

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

that legislation will give the new Secretary the tools he needs to go forward aggressively in addressing many of the problems facing the VA.

I hope every Member of the House and Senate understands it is unacceptable that veterans in this country are on terribly long waiting lines and cannot get the health care they need in a timely manner.

This legislation, which I hope will be passed this week by the House and the Senate, provides \$10 billion for emergency health care so that if a veteran can't get into the VA, that veteran will be able to go to a private physician, a community-based health center, a military base, or whatever but will be able to get timely care.

In addition, the legislation puts \$5 billion into the VA so that they will be able to hire the doctors, the mental health counselors, nurses, and other medical personnel they need so that as soon as possible, when veterans apply for VA health care, they will get not only quality care but timely care.

In addition, this legislation addresses an issue many veterans around the country, especially in rural areas, are worried about—that if they live long distances away from the VA, they will not have to travel 100 miles to get the health care they need; that if they live 40 miles or more away from the VA facility, they will be able to go to a doctor of their choice in that community. This is an important step forward.

This legislation will also do some terribly important work in making sure that widows—women who lost their husbands in battle—will be able to get the education they should be entitled to under the post-9/11 GI bill.

This legislation deals with an issue passed by the House; that is, instate tuition for veterans who today may not be able to take advantage of the post-9/11 GI bill.

This legislation also addresses a very serious crisis within the military today; that is, the issue of sexual abuse and providing women and men who have been abused sexually in the military with care at the VA.

We are at a very important moment in terms of the Veterans' Administration. We will have new leadership at the VA after Mr. McDonald is confirmed. We have a significant piece of legislation that I hope and expect will be passed this week to give the new leadership the tools it needs to start addressing the problems facing our veterans.

It seems to me that if this Nation stands for anything, it must protect and defend those who have protected and defended us. When people put their lives on the line and they come back wounded from war—either in body or in spirit—it seems absolutely immoral if we turn our backs on those men and women.

The legislation we will pass this week begins to address those concerns, and I hope we will do so under the new leadership Mr. McDonald will provide.

Madam President, I yield my remaining time to Senator BROWN to hear his comments on the nomination.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Ohio.

Mr. BROWN. Madam President, I applaud Senator SANDERS for his work on the veterans conference report.

I spoke at a breakfast today. I was with the Presiding Officer from North Dakota at the Air Force Caucus. As important as the Air Force is in North Dakota, it is equally important at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, OH—outside of Dayton.

One of the things I talked about at this breakfast is how proud I am, when it looks as if the Senate does not get as much done as we would like, that Senator SANDERS and Senator MCCAIN—with a supporting cast but principally the two of them—were able to negotiate with a sometimes reluctant, sometimes erratic House of Representatives on some of these issues. They were able to negotiate a very good veterans bill that will primarily do three things: first, make those accountable at the VA actually accountable; second, take care of those veterans who have had to wait longer than 30 days for their care in the VA, veterans who have earned this care; and third, will scale up the VA—the most important parts—so there will be enough doctors and nurses, mental health therapists and occupational therapists, and enough beds and enough capacity at the VA centers and at the community-based outpatient clinics. If you are in the system, you get good care. It is just that too many haven't been able to get into the system, partly because when we went to war a decade-plus ago, the people running the administration in those days and the Congress said: This war will be short. We don't need to bother with scaling up the VA.

That was shameful. They were dead wrong. Unfortunately, far too many veterans have paid the price. That is why this legislation is so important. The timing is perfect to get this reform at the same time that we have an opportunity this week to confirm Robert McDonald, a fellow Ohioan from Cincinnati who ran a company that had more than 100,000 employees, one of the world's biggest, most prestigious consumer companies.

He went to West Point. He served veterans before. He understands veterans' issues. I talked with him a number of times, as has Chairman SANDERS, and Mr. McDonald, as the soon-to-be—I hope the new Secretary. I ask my colleagues to support him—new Secretary will have these new tools because of this conference report which I am hopeful we pass this week.

Mr. McDonald understands the importance of VA health care. He knows—he said this to me in my office and a couple of other times—that the Veterans' Administration has a hospital system unlike any other in the country. It knows how to treat unique illnesses and unique injuries—unique

mostly to veterans—various kinds of brain trauma, various kinds of physical injuries, other kinds of treatment. That is why it makes sense for Mr. McDonald to be the new Secretary of the VA. That is why this veterans conference report is very important.

Mr. BROWN. I yield for my distinguished friend from Georgia.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Georgia.

Mr. ISAKSON. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent to address the Senate for up to 5 minutes.

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

Mr. ISAKSON. Madam President, I want to commend Chairman SANDERS for his leadership. Last night at 9:30 p.m., I came back to the Capitol and executed a conference agreement that he has worked very hard on, and ranking member Senator BURR worked very hard on, and pulled together disparate factions to address the needs of our veterans in a bill that is going to be a toolkit for Robert McDonald, who I hope will be unanimously approved as the next Secretary of the VA in the President's Cabinet.

I rise to talk about Mr. McDonald, but before I do, I want to talk about that conference report.

Our veterans have been abused in the last 10 to 12 years because of a veterans' medical service that has not performed the services they need to perform for our veterans in America. One of the reasons they did this is, Admiral Shinseki, who was the former Secretary, was actually insulated from a lot of the information that was going on in his own Department by the senior leadership at the VA who had become comfortable and passive and not active in terms of the operation of VA medical services.

The bill we signed last night that the Senate will vote on in the next few days is the bill that gives Mr. McDonald and the next Secretary to come the tools they need to enhance the VA and to make it a responsive organization to the 22 million veterans, 6.5 million of whom use veteran medical services, and to the 774,000 veterans in my home State of Georgia who deserve and demand, if you will, the services they were promised when they went into the U.S. military.

Bob McDonald is an outstanding American. He was president, CEO, and chairman of the board of one of the most respected companies in America, Procter & Gamble.

He is the father of two, grandfather of two additional children. He is an outstanding American and his wife Diane is an outstanding lady in support of him and his job at Procter & Gamble. He is going to need that support now as he heads to the VA.

He was a captain in the U.S. military. He graduated from West Point, was trained in airborne warfare, desert warfare, and subtemperature warfare, and he is going to need those talents at the VA in each and every case because it is a mess.

The conference committee report we have passed gives him two tools that are essential. It gives him the authority to hire and fire title 38 and title 5 employees. Title 5 employs the senior leadership and title 38 the next step in leadership down, which is what the VA needs. The VA is an organization of 340,000 people which in the last 3 years has averaged 3,000 disciplinary actions a year. Each of those disciplinary actions meant people were moved from one job to another within the VA and did not lose pay. There is no accountability in the VA and there really has not been. That is why the systemic problems on appointments and veterans services and everything else going on in the VA has not happened. By giving him the opportunity to hire and fire, he will have the respect and attention of those who work in the VA to understand full well they are going to have to carry out the game plan of this leader.

He understands metrics. He understands accountability. He understands leadership. He has taken a job he didn't have to accept, a job he didn't need to have to do at this time in his life, but a job he wants to do to give back to the country he loves and the country he served in the military.

I am confident Bob McDonald will be an outstanding Secretary of the Veterans' Administration, and I commend him to my fellow Senators with my highest recommendation in the hopes that he will be approved unanimously.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Louisiana.

Mr. VITTER. Thank you, Madam President.

I stand today also with high hopes that the new leadership at the VA will bring much needed changes to a department that is clearly, quite frankly, in a shambles, failing our Nation's veterans. During his committee hearing, the nominee Robert McDonald promised to bring a high level of accountability and transparency to the VA, two characteristics that are sorely needed. This is extremely important in an agency where under the leadership of the previous Secretary it would often take months to get answers to routine questions—or in many cases you would never get answers at all.

By the end of this week I am also hopeful that besides confirming the new Secretary, we will send to the President the Veterans Access Choice and Accountability Act. This important legislation includes many needed reforms to the VA, including bringing that accountability to the Department and actually providing our Nation's veterans with choices about where they can receive care.

