

great challenges we have going forward. How are we going to maintain Medicare? Only in Washington would you be able to get by with saying: Medicare is in real trouble, so let's cut it to start another program. This is the only place in America you wouldn't be laughed off the city council dais or off the legislative floor if you said: We have this one program that is in big trouble. We are not going to do anything to reform it, we are just going to cut it so we can start another program. Yet that is what has happened here.

We have already cut Medicare by \$300 billion—that is Medicare Advantage—and on top of this cut to Medicare Advantage we now see that plans are being changed, and they are being changed in significant ways.

Why did we have Medicare Advantage for States such as mine—the State of Missouri—with lots of rural areas, lots of rural hospitals, without always having competitive health care providers? Medicare Advantage provided the competition. It was that competition that made Medicare Advantage and Medicare Part D work and made them work at much less cost than anybody had anticipated. The marketplace works if you focus on a competitive marketplace rather than trying to run health care to be sure there is competition out there. That is what Medicare Advantage did. In our State, 1 out of 4 people on Medicare is on Medicare Advantage—237,000 Missourians on Medicare Advantage.

On February 14, I joined my colleagues in urging CMS not to make any more cuts to Medicare Advantage. There were 40 of us who signed that letter, and 19 of the 40 Senators who signed that letter were Democrats, with 21 Republicans. So there is a pretty bipartisan sense that something must be happening out there to hurt these programs. That is true, not untrue.

Why would we continue to do that? I don't know. So I have joined the Republican leaders in a letter this week calling on Secretary Sebelius to stop moving forward with these misguided policies that do things that impact people on Medicare Advantage; that do things that impact people who had health insurance with a deductible they could afford but now no longer have.

The administration's proposals continue once again to contradict the promise that if you had health care you liked, you could keep your health care policy; that if you had doctors you liked, you could keep your doctors. More and more people are seeing that is not true.

These many stories I have heard I firmly believe to be true, not untrue, no matter what the majority leader of the Senate might have said. Let me share a few of those today as I move toward the conclusion of what I want to talk about today.

Darcie from Kansas City, MO, is a registered nurse and works with Medi-

care patients daily. She sees firsthand the effect the rising expenses on Medicare Advantage are having on people she deals with. This is a quote from her letter:

Our seniors and other Medicare Advantage members should not, as they already do, have to make choices between paying for medicines and other healthcare related expenses or food or housing expenses.

I hope you are able to see the bigger picture, as I do, as a 30-year-old professional nurse who is on the frontlines each and every day taking care of these individuals and their families.

This sounds truthful to me.

Edward and his wife, from Saint Peters, MO, live on a fixed income. He said:

My wife and I are retired seniors living on a fixed income. I have Medicare Advantage, which is provided by Mercy—a Missouri based health insurance company. I am told I will lose coverage next year due to ObamaCare cuts. Why must the cost of ObamaCare—which Missourians did not want—be paid by cuts to seniors? Please change the ObamaCare law to leave Medicare Advantage alone.

Again, 19 Democrats and 21 Republicans signed a letter last week asking the same question. This letter didn't even say: Go back and reverse what you have done. Just stop making these cuts being made right now.

Ronald from Raytown, MO, says his copay has increased as a result of the administration's cuts to Medicare Advantage plans.

Please protect our Medicare Advantage plans. As you know, Medicare is presently underfunded. I do not appreciate those that permit Obama to willfully take [hundreds of billions of] dollars that we seniors have paid into Medicare and use those monies to fund ObamaCare. I am counting on you to protect our Medicare Advantage plans and realize that the less government involvement in our Medicare Advantage plans, the more efficient the plan. As a result of ObamaCare, my copay has increased.

My guess is Ronald knows whether or not his copay has increased. In speaking with him, I am certainly persuaded that the facts he is presenting—like the other people we are talking about today—are absolutely true.

Jennifer from Blue Springs, MO, says:

My husband and I are both on Medicare already . . . the co-pays for our "Medicare Advantage" plans have doubled and, in some cases, tripled from 2013 to 2014 . . . [and that is why I'm responding with a nightmare story].

