting more people in a system which is clearly overwhelmed and needs improvement.

This isn't the fault of the VA, which I believe is fully committed to meeting all the demands our veterans and Congress expect from them. However, the VA can only do so much. As the number of veterans and the complicated nature of their needs increases, we must not pile on additional responsibilities which overwhelm the agency. With the announcement by Senator Hagel of a potentially significant drawdown in the military, many more individuals will come into the VA system.

While the bill before us has worthwhile programs which I support and have championed, we should not expect a massive mandate imposed on VA to change the outcomes we experience. We need a measured approach to changes. They must be done over time and include oversight to make sure our veterans are receiving the attention they deserve in a timely manner.

Madam President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Arkansas.

Mr. PRYOR. Madam President, it is great to see my colleague from Arkansas. We know Senator BOOZMAN tries hard to help our veterans. I thank him for his public service and for focusing on our men and women, whether they are in uniform now or who have served this country.

In the last few weeks I have talked quite a bit about veterans. We have had the veterans retirement cost-of-living fix and a few others which have brought me to the floor to talk about this very important group of people.

In my State of Arkansas we have nearly 255,000 veterans. They have put

on the uniform and served their country. They have put their lives on hold for our country. They deserve to return home to a country which is going to honor the commitments we have made to them and a country which will keep the promises we have made, which is why I have been very supportive of these individuals, especially in the context of the Comprehensive Veterans Health and Benefits and Military Retirement Pay Restoration Act of 2014, S. 1982.

Many Senators are working to make this bill better and get it into a posture where it can pass the Senate. This is a commonsense bill which covers a broad range of topics which are important to our veterans, and a lot of work is going on here behind the scenes. Sometimes when the American people visit the Senate or tune in to C-SPAN 2, they sometimes see an empty Chamber. They aren't always aware of what is going on in the back rooms, here and in the hallways, with folks trying to work through a number of important issues, which is happening with this bill.

I have an important provision in this bill which I have been working on for a while. I think it is going to have broad support on both sides of the aisle, as well as a number of military organizations around the country, called the Honor America's Guard and Reserve Retirees Act. It is kind of a long name, but it is a very simple premise.

Under current law, the military definition of a veteran applies only to servicemembers who have served on Federal active duty under title X orders. This means that many of our servicemembers—most specifically our National Guard members—who have not been deployed under proper orders are falling short of this established criteria.

To put this in perspective: I recently received a letter from an Arkansas veteran named Vincent. He served for more than 20 years in the National Guard. He has protected our families from natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina. He served our country by protecting our borders in Operation Jump Start. He served our Nation in Operation Desert Shield, Desert Storm, Enduring Freedom, and in Iraqi Freedom. Yet he still doesn't meet the military definition of a veteran of the armed services.

Vincent isn't the only one. There are 300,000 National Guard and Reserve servicemembers across the country who fall into this same category. My bill, the Honor America's Guard and Reserve Retirees Act, would fix this. It would amend the military definition of veteran to give Guard and Reserve retirees with 20 years of service the honor of being called a veteran. And it is an honor. It would allow these servicemembers to salute when the Star-Spangled Banner is played, to march in veterans' parades, and be recognized as veterans by other veterans.

I know Members of this Chamber will ask, as they should: This is a cost-neu-

tral bill. There is no cost with this. It is simple, it is cost neutral, and it is an overdue recognition of these individual servicemembers who served bravely for our country.

It is time we pass this bill so Vincent and hundreds and thousands of others can receive the honor they deserve.

Madam President, I yield the floor and I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. REID. I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. BROWN). Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. REID. Mr. President, this morning when I came to the Senate floor, I talked about how it is groundhog year, not "Groundhog Day." What is going on here today is an example of what has been going on with the Republican-driven direction of this Congress for several years.

What are we doing here today? Nothing. Under the rules of the Senate, cloture was invoked 99 to 0. The purpose of that vote was to get on a bill. It is a shame we had to even file cloture on it, but we did, and that takes a couple of days. Everyone should understand that after cloture is invoked, there is 30 hours. It is a waste of time.

Why are they doing that? Why are they causing this? Because they don't want to legislate. They want to do anything they can to stop President Obama from accomplishing anything.

BERNIE SANDERS, chairman of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, has dedicated his heart and soul to something he, his committee, and the veterans community believes in—improving the lives of veterans. We have millions of people who have come home, and are coming home, from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. They deserve a lot.

The legislation that is on this floor is terrific. It is supported by 26 different veterans organizations, including the largest, the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Here is what the commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars said earlier today:

American Legion National Commander Daniel M. Dellinger said Wednesday—

That is today—

that sanctions against Iran have no place in a U.S. Senate debate over legislation that aims to expand health care, education opportunities, employment and other benefits for veterans.

I ask unanimous consent that his complete statement be printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

COMMANDER: KEEP SENATE BILL FOCUSED ON VETS

American Legion leader says no other issues need to be attached to legislation to improve health care, education, employment and benefits for those who served our nation.

WASHINGTON (Feb. 26, 2014).—American Legion National Commander Daniel M. Dellinger said Wednesday that sanctions against Iran have no place in a U.S. Senate debate over legislation that aims to expand health care, education opportunities, employment and other benefits for veterans.

"Iran is a serious issue that Congress needs to address, but it cannot be tied to S. 1982, which is extremely important as our nation prepares to welcome millions of U.S. military servicemen and women home from war. This comprehensive bill aims to help veterans find good jobs, get the health care they need and make in-state tuition rates applicable to all who are using their GI Bill benefits. This legislation is about supporting veterans, pure and simple. The Senate can debate various aspects of it, and that's understandable, but it cannot lose focus on the matter at hand: helping military personnel make the transition to veteran life and ensuring that those who served their nation in uniform receive the benefits they earned and deserve. We can deal with Iran—or any other issue unrelated specifically to veterans—with separate legislation."

A 99-0 vote in the Senate Tuesday cleared the way for a full debate on S. 1982, introduced by Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs. The bill seeks to improve medical and dental care offered by the Department of Veterans Affairs, open 27 new VA clinics where access to care is now difficult, renew the Vow to Hire Heroes Act that has helped some 70,000 veterans find jobs and receive employment training, improve care for those who experienced military sexual trauma and protect cost-of-living adjustments for future military retirees.

Dellinger is the leader of the nation's largest veterans service organization, the 2.4-million-member American Legion.

Mr. REID. It goes into detail as to how wrongheaded this is, that the Republicans are trying to divert attention from an issue that is so very important to the American people, and why their continued obstruction has been so detrimental to our country.

KOCH ADVERTISING

Mr. President, I can't say that every one of the Koch brothers' ads is a lie, but I will say this: The vast majority of them are. Now, enough editorial comment. I am going to read verbatim a column that appeared in today's *The Hill* magazine—newspaper, I should call it—here on the Hill. It is entitled "Koch brothers' ads shameful." Let me read this:

Having a right is not the same thing as being in the right.

In some instances, we have the right to behave immorally. For example, the First Amendment gives some people, in some circumstances, the right to lie.

Let's set aside for a moment whether the billionaire Koch brothers have the right to run a flurry of dishonest ads about ObamaCare and ask instead whether spending millions of dollars to mislead and even lie to the American people is the right thing to do.

There is no legitimate debate about the integrity of the ads. In Louisiana, the Kochs' political front group placed an ad that, to all appearances, features a group of Louisianans opening letters from insurance companies informing them about the problems they face as a result of the Affordable Care Act.

Except that, as ABC News has documented, the individuals in their ad are not Louisianans. They are paid actors who are

not reading actual letters sent by any real insurance company.

