

that was not considered in committee, that greatly expands spending without any realistic offset and would vastly overwhelm the Veterans' Administration health care system. It is shameful that Senate Democrats would seek to score political points by rushing to the floor a bill which the committee did not consider and which could otherwise have been handled in a bipartisan manner through the regular order.

Unfortunately, it has become standard practice around here for the majority to pursue partisan legislation in a sort of "take it or leave it" manner, so it is unsurprising that nobody other than the majority leader and the committee chairman have been allowed the opportunity to amend the bill. Senators on both sides have been shut out of the legislative process. For example, we cannot even vote on the ranking member's veterans amendment—legislation I support—which will not add to the deficit. I am a cosponsor of this legislation, which provides full COLA restoration for servicemembers entering the military in 2014, provides advanced appropriations for VA mandatory accounts, improves services and benefits for victims of military sexual trauma, enhances benefits for survivors and dependents of disabled veterans, encourages the hiring of veterans, and, unlike the Sanders bill, is fully paid for.

As for the Iran sanctions language in the Burr amendment, as I noted yesterday, there is significant disagreement between the President and many Members from both parties in both the House and the Senate concerning the best way to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

The Iranian regime has carried out its best attempt at a charm offensive to forestall not only the implementation but the legislative consideration of even tougher sanctions should the regime fail to fulfill its commitments according to November's interim agreement.

The interim agreement included a Joint Plan of Action, agreed to by Iran. According to that Joint Plan of Action, the U.S. administration, acting consistent with the respective roles of the President and the Congress, will refrain from imposing new nuclear-related sanctions. The agreement is spelled out clearly to the Iranians: Acting consistent with our respective roles. The Iranians can read the plain language and understand that this Congress did not agree to renounce additional sanctions. We did not agree to do that. Yet the majority leader is determined not to allow a single vote on the Kirk-Menendez bill, which could be fully debated by this body prior to a vote. We will not have that debate, apparently, nor will we vote on any amendments related to the bill before us.

I yield the floor.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

MORNING BUSINESS

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the Senate will be in a period of morning business for 1 hour, with Senators permitted in speak therein for up to 10 minutes each, with the time equally divided and controlled between the two leaders or their designees, with the majority controlling the first half.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from New Mexico.

VETERANS LEGISLATION

Mr. HEINRICH. Mr. President, lest we forget, more than 30,000 brave Americans are still serving in harm's way in Afghanistan. Hundreds of thousands of men and women in uniform are serving around the world. They all volunteered. In return for their volunteerism, we made a number of promises. The ability to maintain the strongest and most dedicated military force in the world depends on our Nation's ability to keep those promises.

I am a proud cosponsor of the legislation being debated this week, S. 1982, which is perhaps the most significant veterans legislation to come before Congress in many years. This legislation has the strong support of virtually every veterans organization in the country, including the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Disabled American Veterans, the Vietnam Veterans of America, and the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. These organizations support the bill because it renews our promise to our veterans.

I am very fortunate to represent the State of New Mexico, which has one of the highest rates of military volunteerism in the Nation. New Mexico, a small State of 2 million people, is home to more than 170,000 veterans, and 2,000 New Mexicans endured the Bataan Death March during World War II.

New Mexico is home to many of our Nation's finest military installations: Kirtland Air Force Base, the Air Force's sixth largest base, with over 100 partners and a strategic role in ensuring our Nation's safe, secure, and reliable nuclear weapons complex; Cannon Air Force Base, the fastest growing Air Force base in the country, leading the fight in special operations; Holloman Air Force Base, an indispensable Air Force base with unparalleled airspace now and into the future; and White Sands Missile Range, the largest military installation in the Nation, with a testing and training environment that is unmatched anywhere in the world.

Additionally, New Mexico's National Guard employs roughly 3,800 full-time and part-time military personnel.

Collectively, there are 18,000 military personnel serving today in New Mexico. Volunteerism is not simply a career choice for New Mexicans; it is a way of life. It is ingrained in our State's rich

history of putting community and country first.

The bill before us today renews our promise to all of them and to all of those who are willing to lay down their lives for their country. It provides benefits to all generations of veterans and their families, and it eliminates the cost-of-living adjustment penalty on military retirees.

The legislation incorporates bills and ideas from both Democrats and Republicans to address the disability claims backlog, including one of my own. Across New Mexico I have heard from too many veterans who are frustrated with the delays they experience in receiving their disability benefits.

Last June Senator HELLER of Nevada and I introduced the Veterans Benefits Claims Faster Filing Act, which requires the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to ensure that every veteran is informed of the vast differences in times for processing compensation claims when filing a fully developed claim versus a non-fully developed paper claim.