The other thing Jennifer said is she and her husband are retired. They are musicians, and they had a business where they would go to nursing homes and play gospel music just for their expenses. She points out that because of the increased health care costs, nursing homes no longer have room in their budget for something that is entertaining, such as live gospel music. The reverberations of what happens when the government decides that the government is better prepared to manage not just Medicare and Medicaid—as if we didn't have enough challenges al-

ready—but 16 percent or 17 percent of the economy are seen out there every day.

I certainly believe there have to be some people who are benefiting from this, but the numbers don't suggest that the overall benefit is nearly as good as the overall damage: people losing insurance at greater numbers than people getting insurance; premiums going up more than going down; deductibles rising.

It would be nice for those who supported this to convince people that all these stories are untrue, but I think too many people have true stories to tell for their neighbors and their friends not to realize what is happening because of this government interference with a health care system that was working instead of doing the handful of things we could have done to make the best health care system in the world work better. They were there. They were offered. The President knew they were there. That is not the course we followed, and the course we are following is not leading to a place where most Americans want to be.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Indiana.

Mr. COATS. Mr. President, may I inquire what the order is in morning business relative to time?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. There is 15 minutes remaining on the Republican side.

IRAN

Mr. COATS. Mr. President, I appreciate this opportunity to come to the floor to speak about a different subject but one which is imminent and necessary for us to consider; that is, the current Iranian sanctions issue.

Back in 2007, when Iran had "only" about 700 centrifuges spinning to enrich uranium, we—and by "we," I mean nearly the entire international community—determined that the behavior by the Iranian regime was simply too dangerous to tolerate. The U.N. Security Council began the process of passing a series of resolutions demanding that Iran stop enriching uranium entirely. The United States, led by many here in the Senate, began the very careful and painstaking process of amassing an international coalition to back increasingly tough sanctions, all aimed explicitly at forcing the Iranian regime to end enrichment activities.

The reason for this was because we believed a nuclear weapons-capable or -armed Iran posed an imminent threat not just to the Middle East but to the world community. That was the consensus agreed to by the world community and supported by resolution after resolution from the Security Council of the United Nations and by proclamations by not only our country but by countries around the world.

The entire effort had, for some years, been devoted entirely to ending uranium enrichment activities. The consensus was that nuclear weapon possession or capability posed unacceptable

consequences. Now that goal is nowhere in sight. Neither the interim agreement currently being employed, nor the administration, nor any of the negotiating partners even refer to these resolutions or this multiyear strategy of achieving the objective we set out to accomplish. The objective was that Iran would cease enrichment of uranium, which could be used to achieve nuclear weapons capability. This goal has suddenly been totally abandoned.

The current interim agreement explicitly concedes to the Iranians their right to continue enrichment activities with only meager limitations, all of which can be reversed by the mullahs in Iran in an instant. The mullahs in Iran boast publicly of this great negotiating victory for them, which goes against everything we have been trying to do for the past 6 or 7 years.

It seems unassailable that Iran came to the negotiating table at long last directly as a consequence of the hardship that was achieved by these international economic sanctions that were imposed on this regime. They resisted coming to the negotiating table until these sanctions really started to hit home.

But what is equally clear is that the regime wants sanctions relief and has sought this interim deal to accomplish it—and unfortunately, we have given it to them. And what do we get in return? What we get in return is having negotiated away our very core purpose for doing this in the first place. Instead of using our leverage to continue the progress we had made to bring Iran to cease uranium enrichment, we blunted our very best leverage and our very best tool. Instead of pressing our long-term advantage, we have begun to relieve the pressure on Iran to cease their efforts to gain nuclear weapon capability. And why have we abandoned our goal to stop uranium enrichment? Because the Iranian negotiating team has told us they would never tolerate an end to their long, expensive path to an enrichment industry.

So here is my central conviction on this matter: If those on the other side of the table tell us in advance that our long-held conviction and purpose is asking too much, instead of meekly complying with their request, then we must increase pressure until they change their minds, not abandon our own goal because it is perceived as too tough.

