

Israel from Gaza since early July. I strongly support Israel's recent efforts through Operation Protective Edge to defend itself and to end the threat of additional rocket and infiltration attacks by Hamas. Operation Protective Edge also serves a larger purpose, and its resolution has broader implications for the future of the Palestinian people.

If Hamas declares victory by keeping its weapons stockpile, by continuing to undermine Israel's security, and by turning away from Egypt's efforts to forge a reasonable cease-fire, the net result will be a relative weakening of the Palestinian Authority and of those in the West Bank who have worked toward a peaceful resolution of the overall conflict.

So I support any effort which brings this campaign to an end in a manner that increases Israel's security. That means specifically that Hamas cannot be left with a large stockpile of missiles and rockets and cannot be left with infiltration tunnels. They must be destroyed. Hamas cannot be allowed to aggressively rest, refit, and build up a weapons stockpile. That weakens Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

Here is what I oppose. I oppose any efforts—any efforts by the international community, especially the United Nations—to impose a cease-fire on Israel that does not meet these military objectives and that therefore risks actually rewarding Hamas for a campaign of terror and that seeks to make additional concessions to Hamas such as easing security along the borders of Gaza.

An unfavorable settlement, especially one that left the terrorist group Hamas with a stockpile of weaponry, would create incentives for Hamas to continue smuggling arms from Iran and, of course, to return to violence. An unfavorable settlement would also undermine the leadership of the Palestinian Authority, which has attempted to negotiate with Israel through peaceful means.

So let's be clear. The terror tactics employed by Hamas show contempt for human life, whether Israeli or Palestinian. By employing rockets and mortars as weapons of terror against Israel's civilian population or by using its own schools within Gaza as weapon depots, Hamas has shown a gross disregard for civilians.

The Prime Minister of Israel put it very well when he said: "[Israel] uses missiles to protect our people. They (Hamas) use their people to protect their missiles."

There is no moral equivalency—none whatsoever. These tactics should be loudly and widely condemned, and Israel's right to defend itself should be affirmed.

As I noted last week, Secretary Hagel wrote to the majority leader seeking urgent funding for components of the Iron Dome missile defense system. I and others support this request, as Iron Dome has afforded Israel some real pro-

tection from these indiscriminate rockets.

This morning some of my colleagues will further explain the importance of Iron Dome and the need for the Israeli Defense Forces to press on and finish the job in destroying the infiltration tunnels and weapons stockpiles. Republicans are united in our support of Israel's defense, and this morning my colleagues will explain our opposition to any effort to force a cease-fire on Israel that does not further its security objectives.

In a situation such as this, Israel only has one dependable friend. The United States should not be trying to pressure Israel to make a bad deal that leaves Hamas in a position to continue these attacks against Israeli civilians.

No one has been more active on this issue than my colleague from South Carolina. I see him on the floor now. Therefore, I yield the floor.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order the leadership time is reserved.

MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will be in a period of morning business until 12 noon, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each, and the time equally divided and controlled between the two leaders or their designees, with Republicans controlling the first half and the majority controlling the final half.

The Senator from South Carolina.

Mr. GRAHAM. Mr. President, I return the compliment to Senator MCCONNELL from Kentucky, the Republican leader.

I have been here now since 2002. There is no better friend of the State of Israel than MITCH MCCONNELL. He is the former chairman and ranking member of the foreign ops subcommittee on appropriations that deals with aid to the world—particularly Israel—and it was his idea to come to the floor today and have voices speak in support of Israel at a time when they need friends.

Friends are great to have. They are wonderful in good times. They are a necessity in bad times. Israel is going through some pretty bad times and so are the Palestinian people.

I wish to clearly make myself known. I have nothing against the legitimate hopes and aspirations of the Palestinian people to have their own country, to live in peace and prosperity by Israel. But they have to want it more than I do.

The Palestinian people are suffering. Children are being killed, and the most innocent people on the planet are children. It breaks all of our hearts to see them as a casualty of war.

But now is the time to be clear-eyed and focused as to what the problem

really is. The problem is very simple in many ways. Hamas is a terrorist organization in the eyes of the U.S. Government. Hamas should be a terrorist organization in the eyes of any decent person in the world.

What did they do? They have as their goal not a two-state solution but a one-state solution—the complete and utter destruction of the State of Israel. If you don't believe me, just check out their own charter. They have as their tactics using their own people and children as human shields to win a propaganda war.

When Israeli children are killed, it breaks Israel's heart. When Palestinian children are killed, it breaks the heart of all decent Palestinians, but Hamas sees it as a victory. They literally try to put women and children in harm's way to marginalize the ability of Israel to defend itself against two things.

The tunnels are something new in this fight. Forty-one tunnels have been discovered that go from the Gaza Strip—some into Israel itself—and yesterday five Israeli soldiers were killed by an attack that came from Hamas fighters that penetrated Israel through the tunnels.

So Senator MCCONNELL is not only speaking for Republicans when he says the Senate stands firmly behind Israel's right to destroy the terrorist tunnels, but I think that is the body's view and Democrats' as well.

There is a resolution that is bipartisan in nature before the body, and I hope we can pass it before Thursday. In the resolved clause, it says the Senate opposes any efforts to impose a cease-fire that does not allow the Government of Israel to protect its citizens from threats posed by Hamas rockets and tunnels. That, I believe, is the view of the Senate in a bipartisan fashion.

Today, Republicans take the floor to clearly state where we stand in this conflict. We stand with Israel's right to defend itself against a terrorist organization called Hamas. We stand with the Palestinian people's legitimate aspirations to have a better life. But until that day comes, we are going to be firmly in the Israeli camp to defend themselves, because what would we do as a nation if a neighboring nation dug tunnels under our border for the express purpose of kidnapping and killing our citizens. What would America do if one rocket coming from a neighboring nation fired indiscriminately to kill American citizens? We would respond in the most aggressive fashion, and we would have every right to do so.

As the minority leader stated, there is no moral equivalency. Israel tells you they are going to attack. Israel calls before the attack. Israel gives notice about an impending attack. Hamas secretly fires rockets, caring less where they land. Their hope is that it hits a kindergarten. That is their desire. And the only reason they have not been successful is because of the Iron Dome program that has been a collaboration between the United States and Israel for many years.

There has been discussion about appropriating additional dollars for Iron Dome. That discussion needs to turn into a reality. We don't need to marry it with controversial topics. Israel is under siege. We are the best friend of the State of Israel. They need this assistance. Every Republican stands ready to work with every Democrat to pass—in the next 5 minutes—additional money for the Iron Dome program.

In tough times, what is the smart thing and right thing for America to do? The smart thing for America to do is pursue a lasting peace, a peace with meaning, and not repeat the mistakes of the past. Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. Israel is beyond that moment. America needs to stand by Israel's legitimate right to get to the heart of the problem and not face this threat 6 months or 1 year from now.

The one thing I can tell you that is not a smart thing to do is to give Hamas a bunch of concrete. They are not going to build schools with it; they build tunnels. All the aid the international community has been providing to the Gaza Strip, through the hands of Hamas, has not gone into building hospitals, schools, and the economic improvement of the lives of Palestinians but to create tunnels of war. The tunnels are weapons of war. The thousands and thousands of tons of concrete and iron that have been misappropriated to build these tunnels came from people with a good heart.