It takes, on average, 113 days for veterans to receive a final disability rating if they file a fully developed claim online. Compare that to over a year if they file a non-fully developed paper claim. Filing claims online through the Fully Developed Claims Program accelerates turnaround time and makes processing more efficient. Doing so also provides an additional year of retroactive benefits as an incentive to veterans who file a fully developed claim.

The Faster Filing Act and other legislative efforts represent a collective effort to reduce the backlog and ensure that our veterans receive the benefits they have earned.

I am also proud to have cosponsored legislation introduced by my colleague from Alaska Senator BEGICH to provide advanced appropriations for all—all—VA spending accounts. This would ensure that veterans receive uninterrupted access to the benefits they have earned, even in the midst of a government shutdown such as the one that so irresponsibly occurred last fall. It is unacceptable that veterans would fall victim to the partisan politics of a government shutdown. The legislation today includes a fix to ensure that never happens again.

The bill also helps put veterans back to work. It reauthorizes a 2-year extension for the Veterans Retraining Assistance Program, which retrains unemployed veterans for high-demand occupations. It requires the VA to establish a 3-year program to provide young veterans under 30 the opportunity to serve in an internship that would pair veterans with private sector employers so they can gain civilian work experience.

The bill expands the VA's successful caregivers program to provide caregiver benefits to veterans of all generations, in a similar manner as post-9/11 veterans.

America's service men and women consider our Nation's principles important enough to defend them against all enemies and at any cost. They volunteer to do so. But volunteerism only works if we fulfill our promises. Few sacrifices are as selfless as those our military men and women make in defense of this Nation. We owe them more than a debt of gratitude; we owe them action in both our words and our deeds. This bill backs our word with action. It fulfills our promises. I hope we see it pass this week.

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Washington.

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, on Tuesday I came to the floor to talk about one issue that we are rarely divided on in this building; that is, our duty to keep the promises we have made to provide not only care but opportunity to all those who have honorably served in our Nation's Armed Forces.

The comprehensive veterans legislation that is now before us is really the test for many Members of Congress. Can we all put politics aside for the good of our Nation's veterans to keep that promise? Can we show these heroes that despite our differences, we will work as diligently toward getting them the benefits and care they have earned as they worked for our Nation?

Now, unfortunately, some of our colleagues on the other side of the aisle are indicating they would now prefer to put politics over promises, under the guise of an alternative to this bill. Given what we have seen recently on other bills—supported, by the way, by a majority of Americans—we should not be surprised, but I truly did think and hope this bill would be a different story because it contains ideas from both Democrats and Republicans and because this is an issue which has historically united this body and because we have all pledged to do whatever it takes on behalf of our veterans.

So once again where we are today is that some of our colleagues have decided to use unrelated issues to sour this entire effort for our veterans and their families who stand to benefit the most from this comprehensive legislation we are offering.

With their alternative bill they have now proposed to strip away life-changing programs for veterans who are looking to take the skills they learned on the battlefield to the boardroom. With this alternative, they have decided to halt the expansion of opportunities for our caregivers who are integral to the health and well-being of some of our most vulnerable heroes.

But among these and many other examples of the Republican effort to derail this landmark legislation, there is one issue I find most egregious; that is, their shameful opposition to provide our catastrophically wounded heroes with access to reproductive services they so desperately need to start a family.

This shouldn't be a political issue. This is about giving veterans who have sacrificed everything every option we have to help them fulfill a simple dream of starting a family.

As we all know, our men and women in uniform have become increasingly susceptible to reproductive, spinal, and traumatic brain injuries due to the changing weapons of war. But as we know, thanks to modern medicine, many of these servicemembers are being kept alive and they are returning home. In fact, as of the new year, there are 2,348 servicemembers who are living with reproductive, urinary or pelvic injuries as a result of this war. Similar to so many of our veterans, these men and women come home and want to return to their lives. They want to find employment and, importantly, they want to start a family.

Yet what they find when they go to the VA is that the fertility services that are available don't meet their extremely complex needs. In fact, veterans who suffer from these injuries find that the VA is specifically barred from providing more advanced assisted reproductive techniques such as IVF. They are told, despite the fact that they have made such an extreme sacrifice for all of us, we cannot provide them with the medical services they need simply to start a family.

These are families such as SSG Matt Keil and his wife Tracy. Despite returning home from Iraq as a quadriplegic, Staff Sergeant Keil and Tracy started talking about exploring the possibility of starting a family together, but because his injuries prevented him from having children naturally, Tracy turned to the VA and began to explore her options for fertility treatments. But because of that VA ban they were told no and turned away. They were out of options, and the Keils decided this was important enough to them that they were willing to pay out-of-pocket, out of their own pockets, for IVF treatment in the private sector to the tune of \$32,000 per round of treatment.

