

countless cancers, blood diseases, and lung problems, which have manifested themselves in the years after.

Yet at midnight last night, the beginning of this day, the programs designed to provide critical medical care and compensation to the victims were permitted to expire. That is unacceptable and unacceptable.

I join my colleagues from New York and New Jersey as a leading cosponsor in urging this Congress to act—and to act immediately and urgently—to make sure that we do what is right for those emergency responders who served and sacrificed in the wake of 9/11. Failure to do so is absolutely outrageous. The fund still has some money, and it will continue to function. But this Congress should act to pass the Zadroga 9/11 bill immediately.

Madam President, the second area where I think we ought to be all agreeing relates to doing what is right for our veterans, and that means restoring the \$857 million that has been deleted from the President's request for veterans in the Military Construction, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2016. This bill essentially shortchanges our veterans and straitjackets the Veterans' Administration.

Madam President, I ask unanimous consent to have printed in the RECORD a letter from the American Legion.

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

THE AMERICAN LEGION,

OFFICE OF THE NATIONAL COMMANDER,

Washington, DC, September 30, 2015.

Hon. MITCH MCCONNELL,

Majority Leader, U.S. Senate,

The Capitol, Washington, DC.

DEAR MAJORITY LEADER MCCONNELL: Last May then-National Commander Michael D. Helm called on Congress to pass a budget for the Military Construction-Veterans Affairs Appropriations bill that won't shortchange the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). On April 30 the House of Representatives had passed a funding bill which unfortunately underfunds VA's medical care, major construction and Information Technology accounts by more than \$1.5 billion below the Administration's request.

We were pleased when the Senate Appropriations Committee remedied that shortfall somewhat, but because they were tasked with making an unworkable allocation workable, the Senate version of the bill still underfunds veterans by approximately \$857 million. This comes at a time when the VA is faced with an unprecedented demand for services, in terms of both numbers and complexity.

We need your help to ensure that VA is fully funded so it can provide the care and services veterans have earned and need. An inadequate VA budget will have a negative effect on the timeliness and quality of care that veterans will receive. Fully funding VA must be a very high priority for Congress.

The American Legion is the largest veteran service organization in the nation and we take our responsibility to analyze and evaluate veterans' healthcare options very seriously. As VA, Congress and The American Legion move forward together we must ensure that America's veterans are provided with the healthcare and services they have earned and were guaranteed.

Respectfully,

DALE BARNETT,
National Commander.

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. This letter emphasizes the challenges that the VA faces in meeting the unprecedented and increasing demand for services that our veterans need and deserve. This obligation for our country is not a matter of discretion or convenience, it is a promise that we have made and we must fulfill to provide medical care, skills training, job opportunity, and, most especially, the mental health care that our veterans need so that we can stop the 22 suicides every day in this country—the greatest, strongest, country in history of our world, where 22 of our Nation's heroes commit suicide every day.

They suffer from the invisible wounds of war, post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury. Many of our veterans suffer the more visible wounds, and they need care as well. Many of our veterans in increasing numbers will be coming out of the service needing jobs and skills training, not only through the VA but the Department of Labor. Just yesterday, the nominee for the Veterans Employment and Training Services position in the Department of Labor testified before the Veterans' Affairs Committee as to the importance of services provided by the Department of Labor, and yet they too will be shortchanged by this budget.

So I urge my colleagues to provide sufficient funding to restore that \$857 million and to make sure that we meet those needs of our veterans. Failing to do so is as unacceptable as failing to meet the needs of the emergency responders who went to the 9/11 site. This bill underfunds the VA's medical facilities by \$100 million, reducing the VA's ability to keep pace with the need for critical facility maintenance. This is upkeep that is vital for basic repair and maintenance. Facilities will decay and downgrade without that funding. It is an investment in basic infrastructure.

We ought to be investing in the personnel of the VA—the doctors and nurses and other professionals—so that we recruit and retain the men and women who will really do the work on the ground in the trenches to make sure that the VA provides the best care possible—world-class care to our veterans. They deserve no less. Fully funding the VA honors the service and sacrifice of men and women who have risked their lives to keep our great Nation free. Freedom is never free, and this Nation ought to be keeping its promise to those veterans, which, unfortunately, sadly, reprehensibly, this measure fails to do.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Arizona.

Mr. FLAKE. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent to enter into a colloquy with the Senator from Wisconsin.

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

BORDER JOBS FOR VETERANS ACT OF 2015

Mr. FLAKE. Madam President, we are here to discuss the process for the Border Jobs for Veterans Act that is going to pass shortly.

I yield to the Senator from Wisconsin.

Mr. JOHNSON. Madam President, first, I thank my colleague from Arizona for leading and also for his leadership for working, on a bipartisan basis, with Members from the other side of the aisle to really accomplish something to produce a result. What I have been trying to do as chairman of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs is that I have reached out to every Senator and asked them: If you have identified a problem, if you have a piece of legislation that solves that problem, bring it before our committee, and I will do everything in my power to mark it up, report it out of our committee, and then first work with you to first pass it through the Senate, then through the House, to get that piece of legislation on the President's desk, and to have it signed into law to actually solve that problem.

The Senator from Arizona has done a great job in this particular case because this is a piece of legislation that truly is a win-win. It is a win for our veterans, and it is a win for the border.

I am not going to steal the Senator's thunder in terms of describing all of the benefits of the bill, but I just want to mention a couple. We obviously have a huge problem at our border, and neither one of us would claim that this is going to solve all of our problems. But it identifies one—a staffing problem with our ports of entry. Also there is another problem in terms of our veterans who have served this Nation and are unable to find work. So that is the win-win. This is a perfect example of a piece of legislation now that solves that problem.

Coming from the manufacturing sector, I never did quite understand why our returning veterans—with their esprit de corps, with all their skills, all their dedication, their great attitude—are having a hard time finding work, because certainly in my manufacturing operation in Oshkosh, WI, boy, if I found a veteran, I hired that individual because they are great workers. Now, in my Senate office, we actually have seven veterans with a combined total of 115 years of service.

So I think what we are going to find now at Customs and Border Protection is that this bill will make it easier for veterans to connect with those particular jobs to help staff our ports of entry. Customs and Border Protection is going to find that value of being able to employ the finest among us because we have made that easier. Our veterans are going to have the ability to leave

service and have a very good job further serving the country and keeping our Nation safe.

I again thank the Senator from Arizona for his leadership on this and for working with me to get this passed through our committee, passed through the Senate, and put on the President's desk for his signature to have this bill signed into law so we can be helping our veterans and protect this Nation.

I thank the Senator from Arizona.

Mr. FLAKE. Thank you. I again thank the Senator from Wisconsin and others I will name later for working so hard on this bill.

The Senator made sure that it moved through his committee expeditiously, that we got it to the floor in the Senate and also through the House as well. It is an example of how the Senate and the House can work in a bipartisan way. I appreciate both the appeal that you have made to encourage us to come forward with problems that we have and to vote for ways that your committee can help solve them.

Thank you again.

Mr. JOHNSON. If I could just make one final point, this is a classic example of when we concentrate on the areas of agreement and find the areas of agreement that unite us, as opposed to exploiting the divisions.

Again, this is a perfect example of getting bipartisan support on a piece of legislation. It serves as a great example for everybody serving in Washington to see us concentrate on the areas of agreement that unify us rather than exploit those divisions.

Again, I thank the Senator very much for his leadership.

Mr. FLAKE. Thank you.

Madam President, I wish to talk about the problem that led to this bill. We have made significant investments along the border in terms of port facilities. More needs to be done, obviously, but we made significant investments to accommodate cross-border traffic.

There is a lot of good that goes on at the border. We often just focus on the bad—the illegal crossings, the drug trade, and whatnot—but there is a tremendous amount of good that happens on the border, particularly the border of Arizona and Mexico.

There is a lot of commerce that goes in. Arizona's ports of entry processed \$30.5 billion worth of goods in 2014. This is an increase up from \$18.5 billion in 2009. So there is a lot of good that goes on. We have needed more adequate staffing at these ports.

The Border Patrol officers with whom we often associate the border are in green uniforms. What we need more of are blue uniforms—people to actually facilitate this cross-border traffic and the flow of goods that benefits us, benefits Mexico and other countries to the south as well.

Secretary Johnson, when we asked why we were having difficulty filling these slots for staffing of these ports, said that—well, let me just say we au-

thorized—the Senate and the House authorized—2,000 new CPB officers. We authorized these positions, but as of earlier this year, only 800 of the 2,000 had been filled. So Secretary Johnson was explaining that the delays are associated with applicant background investigations, low polygraph clearance rates, and a shortage of Federal polygraph examiners combined with attrition.

So we thought: What group of people do we have who have gone through these security clearances already and who could clear this hurdle and expedite this? And it is, of course, our returning men and women from the military and those who are now out of service. They have, in many cases, already gone through the security clearances. They have passed the polygraph test and could move more expeditiously into these jobs. Obviously, we have concerns, and we have several other programs that deal with returning veterans to make sure that there are jobs awaiting them.