How long does it take the international community to wake up to the fact that Hamas has a bad heart—an evil, wicked heart. They could care less about their own people. They want to destroy Israel.

Mr. MCCONNELL. Will the Senator yield for a question?

Mr. GRAHAM. Absolutely.

Mr. MCCONNELL. We all remember that 10 or 12 years ago Israel—which had previously occupied Gaza for the purpose of preventing these types of devastating attacks—left. They said: We are through. They made a solid statement and said: We are uncomfortable occupying, and all we ask in return for the removal of our occupation is a peaceful border.

The Senator from South Carolina has just outlined that periodically this is what they have gotten in return for basically leaving Gaza alone and giving it a chance—if it chose to—to have a normal, peaceful existence. Yet they choose to continue the conflict, as the Senator from South Carolina indicated, because they are not in favor of a two-state solution; they are in favor of a one-state solution.

Mr. GRAHAM. Senator MCCONNELL is dead on point—land for peace. Give the Palestinians land and in return Israel gets peace. They gave the Gaza Strip to the Palestinians, and what have they gotten in return? They got 2,500 rockets in the last 3 weeks and terrorist tunnels.

The idea that leaving an area will lead to peace in the Middle East with

the Palestinians has not borne fruit. What to do? No. 1, pass more appropriations for Iron Dome because it is the right and smart thing to do.

No. 2, pass a resolution saying we oppose any cease-fire that does not allow Israel to get to the heart of the problem when it comes to terrorist tunnels and dealing with the rocket threat against their country.

No. 3, push back against the United Nations that has lost its moral way. The Human Rights Commission—which is a subcommittee, for lack of a better term, of the United Nations—passed a resolution 27 to 1 about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Gaza, and I will read the first paragraph:

Deploing the massive Israeli military operations in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, since 13 June 2014 that have involved disproportionate and indiscriminate attacks and resulted in grave violations of the human rights of the Palestinian civilian population, including through the most recent Israeli military assault on the occupied Gaza Strip, the latest in a series of military aggressions by Israel, and through actions of mass closures, mass arrests and the killing of civilians in the occupied West Bank.

This resolution is 1,600-and-something words, and it has a half sentence about rockets against Israel and nothing about the tunnels and never mentions Hamas.

The third thing I would like this body to do, through a letter of resolution, is let the United Nations know we condemn this one-sided view of the conflict and that we find the Human Rights Commission report objectionable and, quite frankly, immoral.

The vote was 27 to 1, and we were the only nation that objected to this resolution, which I think should make every decent person in the world feel the shame of the United Nations.

I thank our leader on the Republican side for creating this opportunity and allowing us to speak on this issue, and I thank him for his longstanding support for the State of Israel.

I close with this thought: In times of trouble, try to do the right thing and the smart thing, and they both come together on this issue. The right thing to do is to stand by your friends in Israel; the smart thing to do is to stand by your friends in Israel. The right thing and the smart thing to do is to oppose Hamas, which has a wicked heart, and allow Israel, once and for all, to fix this problem by demilitarizing Gaza and dealing with the tunnels and the rockets.

As Senator MCCONNELL said, Israel has tried cease-fires time and time again without dealing with the military threat they face. Not this time. When Israel says never again, they are referring to the Holocaust. America needs to stand with Israel and Israel should say to Hamas: Never again will we allow a cease-fire that allows you to dig tunnels under our borders to kidnap and kill our citizens, and never again will we allow you to rear and rain holy terror on our people through

thousands of rockets being fired at innocent civilians.

Now is the time for the Senate to say with Israel, never again.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Republican leader.

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, briefly before Senator AYOTTE takes the floor, I wish to commend Senator GRAHAM for his suggestions. All three of those suggestions should be carried out this week. Time is of the essence.

In listening to the litany of actions by the Palestinians that he recounted—and we all remember, going back almost to the founding of the State of Israel—I am reminded of what one of Israel's early Foreign Ministers once said about the Palestinians. He said the Palestinians never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity.

Mr. GRAHAM. Sad but true.

Mr. MCCONNELL. Sad but true. I recall when Prime Minister Barak was in office at the end of the Clinton years. The administration brokered a deal that Israel at that time was willing to offer and Palestine said no. It was a deal they probably could not get today.

We have seen a litany of opportunities wasted over the years, and the people who suffered as a result of it have obviously been the Palestinian people.

Mr. GRAHAM. Absolutely. With that, I will turn over the debate to my good friend, the Senator from New Hampshire, Ms. AYOTTE, who has been one of the leaders on our side on foreign policy and is a steadfast ally of our friends in Israel.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from New Hampshire.

Ms. AYOTTE. I thank my colleagues, the Senator from South Carolina for his leadership and our leader, the Senator from Kentucky, for the incredible work he has done in supporting our great friend Israel and also leading this body in terms of the issues he has brought forward, not only in supporting important protections, such as the Iron Dome program, but also by ensuring America remains safe and strong. I thank Senator MCCONNELL very much for his leadership.

I rise because I had the privilege in March of traveling to Israel. I went there not only to meet with the leadership in Israel but I had the opportunity to meet with some of the Palestinian leadership as well.

I went to Sderot, which is a town in Israel. I was very much struck by what the Israelis are facing every day and the threat they face from Hamas, a terrorist organization. Go to a town such as Sderot and everyone in their household has a bomb shelter. I met with mothers there whose children feel traumatized because they never know when the next potential rocket may be coming toward their town, and it has very much affected their children. It has affected them so much so that when one

goes to the playground where the children play, the playground itself contains a bomb shelter. There is a caterpillar which looks like something your kids would play in, but it is actually a bomb shelter because this town in Israel has been facing rockets from Hamas. That is what we need to understand in this conflict: Hamas, a terrorist organization, has not only used its own civilians, the Palestinians, as human shields but they have also continued to threaten the children of Israel so much so that their playgrounds have bomb shelters.

What is happening right now in this conflict is that Israel is trying to defend itself against the threat of rockets from Hamas which threaten their children and the Palestinian children, who unfortunately have been put in harm's way by this terrorist organization, Hamas.

They are facing a new threat. Can you imagine if we were faced with a threat where terrorists could pop up through a tunnel and suddenly terrorize the people in this country? Can you imagine what we would do under the same circumstance? That is the threat the Israelis are facing right now. They need to eliminate these tunnels to ensure that their people can be protected from this threat.

How did they build these tunnels? They actually built some of these tunnels by using concrete the Israelis let the Palestinians have for building places such as schools, and instead Hamas has taken this concrete and used it to build terror tunnels to allow them to either kidnap or kill Israeli citizens.

We stand with the people of Israel and their right to defend themselves against this terrorist organization Hamas and the terror it has brought upon not only the country of Israel but also the terror it has brought to the Palestinian people and how Hamas stands in the way of peace in the region overall.

We also stand against the hypocrisy we have seen on many levels, and that hypocrisy and double standard has been most apparent in the U.N. Human Rights Council and the recent resolution passed by that council. I have to wonder why that council exists in the United Nations because they have countries such as China, Cuba, Russia, and Venezuela issuing a resolution condemning Israel for what is happening in this conflict but in no way even mentioning Hamas or what Hamas is doing to use civilians as shields and basically as targets so they can try to get support from the international community.

The opposite is happening in terms of what Israel is doing. There is such a contrast. Israel is taking steps to notify civilians if there is going to be a missile launched in their area. They have warned civilians to leave areas. They have taken extraordinary steps to protect civilian lives in contrast to what Hamas is doing; they are using civilians as shields.

We condemn in this body very clearly what the Human Rights Council has done. The notion that we are going to follow what China, Cuba, Venezuela, and Russia tell the world, which is their view on human rights—and they don't even mention the actions of a terrorist organization that is at the root of the conflict we see right now in Gaza—talk about the situation where the fox is watching the henhouse. That is what has happened with this human rights council. Frankly, this council, in my view, should be eliminated because it is the opposite of standing for human rights; it is for standing for terrorist organizations such as Hamas.

I stand with the recommendations of my colleague from South Carolina and our leader that we need to absolutely condemn the human rights council. We need to reaffirm in this body this week before we leave our support for Israel's right to defend itself and to eliminate the threat these tunnels present to the Israeli people, and, frankly, also to the Palestinian people as well, and to allow them to finally address this threat from this terrorist organization Hamas.

Until this threat is eliminated, there can be no peace in this region. There cannot be peace for the Israeli people and there cannot be peace for the Palestinian people. So it is my hope that we will take this up this week and make sure we clearly send a message to Israel; that we stand with Israel, that we clearly send a message to the U.N. that we are not going to accept the hypocrisy of the human rights council; that we clearly send a message to Hamas: We know who you are. You are a terrorist organization. Stop using civilians to try to accomplish your purpose and we stand with you.

I yield the floor for my colleague.

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, if I may before Senator AYOTTE leaves the floor, I commend her on her contribution to this discussion and particularly with her stories with regard to Israel, and I would also add that I am sure the Senator from New Hampshire agrees with me that the last thing the American Government needs to do right now is try to pressure Israel into a bad cease-fire that doesn't allow this terror to be stopped.

At times it appears to me that the American administration is trying to push the Israelis into stopping before they have finished the job. We all know, based on past history, that unless this operation is completed, these challenges will continue.

I wanted to see if the Senator from New Hampshire shared my view.

Ms. AYOTTE. I would fully share the Senator's view. In order to end this threat we need to support Israel and its right to eliminate the tunnels, to address the missiles and eliminate missiles and the stash that Hamas has that they are targeting Israel with—which, by the way, would have had many more civilian casualties but for the Iron Dome system that we have supported and worked with Israel on.

Finally, we need to get to a point where Gaza is demilitarized and they are put in a position where this threat cannot continue. That is what we need to get to thinking about. But we need to allow Israel to deal with the threat of these tunnels and the missiles so the children in Sderot will not continue to be targeted, so children—not only Israeli children but also Palestinian children—can live in peace in the region. That cannot happen when Hamas continues to be a terrorist organization that threatens all children in the region.

Thank you.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from South Dakota.

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, I wish to end on what my colleagues, the Senator from Kentucky and the leader, Senator MCCONNELL, say. Senator GRAHAM, Senator AYOTTE, and I appreciate Senator MCCONNELL's leadership in making very clear what is at stake here, pushing hard to make sure that the Senate is doing its job in support of Israel, making sure they are able to defend themselves and the funding for the Iron Dome which has been so effective as a defense mechanism against these rocket attacks is done in a way that allows them to continue to use it in that capability.

As you look at the situation in Gaza, I want to start by taking a step back and looking at this conflict in both the historic and regional context. In Israel we have the only functioning democracy in the Middle East. Israel is a nation that emphasizes human rights and tolerance. Its population includes religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity. In Jerusalem you can hear the Muslim call to prayer, the bells from Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches, and the prayers of the Jews at the Wailing Wall all at the same time. There is no other place like this on Earth.

This democracy, however, is situated in a region of intense brutality and extremism. Historically that has meant seemingly endless conflicts with Israel's neighbors, intentionally targeting civilians in order to maximize casualties. One need only look across the border into Syria to get a glimpse of this brutality. When Syrians made the first attempt at striving for democracy, the Assad regime began systematically slaughtering opponents, including gassing civilians with chemical weapons. As that violence spread into Iraq, radical terrorist organizations such as ISIS began killing not only Shia opponents but also other Sunni clerics who would not swear allegiance to ISIS. Communities with ancient traditions such as the Christians in Mosul, who just 10 years ago numbered 60,000, have been forced to flee for their lives. Mosul has been completely emptied of Christians for the first time in 1600 years.

It is in this context the people of Israel have built their nation. It is in this context that we now view the conflict in Gaza. The current conflict in

Gaza is one that Israel did not start. It started with Hamas firing over 2300 rockets from Gaza into Israel, specifically targeting civilian populated areas to maximize potential casualties. In response, Israel has conducted a methodical and enforceable response, as you would expect any nation to do. First Israel locates the source of the rocket. Then an attempt is made to call the residents by phone to tell them to evacuate. In many cases a flare is sent onto the roof as a warning that the location is about to be hit, before that location is ultimately destroyed.

In a region where neighboring leaders indiscriminately drop barrel bombs on residential areas for the sole purpose of slaughtering civilians, Israel goes out of its way to save lives. These are not just civilian lives Israel is saving, because they know that by their efforts they are giving the aggressors a chance to escape as well.

After Hamas continued to launch rockets into Israel, even when Israel agreed on multiple occasions to cease fire, tunnels were used to insert combatants near Israeli settlements. Israel responded with a ground assault to destroy the tunnels and eliminate Hamas's stockpiles of weapons. As the attacks and rocket launches continue, it is understandable that Israel would want to seek out and destroy stockpiles of weapons to keep the cycle from being repeated a few months from now.

Like all of my colleagues on the floor today, I want to see peace in the Middle East. Specifically I want to see peace in the Gaza and West Bank. I want to see peace in such a way that the Palestinian people can live with the prospect of a better life. But as we have seen, peace is not possible when a terrorist organization continues to pursue its cause of annihilating Israel. Peace cannot be achieved while Hamas rejects cease-fire agreements and continues to fire rockets. As violent as the current conflict in the Gaza strip is, it would be far worse—it would be far worse—if Israel did not have the Iron Dome. In any conflict, civilian casualties are a tragedy and if Israel did not have the sophisticated, purely defensive weapons system that allows it to shoot these rockets out of the sky, the number of civilian casualties would be far greater.

Hamas does not drop leaflets telling civilians to evacuate. Hamas does not send flares to warn residents to get out of harm's way. If not for Israel's Iron Dome, civilian casualties in Israel would be staggering. The United States must continue to support Israel by ensuring that Iron Dome missile defense systems remain an effective deterrent to even greater civilian casualties. For as long as Israeli men, women, and children need to run to bomb shelters ahead of Hamas rocket attacks we must support Israel's ability to defend itself.

The United Nations Council on Human Rights and other countries around the world continue to do things

that are consistently at odds with the facts and with reality. Here in the United States we need to do as my colleague from South Carolina said, the right thing and the smart thing, and in this case, the right thing and the smart thing are one and the same. So I hope my colleagues in the Senate will make a priority providing the necessary funding for Iron Dome and in standing united—united—behind our ally and our friend Israel as they defend themselves from these attacks.

Mr. President, I see my colleague from Texas is on the floor, and I would simply ask him what role he sees the United States playing in both supporting Israel and providing support for the Iron Dome.

Mr. CRUZ. I thank my friend from South Dakota.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Texas.

Mr. CRUZ. Mr. President, I am pleased and saddened to stand here in support of my colleagues as we stand united in support of the Nation of Israel.

In the last several weeks over 2500 rockets rained down over the Nation of Israel. Eighty percent of the population had to flee what they were doing and run to bomb shelters to hide—moms, dads, children. When the alarm goes off they have sometimes 10, 15 seconds to get to a bomb shelter.

I want you to imagine if the same situation were happening in America. Imagine if 80 percent of this country in the last several weeks had run to a bomb shelter. Imagine if 240 million Americans in the last several weeks had been sitting at work or in the doctor's office or having breakfast and had to grab their children and run in panic toward a bomb shelter. Imagine what our country would be doing in response.

In recent weeks we have discovered that Hamas has opened a new chapter in the annals of terrorism. It is not just raining rockets down from on high, but it is now attacking from below. Some 32 full-scale terror tunnels have been discovered dug under the ground under the border and coming up in kibbutzes inside Israel along Gaza. Some of the tunnels come up inside kindergartens. We have discovered in recent weeks a terrifying plot that was underway for Hamas terrorists on Rosh Hashanah to come through those tunnels—hundreds of them—to emerge in kindergartens to kidnap and murder vast numbers of young Jewish children.

Imagine right now if enemies of this country had dug tunnels into this country and were coming up into our schools. Imagine if Iran or China or some other hostile foreign nation had tunnels from which your children and my children were at risk of being kidnapped or murdered. Today in Gaza we see massive civilian casualties that are the direct consequence of the violence of Hamas.

You see, the human casualties are not an unintended side effect of the

conflicts. They are the objective that Hamas seeks—dead Palestinian children and women and men. We know this because Hamas is engaging in a war crime right now, not that the United Nations Human Rights Council would ever say anything about it. But Hamas is engaging in a war crime of using human shields—deliberately using human shields. Where do they place their rockets with which they are raining down death and destruction upon Israel? They place them in schools. They place them in private homes. They place them in mosques. Deliberately they surround their rockets and their terror tunnels with innocent civilians.

Israel right now is engaged in something unprecedented in the annals of modern warfare. It is undertaking more humanitarian effort to spare civilian deaths than any military has in recorded history. Before attacking, Israel sends out texts. When they discover a rocket battery they need to take out because it is firing rockets targeting innocent civilians, they send texts saying: Clear out of the area. They try to save the Palestinian civilians. They drop from the sky pamphlets on an area that is about to be bombed to take out the rockets that are coming from that area. The pamphlets say to the civilians: Get out. Get out because we are going to take out the rockets and you are in harm's way. Not only that, they have a practice of sending an initial knock bomb. What does that mean? It means the first bomb lands on the roof and makes a knock. It doesn't explode; it just makes a loud knock. They do that for a reason: So the people inside the building can look up, can hear the knock, and can flee the building so the second missile can take down the building and the rockets that are housed inside and being used to try to murder innocent civilians.

A few weeks ago Prime Minister Netanyahu summed it up very powerfully when he said: Israel uses missile defense to defend our citizens. Hamas uses its citizens to defend its missiles.

Israel has tried to warn Palestinian civilians: Don't be located where the missiles are because we are going to respond as any sovereign nation will to protect our citizens.

What does Hamas say? Hamas tells the Palestinians: Stay there.

Picture that for a second. Israel is warning civilians to clear the area because they are going to take out the rockets and they are going to take out the tunnels. The response from Hamas is: No. Stay there.

Why? Because what they want to see is Palestinian children, Palestinian women killed so they can put the pictures on the Sunday night news because they know the world—many at the United Nations, many in the media—will behave like useful idiots. They will point to the civilian casualties that are Hamas's fault. When you put rockets on top of children, when

you tell the children “do not leave,” when you know the rockets are going to be taken out—it is Hamas, the terrorists who are responsible for those children’s deaths. Yet the international community puts the pictures on the evening news and blames the nation of Israel.

I am proud this week to have joined my colleague, Senator GILLIBRAND from New York, in filing a bipartisan resolution in this body condemning Hamas’s use of human shields, condemning it as a war crime, condemning it as an outrage, condemning it as the direct reason we are seeing so many civilian deaths.

I have to note that one of the reasons civilian deaths have been mitigated in Israel is because of the incredible success of the Iron Dome missile defense system. Ronald Reagan’s “Star Wars” is today’s Iron Dome.

We see unfolding in recent weeks in Israel the product of President Reagan’s vision when he proposed the Strategic Defense Initiative, or SDI, on March 23, 1983. Critics at the time dismissed it as “Star Wars.” The Presiding Officer will recall—we were both teenagers at the time, and we recall learned experts, so to speak, going on television saying SDI was a fool’s errand; it was a dream. The analogy that was given was you cannot hit a bullet with a bullet; it can’t work. Well, run the clock forward three decades, and we see an Iron Dome, the strategic vision of President Reagan, playing out in real-time.

There is a wonderful video on YouTube that I encourage anyone who is interested to Google and watch. It is a video called “Iron Dome Wedding.” If people Google it, they will discover a video from a wedding in southern Israel. It is an ordinary wedding video, just like I suspect the Presiding Officer and I both had from our weddings. But in the midst of it, rockets begin coming through the night sky. We see rockets come across the sky, and then we see Iron Dome interceptors come up and explode the rockets. One after the other is hit and explodes, and the whole thing looks like fireworks. In the background we hear the wedding music and the sound of celebrating, and we think, were it not for these Iron Dome interceptors, those missiles might be landing on that wedding and causing carnage and death and destruction. But because of the potential, the power, the actuality of missile defense, instead they are intercepted.

There are indisputable differences between the intercontinental ballistic missiles that SDI was designed to target and the low-tech missiles Hamas is firing over Israel that Iron Dome is intercepting. That is why Iron Dome is one part of a three-tiered system that includes David’s Sling and the Arrow 2 and 3 systems, which are designed to guard against more sophisticated weapons, such as the longer range missiles being provided to Hamas by Syria and Iran, and they would also defend

against nuclear ballistic missiles of the sort being developed in Iran.

It is worth underscoring, even as the fighting in Gaza grabs the headlines, that we have to keep our eye on the far more serious danger of a nuclear Iran. The threat of a nuclear-armed Iran would make Hamas and their rockets seem like child’s play. And our support for Iron Dome should be understood in the context of support for the continued development of these systems, which not only protect our friend and ally Israel, but they protect us. There is a reason why Hamas and Iran refer to Israel as the “Little Satan” and the United States as the “Great Satan,” because their intention with both is the same terror, the same murder, the same death and destruction.