In other words, nothing about the ad is true.

The response from the brothers' organization: "The viewing public is savvy enough to distinguish between someone giving a personal story and something that is emblematic."

A little editorial comment before I continue with this op-ed piece: How about that for a response? That is code word for "we have a lot of money, and we will run ads about anything we want to run ads about."

I continue the column:

Were this an ad for Stainmaster carpet, a Koch product, Federal Trade Commission guidelines would require the ad to "conspicuously disclose that the persons in such advertisements are not actual consumers."

That is from the FTC.

Moreover, the FTC would require them to either demonstrate that these results of ObamaCare are typical or make clear in the ad that they are not.

Needless to say, the ad meets none of these requirements, thereby conforming to the legal definition of false advertising.

Not all Koch ads feature actors. Even those with real people, though, are not necessarily factual. Witness the attack on Rep. Gary Peters (D-Mich.)—

Who, by the way, is running for the Senate—

in a Koch-funded ad featuring a Michigan leukemia patient.

Everyone sympathizes with her struggle, as well they should. But neither her bravery nor her suffering makes the words she utters true. They aren't.

In the ad, the patient claims, with ObamaCare "the out-of-pocket costs are so high, it is unaffordable." The *Detroit News* reports the "ad makes no mention that [the patient] successfully enrolled in a new Blue Cross plan where she's been able to retain her University of Michigan oncologist and continues to receive the life-saving oral chemotherapy. . . . The ad also does not mention that [her] health care premiums were cut in half."

The *Washington Post's* Glenn Kessler did the math. She saved \$6,348 a year on premiums. And because ObamaCare caps out-of-pocket costs for plans at \$6,350, she will be paying, at most, \$2 more this year for her care.

It's hard to call that an unaffordable increase.

If it were just these two egregious examples, someone might suggest I'm picking on the Koch brothers. Now, I do not always agree with the fact checkers, who are sometimes wrong. But it is striking that PolitiFact reviewed 11 ads placed by the brothers' organization, and not a single one was rated "true" or even "mostly true." Nine were rated "false" or worse.

So, I return to my original question. Whatever their constitutional rights, are the Koch brothers right to degrade the Democratic process with lies? Are they right to use tactics that are, by legal definitions, deceptive and dishonest? Are voters choosing a candidate due any less respect and honesty than consumers buying carpet?

We in the consulting profession—

This column is written by a nationally known pollster by the name of Mark Mellman—

We in the consulting profession need to ask ourselves hard questions about where the line is that we won't cross. When does the

pursuit of victory at any cost exact too high a price? When does dishonesty distort democracy?

Politicians, political parties or media that fail to condemn these tactics, as well as broadcasters that air these ads, and the consultants who make them, are all complicit in the Kochs' immorality.

Mr. President, this is the truth. This is the truth. What is going on with these two brothers who made billions of dollars last year and attempted to buy our democracy is dishonest, deceptive, false, and unfair. Just because you have huge amounts of money, you should not be able to run these false, misleading ads by the hundreds of millions of dollars.

They hide behind all kinds of entities. It is not just their front organization, Americans For Prosperity. They give money to all kinds of organizations—lots of money. When you make billions of dollars a year, you can be, I guess, as immoral and dishonest as your money will allow. It is too bad they are trying to buy America, and it is time the American people spoke out against this terrible dishonesty and about these two brothers who are about as un-American as anyone I can imagine.

Mr. WICKER. Mr. President, does the Senator yield the floor?

Mr. REID. I sure do.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Mississippi.

HEALTH CARE

Mr. WICKER. Mr. President, I rise briefly this afternoon to join my colleagues in expressing deep disappointment with yet another decision by the Obama administration to undermine the health care options of millions of Americans.

As we all know, the President promised, "If you like your health care plan, you can keep it." But his law's drastic cuts to Medicare and Medicare Advantage are creating an impossible environment for Americans to keep their insurance plans or to keep their doctors. Even more troubling is that funds raided from Medicare will be spent on the President's flawed health care law.

In particular, Medicare Advantage serves more than 15 million American senior citizens, including some 56,000 Mississippians. It is a program that incentivizes market-based competition and patient choice. These are two elements that have made it both popular and successful. Nearly one-third of all Medicare patients voluntarily enroll in this type of health care plan, and 95 percent of Medicare Advantage members rate their quality of care as "very high."

Independent reports show that seniors will see their plans canceled. They will see higher premiums and fewer choices because of these severe cuts to Medicare and Medicare Advantage. I have heard from health care professionals in Mississippi who are concerned about the law's negative impact on patient care.

I came to the floor earlier this week to speak about the profound human

cost of the President's health care law. It is past time for the President and his allies in Congress to recognize the devastating consequences of ObamaCare. Delaying and changing the law, which the administration has done some two dozen times—with questionable legal authority, I might add—will not fix the damage. This is a law that just doesn't work.

The solution is to repeal and replace ObamaCare with market-driven reforms that empower Americans to decide which health care options are best for them. We can do better than this law, and we owe it to the American people to do so.

Thank you, Mr. President. I yield the floor and note the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

Mr. COBURN. Mr. President, I come to the floor again to talk about—it is my understanding we are not going to be allowed to offer any amendments again on a significant bill that spends billions, tens of billions of dollars—to talk about a couple of amendments I have.

My staff recently talked with some veterans from Oklahoma, and I want to give you an anecdote that just happened. This is about VA care. This is a lady, a 100-percent disabled veteran, who has had knee replacements at a VA hospital. She did not have one knee replacement, she had two knee replacements. And then she had two knee replacements on the other knee.

If you look at the statistics of a knee replacement having to be replaced, it is a very rare occurrence. But the fact that you would have two knee replacements, and both of them would have to be replaced is unheard of.

The story does not end there. The story ends with the fact that during her second knee replacement, they broke her femur. So they had to put a rod into her femur. When they put the implant in, she ended up with one leg an inch longer than the other leg.

The fact is that this all occurred at a VA hospital. And it is unheard of that somebody who has a knee replacement on one side would have to have another one done because of complications, and then have the other knee done, and have to have that knee redone because of a complication. But then on top of it, as to the skill of the surgeon in terms of doing a second replacement and having a rod, and then putting the wrong rod in, it creates a leg length discrepancy that can only be corrected now by her spending a significant amount of money on an orthotic shoe on the shorter leg which, if you know anything about medicine, changes the alignment of the spine, which causes tremendous arthritis in the spine of that patient.

So here is a patient that if you look across the world in the private sector 99.9 percent of the time would not have had to have either of them replaced, would not have had to have a rod put in her femur, and would not have a leg-length discrepancy.

I agree that is an anecdote. But those are the kinds of things that we are not holding the VA to account for.

One of the amendments I was going to offer to this bill was a very straightforward amendment requiring every 6 months that the VA publish, in both their hospitals—outpatient—and nursing homes the quality of their care, the mortality rates, the complication rates, the infection rates, the wait times in their emergency rooms, the wait times for a screening examination, the wait times for an endoscopy, the complications associated with those, so veterans could actually see and compare it to the private sector—every other hospital knows all this stuff and publishes it—so they can see and compare the quality of care. Because we have an honor-bound commitment to offer care to those who have offered to sacrifice their life and their future for our freedom.

But we are not going to be able to offer the first step in terms of accountability to the VA health system because we get to offer no amendments.

What if you knew—and this does not apply and I do not mean to denigrate the whole VA system because there are some great VA hospitals, but in your area, where you have to go, if you knew the quality was 20 or 25 percent less than what you could get in your own hometown, would you still go to a VA hospital? Should veterans not know whether they are getting a standard of care that equates to what they could get in the private sector? They are not going to know because that is nowhere in terms of the accountability of the VA system I talked about yesterday.

