



United States
of America

Congressional Record

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE 114th CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION

Vol. 161

WASHINGTON, TUESDAY, APRIL 14, 2015

No. 53

House of Representatives

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

DESIGNATION OF SPEAKER PRO TEMPORE

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

WASHINGTON, DC,
April 14, 2015.

I hereby appoint the Honorable DAN NEWHOUSE 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 OUR TROOPS HOME FROM AFGHANISTAN

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The Chair recognizes the gentleman from North Carolina (Mr. JONES) for 5 minutes.

Mr. JONES. Mr. Speaker, I am back on the floor today because, while we were home during the Easter break, there was a tragedy in Afghanistan that largely escaped the national news.

On April 8, Army medic John Dawson was shot and killed and eight other Americans were wounded by an Afghan soldier who opened fire on them. This tragedy is yet another example of the American blood spilled in Afghanistan.

Sadly, this kind of tragedy, an American soldier being killed by a supposed Afghan ally, is nothing new. The poster I have with me today is a picture of two little girls, Eden and Stephanie, who lived in my district for a time.

Their father, Sergeant Kevin Balduf, who was stationed at Camp Lejeune in my district, died in May of 2011 in Afghanistan, along with Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin Palmer, who also was stationed in my district at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point.

They were shot by an Afghan policeman they were training. The night before Sergeant Balduf died, he emailed his wife, Amy, and he said:

I don't trust them. I don't trust them. I don't trust any of them.

The next day, he was killed.

Mr. Speaker, last December, when Congress passed final appropriations for fiscal year 2015, it provided \$4.1 billion for the Afghan National Security Forces and additional funding for development assistance. This is more money than the Afghan Government generates in a year.

The special inspector general for Afghan reconstruction, John Sopko, regularly produces reports of the rampant waste, fraud, and abuse of American taxpayer dollars in Afghanistan; yet we in Congress continue to spend billions in Afghanistan. To what end? Why are we going to spend billions of dollars and have troops in Afghanistan for 9 more years—for 9 more years, Mr. Speaker?

As Roger Simon, an editor with Politico, said in October 2014:

If you spent 13 years pounding money down a rathole with little to show for it, you might wake up one morning and say: "Hey, I'm going to stop pounding money down this rathole." The United States Government wakes up every morning and says: "The rathole is looking a little empty today. Let's pound a few more billion dollars down there."

Mr. Speaker, that is sad for the American taxpayer who, tomorrow,

many of the American taxpayers will pay their taxes to the Federal Government; and we, in Congress, will continue to take their tax money and spend billions over in Afghanistan with very little accountability for the American taxpayer. That is unacceptable.

When you look at the limbs and the death that is going on in Afghanistan, you wonder why someone, years ago, said that Afghanistan is the graveyard of empires. Yes, Mr. Speaker, America is headed for the graveyard in Afghanistan. I don't understand my colleagues in Congress.

Mr. Speaker, it is time to bring our troops home from Afghanistan once and for all. We have wasted billions of dollars and spilled so much American blood in a futile attempt to save a fractured country from itself. Afghanistan is truly the graveyard of empires that I just mentioned. It is time for Congress to lead the way and end our presence in Afghanistan.

May God continue to bless our men and women in uniform, and may God continue to bless America.

FREE AMIR HEKMATI NOW

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

Mr. KILDEE. Mr. Speaker, I come to the floor today to bring up the case of my constituent, a young man by the name of Amir Hekmati. He is an American citizen, born and raised in the United States, grew up in my home town of Flint, Michigan, and served in the United States Marine Corps. He is a brother; he is a son.

Three and a half years ago, he traveled to Iran. His parents are of Iranian descent. He traveled to Iran to meet for the first time a grandmother that he had never seen, traveled under his own name, notified the government that he was going.

This symbol represents the time of day during the House proceedings, e.g., 1407 is 2:07 p.m.

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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After just a couple of weeks, he was apprehended, disappeared; and, after a few months later, it was revealed that he had been tried and convicted and sentenced to death.

A young man, an American, traveling under his own name in Iran, who had served in the United States Marine Corps, was sentenced to death simply for being an American in Iran that had served this country. He is an innocent man, and he continues to languish in Evin Prison.

I am here to make it clear that the Congress of the United States and the American people are watching the Iranian Government. If, in fact, Iran intends, as they purport to do, to try to take steps to join the international community, they cannot hold Americans like Amir Hekmati as political prisoners.

Members of Congress on both sides of the aisle, from JOHN LEWIS to DARRELL ISSA, have joined in the effort to raise awareness around Amir Hekmati's case. It is important that we never let this case fade into the woodwork.

I think about Amir the same way that I would think about it if my own son were being held in a prison on the other side of the world, and I know that every other Member of Congress who has been engaged in this effort feels the same way. He is one of us; he is our son, and he needs to be reunited with his family.

As we now are considering, I think, a really important moment where there have been negotiations to try to deal with Iran's nuclear aspirations—and personally, I support this direction, I support the direction the administration has gone in creating a framework through negotiation to make for a more peaceful world. It is very difficult for many of us in Congress, especially those of us who represent those few Americans being held in an Iranian prison, to view this agreement other than through the lens of that experience.

If Iran truly intends to try to rejoin the global community, they can make a very clear demonstration of their seriousness by releasing Amir Hekmati and the other Americans that they hold. We all can play a role in making that happen. I encourage everybody out there—Members of Congress, people who want to become engaged—to get to social media. Use #freeamir or #freeamirnow.

We know that the Iranian Government does pay attention to what the American people think—the Iranian citizens certainly do—and we know that we have to keep the pressure on right now. It is, as I said, very difficult for many of us who support the direction that this administration has taken these negotiations and really hope that it bears fruit, really hope that it creates an agreement that makes the world—and particularly that region—safer.

We can only really accept Iran as a member of the global community not

just by entering into this agreement, but by them joining the world community by not being a nation that can take a young man who served his country, who grew up here, was the captain of his high school hockey team, simply wanted to go to see the country that his parents were born in, and to visit the grandmother that he had never met. To hold him as a political prisoner, as a chip in a geopolitical struggle, is beyond the pale; and it is something that can't be accepted.

Please, my friends, my colleagues, join me in continuing to raise your voices to make sure that not one day passes—especially during this period where we are considering this potentially historic agreement—not one day passes where Amir Hekmati, Jason Rezaian, Pastor Abedini, Mr. Levinson, that their cases, their names, are never forgotten.

A BALANCED BUDGET FOR A BETTER AMERICA

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

Mr. THOMPSON of Pennsylvania. Mr. Speaker, on September 22, 2011, former Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen referred to our national debt as “the single biggest threat to our national security.”

He was correct in his statement that the United States continues to suffer from overbearing debt and, unless immediate action is taken, future generations will face unsurmountable challenges.

No one wants a future where policymakers are forced to choose between discretionary programs, like roads and bridges or educating our children, when they continue to be crowded out by mandatory spending which accounts for more than two-thirds of our annual budget.

We need a strong social safety net. We need a strong national defense. We need an America where young learners can have access to a quality education and workers can receive the skills that they need to gain family-sustaining jobs and keep businesses thriving and competitive, both domestically and globally.

Unfortunately, aspirations for a more prosperous America are not going to be achieved until we begin to get out from underneath this burden of debt.

Mr. Speaker, since 2009, the Obama administration has added more than \$7 trillion to our national debt, and today, we owe more than \$18 trillion, an amount greater than the annual gross domestic product.

While bipartisan agreements have led to some successes since 2011, Congress must continue to put forth a blueprint that aims to reduce deficit spending and provide a path to long-term fiscal stability.

Recently, the House passed a strong budget resolution that aims to reduce

spending by \$5.5 trillion over 10 years to get a handle on erroneous regulations and mandates that impede job creation and promote true patient-centered healthcare solutions.

Mr. Speaker, the critics of this plan have unashamedly claimed that Republicans “want to end Medicare as we know it.” Well, those accusations could not be further from the truth. Unfortunately, these nearsighted individuals have focused more on partisan attacks rather than looking at the long-term challenges that we, as a country, face together.

According to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, the Medicare hospital trust fund will be insolvent by 2030, which is closer than we all would like to admit.

The House Republican proposal presents a plan to save, strengthen, and secure Medicare for today's seniors and tomorrow's retirees. It makes no changes for those in or near retirement, provides future seniors with premium support, and will result in actual savings for both beneficiaries and tax-payers.

The do-nothing alternative will only serve to break promises this country has made to our seniors and places us on a road to rationing, where beneficiaries will be burdened with arbitrary caps to medically necessary procedures and care.

Mr. Speaker, I am in no way claiming this blueprint is perfect, but please be assured that I was not elected to sit idle or squander an opportunity to ensure that our great country can continue to support promises that we have made.

Moving forward, as the House and Senate begin to conference and work out the details between each Chamber's respective budgets, I will remain committed to ensuring a strong national security, economic competitiveness, and an atmosphere that fosters positive growth throughout Pennsylvania and across our great country.

We have been given an opportunity to strengthen this great Nation. Let us work toward that end, rather than vilify those who look to provide us options. Our children and future generations of Americans deserve as much.

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APRIL 16—D.C. EMANCIPATION DAY: HONOR WITH THE VOTE AND WITH STATEHOOD

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The Chair recognizes the gentlewoman from the District of Columbia (Ms. NORTON) for 5 minutes.

Ms. NORTON. Mr. Speaker, during the next 3 days, I will be coming to the floor, leading up to Thursday, April 16—D.C. Emancipation Day. That is the day that Abraham Lincoln emancipated the slaves in the District of Columbia before slaves nationwide were emancipated.

Now, no resident of the District of Columbia is a slave today as in 1863,