

that VA does well. I think it is also important to acknowledge the amazing things VA is accomplishing each and every day. For instance, patient satisfaction at VA medical centers remains high throughout the country as does the quality of care veterans receive. VA has taken an aggressive stance on homelessness by pursuing the ambitious goal of eliminating veteran homelessness by 2015 and continues to make significant progress in reducing the number of veterans living on the street. Finally, the VA continues to make significant advances in health care through its world-class research programs.

These are the realities and the challenges facing any nominee for a leadership position at the Department. I firmly believe Sloan Gibson is uniquely qualified to address these challenges. Mr. Gibson has a history of service to this Nation that has provided unique insights into the challenges confronting the servicemember and veteran communities. Mr. Gibson began his service as a cadet at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. He graduated in 1975 and went on to serve as an infantry officer, earning airborne and ranger qualifications during his military service. His service to this country, however, did not end when Mr. Gibson left military service. He continues this tradition of service today by leading the United Service Organizations, commonly known as the USO, which has the important mission of lifting the spirits of America's troops and their families.

I feel the relationships Mr. Gibson has developed with the Congress and senior leaders within the Department of Defense during his tenure at the USO will serve him well as Deputy Secretary. Collaborative efforts between VA and DOD such as the Integrated Electronic Health Record and Integrated Disability Evaluation System have the potential to make the delivery of benefits and services much more efficient and to provide servicemembers with a smooth transition to civilian life. Yet, these efforts continue to face significant challenges. VA needs a Deputy Secretary like Sloan Gibson who will be able to provide the leadership attention necessary to ensure continued and meaningful collaboration between the Departments.

Sloan Gibson also has the business experience, gained from service in both the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors, necessary to serve as Deputy Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs. Following military service, Mr. Gibson spent 20 years serving in a number of positions within the banking industry. This service included 11 years as an executive at AmSouth Bancorporation. He retired from AmSouth in 2004 as vice chairman and chief financial officer.

Sloan Gibson's tradition of service, business experience, and educational qualifications make him well suited to manage the day-to-day operations of

one of this Nation's largest Cabinet Departments. I am confident that if confirmed Mr. Gibson's service as Deputy Secretary would improve the lives of America's veterans and their families and as chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee I look forward to working with Mr. Gibson to do just that.

I urge my colleagues to join me in voting today to confirm the nomination of Sloan Gibson to serve as Deputy Secretary at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Mr. REID. Madam President, I yield back all time.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is, Will the Senate advise and consent to the nomination of Sloan D. Gibson, of the District of Columbia, to be Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs?

The nomination was confirmed.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the motions to reconsider are considered made and laid upon the table.

The President will be immediately notified of the Senate's action.

#### LEGISLATIVE SESSION

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senate will resume legislative session.

#### MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. REID. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that we proceed to a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak for up to 10 minutes each.

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

#### MODERNIZING CUBA POLICY

Mr. LEAHY. Madam President, today the Atlantic Council's Adrienne Arsht Latin American Center released a new, bipartisan public opinion survey on Americans' views about U.S. policy toward Cuba which should be read by every Member of Congress. The findings of this thorough and wide-ranging poll will surprise many. For instance, not only do Floridians—and Cuban-Americans in Florida—favor new policy approaches, but they do so in even larger numbers than do Americans in other regions of the Nation.

It is time—past time—to modernize our policies and the frozen-in-time embargo on Americans' travel and trade with Cuba that have accomplished nothing but to give the Cuban regime a scapegoat for the failures of the Cuban economy. Change will come to Cuba, but our policies have delayed and impeded change. It is time to elevate the voice of a crucial stakeholder: the American people. Thanks to this poll, they are silent no longer.

It is time to recognize that U.S. policy toward Cuba has been unsuccessful in achieving any of its objectives. There is no disagreement among Amer-

icans on both sides of the issue about the desire for a government in Cuba that respects individual liberties. We want to see freedom of expression Cuba, just as we want to see American citizen Alan Gross, who has been imprisoned there for more than 4 years, come home. The disagreement is over how best to achieve that.

Just about the only beneficiary of our embargo has been Cuba's current regime.

The poll shows that a solid majority of Americans, including Cuban-Americans, favor a different course.

Trade with Latin America is the fastest growing part of our international commerce. Rather than isolate Cuba with outdated policies, we have isolated ourselves. Our Latin, European and Canadian friends engage with Cuba all that time. Meanwhile, U.S. companies are prohibited from any economic activity on the island.

