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House of Representatives

The House met at 10 a.m. and was called to order by the Speaker pro tempore (Mr. HARDY).

DESIGNATION OF SPEAKER PRO TEMPORE

The SPEAKER pro tempore laid before the House the following communication from the Speaker:

WASHINGTON, DC,
February 25, 2015.

I hereby appoint the Honorable CRESENT HARDY to act as Speaker pro tempore on this day.

JOHN A. BOEHNER,
Speaker of the House of Representatives.

MORNING-HOUR DEBATE

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the order of the House of January 6, 2015, the Chair will now recognize Members from lists submitted by the majority and minority leaders for morning-hour debate.

The Chair will alternate recognition between the parties, with each party limited to 1 hour and each Member other than the majority and minority leaders and the minority whip limited to 5 minutes, but in no event shall debate continue beyond 11:50 a.m.

BRING A CLEAN DHS BILL TO THE FLOOR

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The Chair recognizes the gentlewoman from Texas (Ms. JACKSON LEE) for 5 minutes.

Ms. JACKSON LEE. Mr. Speaker, today I rise with a question: Should America be brought to the brink of her own security and safety? With that question, I ask my friends on the other side of the aisle, the Republicans and the Speaker, to put on the floor of the House the full funding of the Department of Homeland Security.

Mr. Speaker, I had the privilege of beginning my tenure on this com-

mittee in the aftermath of the tragedy on 9/11. Some of us who served at that time were able to go to the site after 9/11. We were able to go soon enough to see some of those who were in the midst of recovering, since the first responders of New York refused to leave anyone behind.

It was a devastating and emotional time, but the resilience of that time also reflected America's values. I remember very strongly standing on the steps of the House, Republicans and Democrats, singing the song "God Bless America."

What we have come to today is that we are frivolously using these political tactics of taking political security over national security and rejecting our responsibility of ensuring that the men and women who are on the front lines for the security of this Nation can continue their jobs.

First, Mr. Speaker, let me say that there is a court order that has temporarily issued an injunction. That court in Texas did not in any way assess the constitutionality of the President's executive actions. Why? Because he has the authority. His comments that have been repeated over and over again about his lack of authority were, yes, he does not have the authority to convey an immigration status. His executive actions are not on immigration status. They are simply keeping families from being torn apart and mothers and fathers and children from being deported. It is not an immigration status. It is a stay of deportation.

And so the fuss that is being made impacts the TSA officer tragically shot in a Los Angeles airport, or New York or Houston or Dallas or Chicago or Raleigh-Durham; that TSA officer who stands on the front lines of our security and we look them in the eye and tell them they cannot be paid. You know, Mr. Speaker, when the shutdown happened before, it was Democrats who had to retroactively ensure that those workers were paid.

We want border security? We won't be paying our Border Patrol agents or ICE agents. Even though it is suggested that fees will take care of it, there are 30,000 employees that the fees will not take care of.

So I rise today pleading to have my friends acknowledge that, first of all, they are wrong on the executive actions. As we go to a hearing in Judiciary, I will be able to show that these individuals will probably be vetted more extensively than many others in the immigration process. Fourteen provisions have to be utilized before they can be eligible for the executive action the President has suggested.

But what I am going to say, Mr. Speaker, as I started by saying, is that we are bringing America to the brink. In the midst of my comments, I indicated that I remember how we came together in the tragedy of 9/11. Well, we have a raging ISIS and ISIL, we have an unknown terrorist threat, and we know that the United States, although strong, stands, as the rest of the world does, needing to be prepared for those who want to be individualized, franchised terrorists.

I take my responsibility seriously. I believe in the Constitution. I even believe in language that indicates, as we say often in the Declaration of Independence, that we all are created equal, and language in the Constitution that says we have come to form a more perfect Union.

This is not perfect, and this can be remedied. I ask the Speaker to put this bill on the floor of the House in the name of firefighters and police officers and ICE officers and grants going to cities for using their best tactics; fusion centers that deal with terrorism—in their name, and many others, like Border Patrol; ICE, as I indicated; the Secret Service, as I indicated; TSA agents; parts of FAA; and FEMA, when the North is freezing and needs that kind of assistance.

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Matter set in this typeface indicates words inserted or appended, rather than spoken, by a Member of the House on the floor.



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In the name of the people of the United States of America, how much pleading do I need to do? As a member of the Homeland Security Committee believing in those innocent families who have come here to do nothing more than to work on behalf of their families and desire to be united, on behalf of the mothers and fathers, Mr. Speaker, I ask that the Speaker put on the floor of the House a clean DHS bill so that we can vote now, now, now.

SERVING OUR NATION'S VETERANS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The Chair recognizes the gentleman from California (Mr. LAMALFA) for 5 minutes.

Mr. LAMALFA. Mr. Speaker, the Veterans Affairs Office of the Inspector General issued a report last Wednesday on their investigation into the nearly 14,000 veteran benefits claims that were found in a filing cabinet in Oakland, California.

Last year, these claims were brought to our attention by VA staff members, who have known about these claims for many years—despite their best efforts to raise awareness of the injustice in how these claims were being handled.