Thankfully, Staff Sergeant Keil and Tracy welcomed twins Matthew and Faith into the world after only one round of treatment.

Tracy said after their birth:

The day we had our children something changed in both of us. This is exactly what we had always wanted, our dreams had arrived.

The VA, Congress and the American people have said countless times that they want to do everything they can to support my husband or make him feel whole again and this is your chance.

Having a family is exactly what we needed to feel whole again. Please help us make these changes so that other families can share in this experience.

Tracy and Matt aren't alone. There are many men and women out there who share this common thread of a desperate desire to fulfill their dream of starting a family, only to find that the catastrophic wounds they sustained while defending our country are now

preventing them from seeing that dream through.

It shouldn't be that way. Unfortunately, Republicans are indicating they will not join us today in overturning this absurd and antiquated ban. Apparently, they would rather our Nation's heroes spend tens of thousands of dollars of their own money in the private sector to get the advanced reproductive treatments they need to start a family. They don't see the problem in letting our veterans' marriages dissolve because of the stress of infertility, in combination of course with the stress of readjusting to life after such a severe injury, driving relationships to a breaking point.

Any servicemember who sustains this type of extremely serious injury deserves a lot more. We came very close actually to making this bill a reality in the last Congress. In fact, Tracy Keil, whom I just talked about, watched from the gallery when we unanimously passed this legislation—unanimously.

But I am, once again, imploring Republicans to stand and explain to our men and women in uniform—who I know are paying very close attention to this debate—why they now want to turn their backs on the catastrophic, reproductive wounds that have become a signature of these wars.

Only yesterday I spoke to a crowded room of heroes from Disabled American Veterans and told them the heart-breaking story of the Keil family that I just shared and why this legislation is so important. If their cheers and applause are any indication, I would say they wholeheartedly agree our women veterans deserve this, our male veterans deserve this, and certainly our military families deserve this.

I am on the floor to ask my colleagues a simple question: Are you willing to tell those brave men and women who didn't ask those questions when they were put in harm's way that you are going to let politics get in the way of our commitment to them?

The catastrophic wounds we have seen from injuries in Iraq and Afghanistan have meant that our veterans' dreams to start a family have been put on hold because of the tremendous cost of IVF services. We believe that is a cost of war, and we believe the VA absolutely should cover it, and it is unacceptable to let unrelated issues stand in the way.

Even the major veterans service organizations and their leaders have said to us that issues such as the Iran sanctions—that the other side wants to offer—have no place in this comprehensive veterans legislation, people such as American Legion Commander Daniel Dellinger, who said: "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," or IAVA founder and CEO Paul Rieckhoff, who called this

comprehensive legislation “a game changer that will change the trajectory for millions of veterans for decades to come.”

As serious and as timely as they may be, unrelated issues such as Iran sanctions are just calculated attempts to dismantle our bipartisan effort to expand health care, education opportunities, employment, and benefits for our Nation's heroes. We can't allow our commitment to them to lapse or get caught up in separate issues of political grandstanding.

I thank the Senator from Vermont and all of his staff for their tireless work on this comprehensive legislation they have brought to the floor. I truly hope our colleagues will reconsider opposing this commonsense and important step to give those who have sacrificed everything the reproductive treatments they need to start a family.

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Virginia.

Mr. KAINE. Mr. President, may I inquire how much time remains for the Democrats during morning business?

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Twelve minutes remain.

Mr. KAINE. I ask unanimous consent to use the remainder of the Democrats' time.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection.

SYRIA

Mr. KAINE. Mr. President, I rise this morning to speak about the widening dimensions of the slaughter in Syria. A country of 23 million people, a proud country, is being transformed before our eyes into skeletons, refugees, and ghosts.

Three million Syrians have fled to neighboring countries. That number will likely exceed 4 million by the end of the year. Nearly 7 million Syrians are refugees within their own country, driven from their homes by the atrocities of the Assad regime. More than 130,000 innocent people have lost their lives during the 3-year civil war. We are witnessing one of the greatest humanitarian crises since World War II, and it can be stopped.

Last summer my Committee on Armed Services colleague Senator ANGUS KING of Maine and I visited Turkey and Jordan to explore the dimension of the refugee crisis in both of those nations. We visited refugee camps and talked to government leaders and NGOs about the damaged lives and the stressed communities that result from this unprecedented displacement of Syrians.

Last week the Senator from Maine and I visited Lebanon to see the scale of the Syrian crisis in that country. In a country of only slightly more than 4 million people, there are already over 1 million Syrian refugees who have fled into Lebanon over the last 3 years, one in four. Think of the scale of that refugee crisis. If we were to receive in the

United States war refugees at that scale, it would be 75 to 80 million people, nearly one in four.