One of the other amendments I was going to offer would be to strike section 301. The chairman of the committee yesterday referenced section 302. He was actually talking about section 308 of his bill, not section 302 of his bill. But when you expand VA health care to Priority Group 8—these are people who do not meet the income, have no service-connected disability, and have no limited resources—to put them into the VA health care system, when we are not adequately treating the veterans who are eligible for service today in the VA health care system, what you are really doing is taking away our commitment to care for those to whom we have already promised care. So it is somewhat cynical that we would expand from 6 million to a potential of 22 million people in a system that is behind the curve already.

The other thing that is important for that is the care for these veterans with nonservice-connected disabilities was excluded from the VA's priority group so the VA could focus—focus—its lim-

ited resources on our veterans with service-connected disabilities. In other words, they have a health complication because they served our country.

As former Secretary Anthony Principi said: Remember, when everyone is a priority, no one is. That is exactly what this bill will do. It will take the priority away from our veterans with service-connected disabilities to where they will fall further through the cracks.

The other thing in this section is—the only thing worse than them being in the Affordable Care Act, which is what this is really specifically designed to do, is to take them out of the exchanges and put them into the VA. So what we are saying under this bill is, if you are a high-income, nondisabled veteran, and the only health care coverage you have available to you is an ObamaCare exchange, then you now qualify for VA services.

What is that about? What that is about is moving to a single-payer, government-run, totally government-run health care system. And this is about moving 16 million veterans—or the potential of up to 16 million veterans—to that position. So the only thing worse than being covered by the VA, where veterans are waiting for weeks to see a doctor and literally dying because of medical deficiencies, is being in an Affordable Care Act exchange.

This amendment would strike the expansion from the legislation, which would ensure that the VA remains focused on the service-connected disabled and increasing the quality of care for more than 6 million veterans currently in the VA system.

I want to talk a minute about why we did that. We created the VA health care system for those who have a complication of their service—a complication of their service.

Do we have a commitment, one, to ensure that those who have a complication from their service get the care we have promised them?

I believe we do. Section 301 would markedly minimize that commitment to those who have a complication from their service. So how is it that we have come about, that we have this great big VA bill on the floor, without any oversight, aggressive oversight, on holding the VA accountable to do what it is supposed to be doing now—with a 59-percent increase in budget since October 1 of 2009, and expand it and blow it to an area where we are going to offer these same services, where we are not meeting quality outcomes, we are not meeting timeliness outcomes, we are not meeting care outcomes, and we are going to put that on the VA system?

I would say the better way to honor our veterans who have a complication associated with their service is to hold the VA accountable through transparency of their quality.

Here is the other thing that has not been studied, and we do not know the answer to this. I certainly do not know

it. I cannot find it anywhere. It is this. What does it cost to do an "X" procedure in a VA hospital, totally absorbed, versus doing it in a nonVA hospital? Let's assume quality is the same. Would the American taxpayer be better off if, in fact, we delivered that service at a cost that is much less?

But nobody has asked for those numbers. The VA cannot give those numbers. The VA does not know those numbers. So we are driving blind. We do not know what it costs to do a total knee in a VA hospital. We do know what it costs in Oklahoma City from every hospital. As a matter of fact, there is a wonderful hospital in Oklahoma City that advertises every price, all their complications, everything else out there. They have people from all across the country coming because they are so much cheaper and so much better than what people in the private market can get done where they live.

Let's see how VA cost and quality and outcomes compare to that. If you really want to drive quality for our veterans, we have to have accountability in terms of how we spend money, accountability in terms of the outcomes, accountability in terms of the quality, and accountability in terms of the service.

The other amendment that I have would allow service-connected veterans who are driving hundreds of miles—in my State—to get care with a pilot program which would allow them to go anywhere they wanted, to their home town, to the next town over if it is bigger and has higher quality, rather than drive 200 miles to get their care at a VA hospital. We would cover it under Medicare rates, since we do not know the cost ramifications of what we do at VA clinics and VA hospitals, in terms of the total absorbed cost, but we do know what the price would be if we had Medicare paying. My learned opinion is that, No. 1, veterans would have access to care closer to home, probably improved quality, and most probably a decreased cost for the Federal Government, i.e., the American taxpayers in terms of meeting this honor-bound commitment to our veterans.

If, in fact, you served this country, and one of the benefits of serving this country—and you have a service-connected disability associated with that—is a promise of quality health care, why do we say you can only get it in a VA clinic or a VA hospital? If you served our country, why can't you get it wherever you want? I mean, you served our country to preserve our freedom of choice, our freedom to do and select what is best for us and our interests. Why can't a veteran have that privilege that he or she fought for and put their rear ends on the line for? Why do we not avail them of the freedom that they sacrificed for?

Nobody will answer that question. Nobody will come down and answer that question. Those are knowable answers. They are moral questions. If you sacrifice, should you not have the bene-

fits of the freedom for which you sacrificed?

The other problem with this bill is it has a false pay-for, money that we might have spent on a war in Afghanistan. Because we are not going to spend it, we are going to spend it here and call that a pay-for. That is not a pay-for. It does not pass muster. It does not pass the budget point of order on it. Everybody knows that.

So what we ought to be doing, instead of having this bill on the floor, we ought to have a bill on the floor that holds the VA accountable, that creates transparency in the VA so that everybody in the country, including the veterans can see outcomes, quality, and cost. Finally, we ought to give the veterans the freedom that they fought for; that if they are deserving of this benefit, they ought to be able to get the benefit anywhere they choose, because they are the ones who preserved the rights and the abilities and the capabilities for us to experience the freedoms to make choices for ourselves.

I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

Mr. BURR. Mr. President, I come to the floor as the ranking member of the Veterans' Affairs Committee as we consider S. 1982, the Sanders bill. I have been down to the floor several times, and I will not take up a lot of the Senate's valuable time right now. But I do want to cover some things that have transpired since the last time I was on the floor today, when I read from an editorial that was written by Concerned Veterans of America. The group was challenged by some of my colleagues here as to whether it was a front group, whether this was a political front group.

Let me assure my colleagues, it represents real veterans. But in an effort to try to debunk the belief that this is just about one political group, I want to read some from another editorial written by Stewart Hickey of AMVETS. Now, nobody can question whether AMVETS is a legitimate veterans service organization. They have been around for a while. I will be selective in my reading:

While we agree the bill addresses many critical issues and recommends important solutions for our veterans, we do not support this bill for several reasons. First, it would be morally irresponsible and fiscally unsound, given the historically volatile situation in Afghanistan, to hang the funding for such robust legislation on any potential "peace dividend." Throwing more money—upwards of \$30 billion, and taken from war funds no less—at a failing department will only make matters worse.

This kitchen sink-like bill also endeavors to be all things to all veterans, and is very

enticing to all of us "Veterans Service Organizations" as the panacea for all of our legislative agendas. The problem is, in its current configuration, it has little to no chance of passage, it's just too "pie in the sky" and lacks the power base to hold VA accountable for providing excellent care and services to veterans currently accessing the system.

It goes on to say:

We all want what is best for the veterans community, and many of the provisions in S. 1982 are positive. However, "bigger" does not mean "better." And the Sanders bill further expands a VA system that is already overwhelmed and cannot meet the current needs of veterans. Before overcommitting the Department of Veterans Affairs and subjecting our veterans to more broken promises, Congress should rally on legislation that keeps the promises already made.

Yet another veterans service organization says: Reform the Veterans Administration.

Dr. COBURN from Oklahoma, the Senator from Oklahoma, was talking about horror stories within the veteran's facilities. So I say to my colleagues: You know, the mistake here is that we are not on the floor debating the reform of the VA and then debating any expansion.

But the fact is that we look at editorial after editorial of people who have some contact with the VA. They are saying: The last thing you should do is expand service. The last thing you should do is use gimmicks to pay for it. The last thing you should do is saddle our kids with not only the debt for it but the responsibility to uphold a promise that might be impossible.

Let me speak a little further on some of the things Dr. COBURN hit on. This is about hospital delays, veterans dying at VA facilities. I came down earlier—and I might add right now that this is the stack of the Inspector General of the VA for 1 year, 1 year's worth of investigations on VA facilities where they made specific recommendations of changes that had to be made.

This dealt with the death of veterans. It dealt with Legionnaire's Disease. It dealt with things as simple as more than one patient using a disposable insulin pen—something meant for one patient that was used for multiple patients, exposing them to potential illnesses.

If the question is, do we keep the promise of the quality of care to our veterans? And if that is not important enough, let me go to the veterans that are in the system trying for the first time to get a disability rating because of a service-connected disability.

The number of claims pending in America right now is 673,000 veterans. These are individuals who have filed a claim with the Veterans' Administration, who are waiting in line for the determination to be made about what percentage of those claims they will approve. The number of claims that are considered backlogged right now is 389,000 veteran's claims.

Once a veteran receives a disability rating, if in fact they feel that the VA has come to the wrong conclusion as to the percentage, they file an appeal. The

number of appeals pending is 272,000 appeals. So one can conclude from this that the number of claims pending is 673,000 plus 272,000. So there are over 1 million veterans right now waiting for a determination by the VA specifically or by the Court of Appeals to sort out their disability status.

The number of days to complete a claim is 265 days. Let me say that again: 265 days to complete a claim. Right now, claims pending are 673,000. The number of days for an appeal that is pending is 600 days—600. So let's just say of that 1 million claims that are either pending or that have been appealed, which is 1 million veterans, the number of days to complete the claim on average took 265 days, and the number of days for an appeal, on average, was over 600. We are now at 800 days. That is almost 3 years.

I hope my colleagues are understanding what I am saying. We have a severely dysfunctional Veterans' Administration today. We have a population of warriors who are coming out of the battlefield in Afghanistan. They are coming back from deployments. They leave the service; they file for disability; they wait, they wait, they wait, they wait. When they finally get their disability claim and they are going to the VA, now all of a sudden we are talking about dumping millions of additional veterans into the line with them.

My good friend and chairman Senator SANDERS said: We can handle this because we have 27 clinics, outpatient facilities in this bill that, under a lease agreement, we are going to build out—27 facilities. They are for the veterans we have today. We don't have enough facilities to handle the current population, and he said this could handle the millions who are going to come in.

Let me remind my colleagues once again that currently we have \$14 billion worth of veterans construction underway. We appropriate about \$1 billion a year. That is a 14-year backlog on the construction of these facilities, and none of the 27 leases that are in this bill will be ready in December 2014 when the enactment of this legislation takes place.

There is one other area of massive expansion other than to veterans with nonservice-connected disabilities, and that is to a program called our caregivers program. I am pretty passionate about this because I wrote the legislation. My good friend Senator Akaka, who is no longer here, who was chairman of the Senate veterans' committee, became a champion of it. Earlier, I read Senator Akaka's statements on the Senate floor the day it was passed. He stated as clearly as anybody ever has why we limited this to a demonstration project, why we rolled it out to a small group. Our intention was that when the VA was fixed, reformed, and was capable of implementing a plan that expanded the caregiver program, we would do that but not a day sooner.

Now, all of a sudden, we are not just talking about extending the caregiver program to every current-era veteran; Senator SANDERS' bill extends it to every era. Veterans from every era who served who are still alive would be eligible for caregivers.

On occasion, he has pointed to the wounded warrior program. I will read a letter the Wounded Warrior Project sent to the committee when this legislation was being considered.

They said:

More than 2 years after initial implementation, VA still has not answered—let alone remedied—the problems and concerns that WWP and other advocates raised regarding the Department's implementing regulations. For example, those regulations leave "appeals rights" unaddressed (including appeals from adverse determinations of law); set unduly strict criteria for determining a need for caregiving for veterans with severe behavioral health conditions; and invite arbitrary, inconsistent decisionmaking. Simply extending the scope of current law at this point to caregivers of other veterans would inadvertently signal to VA acquiescence in its flawed implementation of that law. We recommend that the Committee insist on VA's resolving these long-outstanding concerns as a pre-condition to extending the promise of this law to caregivers of pre 9/11 veterans.

If there is one thing I have made perfectly clear yesterday and today, it is that there is nothing in this bill that reforms the VA. Look at any area of the legislation. There is no reform. Yet editorials from service organizations, letters from the Wounded Warrior Project—and they were, make no mistake, behind caregivers. Their letter to the chairman said: Don't do this until it is fixed.

Well, we are where we are. To suggest that all veterans, all veterans organizations, all organizations that deal with veterans are for this is just inconsistent with the paper trail that exists, letters and editorials.

There are two things that don't go away: one, the need to reform and, two, the promise we made to our country's warriors.

We have to ask ourselves: Are we better off fixing the VA before we enlarge the population or after we enlarge the population? I can answer that. It is tough to do now, and it is not going to happen without congressional leadership. But if we expand the population, dump it on a system that is physically not capable of handling it, administratively not capable of handling it, what do we say to those veterans who need the VA health care system and can't get in to see a primary care doctor? What do we say to a person who needs mental health treatment but can't see a psychiatrist, can't get in to be evaluated, and doesn't get the medication they need?

I plead with my colleagues, don't make this mistake. There is an alternative bill. It is taken from the Sanders bill. It is 80 percent, but it doesn't have the massive expansion. It doesn't reform, but it really moves forward on some important issues.

No matter what we do, at some point we are going to have to show the leadership how to reform the VA. Why? Because we are going to keep our promise to veterans. The promise to veterans was that we would provide them a quality of care that was unprecedented.

I am not sure there is a Member of this body who believes we can dump this population onto the Veterans' Administration and that we can look any veteran in the face and say: We kept our promise to you. Yes, you may have access, but it may be months from now. You may have the ability to go to the VA, but we don't have any room; there is no room in the inn.

These are all part of keeping your promises.

I will go back to what the AMVETS editorial said, and I will end with that because I see my colleagues here.

Bigger is not necessarily better. When I gave these statistics on backlogs of claims and appeals, these are veterans who aren't asking for bigger, they are asking for better. They are asking us to sort out this system and make it work in a way they deserve. All we will do is exacerbate the problem if, in fact, we pass S. 1982.

I urge my colleagues, support the alternative—if we are given the opportunity to offer one. If not, then don't do this to our country's veterans. Wait and let us reform the VA. That is our responsibility. That is our promise.

I yield the floor.

THE PRESIDING OFFICER. (Mr. BLUMENTHAL). The Senator from Mississippi.

Mr. WICKER. Mr. President, are we in morning business? What is the pending business?

THE PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator should be aware we are on the motion to proceed to S. 1982.

Mr. WICKER. With the Senate's permission, I propose to speak, along with Senator MANCHIN, as in morning business on another matter.

THE PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection.