In July 2014, the former Deputy Under Secretary of the VA for Field Operations testified before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs that the 14,000 claims that were found in a file cabinet had been brokered so that they would receive attention by the VA's highest performing offices.

Just 2 weeks prior to that on a site visit to the Oakland VA, the regional and division management told me that these 14,000 claims basically never existed. As a matter of fact, they claim it was a story made up by disgruntled employees.

The VA's Office of Inspector General's investigation confirmed the discovery of 14,000 claims in a filing cabinet, confirmed that some of these claims dated back to the 1990s, confirmed that thousands of these claims had not been processed, and confirmed that the staff at the Oakland VA had not been directed to properly store these claims.

Oakland VA's management claimed after my visit that they then had discovered 13,184 veteran benefit claims and 2,155 claims which required action or review. But during an onsite review, the Office of Inspector General could not confirm the existence of these claims due to the Oakland VA management's "poor recordkeeping practices."

How was the Oakland VA able to arrive at such exact numbers without maintaining records that allowed the OIG to verify the existence of these claims? It just doesn't make sense, and we have to get to the bottom of these numbers. The VA is required by law to respond to every initial claim they receive, to safeguard Federal records, and to protect private information of the veterans they work with.

When the Oakland VA managers discovered that 2,155 claims were more than several years old and required action or review, a special projects team was formed to complete this urgent task. Members of this team have told my staff that many of those claims belonged to veterans who had passed away while waiting for benefits to be processed and that their families were never contacted.

Inexplicably, the Office of Inspector General later discovered that 537 initial claims that had been marked by this special team as processed were never actually processed. Some of these claims were as old as June 2002, yet another troubling instance of the Oakland VA managers failing to provide the type of service northern California's veterans deserve.

The VA Office of Inspector General viewed only 34 of these unprocessed claims, though for some reason they declined to select a random sample. Instead, the 34 claims were selected "judiciously," which didn't make any sense. Of the 34 claims that were reviewed by the Inspector General's office, seven still remain unprocessed. In fact, though, these claims had been reviewed several times from December 2012 to June 2014 without any action being taken. In one instance, a veteran with PTSD was underpaid almost \$3,000 because his initial claim was not processed correctly.

This type of dysfunction and complete lack of oversight and accountability cannot continue in Oakland or at any VA regional offices across the country.

Sadly, this report sheds very little light on who should be accountable for these failures and is incomplete.

I am grateful the report was done and that the inspector general did delve into this issue at Oakland and many other offices, but the fact that no real conclusions were made on who is to be held accountable means much work remains to be done. We must continue to search for these answers and work to make sure the VA regional offices are properly serving our veterans.

I am also grateful, on the positive, for the many staff members of the VA—many, former veterans themselves—who care about this. They process many of these claims and make sure veterans are served. But we see there are a lot of holes in the system, obviously, that are making many veterans not have the confidence that they are going to be served, that they are going to get their claims processed, or indeed get health care if they need it later.

Indeed, the tragedy we have is that anywhere from 12 to 22 veterans give up each day in this country and commit suicide. Because they have no hope left of having the promise kept to them shows that we have much to do.

So I am grateful for those VA staffers that come to us blowing the whistle on what is wrong with the system when they can't get help from their manage-

ment to make things right. We ask them to please keep coming forward.

Contact my office, contact my staff on what needs to be done to get the word out to help make this right, because we want the VA to function well. We want the employees to feel like they are part of a system that is serving veterans and to have a good relationship within their office, but also to ultimately serve what we need as taxpayers and Americans that revere our veterans.

PASS A DHS FUNDING BILL

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The Chair recognizes the gentlewoman from Ohio (Ms. KAPTUR) for 5 minutes.

Ms. KAPTUR. Mr. Speaker, I stand here this morning as a member of the Appropriations Committee and its Subcommittee on Homeland Security. Our subcommittee is responsible for setting and overseeing funding for the operations of the Department of Homeland Security.

In 2 days, on February 27, astoundingly, funding for the Department of Homeland Security runs out because the Republican majority can't agree on a bill due to their internal disagreements on the immigration provisions which are contained in the same bill because it is in the same Department.

Although a clean funding bill, H.R. 861, could quickly be brought to this House floor for a vote to fund the entire Department for the remainder of this fiscal year, Republicans have defaulted to the rightwing extremists in their own party and instead have chosen to hold the security of our Nation hostage in order to contort the legislative process.

They would defund the President's immigration executive order merely because they want a partisan win more than they want to govern. What a tragedy.

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To quote an editorial from yesterday's Washington Post: "The fervor of Republican partisanship, especially in the House, is immune to logic beyond an insistence on victory at any cost."

This is a Republican Party that just a year and a half ago shut our Nation's government down for 16 days, stopping critical services and doing significant harm to the U.S. economy; then, too, they seemed more interested in a political win than responsible governance.

Recall, their party also had the opportunity last Congress to bring a bipartisan comprehensive immigration bill to the floor for a vote but declined to act. They have chosen not to address a concern that an overwhelming number of Americans believe needs to be resolved.

There are grave consequences for forcing the Department of Homeland Security into a shutdown. The Republican Congress would cripple the Federal Emergency Management Agency's preparations for future disasters as