Israel is currently working to carry out the grinding work to eradicate these terror tunnels that have been built under schools and kindergartens designed to kidnap and murder young children. I would note that it is an enormously difficult task, one that might prove impossible were it not for the success of Iron Dome limiting the effectiveness of those rockets.

I encourage this body to stand together, united as one, Republicans and Democrats. There may be issues on which we disagree—there may be a great many issues—but we ought to be able to stand together as one and speak in unison that we support the nation of Israel and that we will work with the nation of Israel immediately to replenish their Iron Dome supply so they can protect the citizens there and so they can do what is necessary to eradicate the Hamas rockets and terror tunnels being used to commit war crimes. There should be a unified, bipartisan voice in this body, and it is my hope that by the end of this week that is exactly what it will be.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. MURPHY). The Senator from Maryland.

Ms. MIKULSKI. What is the parliamentary situation?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senate is in a period of morning business.

Ms. MIKULSKI. May I proceed or does the other party wish to—how much time is remaining on our side?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The minority has 3 minutes remaining, the majority has 47 minutes remaining.

Ms. MIKULSKI. With the concurrence of the minority party, I wish to proceed. I know they haven’t yielded back their time. If that is agreeable, and hearing no objection, I will proceed.

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

Ms. MIKULSKI. Mr. President, I rise today as the chair of the Appropriations Committee to talk about several challenges facing our country.

First, I wish to respond to the comments made by many of the Senators this morning on the compelling need to pass supplemental appropriations to help Israel replenish the rockets it has

used in its Iron Dome missile defense system. I am an unabashed, unrelenting supporter of that effort.

For many years, as a U.S. Senator on the Appropriations Committee, on the Defense Subcommittee, as well as as a member of the Intelligence Committee, I know how important the Israeli missile defense system is, including Iron Dome, David’s Sling, and others that are absolutely crucial. I worked hands-on with Senator Inouye—the late great Senator, a Congressional Medal of Honor winner—to make sure we funded the missile defense system for Israel and to work on a bipartisan basis with Senator Stevens and Senator COCHRAN. We worked together, and thank God it worked. We also implemented an agreement signed by President Bush with the Government of Israel that we would always help Israel maintain its qualitative edge. We have done it, and I am proud of it.

Now more than ever an antimissile defense system that has worked needs to continue operation. We know the technology works, but they need to make sure they have the tools to make the technology work—these additional rockets.

We know Israel is under attack. It has always been under attack since its very founding. This is not an existential threat; this is not an abstract threat; it is a daily threat. We know Israel is trying to defend itself against the grim, unrelenting attacks by Hamas—a self-avowed terrorist organization that has sworn in its documents not to allow Israel to continue. They absolutely oppose an independent Israeli State.

This month we are commemorating the Warsaw uprising. The Presiding Officer is a member of a group we affectionately call the Polish Caucus—those of us who have a relationship with the Polish Government, one of our greatest supporters in the NATO alliance. We recall that 70 years ago people were willing to fight back against the Nazis, rising out of the sewers of the Warsaw ghetto to be able to fight them off with sticks and stones and out-of-date weapons, working to liberate Poland from Nazi oppression.

Miles away, in places such as Dachau, Auschwitz, and others, there were the death camps. We are 1 year away from commemorating the liberation of the death camps. We know that as those people marched out of those death camps, they made their way into Palestine, which became the State of Israel.

We were the first Nation to recognize the necessary and rightful place for Israel to exist as an independent government and forever and a day the homeland for the Jewish people so they would be safe from terrorism and what occurred.

I am for this whole Iron Dome supplemental, and we need to do it, but it cannot be the only thing we put in this supplemental. We have neighbors right now hurting in our own country—our

Western States with wildfires raging over hundreds of thousands of acres, land being depleted, local resources for first responders being exhausted, local funds being worn down. We have to—we have to—be able to respond to the Western border.

Then there is the crisis at our border, and the crisis is at our border because of the crisis in Central America.

So when we move on the supplemental, let's look out for the great State of Israel, let's look out for our neighbors who are facing wildfires, and let's look out for what is going on at our border.

But, Mr. President, I came to the floor, first of all, to compliment Senator SANDERS for the outstanding job he did working on a bipartisan basis to pass the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014. What a great job they did, out of a scandal—a terrible scandal—affecting our Nation's veterans, where they had to stand in line simply to see a doctor in the very country they fought to defend.

Now they have found they have had to defend themselves against VA bureaucracy and in some places duplicitous action.

Well, the Sanders bill goes a long way, again, working on both sides of the aisle and both sides of the dome. Gosh, when we do this, this is why I wanted to be a Senator. I know this is why many others wanted to be a Senator: coming here, working on concrete problems, shoulder to shoulder, on a bipartisan basis, hands across the aisle, hands across the dome. And they did it. When this bill is passed, we will reduce the long wait times for veterans, we will increase doctors and nurses and specialty providers. It will allow veterans to see local providers if they have been on a wait list for an extended period of time or have to drive 40 miles to be able to get to a VA clinic.

Boy, do I know that when I look at some of the rural areas.

We are going to pay for it with \$10 billion in mandatory emergency funds. Mandatory emergency funds, that is the way to do it.

The Sanders bill will go a long way in increasing personnel and also in expanding a number of clinics—27 new clinics. So I think it is great.

But as important as that bill is—and it is an important step—it cannot be the only step we take this week. I am so excited that shoulder to shoulder, again, if we work together, we can do a trifecta for our veterans. We can pass the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act—new opportunities for health care, where veterans do not have to stand in line. Also, we are going to vote today on Robert McDonald to give the VA a new Secretary, a new CEO, new leadership, hopefully new energy, new vitality, and new ways of doing business, bringing the practical know-how of the private sector to meeting our mission. But as important as those two are, I also come

as the chair of the Appropriations Committee to say, why don't we take a third step that really will do the job? Let's pass the VA MILCON appropriations bill so we can actually put next year's funding in the Federal checkbook rather than just putting VA on autopilot? We can actually make a big difference with the new accountability, expansion of care bill, but that will take days, weeks, months to put in operation. Right this minute we could pass the VA MILCON bill as well as giving new leadership.

I come here because I really do want to move the VA MILCON bill.

The Appropriations Committee works through its subcommittees. And, wow, I have two great leaders on the VA MILCON Subcommittee, the chairman and ranking member, two outstanding Senators: Senator TIM JOHNSON of South Dakota and Senator MARK KIRK of Illinois. They have worked so assiduously on coming up with a bill for funding our veterans for fiscal year 2015. It is an outstanding bill. But right now we are out there in the wilderness. We have moved it through the subcommittee. We have moved it through the full committee. It passed unanimously. We are out in the ethers waiting to come to the floor. JOHNSON and KIRK, MIKULSKI and SHELBY, we are like people with our noses pressed against the glass. We see it within our grasp but we cannot get through. All we want to do is help to complete the job we are trying to undertake today.

As much as the bill will be that Senator SANDERS worked on, without the VA MILCON appropriations bill, the veterans will lack key tools to expand care, important support personnel that allows the doctors and nurses to do their job, important technology to run contemporary institutions. By the way, the bill we are going to be working on, the Sanders bill, is focused on health care, but we on the Appropriations Committee dealt not only with aspects of that but also the terrible backlog on veterans disability.

Mr. President, veterans disability—not only do you have to stand in line to get health care, but you are standing days, weeks, months to get your disability claim. You have lost an arm or a leg or you cannot breathe or you have PTSD and we cannot get your disability processed. This is unacceptable. What we do in the VA bill is come up with the funds to really modernize the VA.

First of all, just in terms of health care, to complement the Sanders bill, we have money in there to develop state-of-the-art technology so the doctors can provide medical health care, to make sure we have the modern equipment and the modern IT systems.

Right now, we need to be able to have DOD talking to the VA because veterans come from DOD. But we have an interoperable system. We work to fix this. We also deal with this backlog. You have no idea, Mr. President. My

State of Maryland and my office in Baltimore have not had a good track record. I vowed to my veterans that I would try to break that backlog. And you know what. Working together we have been able to do this.

In the fiscal year 2015 bill, we fund an appeals process, we train additional claims processors, we require the management at the Veterans Benefit Administration to deal with the backlog, working with the new Administrator. We have not only great ideas, but we actually put the money in the Federal checkbook. JOHNSON-KIRK did it. Do you know how they did it? Yes, talking to the VA, reviewing tons of GAO and inspector general reports, and guess what else they did. They talked to the veterans. They talked to these wonderful volunteer service organizations.

So I am going to propose something later on today or later on this week. I do not want to be the chair of a committee who has her face pressed up against the glass looking longingly at the Senate floor with a bill I know will help the Veterans' Administration with the heavy lifting to deal with the health care and disability backlog. Because I believe in no surprises and no stunts, later on today or later on this week, I will ask unanimous consent to bring up the VA MILCON on third reading to be able to compliment what we are doing here today. I want to be able to do that and I hope no Senator will object to it.

Now, just again, in the spirit of full disclosure—because I truly have pledged to my colleagues on both sides of the aisle I would never be a surprise chair and I would never be one to pull gimmicks or stunts—I am going to ask that consent. I want people to know about it so they can discuss it, chew on it, talk at their respective luncheons.

When I ask unanimous consent, I am going to ask that it be brought up on third reading. Why am I doing that? Because under the rules of the Senate, if you bring up a bill on third reading, there are no amendments. So the question would be: Senator MIKULSKI, are you trying to stiff-arm again? No. I am trying to get the job done. I am not trying to stiff-arm the opportunity to offer amendments. But we have 72 hours left before we take this really long break—really long, long, long, very long—did I say “long”—break. I do not think, when you need health care for veterans, when you need to modernize technology, when you need to crack the backlog—while we are kind of basking in the Sun somewhere—I do not want them in line.

So either this afternoon or sometime tomorrow, I will ask unanimous consent. I will turn to my 99 colleagues, and in the spirit of really meeting compelling needs of our veterans, I will ask that bill come up so that as we move through the other two aspects that we are going to do to help veterans, we can do the VA MILCON bill.

So I wanted to come to the floor today to talk about how we support a

treasured ally, how we look out for our neighbors in the West fighting our wildfires, and how we deal with the crisis in Central America, where children are being victimized and brutalized every day so they are making the long march across that terrain and territory to come to the United States of America.

So I hope in the short time the Senate is going to be in session this week and this month and even this year we could use this week to meet the needs that are confronting us, but, most of all, I would hope we do not just do part of the job for our veterans; we do this trifecta that I am recommending: passing the Veterans Accountability Act, the health care act; give us a new CEO; and have a chance to pass the VA MILCON bill.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The assistant majority leader.

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, I want to associate myself with the remarks of the chairwoman of the Appropriations Committee, my chairwoman, Senator MIKULSKI.

I would add perhaps one particular point; that is, this Senator will be basking in the Sun in Illinois during the recess, and I invite the Senator from Maryland to come join us any time she would like to. But it will not be in ordinary vacation climes; it will be in my home State. I am sure the Senator is going to be spending a lot of time in hers as well.

Ms. MIKULSKI. If I could respond to the Senator from Illinois, yes, I am staying in Maryland because I had hoped we would even be working on conference reports and so on. But while the Senator is in Illinois and I am in Maryland, most of all, we do not want our veterans standing in line for their health care or their disability benefits. So shoulder to shoulder, forward together.

Mr. DURBIN. I thank Senator MIKULSKI.

Mr. President, this supplemental appropriations bill is important. It is timely. One of the provisions in it is an additional \$225 million for the Iron Dome defense. The Iron Dome defense is a joint effort by the United States and Israel to protect Israel from rocket attacks. Imagine you are living in your hometown and a neighboring State or neighboring town just fired 2,000 rockets into your hometown. These are not Fourth of July rockets; these are deadly rockets that kill. You want some protection. The Iron Dome provides protection for Israel.

This joint effort by the United States and Israel has been successful. Despite 2,000 rocket attacks, the casualties on the Israeli side have been minimal, relatively minimal, and it is because of the Iron Dome defense.

What attacks does Israel face today? Well, they face Hamas attacks from Gaza. Hamas is an organization which the United States characterized as a terrorist organization almost 20 years

ago. We know Hamas. We know their tactics. What they are doing is putting rocket launchers in civilian neighborhoods near hospitals and apartments and homes, and they are launching these missile attacks on Israel and daring them to fire back into civilian populations.

Iron Dome protects the Israeli population from the missiles being shot by Hamas in Gaza. Now the Israelis have invaded Gaza to go to the source to stop these rocket attacks.

Sadly, during the course of this effort in Gaza, there have been casualties—some on the Israeli side, of course; but hundreds, maybe a thousand on the side of the civilian population in Gaza. This is because the strategy of Hamas is to put their armaments smack-dab in the middle of civilian populations. As has been said, in Israel, they use weapons to protect civilians; and in Gaza, they are using civilians to protect weapons. That has to come to an end. We have to have an end to the hostilities between Gaza and Israel. No nation—no nation on Earth—would sit still for 2,000 rocket attacks into their population. That is what Israel has faced over the past several weeks. But the people of Gaza also need much better than they are receiving when it comes to Hamas.

Hamas, sadly, is engaging in tactics using human shields at the expense of the civilian population. When they are told about the civilians that are dying in Gaza, leaders in Hamas say: Well, they are martyrs for the cause. I will have to tell you, it would be very difficult for me to understand and explain to a family that has lost a child they love that their child has just become a martyr.

This has to come to an end. The hostilities between Gaza and Israel have to end, I hope, in some negotiation and peaceful resolution. Maybe it is wishful thinking, but I do believe we need to make the effort. I commend Secretary of State Kerry for his effort at trying to engage Egypt and others in this conversation.

The supplemental bill before us today provides more money for interceptor missiles for Iron Dome—to protect Israel—money requested by our Secretary of Defense, money which I support. As chairman of the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, we added some \$350 million for Iron Dome defenses in the next fiscal year which begins October 1. This money is needed now because of the hostilities between these two countries. I certainly support it.