PUERTO RICO STATUS RESOLUTION ACT

Mr. WICKER. I rise today to speak about a recently introduced bill regarding the future of Puerto Rico's political status. Known as the Puerto Rico Status Resolution Act, this legislation would call for an up-or-down referendum on Puerto Rican statehood, excluding the option of Puerto Rico's current status of Commonwealth. The President and Congress would have to proceed with legislation if statehood receives a majority of votes.

I support Puerto Rico's right of self-determination. This is an issue I have closely followed and been involved in for the better part of two decades. Concern about the way we do statehood determination votes in Puerto Rico is an issue that has crossed party lines in the Congress.

I would say to my colleagues, Congress needs to make sure, at a minimum, that any process used to measure the intent of Puerto Rican voters is

objective; otherwise, the outcome will be neither fair nor a meaningful test of public opinion. That is why it is so important not to exclude the option of the current Commonwealth status.

The status resolution act does not rise to the threshold of fairness or a meaningful test of public opinion. There are two reasons:

First, legislation has already been enacted that calls for a plebiscite on Puerto Rico's political status. The 2014 omnibus already includes funding for a plebiscite that would include all available options for political status. Allowing Puerto Ricans the opportunity to choose a status besides statehood is in keeping with a recommendation from the White House Task Force Report released in 2011.

Second, the referendum proposed by the status resolution act would have the same shortcomings as the plebiscite held on November 6, 2012. The results of that referendum were widely criticized, as well as the tortured ballot designed by the pro-statehood party. Of the 1.9 million Puerto Ricans who participated in the referendum, only 834,191—or about 44 percent—favored statehood. Only 44 percent favored statehood. Close to half a million voters declined to respond to the second question on the ballot, evidencing their dissatisfaction with the choices offered. We need to offer better choices. The percentage of statehood supporters has not changed significantly over the past 20 years and certainly does not serve as an impetus for Congress to entertain yet another admissions process now.

Elsewhere on the November 6 ballot that I referred to, public support was clear for the pro-Commonwealth Popular Democratic Party and the election of pro-Commonwealth and anti-statehood candidate Alejandro Garcia Padilla as Puerto Rico's new Governor. In fact, the Commonwealth's legislature, as a result of that election, is now controlled by the pro-Commonwealth party, as is the mayorship of San Juan, the capital of the Commonwealth.

Statehood advocates may attempt to manipulate ballots and election results to support their preferred outcome, but they do so at the expense of the democratic process and the right of every Puerto Rican to have a say in the island's political future.

The referendum process should be conducted in a fair and transparent manner that reflects the true will of the people. In the past, I have introduced legislation that would recognize Puerto Rico's right to convene a constitutional convention—a process that could help build consensus rather than advance the exclusive agenda of one political party over the other.

For Commonwealth supporters, Puerto Rico's current status is instrumental to preserving the island's rich heritage and maintaining the authority needed to address specific needs. The status resolution act not only has the potential to trample on people's

rights, but it also distracts from the island's pressing economic and security concerns.

In conclusion, Congress and the Obama administration should continue to strengthen the partnership between Puerto Rico and the United States in constructive ways instead of encouraging a shortsighted and flawed referendum. Puerto Rico faces economic, energy, and public safety challenges that have a direct impact on the quality of life of its residents. Joint efforts to restore economic growth, modernize energy resources, and reinforce strategies for combating drug trafficking could have a big impact. I am encouraged by proposed reforms, and I wish the best to Gov. Garcia Padilla in the early days of his term in office.

I hope the Senate will not attempt to impose a solution from Washington, DC, on Puerto Rican voters—a solution that would be contrary to the public opinion of inhabitants of the island.

I am glad my colleague from West Virginia, who serves on the Energy and Natural Resources Committee which exercises jurisdiction over matters relating to Puerto Rico, has joined me on the floor, and I would now yield for him—Senator MANCHIN—to comment on a recent study by the GAO on Puerto Rico's economy and the potential effects of statehood.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from West Virginia.

Mr. MANCHIN. Mr. President, I wish to thank my colleague Senator WICKER for his longstanding concern about Puerto Rico's current status and how they can govern themselves and work independently. As you can tell, this is a bipartisan concern we have and we are working very closely together.

As Senator WICKER mentioned, the Government Accountability Office is currently working on a report that examines Puerto Rico's economy and the cost of admitting Puerto Rico as a State. I look forward to seeing the results of that report. But in light of the fact we are still awaiting the GAO report, in addition to a number of other reasons, I share Senator WICKER's concerns about the Puerto Rico Status Resolution Act.

On August 1 of last year, the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, which has jurisdiction over Puerto Rican issues, held a hearing on the political status of Puerto Rico, where we had the opportunity to hear from Governor Padilla, Commissioner PIERLUISI, and the President of the Puerto Rican Independence Party Ruben Berrios. I appreciated their willingness to openly discuss the ongoing status debate in Puerto Rico and their work with the committee members on how to move forward.

Similar to Senator WICKER, I support Puerto Rico's right to self-determination. However, I have voiced my concerns that the 2012 plebiscite did not meet our democratic standards of fairness and exclusivity, and more than

470,000 Puerto Ricans who left the ballot's second question blank would seem to share my concerns as well. We need a process with the support of all Puerto Ricans, regardless of their beliefs and political status.

Supporters of statehood argue about the constitutionality of different status options. Crafting a plebiscite, however, which excludes all options except statehood, as the Puerto Rico status resolution does, is not the solution. It is not the solution.

The 2014 omnibus includes funding for a plebiscite that would be proctored by the Department of Justice which can authoritatively decide on the constitutionality of all possible status options. Further, both those who are pro-Commonwealth and those who are pro-statehood have expressed support for this process. This is not true of the 2012 plebiscite nor the Puerto Rico status resolution.

Political status is not the only issue facing Puerto Rico. The Commonwealth has faced more than half a decade of economic recession and high unemployment, as well as exceptionally high utility costs and continued obstacles to economic development.

As a former Governor I have great respect for Governor Padilla and the challenges he is up against, which are not unlike many of our own States in our country. In meeting with Governor Padilla, I have had the opportunity to hear directly about the enormous economic difficulties he has tackled in his short time as Governor.

In my understanding the 2014 budget—his 2014 budget for Puerto Rico—would significantly reduce the Commonwealth's projected deficit. General fund expenses were down by nearly \$200 million during the second half of last year and expected revenue is up. The Governor has made these efforts with the goal of having a balanced budget by 2015, something we could all work toward and a goal I applaud. I understand and have seen that progress is being made.

The Senate should do everything we can to encourage economic development across our country, including in the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. We need to work as partners in confronting its high energy costs, double-digit unemployment, and continuing recession. As we support self-determination, we should ensure our focus on political status does not prevent us from addressing the immediate economic needs of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

I thank my colleague for the time to join him in speaking on this important issue and I look forward to his support of a fair and open process and to working with him on this issue.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Mississippi.

Mr. WICKER. Mr. President, if I might, let me congratulate my colleague from West Virginia on his remarks and in closing make three observations.

Despite the economic hardships of the region, the economy of Puerto Rico is the strongest of any of the Caribbean islands, and this has occurred under Commonwealth status—the special relationship that Puerto Ricans have with the United States as U.S. citizens but with their separate identity on the island.

Secondly, I would point out that some of the most vocal pro-Commonwealth voices in this Congress are Puerto Rican Americans who happened to have been elected to the Congress from the States, and they speak also and have spoken also with authority in favor of the Commonwealth concept but also in favor of a fair and accurate election.

Finally, I wish to just drive home a point Senator MANCHIN and I have made. On election day in 2012, 1.9 million Puerto Ricans showed up to vote in that election. The pro-Commonwealth candidate for Governor was elected, the pro-Commonwealth candidate for mayor of San Juan was elected, and a majority of the legislature of the island that day turned out to be pro-Commonwealth.