Let me say that this doesn't affect any of the preferences or other positions that are available for our veterans. This simply requires CPB and the Department of Homeland Security to coordinate or collaborate with our military to see what jobs are out there and see what positions can be filled.

It shouldn't take an act of Congress to get two agencies to work together like this, but sometimes it does. So that is what this legislation is doing, and it will require reporting to happen as well to make sure that this is being accomplished and the coordination is occurring.

Let me just talk about some of the endorsements for this legislation, some of those groups that have helped us in exploiting the need and coming to a solution.

The Arizona Chamber of Commerce and Industry said:

The Border Jobs for Veterans Act . . . helps advance two major national priorities: the facilitation of cross-border commerce and the future employment of the tens of thousands of men and women who separate from military service each year. Ensuring our ports of entry are properly staffed is critical to our nation's ability to compete on a global scale.

The president of the Fresh Produce Association of the Americas said:

The Border Jobs for Vets Legislation is crucial for continuing to grow the nation's economy. It is helping businesses across the country continue to prosper by facilitating trade while also using the skills and knowledge of an amazing asset we already have, our veterans, to do this important work.

The Greater Nogales-Santa Cruz Port Authority said:

Border communities like Nogales, Arizona, depend greatly on the ability of people and goods to cross the border effectively and efficiently. We have been pushing for many years for additional staff. . . . The Border Jobs for Veterans Act is one of the most significant steps taken on this issue in many years.

The president of the Tucson Hispanic Chamber of Commerce said:

We appreciate our Arizona Senators' innovative approach to a problem that is impacting our communities and our economy. Any impediments that increase wait times at our ports of entry such as a lack of adequate staffing impact our retail sales and ultimately the financial success of our business community in Arizona.

I would like to take a moment to thank my Senate colleagues—Senator RON JOHNSON, who already spoke here; Senator MCCAIN, who played a critical role in this; Senator SCHUMER, Senator BURR, Senator BALDWIN, Senator FEINSTEIN, Senator LANKFORD, Senator SULLIVAN, Senator TILLIS, Senator TOOMEY, and Senator DAVID VITTER—for cosponsoring this bipartisan legislation.

After being approved by the Senate, Arizona Congresswoman MARTHA MCSALLY has led the effort to get it passed in the House unanimously. She played a great role there, and I want to thank her for leading this effort in the House.

Thanks to everyone's support and the hard work of committee staff, including Brooke Ericson and Holly Idelson on the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee and Paul Anstine of the House Homeland Security Committee, we now have this bill ready to head to the President's desk.

In conclusion, let me just say that those leaving the military need jobs and CBP needs officers. This is a great bill that will require coordination between the two, and it will lead to greater staffing at less cost and certainly in less time. So I look forward to having the administration look at this and look forward to having the President sign this legislation.

With that, Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the immediate consideration of H.R. 2835, which was received from the House.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the bill by title.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (H.R. 2835) to actively recruit members of the Armed Forces who are separating from military service to serve as Customs and Border Protection officers.

There being no objection, the Senate proceeded to consider the bill.

Mr. FLAKE. I ask unanimous consent that the bill be read a third time and passed, the motion to reconsider be laid upon the table, and any statements related to the bill be printed in the RECORD.

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

The bill (H.R. 2835) was ordered to a third reading, was read the third time, and passed.

Mr. FLAKE. 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.

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

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

MILITARY CONSTRUCTION, THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS, AND RELATED AGENCIES APPROPRIATIONS ACT, 2016—MOTION TO PROCEED—Continued

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST—S. 2101

Ms. AYOTTE. Madam President, I come to the floor today to ask for an extension of a very important program to my State—the Land and Water Conservation Fund—and because of that I ask unanimous consent that the Energy and Natural Resources Committee be discharged from and the Senate proceed to the immediate consideration of S. 2101; I ask unanimous consent that the bill be read a third time and passed, and the motion to reconsider be laid upon the table.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

The Senator from Utah.

Mr. LEE. I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Objection is heard.

The Senator from New Hampshire.

Ms. AYOTTE. Madam President, I am very disappointed that last night the Land and Water Conservation Fund expired, and so it has lapsed. I just offered a unanimous consent request to extend this fund for 60 days to make sure there was not a lapse in this important program.

This is a fund that, in my home State of New Hampshire, has been used to ensure the public can enjoy our beautiful environment and our natural spaces, from my home city of Nashua, NH, and Mine Falls Park, which I love to run through every morning when I am in New Hampshire, to our beautiful White Mountain National Forest.