The bill also, perhaps most importantly for Louisiana, finally authorizes much needed community-based clinics around the country, including two which have been long delayed in Louisiana by pure ineptitude and bureaucratic screw-ups at the VA—clinics and

expanded clinics in Lafayette and Lake Charles. For 4 years I have been fighting the Washington bureaucracy tooth and nail to get these new expanded outpatient clinics. They are vitally important to Louisiana veterans who now sometimes have to drive up to 4 hours to receive services that have been promised to them much closer to their community.

The current clinics in Acadiana are overcrowded and don't offer the full range of services that these new clinics will. As I said, VA ineptitude delayed the clinics in the first place. If it weren't for their mistakes, these clinics would actually already be built. When they were finally teed up and ready to go, then the Congressional Budget Office made a ridiculous decision that again threw these clinics into limbo because of a scoring issue out of the blue. Finally in December, the House was able to pass a bill that dealt with these CBO concerns that passed 346 to 1.

Normally when a bill passes with that sort of margin the Senate will quickly pass it by unanimous consent. Unfortunately, that didn't happen.

First we needed to attach an amendment to address some marginal concerns. Then even after we had done that—even after that received full agreement in the Senate, unfortunately Senate Democrats, led by the Chair of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, held up the legislation basically as a hostage to try to get a broader VA package. Actually I had to come down and ask unanimous consent for the House clinics legislation six times on the floor. Unfortunately, six times Senator SANDERS denied that unanimous consent. It was only after the VA scandal broke that momentum shifted and, thankfully, it looks as though we will finally pass this into law, the clinics legislation, along with this important reform bill.

When the authorization occurs, I strongly urge Mr. McDonald and the VA to streamline the process to get these two clinics built as soon as possible, given the long and arduous history of VA delays and screw-ups. The veterans of Louisiana have waited patiently, literally for years. These clinics are overdue. Let's get on with it. Louisiana veterans have had to wait for numerous delays caused by VA mistakes. The least the Department can do is to make sure these clinics are now built with the utmost haste and efficiency.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Kansas.

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

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

Mr. MORAN. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent to address the Senate for approximately 4 minutes.

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

MCDONALD NOMINATION

Mr. MORAN. Madam President, I have been a Member of Congress in both the House and in the Senate, and in my entire time as a Member of Congress I have served on either the House or Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee. Over that time I have worked with nine Secretaries of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Today I am here to add my support and ask for the confirmation of someone who I believe will be the next Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Mr. Bob McDonald.

I had believed—I do believe—that a change at the Department of Veterans Affairs was necessary. I made clear that we needed to change the leadership at the top, and I believe this change is a good thing for the Department—the management of the Department, but, most importantly, for the veterans whom the Department is to serve.

I also know a change in the leadership of the Department of Veterans Affairs in and of itself is insufficient to solve the problems our veterans are facing in access to health care and in the long time our veterans are required to wait to receive their benefits.

I have met with Mr. McDonald in my office. I also, as a member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, had the opportunity to listen to him testify and to ask him questions in the confirmation process, and I was completely impressed by his candor, his sincerity, and certainly his commitment to serving our Nation's veterans. He is a leader in the tradition of the 82nd Airborne Paratroopers who are well regarded as the first to be called when there is a military emergency. As they say, when the President calls, the 82nd Airborne will answer. In my view, that is exactly what we have in Mr. McDonald. When the President called, he answered that call. He answered the opportunity to serve the veterans of this country.

When the President needed help, he found someone, in my view, who will dutifully fulfill the responsibilities of being a Cabinet Secretary and work on behalf of our Nation's veterans.

It seems to me there is no certainty in this world in which we know people for brief amounts of time, but it certainly seems clear to me that Mr. McDonald is the right person to lead the VA. He is willing and capable of restoring hope in veterans so they can trust the agency and the Department that was created for their benefit.

I asked the President—I don't know that he ever saw my request or certainly never probably listened to my request, but the plea was please nominate someone from outside the Department of Veterans Affairs. This gentleman, Mr. McDonald, while having