As flawed as the plebiscite was, the fact remains, of the 1.9 million American citizens in Puerto Rico who voted—who showed up to vote—only 44 percent of them cast a ballot in favor of statehood. That is a figure that cannot be controverted: 1.9 million people showed up to vote—American citizens in Puerto Rico—and only 44 percent of them checked the box for statehood.

So as we go forward and as we implement the provisions of the omnibus act, let us make sure that whatever we do we have the facts, as Senator MANCHIN has pointed out, and also we have a process to accurately reflect the will of the Puerto Rican people.

I thank the Chair, I yield the floor, and I suggest the absence of a quorum. The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, I have talked to a number of my Republican colleagues, some of whom have expressed support for many of the provisions in this comprehensive veterans bill. Many of my Republican colleagues say they would like to support the bill, but they have concerns about how it is paid for and the issue of deficit—increasing the deficit. So let me say a word about this.

Unlike many expenditures, including the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the truth is this bill will not add one penny to the deficit. Let me repeat: This bill will not add one penny to the deficit. The Congressional Budget Office—the nonpartisan scorekeeper—has estimated that mandatory spending in this legislation will total \$2.88 billion over

the next decade. All of this mandatory spending is completely offset not by the overseas contingency operations—or OCO—but through more than \$4.2 billion in actual savings from programs within the jurisdiction of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs. As a result, CBO has determined that overall mandatory spending—mandatory spending in this bill—will be reduced by more than \$1.3 billion.

In addition to the mandatory spending, this bill authorizes \$18.3 billion in discretionary spending over the next 5 years to improve the lives of our Nation's veterans and their families.

As we know, there is no rule in the Senate that an authorization of funding has to be offset. In essence, the discretionary spending provisions in the legislation we are debating today are just recommendations on how much additional funding we believe is needed for our Nation's veterans. It will be up to future legislation originating in the Appropriations Committee to approve or disapprove these recommendations. In other words, the Veterans' Affairs Committee is an authorizing committee; the final decisions in terms of expenditures are made by the Appropriations Committee.

Many of my Republican colleagues have insisted even recommendations of new spending—spending which may never actually happen because it has to go through the Appropriations Committee—be offset. I have done my best to listen to their concerns and have come up with an offset which will not add to the deficit over the next decade.

Specifically, the discretionary spending authorized under this bill is paid for by using savings from winding down the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—otherwise known as the OCO fund. CBO estimates spending for overseas contingency operations will total \$1.025 trillion over the next decade, so a little more than \$1 trillion. Spending as a result of this legislation will be a tiny fraction of that amount—less than 2 percent.

OCO funds are designed, very broadly, to be used to fund war-related activities. In my view, it is totally consistent with the goals of this funding source to provide support for the men and women who have defended us in those wars.

In recent years OCO funds have provided assistance to Syrian refugees, and have helped the people of Haiti recover from a massive earthquake. Further, since 2005, the Defense Department has used OCO funding for childcare centers, hospitals, schools, traumatic brain injury research, and orthopedic equipment.

In 2010, \$50 million in OCO funds was used for the Guam Improvement Enterprise Fund. Last year, OCO funds were allocated to the following countries: Egypt, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Lebanon, Somalia, South Sudan, Tajikistan, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Yemen. Last year, OCO funds were used to combat trafficking

in persons related to labor migration in the Kyrgyz Republic, and to establish a Tunisian-American Enterprise Fund.

In 2011, \$89.36 million was used by the National Guard to support the southwest border of the United States.

This year, \$218 million in OCO funding is being used for the TRICARE health care program.

These are some of the ways in the past OCO funding has been used. I am not here to argue about the wisdom of any of those expenditures. Many of them may well be valid. What I will say is the needs of our veterans are also valid. If we can spend OCO funds for the Guam Improvement Enterprise Fund, I think we can use OCO funds to protect the interests of our veterans. Again, this expenditure is less than 2 percent of the savings from ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I have heard my friends on the other side of the aisle call this a budget gimmick. I disagree. Republicans and Democrats in the House and Senate have voted several times to count war-related savings as a reduction in the deficit.

For example, virtually every Republican in the House of Representatives and Senate voted for the fiscal year 2012 budget resolution, introduced by Representative PAUL RYAN, which counted \$1 trillion in deficit reduction from “phasing down overseas contingency operations”—not what I am saying, but what the Heritage Foundation points out.

If the savings from winding down wars can be counted as deficit reduction, clearly we owe it to our Nation's veterans to use a very small percentage of this fund to make their lives a little bit better at home.

To me, placing modest caps on OCO—overseas contingency operations—funding to pay for the most comprehensive veterans legislation in a decade is a no-brainer. This money was always intended to assure the well-being and success of those brave men and women who have served our great country.

Finally, I think we should be very clear: The cost of war does not end once the last shots are fired and the last battles are fought. When members of the military lose arms, legs, eyesight, come back with PTSD or TBI from fighting in wars which Congress authorized, we have a moral obligation to make sure those veterans receive all of the benefits they have earned and deserve. When American soldiers die in combat, we have a moral obligation to make sure the spouses and children they leave behind are taken care of as best as we possibly can.

This speaks to the funding of this legislation, and I hope we will have strong support from all of our colleagues.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Rhode Island.

Mr. WHITEHOUSE. Mr. President, I thank the distinguished chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee for

his remarks, and for the relentlessness, enthusiasm, and passion which he has pursued putting together this extraordinarily strong bill for our veterans. I look forward to supporting it, and I commend him for his excellent work.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Mr. WHITEHOUSE. Mr. President, I am here because every week the Senate is in session, now for 59 weeks, I give my climate speech, hoping some day sparks will hit tinder.

I could give a whole separate speech about the evil done by the Supreme Court Citizens United decision, and I could give a separate speech about the gridlock which bedevils the Senate. But this week's climate speech will touch all three—Citizens United, gridlock, and climate change—to show how the three are connected.

We fail here in this Senate to address climate change because of the peculiar gridlock in Congress. And Congress is peculiarly gridlocked because of the evils of Citizens United. Our failure to address climate change is a symptom of things gone wrong in our democracy.

I have spoken before on the Senate floor about the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision, one of the worst and most disgraceful decisions ever made by the Supreme Court, destined to follow cases such as *Lochner v. New York* onto the ash heap of judicial infamy. But we are stuck with it now. Until the Supreme Court gets its bearings back, their Citizens United stands.

In a nutshell, the Citizens United decision says this: Corporations are people; money is speech; so there can be no limit to corporate money influencing American elections under constitutional principles of freedom of speech.

If that doesn't seem right, it is because it is not. To unleash that corporate power in our elections, the conservative Justices had to go through some pretty remarkable contortions: They had to reverse previous decisions by the Court which said the opposite; they had to make up facts which are demonstrably flat-out wrong; they had to create a make-believe world of independence and transparency in election spending; and they had to maneuver their own judicial procedures to prevent a factual record which would belie those facts they were making up. It was a dirty business, with a lot of signs of intention, and it has produced evil results.

Let's start with the contortions the conservative Justices had to go through to uncork all that corporate money. They had to first make the leap that corporations are people and money is speech to ensure corporate money is protected by the First Amendment. They went a more circuitous route, but that is where they ended up. And it is quite a leap when you think of how suspicious the Founding Fathers were of corporations. There is no mention of corporations in the Constitution. So much for these conservative Justices' fidelity to originalism—a constitutional theory

the conservatives put a lot of credence in when it suits them.