This new detailed survey paves the way for a policy toward Cuba that is in the national interest of the United States as a whole. That is what the country needs, it is what the American people have made clear they want, and it is the responsibility of the White House and the Congress to act.

Let us have the common sense, and the courage, to finally put an end to the Cold War in our own hemisphere.

In this same spirit of bipartisanship as this public opinion poll, Senator JEFF FLAKE and I joined together in writing a guest column about the compelling reasons to change these antiquated policies. Our piece appeared today in the Miami Herald. I call it to the attention of the Senate, and I invite other Senators to join in re-examining and changing our self-defeating approach in our relationship with Cuba and the Cuban people. I ask unanimous consent that the article be printed in the RECORD.

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

[From the Miami Herald, Feb. 11, 2014]

#### TIME FOR A NEW POLICY ON CUBA

(By PATRICK LEAHY and JEFF FLAKE)

We are in the fifth decade—more than half a century—of our country's embargo toward Cuba. During that time the Soviet Union has ceased to exist. Apartheid in South Africa has ended. We have re-established diplomatic relations with the communist governments of China and Vietnam. Still, the United States has refused to reexamine the political and economic embargo on Cuba.

A majority of Americans, including Cuban-Americans, wants to change course. So do we.

A new public opinion poll commissioned by the Atlantic Council's Adrienne Arsht Latin American Center and carried out by a team of highly respected pollsters from both sides of the aisle shows a stark contrast between current American attitudes and the archaic U.S. embargo.

A solid majority of Americans from every region and across party lines supports normalizing relations with Cuba. When asked about specific elements of the policy—such as undoing the ban on travel by Americans to Cuba, facilitating financial transactions,

meeting with the Cuban government on bilateral issues like fighting drugs and smuggling—the margin is more than 61 percent.

Challenging conventional wisdom that Floridians—and especially the state's large Cuban-American population—are in lockstep with the embargo, the poll finds stronger support for normalization in Florida (63 percent) than in the country overall (56 percent). A full 67 percent of Floridians support removing all restrictions for Americans to travel to Cuba, and 82 percent favor meetings with the Cuban government on issues of mutual concern.

Simply put: The state that reportedly once had the greatest reluctance to re-engage has reversed its position.

Having jailed political opponents, Cuba has a political climate that is far from free. The Cuban government continues to hold former USAID subcontractor Alan Gross in prison. The Cuban government has inched toward loosening its grip on the island's economy. Despite that, however, the Cuban people continue to live under a repressive regime.

However, it would appear that a standard of 100 percent political alignment with the United States before allowing freedom of travel or economic activity with another country is only applied to Cuba. For instance, U.S.-China trade topped \$500 billion in 2011, and we granted permanent normalized trade relations to Russia in 2012. American tourists visit both countries without restriction. It is easy to see why most Americans now oppose our frozen-in-time policies toward Cuba.

Trade with Latin America is the fastest growing part of our international commerce. In 2014, economic growth in Latin America is expected to continue to outpace U.S. growth. Rather than isolate Cuba with outdated policies, we have isolated ourselves.

For example, the presidents of our Latin American partners, including close allies such as Colombia and Mexico, recently traveled to Cuba alongside the U.N. secretary general. In January, Brazil joined Cuba in inaugurating a huge new shipping terminal on the island. And our European and Canadian friends engage with Cuba. Meanwhile, U.S. companies are prohibited from any economic activity on the island.

Just about the only beneficiary of our embargo has been Cuba's current regime. The embargo actually has helped the Castros maintain their grip on power by providing a reliable and convenient scapegoat for Cuba's failing economy. Change will come to Cuba. These counterproductive U.S. policies have delayed it.

President Obama has already relaxed some facets of our Cuba policy, lifting restrictions on Cuban-American travel and remittances, which have had positive effects. Anecdotally, U.S. remittances have been crucial in allowing Cuban entrepreneurs to take full advantage of economic openings that the Castro regime has been forced to allow. This not only improves Cubans' lives but will make future economic contractions by the Cuban government difficult for the regime to attempt. Current policy boxes U.S. entrepreneurs and companies out of taking part in any of this burgeoning Cuban private sector.