A second part, the major part of this supplemental appropriation, deals with the humanitarian refugee crisis we have on our border. It is not often the United States faces a refugee crisis. Think back in history. The only refugees who come to our shores are usually from nearby countries: Haiti, Cuba. Occasionally, we have refugees coming such as after the Vietnam War, the Hmong people who were our allies in that war.

But we are not like most countries in the Middle East, for example, that have a steady stream of refugees. The United States does not engage in refugee crisis alleviation because of our location and geography and our history. Seldom have we been challenged. But today we are challenged. We are challenged because in the first 6 months of the year 57,000 unaccompanied children—children—presented themselves at the border with Mexico. They were not trying to sneak in. They literally walked across the border and presented themselves to the first person in uniform.

They were told to do that by their families. Why did they make the trip to the border as kids—by themselves—to present themselves? Because in three countries in Central America there is a state of lawlessness: Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador. Eighty percent of the children who have come to the border came from those three countries. They are not just coming to the United States, incidentally. There has been a 700-percent increase in refugees to adjoining Central American countries from those three countries.

This has been going on for some time. But for the past 2 or 3 years, it has gone from bad to dramatically worse. We met last week with the Ambassadors from these three countries, and we talked about what created this. A lot of it has to do with the drug gangs—drug gangs that are transporting drugs through those countries for sale largely in the United States. These drug gangs have become powerful and rich, well armed and notorious for their barbaric tactics.

They recruit young people into their drug gangs at the point of a gun. They mutilate those who even hesitate to join the drug gangs. God forbid it is your daughter, because they have a reputation for raping young girls. If they are not satisfied with their response, they kill them on the spot and leave them in plastic bags by the highway. That is why many families are sending their kids away from this deadly violence.

Two weeks ago I went to a shelter in Chicago. This was a transitional shelter where 70 children from the border are being held until they can be placed with their families in the United States or with some trusting family that takes up foster care. I saw these kids firsthand. Your image of them may be different than what you actually see.

My wife said to me: Well, why do they not show pictures of these kids? Well, they try to protect their identity and confidentiality by not showing photos. But if you could see them, you would see children of all ages. There were five women who walked into the dining hall at this transitional shelter.

They did not seem to me to be 14 years of age. Each one was carrying a baby. They were the victims of rape in Honduras. They were carrying these newborn infants in their arms, as they

had done during the 8-day bus journey to get to the border. I asked some of the staff at this transitional shelter—I had been told that many of the families, before they send their young girls on this dangerous and sometimes deadly journey, give the girls birth control pills because they anticipate they will be attacked during the course of this journey. They said: It is true.

What desperation would you have to reach before you turned your daughter loose under those circumstances? These families are literally trying to escape a burning home and sending their kids to the only safe and secure place they can think of.

What do we need to do? First, we need to get to these countries and tell them: Stop. Stop these deadly journeys, these journeys which, sadly, lead to harm and even death for some of these children. Do not let this happen any more. We have to work with the governments of those countries to make it clear this is the wrong thing to do. It is wrong because once these kids get into America, they are not entitled to stay. They are not entitled to be citizens, unless, perhaps, they qualify for asylum. They are going to be sent back.

After they are sent back to these countries, if they ever try to reenter the United States they can be found guilty of a felony. This is serious. So the notion that they can just come to America and stay here if they wish is not true. That is the first thing we need to do.

The second thing we need to do is to stop the smuggling and the coyotes that are bringing these kids into the United States. They are charging these poor families in Central America thousands of dollars they do not have to bring these kids to the border. We have to work with Mexico to hold these coyotes and smugglers accountable.

Third, I want to tell you, I think this really is key to our discussion. This is a test of who we are as a country. How many times in our history has the United States rallied for families and children around the world?

Do you remember just a month or two ago in Nigeria when 300 girls were kidnapped by Islamic extremists? Members of the Senate from both parties came to the floor to protest outrage that 300 young teenage girls would be kidnapped by these extremists. We engaged at every level to let the world know America cared. It was not the first time. There is a long history of it. We have stood for families and children around the world for humanitarian purposes throughout our history. Look back to the refuseniks, the Russian Jews who were being discriminated against in the Soviet Union. The United States was one of the leading nations in the world to stand behind those families and those children, bringing them to the United States so that they could escape antisemitism and Communism.

When you look at the victims of the Haitian earthquake, the United States

was providing foreign aid to those families and children because we are, in fact, a caring nation. That is who we are. Throughout our history we have shown it. We need to show it again with these children. Some extreme American politicians have said: It is not our problem. Put them on a bus. Put them on a plane and dump them back wherever they came from—not our problem.

God forbid that is the verdict of history, that the United States, when it saw vulnerable, helpless children, did not care. I think more highly of this country. I think we have proven over and over that we do care. There have been some extraordinary statements made about this crisis by many people. The one that caught my eye was from a friend who happens to be the Governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Deval Patrick was born in Chicago. Maybe that is why I am partial to him. But Deval Patrick spoke about Massachusetts and its feelings toward these children.

He recalled moments of history. Here is what he said: My inclination is to remember what happened when a ship full of Jewish children tried to come to the United States in 1939 and the United States turned them away. Many of them went back to their deaths in Nazi concentration camps.

He went on to say:

I think we are a bigger hearted people than that as Americans.

I agree with Governor Patrick. President Obama has asked for resources to care for these children, to place them, to give them the right of seeking asylum if they can make that established legal claim and, if not, to return them, humanely, to the countries they came from. Two of the three Ambassadors we met with, incidentally, said they could not guarantee the safety of those children in Honduras or El Salvador, if they came back. Let's do the right thing and pass this supplemental appropriation. Let's provide the resources so these children are treated humanely, ultimately given their hearing, ultimately returned, in most cases, to the country they came from.

How will history judge us? How will we be judged if, when these refugee children came to our border, they were turned away and sent back to harm, violence or even death?

We do not want that to happen. That is not who we are as Americans. We care. We show it. Our government should show it as well. The Senate will get an opportunity to do that very soon—we hope maybe this day or this week—as we wind down the session.

The last point I want to make is a tribute to two of my colleagues who have done an extraordinary job when it comes to the Veterans' Administration. I am referring to JOHN McCAIN, my friend who came to Congress with me many years ago, the former Republican candidate for President and a conservative from Arizona. He teamed up with—of all people—BERNIE SAND-

ERS of Vermont, self-styled independent socialist Democrat. How about that? SANDERS and McCAIN sat down to solve the challenge facing the VA. God bless them. They did it. They are reporting a bill to us which is a dramatic improvement over the current VA system.

We are now overwhelmed with the Veterans' Administration disability claims. Forty-five percent of the veterans coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan have filed a claim. We have tens of thousands of these claims pending, many of them for post-traumatic stress disorder.

We have said, incidentally, that we are going to help all veterans. Some 400,000 veterans from other wars are making PTSD claims. In addition, we have those who served in Vietnam, exposed to Agent Orange and with nine different diseases being treated. We have those who were victims of Gulf War Syndrome being treated. We have homeless veterans who are now being brought in and counseled so they can get their lives back on track. It is an overwhelming responsibility which the VA has today.