To treat corporations as people and money as speech, the conservative Justices also had to overrule previous Supreme Court decisions which had said the exact opposite, which they did, upending a century of law. So much for fidelity to precedent.

The conservative bloc then had to deal with the inconvenience that First Amendment doctrine actually allows the government to regulate elections, to protect against either political corruption or even the appearance of corruption.

So how do you take away the people's ability to restrain corporate money in elections when protecting against corruption is a legitimate reason for restraints on corporate money? What you do—and what they did—is decide, by making a finding of fact, that corporations' money would not corrupt elections or politics; indeed, that no amount of corporate money could even appear to corrupt elections or politics. So much for fidelity to the judicial rule which appellate courts, State or Federal, are not supposed to engage in fact-finding.

This fact-finding about corruption by the conservative Justices caused another little inconvenience: The assertion that corporate money can't corrupt politics is laughably false. This meant the conservatives couldn't allow a factual record in the case. A factual record, with testimony and evidence about such a ludicrous proposition, would have blown it out of the water. So they let the little, narrow Citizens United case get all the way through the judicial process, including briefing and argument before them, and then they went back and changed the question into a big one.

This clever maneuver at the very end of the case guaranteed there would be no factual record developed on the new and larger question. And that freed their hand.

I should emphasize that this was a third transgression. The first transgression was for conservatives to ignore their own constitutional theory of originalism in getting to the "corporations are people and money is speech" result. The second transgression was violating the traditional rule that appellate courts were not supposed to engage in factfinding at all, let alone ludicrous factfinding. The third transgression was this maneuver with the question presented.

As a general rule, when cases come to a supreme court, State or Federal, the court defines the "questions presented" by the case. This may not seem like a big deal, just something in the ordinary course, but it is actually an important limit on judicial power under our constitutional separation of powers. It is what prevents a supreme court from roving willy-nilly into any question it wants any time. Courts have to wait until a case comes that presents a particular question, and

then they identify what the question is. So it was odd indeed when the Chief Justice went back, after the case was briefed and argued, and did his own new "question presented." But it did the job.

Now the court—with no record saying otherwise—could pretend that corporate money just plain can't corrupt American elections, can't do it, no way, no how—the conservative immaculate conception of corporate money.

Pretending that corporate money couldn't possibly corrupt or even appear to corrupt American elections allowed them to sweep away any interest of the people in keeping corporate corruption out of our politics and elections. People don't need to worry their little heads about corruption, they said. Corporate money in elections is immaculate and can't corrupt.

Bingo. That got them where they wanted. We, the people, could no longer limit corporate spending in our elections. As we have seen, the big money began to flood in.

Citizens United actually gets worse in its plain errors about how independent corporate money was going to be from candidates and how transparent it was going to be whose money was truly behind all of those negative ads. Independent? Transparent? Look at the last elections. How did that work out? Subsequent history shows the falsity of that nonsense.

Those contortionist justices completely ignored a big, important fact: what big money can do, big money can threaten to do or promise to do, and there is going to be nothing independent or transparent about those private threats and promises. The Citizens United decision opened this avenue to corruption while pretending corruption was impossible.

So on to the next step: How do the evils of this Citizens United decision lead to the evils of gridlock? Look around. Look at who is scared of whom and look at who is angry with whom around here.

Democrats and Republicans actually get along pretty well—at least Democrats and most Republicans. We are policy adversaries on many subjects, but Democrats and Republicans have been policy adversaries for decades. Democrat versus Republican is old news. It doesn't explain the new weirdness around here.

Look at what you see. The real fear and the real anger around here is between the mainstream Republicans and the tea party extremists. Look around. Ask around. Where do emotions run high? Where are the shouting matches? Where are the insults hurled? Where are Senators heckled by their colleagues? The worst of it is not between Democrat and Republican, it is between tea party and Republican.

Who is being told how they can and cannot vote and what they can and cannot say? Who is being bullied and punished when they don't follow the party line—the tea party line? Not

Democrats, Republicans. No one likes being bullied.

Is it the irrefutable logic of tea party argument that scares regular Republicans? Is it the clear grasp by the tea party of modern economic, cultural, and scientific realities that scares regular Republicans? Is it the broad way the tea party represents our great and diverse democracy that scares regular Republicans? Is it the keen political acumen of the tea party, say, shutting down the U.S. Government and darned near blowing the debt limit, that scares regular Republicans?

Those questions answer themselves, don't they? No. The thing that scares regular Republicans is the big money—the big corporate money, the billion-aire money—behind the tea party.

The Koch brothers, for instance, may be a living cartoon of avarice, out to pollute even more and make even more money, but when the Koch brothers' big money comes in and bombs you in a small primary election, it is pretty scary. When the paid-for rightwing attack machine turns on you in your Republican primary, that can be pretty scary.

So the gridlock comes when the Republican party will not work with Democrats—not because we don't make sense and not because most Republicans don't want to make sense but because they are scared of tea party attacks funded by Citizens United money.

That brings us to climate change. As I have described in a recent speech, tens—perhaps even hundreds—of millions of dark-money dollars are being spent. Is all that money being spent having any effect on Republicans? Just look.

In this body we have Republican colleagues who have publicly acknowledged in the past carbon-driven climate change and have called for legislative action. In this body we have a former Republican Presidential nominee who campaigned for President on addressing climate change.

In this body we have Republicans who have spoken favorably about charging a fee on carbon, including the Republican original cosponsor of a bipartisan carbon pollution fee bill. We have a Republican colleague who cosponsored climate change legislation when he was in the House and another who voted for the Waxman-Markey cap-and-trade bill when he was in the House.

In this body we have Senators who represent historic villages now washing into the sea and needing relocation because of climate change and sea level rise, and Senators who represent great American coastal cities that are now overwashed by the sea at high tides because of climate change.

We have Republican Senators whose home State forests—by the hundreds of square miles—are being killed by the marauding pine beetle, and Republican Senators whose home States' glaciers are disappearing before their very eyes

in their own lifetimes. We have Republican Senators whose home States are having to raise offshore bridges and highways before the rising seas.

We have Republican voters who actually get that climate change is real. It is the tea party that has the deniers. Sixty-one percent of nontea party Republicans say there is solid evidence the Earth is warming, but only 25 percent of tea partiers agree—a 36-point swing between Republicans and tea partiers.

Republicans outside of Congress, immune from the effects of Citizens United, have actually supported a carbon pollution fee so long as it is revenue neutral and doesn't add to big government. You could actually lower other taxes with it. But Republicans in Congress will now scarcely say a word about climate change—not since Citizens United; not since that disgraceful decision uncorked all that big, dark money and allowed it to cast its shadow of intimidation over our democracy.

So that is how Citizens United connects to climate change.

While our American democracy suffers and stalls, the evidence of climate change relentlessly mounts. The damage will be done in our atmosphere and oceans. The damage has already started.

I have to warn my colleagues that the denier machinery—the beast I described earlier this month—will ultimately be shown for the evil apparatus of lies that it is. When that happens, there will be more damage to go around. There will be damage to a party that allowed itself to be taken over and silenced by that corrupt apparatus, ignoring the plain facts in front of their faces.

There will be damage to a supreme court that went through such peculiar contortions to let that dark money loose, ignoring plain facts in front of their faces. We Americans, who hold our lamp high to the rest of the world as a beacon of democracy, will have some explaining to do about how we—to the dismay of the rest of the world—let our great democracy be stifled by greedy polluters, ignoring the plain facts the world faces.