Further, there is simply no legitimate justification for restricting any American travel to Cuba. The travel ban, like the rest of the embargo, only bolsters the Cuban government's control over information and civil society. Instead of willingly restricting the liberty of our own citizens, we should be taking every opportunity to flood Cubans with American interaction, with our ideas, with our young people.

Americans want a change in our Cuba policy. The president should heed the majority of those across the country who recognize

that we have much to gain by jettisoning this Cold War relic.

#### ADDITIONAL STATEMENTS

##### LITTLE COUNTRY THEATRE

• Ms. HEITKAMP. Madam President, I am pleased to honor and recognize the Little Country Theatre at North Dakota State University as it celebrates its 100th anniversary.

Founded in 1914 by a small group of drama students, the Little Country Theatre has inspired, challenged, and educated countless students, faculty, and community members across North Dakota. Today, the Little Country Theatre is well recognized and respected for its diverse programming and for bringing the gift of theater to the public.

Over the last 100 years, the Little Country Theatre has presented hundreds of plays throughout North Dakota. It is celebrating its 100th season with several special events, including the screening of a documentary on the rich history of the theater, its faculty, its leaders and its impact on the community. In addition, the group will be performing classic stories such as Oklahoma and Shakespeare's Love's Labour's Lost and hosting many thought-provoking discussions.

The Little Country Theatre is a fixture on the North Dakota State University campus and serves as an important hub for current students by helping them understand the great value of theater and performance art. But its impact can be felt well beyond the stage and campus. It has spread the joy of the theater to rural communities across the State, while inspiring the next generation of actors and actresses. I am proud to acknowledge and honor this significant milestone for the Little Country Theatre.

I ask the Senate to join me in congratulating the Little Country Theatre on its first 100 years and in wishing continued success in the future.●

#### SOUTHERN WEST VIRGINIA MOBILE HEALTH CLINIC

• Mr. MANCHIN. Madam President, today I wish to celebrate an exciting and significant victory for local veterans in southern West Virginia and to recognize the unwavering dedication of the people who have worked tirelessly to bring the first-ever mobile veterans health clinic to Mercer County.

Today, the Beckley VA Medical Center will debut the long-awaited mobile health clinic in Bluefield, WV. This facility will improve access to primary and mental health-care to the growing number of veterans in the region.

This is wonderful news for our brave heroes who have been without accessible health care for far too long. Until now, our veterans' only option for receiving health care has been to drive over an hour to the closest clinic or

hospital. Expecting our veterans to commute this far after these courageous men and women have already risked their lives in the defense of this country is simply unacceptable.

I have always said that West Virginia is one of the most patriotic states in this great Nation, and we are so proud of the number of veterans and Active-Duty members who have served with honor and distinction. Upon returning home, they truly deserve the absolute best care and treatment that is available. That is why we have made it our top priority to bring this clinic to serve the veterans in Mercer County and the surrounding communities with quality care.

The mobile health clinic will be an extension of the Beckley VA Medical Center, and it will be initially stationed in Bluefield, WV. As long as it is utilized by area veterans, we can count on this facility to stay in southern West Virginia for years to come.

I especially want to emphasize the efforts of one very special West Virginian who has dedicated the past 18 years to helping the veterans of southern West Virginia—Al Hancock. His leadership and commitment to the betterment of the veteran community is truly why this mobile clinic will open its doors today.

Throughout his life and still today, Al has answered the call of service—whether it was serving our great Nation or helping the people of West Virginia. He is a retired teacher and a retired Air Force veteran who served two tours in Vietnam.

A proud and passionate leader, he was the chairman of the retired military support group and he led discussions among over 250 veterans about the issues concerning them most. He talked with fellow veterans, their spouses, and their families regularly.

One issue that continued to arise was the need for more accessible health care. After more than 150 letters sent to the local newspaper and issuing a petition containing more than 3,000 resident signatures, he provided a voice to the veteran community. Despite the many obstacles and hurdles, Al never gave up—he worked passionately and tirelessly to bring this issue to light. And finally, that voice resonated loud and clear. Because of Al's perseverance and determined vision, I am proud to have worked closely with Al to help bring people together to make his vision a reality.

With the hard work and partnership of the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Beckley VA, and the West Virginia delegation, we have been able to make a difference for Al and for all of the veterans who reside throughout southern West Virginia.

We owe our veterans more than a debt of gratitude. Showing our appreciation to the brave men and women who have served is something we should do each and every day. By delivering this mobile health clinic, we are