The Sanders-McCain veterans bill is going to address them by providing more resources for our veterans and more medical professionals, which we need. Remember—we all should every single day—that we said to the men and women who enlisted in our military and who volunteered: If you will raise your hand, swear allegiance to this country and risk your life, we will stand by you when you come home.

We are going to keep our word. We promised. We are going to keep our word. This bill—this veterans bill that is going to come before us this week—does exactly that. SANDERS and McCAIN met with the House conferees and worked out an agreement—an agreement which is going to benefit the Hines VA in Chicago with an additional facility which they need. There is an amendment which is going to help facilities all across this country serving our veterans—an amendment which says: If you happen to live too far away from a veterans hospital, we are going to find a way to make sure you get timely care that is near your home. I think it is the least we can do. We owe it to our vets.

I tip my hat to my colleagues, Republican and Democrat alike, who put this together. I am looking forward to voting for it this week.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Vermont.

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, I agree with my distinguished colleague, the senior Senator from Illinois. I think Senator SANDERS and Senator McCAIN showed that things can get done around here. I think of the tremendous work the Senator from Illinois did last year and helped us get an immigration bill through this body. We had a large majority of the Senate vote for it—Republicans and Democrats alike.

How I wish the leadership in the House had allowed them to vote on it. I think we would be in a far better position to deal with these problems with the DREAMers and with those seeking to come into our country. I applaud the Senator from Illinois for never giving up.

Mr. DURBIN. If the Senator from Vermont would yield for just one moment. I want to thank him personally. As chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, he has made a point of making sure the DREAM Act, a bill which I introduced 13 years ago, has had a fair hearing before the committee on more than one occasion and has been reported by the committee. It was part of that comprehensive immigration bill. I thank him for bringing it up.

I just want to say for the record that one Republican Senator has said he wants to deport all of the DREAMers. He is in for a fight because these young men and women are proving over and over they can make a valuable contribution to this country. I thank the Senator from Vermont.

(The remarks of Mr. LEAHY pertaining to the introduction of S. 2658 are printed in today's RECORD under "Statements on Introduced Bills and Joint Resolutions.")

Mr. FRANKEN. I yield the floor.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Ms. HEITKAMP). Morning business is closed.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

NOMINATION OF ROBERT ALAN McDONALD TO BE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will proceed to executive session to consider the following nomination, which the clerk will report.

The bill clerk read the nomination of Robert Alan McDonald, of Ohio, to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the time until 12:30 will be equally divided in the usual form.

The Senator from Vermont.

VETERANS HEALTH CARE

Mr. SANDERS. Madam President, as the chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I rise today in strong support of the nomination of Robert McDonald to serve as Secretary of Veterans' Affairs.

I also thank Majority Leader REID for moving this important nomination forward as quickly as he has, and I very much hope that later this afternoon, with a very strong vote, the Senate will vote to confirm Robert McDonald as Secretary of the VA.

Before I talk about Mr. McDonald's qualifications, I wish to take a moment

to express my sincere thanks to GEN Eric Shinseki for his dedicated service to our Nation, first as a soldier and then as head of the VA, working tirelessly to provide for those injured during war and the families of those who perished on the battlefield. He set very ambitious goals, and under his leadership VA made significant strides in reducing veteran homelessness and transforming a paper-based claims system to one fit for the 21st century. I thank him and his family very much for his service.

It is my strong belief that Robert McDonald will bring two very important qualities to the position of Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

First, he is familiar with the military as well as the needs of veterans and their families. Mr. McDonald and his family have a history of service to our Nation. Mr. McDonald began his service as a cadet at the United States Military Academy at West Point. He graduated in 1975 in the top 2 percent of his class with a degree in engineering and went on to serve as an infantry officer in the Army's 82nd Airborne, earning Airborne and Ranger qualifications during his military service. His father served in the Army Air Corps after World War II. Additionally, his wife's father was held as a POW after being shot down over Europe. Her uncle served in Vietnam and still receives care at the VA. Also, Mr. McDonald's nephew is currently serving and deployed with the U.S. Air Force. In other words, Mr. McDonald and his family have a deep understanding and service with the U.S. military.

Upon hearing Mr. McDonald at the hearing we held in our committee for the confirmation process, I was convinced that he has a deep passion to do everything he can to protect our veterans.

The other quality Mr. McDonald brings to this job is that he has been the CEO of one of America's leading corporations, a company which has tens of thousands of employees. His more than 33 years with Procter & Gamble gives him the tools to create a well-run and accountable VA. In other words, he will bring the tools of a CEO and a private corporation to the VA—a huge bureaucracy that needs a significant improvement in accountability and in management.

As we begin debate on Mr. McDonald's nomination, I believe it is important that my colleagues understand the realities he will face in leading the VA.

The VA operates the largest integrated health care system in the United States, with over 1,700 points of care which include 150 hospitals, 820 community-based outreach clinics, and 300 vet centers. In fiscal year 2013 the VA provided 89.7 million outpatient visits each day—today, tomorrow, yesterday. The VA conducts approximately 236,000 health care appointments. In other words, it is a huge system.

VA's problems, which Mr. McDonald will have to address immediately, have been widely reported in recent months. In my view, Acting Secretary Sloan Gibson has done an excellent job in taking a number of critical steps to address the problems confronting the VA, but clearly there is much more to be done.

We now know, among other issues, there is a significant shortage of doctors, nurses, and mental health providers within VA, as well as the physical space necessary to provide timely access to quality care. This is a major problem because at the end of the day, no matter how well run the VA is or any health care system is, we are not going to be able to provide quality, timely care unless there are the doctors, nurses, and other medical personnel available to do that work. As a result of the shortages, we know that we have tens of thousands of veterans today in many parts of this country on lists that are much too long in order to gain access to the VA. We also know that hundreds of thousands of veterans who have appointments scheduled are waiting too long to be seen and receive care.

I think it is important that everybody recognize that as a result of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, in the last 5 years 2 million more veterans have come into the VA. This is on top of an aging population of VA patients who served in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam—patients who often need a whole lot of care as they age. So combine new people coming into the VA, often with very serious problems—including some 500,000 veterans coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan with PTSD and TBI—and an aging population with difficult problems, and that is where we are, and those are some of the issues the VA is going to have to address.

While I am on the subject, let me say that most people understand—and that includes many of the veterans I talk to every day in Vermont, veterans across the country, and the national veterans organizations that represent millions of veterans—that once people get into the VA system, in general the quality of care is good. That is not just what veterans and their organizations say; that is what a number of independent studies show. Our problem right now is how to figure out a way that when people apply for VA health care, they get into the system quickly and that once they are in the system, they get the appointments they need in a timely manner. That is our job. It is not going to be an easy job, but that is the job we face.

My hope is that tomorrow or Thursday the House and the Senate will be voting on a comprehensive piece of legislation authored by Congressman JEFF MILLER, chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, and me. I think it is terribly important that we pass that bipartisan legislation with a strong vote in both Houses because