The historian David McCullough spoke at the Library of Congress 2 weeks ago about John Adams and America's founding generation. He reminded us that when those men signed the Declaration of Independence, they were signing their own death warrants. When they pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor to this cause, it was not mere words. David McCullough explained: "It was a courageous time." And look at us, our great democracy mired in polluters, lies, and money.

But I still believe this can be a courageous time. As Americans have in the past, we can shed the shackles of corrupting influence and rise to our duty. It just takes courage to make this a courageous time.

I yield the floor and note the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

IRAN

Mr. CHAMBLISS. Mr. President, I rise today to address the significant and persistent national security threat stemming from Iran's unchecked nuclear program. I urge my colleagues to support the amendment to S. 1982 from the senior Senator from North Carolina which includes provisions to strengthen our sanctions against Iran should they fail to comply with their obligations under the joint plan of action.

Last November the Obama administration, without sufficient consultation with Congress, committed to an interim nuclear agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Under this agreement we are granting to Iran over \$7 billion in sanctions relief in exchange for their commitments to decelerate their nuclear program—commitments which will be difficult, if not impossible, to verify or enforce.

In effect, we are delivering billions of dollars in repatriated oil sales proceeds, additional foreign trade, and currency—all in exchange for hollow promises of compliance with laws and U.N. Security Council resolutions they should already be following.

The stated U.S. policy, which American Presidents have repeated for decades, is to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. However, this agreement maintains Iran's nuclear weapons capability, and it allows Iran to continue to enrich uranium.

Moreover, Iran will not be required to destroy any centrifuges and will be permitted to replace centrifuges that become inoperable. The pact does little to reverse Iran's nuclear ambitions and sets a precedent for further sanctions relief in exchange for cosmetic concessions.

Rather than easing effective sanctions, we should be tightening existing sanctions until a better long-term deal can be reached. The United States must take a strong stance to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran. If they do not agree to roll back their nuclear program, then they should face stronger sanctions.

That is why I strongly support provisions in the amendment from Senator BURR that would incorporate key provisions of the Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act into the pending veterans legislation.

Mr. President, 58 of my Senate colleagues have already signed on to this important freestanding legislation. They and I agree that the Government of Iran continues to expand its nuclear and missile programs in direct violation of multiple United Nations Security Council resolutions. Iran has a

demonstrated record of defiance and will continue to work toward stockpiling weapons grade nuclear material, sponsoring terrorism, and disregarding basic human rights.

Given these facts, it only makes sense that we take our own national security and commitment to our allies' security seriously by passing expanded sanction authorities, should Iran fail to uphold its end of the interim agreement.

Equally important, this legislation would give Congress the opportunity to review and—if necessary—disapprove of any final agreement with Iran.

I am hopeful Iran will come to the table with real, verifiable concessions in a final agreement on their nuclear program. However, hope is a poor national security strategy.

The Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act would set the proper framework for ensuring Iran dismantles its illicit nuclear infrastructure, complies with all Security Council resolutions, cooperates with the International Atomic Energy Agency, respects human rights, and ceases to promote global terrorism.

Furthermore, the Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act implements President Obama's own policy. In his recent State of the Union Address, he stated that he will "be the first to call for more sanctions" should Iran fail to uphold the interim agreement.

By passing this legislation, we are ensuring that the United States has the ability to further penalize Iran for its continued noncompliance.

Nevertheless, President Obama has threatened to veto this legislation, further indicating his willingness to blindly concede to Iranian rhetoric.

Now is not the time for this Nation to exhibit weakness. Now is our chance to demonstrate to Iran and to the world that we are serious about nuclear nonproliferation and compliance with international laws and obligations.

For these reasons, I strongly support the Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act as presented in this amendment, and I urge my colleagues to act swiftly to pass this important measure.

I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. REID. I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

Mr. REID. I ask unanimous consent that the remaining time postcloture be yielded back.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Without objection, all time is yielded back.

The question is on the adoption of the motion to proceed.

The motion was agreed to.

COMPREHENSIVE VETERANS
HEALTH AND BENEFITS AND
MILITARY RETIREMENT PAY
RESTORATION ACT OF 2014

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the bill by title.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (S. 1982) to improve the provision of medical services and benefits for veterans, and for other purposes.

AMENDMENT NO. 2747

Mr. REID. On behalf of Senator SANDERS, I have an amendment at the desk.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the Sanders amendment.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

The Senator from Nevada [Mr. REID], for himself and Mr. SANDERS, proposes an amendment numbered 2747.

(The amendment is printed in the RECORD of Tuesday, February 25, 2014 under "Text of Amendments.")

Mr. REID. I ask for the yeas and nays on that amendment.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there a sufficient second?

There appears to be a sufficient second.

The yeas and nays were ordered.

AMENDMENT NO. 2766

Mr. REID. I have a second-degree amendment at the desk.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

The Senator from Nevada [Mr. REID] proposes amendment numbered 2766 to amend amendment numbered 2747.

The amendment is as follows:

At the end, add the following:

This Act shall become effective 1 day after enactment.

CLOTURE MOTION

Mr. REID. I have a motion, cloture in nature, at the desk.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The cloture motion having been presented under rule XXII, the Chair directs the clerk to read the motion.

The 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, hereby move to bring to a close debate on S. 1982, the Comprehensive Veterans Health Benefits and Military Retirement Pay Restoration Act.

Harry Reid, Bernard Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Patty Murray, Michael F. Bennet, Mark Begich, Debbie Stabenow, Charles E. Schumer, Edward J. Markey, Richard Blumenthal, Ron Wyden, Maria Cantwell, Heidi Heitkamp, Christopher Murphy, Christopher A. Coons, Mazie K. Hirono, Tammy Baldwin.

MOTION TO COMMIT WITH AMENDMENT NO. 2767

Mr. REID. I have a motion to commit S. 1982. It has instructions, and that is also at the desk.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the motion.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

The Senator from Nevada [Mr. REID] moves to commit the bill to the Committee on Vet-

erans' Affairs with instructions to report back forthwith with the following amendment No. 2767.

The amendment is as follows:

At the end, add the following:

This Act shall become effective 3 days after enactment.

Mr. REID. I ask for the yeas and nays on that motion.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there a sufficient second?

There appears to be a sufficient second.

The yeas and nays were ordered.

AMENDMENT NO. 2768

Mr. REID. I have an amendment to instructions at the desk.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the amendment.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

The Senator from Nevada [Mr. REID] proposes an amendment numbered 2768 to the instructions of amendment numbered 2767.

The amendment is as follows:

In the amendment, strike "3 days" and insert "4 days".

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there a sufficient second?

There appears to be a sufficient second.

The yeas and nays were ordered.

AMENDMENT NO. 2769

Mr. REID. I have a second-degree amendment at the desk.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

The Senator from Nevada [Mr. REID] proposes an amendment numbered 2769 to amendment numbered 2768.

The amendment is as follows:

In the amendment, strike "4 days" and insert "5 days".

CLOTURE MOTION

Mr. REID. I have a cloture motion at the desk.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The cloture motion having been presented under rule XXII, the Chair directs the clerk to read the motion.

The 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, hereby move to bring to a close debate on amendment No. 2747 to S. 1982, the Comprehensive Veterans Health Benefits and Military Retirement Pay Restoration Act.

Harry Reid, Bernard Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Patty Murray, Michael F. Bennet, Mark Begich, Debbie Stabenow, Charles E. Schumer, Edward J. Markey, Richard Blumenthal, Ron Wyden, Maria Cantwell, Heidi Heitkamp, Christopher Murphy, Christopher A. Coons, Mazie K. Hirono, Tammy Baldwin.

Mr. REID. I ask unanimous consent that the mandatory quorum for both cloture motions required under rule XXII be waived.

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