In Lebanon last week we met with government leaders, NGOs, and the U.N. High Commissioner on Refugees. What we learned is staggering. The Lebanese people have been unbelievably resilient and welcoming, almost beyond the point of belief. The water and health infrastructure of that Nation is strained to the breaking point.

The Lebanese economy, already fragile, is teetering. Schools in Lebanon now operate on double shifts with Lebanese children in the morning and refugee children in the afternoon, accommodating tens of thousands of refugee children, with more coming every day.

The decision by the Lebanese terrorist militia Hezbollah to go all in to support the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad has led to a wave of extremist bombings against Hezbollah-connected sites and leaders within Lebanon in which many civilians are casualties. Senator KING and I witnessed a bombing in downtown Beirut while we were there, seeing it miles away. Many in our group saw the explosion, saw the smoke rise. We felt certain that our meetings would be canceled that day, but one of the most grim aspects of our trip is a bombing, a suicide bombing that killed 5 people and injured nearly 100, caused no one to change their daily routine. That is what life is in Lebanon largely because of the Syrian civil war.

The crisis extends beyond Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. Refugees are streaming into nearby Iraq by the thousands—30,000 in 1 day in August—exacerbating the deterioration of that country's stability and drawing it deeper into sectarian conflict.

This photo is on the Iraq border with Syria, and we see these refugees stretching into the distance in the hills beyond. This is what is happening with all of the neighboring countries to Syria.

The United States is the largest provider of assistance to the refugees who have fled outside of Syria. We have provided \$1.3 billion in aid thus far, \$340 million in Lebanon alone, but getting relief into Syria is the next challenge.

The conditions in Syria are even worse than the conditions I described in Lebanon. Nearly 7 million Syrians are displaced within their own country, more than 9 million Syrians need humanitarian aid, but they have not been able to receive basic humanitarian aid, food, and medicine due to the actions of the Bashar al-Assad regime and also due to the complicity of the regime's patron, Russia.

The denial of humanitarian aid is a war crime, pure and simple. Thousands are dying of starvation. Cases of tuberculosis, polio, typhoid, and other diseases are expanding at an exponential rate. None of this is an accident. The Assad regime is using forced starvation and forced sieges as a weapon to destroy the Syrian people.

Last month I met in the Senate with Syrians who had survived the chemical weapons attacks carried out by the Assad regime in August of 2013. They described in gruesome detail what they and their families, many young children, endured in August. But the most shocking moment of the interview came when a 22-year-old survivor, who had fled Syria through Lebanon, said if she had to pick, she would rather die a death because of chemical weapons than be hit by a barrel bomb or starved to death because death by chemical weapons would be quicker.

In recent weeks nothing has epitomized the brutality of the regime more than the use of these barrel bombs. The bombs are crude weapons. They are simple oil drums that are filled with shrapnel and explosives. Helicopters often deliver the weapons, and helicopters often hover over neighborhoods for minutes to just scare everyone who knows what is coming. The barrel bombs drop. They explode shrapnel and level neighborhoods.

This is an example of a neighborhood in Aleppo. At one point hundreds were killed when barrel bombs were dropped on Aleppo earlier this month. We see the size and scope of the devastation and see families and their children fleeing the area in the aftermath of a barrel bomb, and this is going on every day in Syria. Secretary Kerry has rightly called these barrel bomb attacks unacceptable and barbaric.

The primary architect of these crimes is Bashar Assad, but he has a patron who funds and supports what he does and who has the ability to stop the atrocities. Russia is Assad's principal support, and since the start of the Syrian civil war Russia has shown it is complicit in these war crimes. But it is also capable of stopping them.

In the United Nations Russia has used its veto power and threat of veto on the Security Council numerous times to block international action to help the Syrian people. Three of these vetoes were used to block basic humanitarian aid. What possible reason could any civilized nation have to deny war victims food and medical supplies?

But Russia has shown it can be persuaded or shamed into taking action to promote the basic safety of the Syrian citizens. In August, with the threat of U.S. military action to punish the Assad regime for use of chemical weapons against its own civilians, Russia realized it could no longer be the sole global apologist for this atrocity. So it persuaded Syria to admit to the crime, acknowledge the existence of a stockpile, and commit to the complete destruction of these inhumane weapons. While that process has been slow, the weaponry has not been used since Russia realized the world would not tolerate such a clear violation of international law.

Similarly, after repeatedly blocking U.N. action to deliver humanitarian aid in Syria, Russia decided, in the midst of the Sochi Olympics, it could