I had the opportunity to come to the floor yesterday with Senators from both sides of the aisle, including my colleague from Montana, Senator DAINES. The Senator from Montana had a wonderful picture of him and his wife in their public lands that have been preserved using the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The picture was of him and his wife hiking. We all understand that a big part of the beauty of this country is our natural beauty, and because of that, the Land and Water Conservation Fund was established in 1965. It was actually established to aid in the preservation of spaces for outdoor recreation across this Nation.

In New Hampshire we have a very strong tradition of the outdoors being such a part of who we are. In fact, the Land and Water Conservation Fund has led to more than 650 individual acquisition and development projects in our State. We very much support the public use of our lands in our State, enjoying their natural beauty, whether it is hiking, fishing, hunting or any number of other wonderful uses we can have of our public lands. So this fund has been very important, and I believe we should not let it lapse.

The law that created the Land and Water Conservation Fund in 1965 established that a portion of the revenues coming from oil and gas leasing would be designated for this purpose. So to not extend this fund really is another example, if you look at the fund itself, where portions of these dollars have actually been taken to spend for other purposes in the Treasury, not in accordance with the law. We see that happen too much in Washington. But to let this lapse is very unfortunate.

I am very disappointed my colleague has rendered an objection because this is such a bipartisan issue and something that has done so much for our country—this program—and for my home State of New Hampshire. So I hope in the coming days we will be able to work together to have the Land and Water Conservation Fund program extended and that we can get beyond the partisan objections and get it done so we can work together to preserve the beautiful spaces in this country. This program has done so much for my home State of New Hampshire and for many States across this country, and that is why it has such strong bipartisan support.

Madam President, I am very disappointed that my very reasonable request in asking for unanimous consent to extend this program for 60 days until we can get to the long-term permanent authorization—which I support and I have cosponsored, and I think that is what we need to do in the long term—has been objected to. To let this lapse is completely unacceptable when it has been such a strong program in allowing everyone in this country to enjoy our public lands, to enjoy the great outdoors in the greatest country on Earth.

With that, I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. BLUNT. 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. BLUNT. Madam President, I want to talk for a few minutes about the discussion we are having about whether to have a discussion. The debate we are having about whether to have a debate is always amazing to me. How far we have moved in such a short period of time from the way the Congress always did its work. The way you set your priorities, both at home and in the government, is how you spend your money. You might think that is not the way you set your priorities, but if you think something is very important to you and your family and you find out you are not investing any money or time in it, it is probably not all that important. It is probably something you have decided is a good thing to say is very important.

This is the process we go through in the government to talk about what our

priorities are. What could be more significant in our priorities than the bill that I would like to see us take up today, the VA-Military Construction bill, the bill that determines lots of things about not only people who serve in the military but what is available for their families, and what kind of support structure there is, and then with the Veterans' Administration, what is there after they serve, how are we meeting that commitment we made to our veterans that if they serve for the government—and we are grateful, so we should then make sure we are always there to do what the American people have told veterans we would do if they served.

We have already had votes not to go to the Defense appropriations bill—a bill that is about the same amount of money the President asked for and what the President said was needed to defend the country, but apparently there is some balance somewhere in the world—that I am not aware of—that no matter how much it costs to defend the country, you have to spend that much money on other things that don't defend the country; that there is a balance between what is happening in Syria today and how many employees the EPA needs or how many employees the IRS needs. Obviously, that is something that doesn't make sense to people. It doesn't make sense to me, but we couldn't get the four additional votes we needed to go to the Defense appropriations bill. I guess in a world where the President said he is also going to veto the Defense authorization bill—not because of what it authorizes but because of the money that eventually the appropriators would have to spend—people have to wonder what is going on. The No. 1 priority of the Federal Government is to defend the country, and following that priority, our obligation is to those who serve in the military and their families. That is what the Military Construction bill would do. It actually spends a little more money than we spent this year. That appears to be everybody's complaint; that somehow the government is not spending enough money, but the Appropriations Committee took the amount of money that the law allows, and the Budget Control Act did a good thing in terms of keeping spending under control. That is one of the few things that has happened in Washington, DC, in a long time that actually did put a lid on spending because it actually put a lid on spending. It actually says in the law how much money we can spend this year on discretionary spending. The Appropriations Committee, with Republicans in charge for the first time in a long time, did the work for the first time in a long time. In fact, this is the first year in 6 years that the Appropriations Committee voted all the bills out of committee, marked up all of the bills, cut places where the committee thought should be cut, increased places where the committee thought should be increased, and this at a level that the law