So what have we bought with this interim agreement? According to the Bipartisan Policy Center, of which I used to be a part, the main practical consequence of this claimed “freezing” is that the time Iran now needs to produce a critical mass of highly enriched uranium—20 kilograms—with current centrifuges has gone from an estimated 59 days to 63 days. What did we gain from the agreement? Four days—four days longer that it will take Iran, once they flip the switch, to get highly enriched uranium, which allows them nuclear capability.

It seems clear that among Iran’s principal objectives now is to break apart the strong international consensus we have worked so hard over so many years to forge. Prospects for Iran to do so look pretty darned good. Clearly Iran has not lived up to what they agreed to do or what we asked them to do. But there seems to be no prospect in place for our returning to sanctions unless the Senate, on a bipartisan basis—and there is bipartisan support for this—is able to impose the next round of sanctions should this interim agreement not achieve its objectives. Yet we are currently being blocked from bringing this legislation to the floor.

I repeat: This is bipartisan legislation led by Senator MENENDEZ of New Jersey and those who have been actively engaged and involved. But now we are being asked to stand down. We are not even given a chance to exercise our vote on this, which we are attempting to add to the pending legislation here. Again, delay, delay, delay is putting us in a position of essentially conceding to the Iranians what they want and giving them the opportunity to continue to pursue their quest for nuclear weapons capability.

Obviously, for them, it is just fine if they can turn the protracted uncertainty and gradual sanctions relief into a series of lesser agreements. But for us, more interim agreements will mean our allies will become accustomed to these gradual changes and the increasing commerce in Iranian oil. They will become less inclined to again reverse course almost regardless of Iranian actions. Following that prolonged process, we confront a stronger Iran but a weaker international coalition opposed to Iranian nuclear ambitions. Iranian ambitions and capabilities will grow, our efforts to halt the Iranian quest for nuclear capability will diminish, and we will then be left with a choice of containing or taking military action against a nuclear-capable, if not nuclear-armed, Iran.

The President has said repeatedly that “containment” is not an option. It is not for me either. Since he also said military force is an option, it seems clear to me this current course is more likely to bring us to that stark point than to a negotiated settlement.

We must be determined to do what we can in the Senate to prevent us from reaching that point. Not only must we refocus our government and other friendly governments on the need to eliminate Iran’s nuclear infrastructure in any final agreement—no matter how difficult that might be—we must also oppose Iran’s likely intentions to prolong the negotiation process intended to continue to weaken our coalition.

The Nuclear Weapons Free Iran Act that I have cosponsored will give us great leverage in doing that. It will make it clear that the Senate will not support playing Iran’s game any longer than we already have.

I deeply regret that we are not being given the opportunity to debate this issue before the American people and among ourselves, that we are not allowed to have a vote in the Senate as to whether our current policy that this administration is pursuing is the right policy to achieve the goal which we all agreed to.

The last four Presidents—two Democrats and two Republicans—have declaratively said: A nuclear-capable Iran is unacceptable. President Obama has stated that over and over. Yet here we are engaged in a process that advances that prospect.

We are put at a disadvantage, and we are giving away the one tool that has brought Iran to the negotiating table. They have trumpeted publicly about how they have outsmarted us and outnegotiated us and achieved what they wanted to achieve and diminished our opportunity to achieve what the world community wants to achieve. We will rue the day that we almost had Iran to the point where we could have achieved our goal but stepped back and conceded to their promise and commitment to continue to enrich, to continue to add centrifuges, and to continue their pursuit of nuclear weapons capability.

If Iran is armed with nuclear weapons, it will pose unimaginable consequences to us. There has been total agreement on that among the world’s Nations. Yet here we stand at the moment of decision—right when we, in a sense, had them where we wanted to get them, and we conceded that.

I deeply regret that we have not been able to move forward with these additional sanctions to be employed if—in this first interim agreement—Iran does not live up to the objectives and goals which we have demanded.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER. 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 report.

The legislative clerk read as follows: