

wrestling with the duties and constitutional authorities in advance of November's Presidential elections before we will know which party will win. We need to have this conversation now precisely because we don't know which party will win.

Let me be realistic for a minute. I hope it is not pessimistic, but I will be realistic. I actually don't think there is much will in this body to do things like recovering the power of the purse. And even if there were, the will to get beyond R's and D's, shirts and skins Kabuki theatre, as we drift toward a parliamentary system with "winners take all" in the executive branch—the actual act of trying to recover power, the power of the purse and the legislative powers that the Constitution vests in this body—would be very difficult at a time when the public is so cynical and so disengaged because of how dysfunctional this institution is.

I think that the Democrats are likely only to recover a sense of their article I powers if they are looking at a President Trump or a President X or a President Y or whoever the scariest candidate might be to the Democrats.

Similarly, I think the Republicans are most likely prone to forget most of their concerns about Executive overreach if a Republican does defeat Secretary Clinton in November.

I will just end with two brief stories. In the first, FDR was frustrated with the Supreme Court, so he had a solution. He would just pack the Court. Who could stop him? He had control of the Congress, after all.

Well, someone did stop him—Senate Democrats who cared about the Constitution and their oath stepped up.

In one of the other great instances of this place just saying no, regardless of party, LBJ—arguably the most powerful leader until the last 10 years in the history of the Senate, the most powerful leader this place had ever known in his age—became VP and said he would essentially remain majority leader of the Senate at the same time. Again, it was Democrats in this body who said no based on their constitutional responsibilities, not their partisanship. These were men and women who cared more about their country and more about their Constitution and more about their oaths than their party.

I think that all of us in both parties should look to those examples and again be talking in the future about how we emulate them and recover the responsibilities of this body.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Georgia.

SUPPORTING OUR VETERANS

Mr. ISAKSON. Mr. President, I think it is important that we pause for a moment at the end of 2015, look back upon the past 12 months and, in particular, look at the Veterans Administration and the veterans who have served our country, looking at the problems that we have solved and the things we have done to better improve those services.

When the year dawned, we had a scandal in Arizona at a Phoenix hospital. We had bonuses being paid to employees who had not performed. We had medical services that weren't available to veterans who had earned them and deserved them. As a Senate, we came together in the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, which I chair. We had a bipartisan effort to see to it we addressed those problems.

So for just a second I want everyone to pause and realize what we have done bipartisanship and collectively for those who have served our country and the veterans today.

No. 1, by the end of January, we had passed the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act to deal with the growing problem of suicide with our veterans. It is already working with more psychiatric help available to our veterans, quicker responses for those who seek mental help, better diagnosis of PTSD and TBI, and a reduction in the rate of the suicides that take place in the veterans community. That was affirmative action. It passed 99 to 0—Republicans and Democrats—in the Senate of the United States.

We took the veterans choice bill, which had passed in August of last year, and made it work better for the veterans of our country. In the first 9 months of this year, the Veterans Administration fulfilled 7.5 million more individual appointments for veterans and benefits than they had in the preceding year, all because we made the private sector a part of the VA and allowed veterans to go to the doctor of their choice under certain qualified situations. We made access easier, we made access better, and because of that, we made health care better.

Then we addressed the Denver crisis, and this is the most important thing of all. In January we got this little note from the VA that they had a \$1.3 billion cost overrun on a \$1.7 billion hospital, a 328-percent increase in cost with no promise that it would go down.

Ranking Member BLUMENTHAL, myself, and the Colorado delegation flew to Denver and brought in the contractors and the VA. We made significant changes. First we took the VA out of the construction business. They had proven they didn't deserve the ability to manage that much money or to build things. Their job was to deliver health care.

We took the construction and put it in the hands of the Corps of Engineers, where construction and engineering was responsible. We told the VA: You may have a \$1.385 billion cost overrun, but if you are going to pay for it, we are not going to borrow from China. You are going to find it internally in the \$71 billion budget of the Veterans Administration. And they did.

By unanimous consent this Senate and the House of Representatives approved the completion of that hospital, the funding of the shortfall, and the management takeover by the Corps of Engineers. Today it is on progress to be

there for the veterans of the Midwest and the West in Denver, CO.

Then we dealt with many other programs, such as homelessness and caregiver benefits to our veterans' caregivers, to see to it we have the very best care possible available.

Then we changed the paradigm. The VA had so many acting appointees and so many unfilled positions that they couldn't function as well as they should. So we went in, and we approved Dr. David Shulkin to be the under secretary for medicine. We took LaVerne Council and approved her to be the head of information technology. We took former Congressman Michael Michaud and made him the Assistant Secretary of Labor for Veterans' Employment and Training. We put highly qualified people who knew what they were doing in positions where we had vacancies. We are already seeing a benefit in health delivery services, planning for IT coordination, and, hopefully, interoperability between the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense in terms of medical records, which is so important.

But we also did something else. We said we are no longer going to tolerate scandals in the VA or look the other way, and we are not going to pay rewards and bonuses to people who aren't doing the job. As you heard earlier today with Senator CASSIDY from Louisiana and Senator AYOTTE from New Hampshire, with the help of Senator SHERROD BROWN of Ohio, we are going to pass legislation that is going to hold VA employees accountable, have a record if they are not performing, and in the future prevent any Veterans Administration employee who is not doing a job from getting a bonus for a job that is not well done. That is the way it works in the private sector. It ought to be the way it works in the government.

Then we took another problem. We took the problem of the scandal in the VA relocation benefits, which cost hundreds of thousands of lost revenue to the VA—funds that were given to VA people for transferring, some of them within the same geographic area where they originally were working. We told Secretary McDonald: You need to go in there, and you need to clean this thing up. To his credit, the Secretary did, and to his credit, the former brigadier general who was the head of that department retired. He resigned from the VA rather than face the music in terms of the investigation.

But we took affirmative action to see to it we would have no more scandals. We want zero tolerance for poor performance, and we want to reward good performance, but that is the way it needs to be. It is very important also to understand that we have goals for the future. We are going to continue as a committee with the VA leadership on a quarterly basis. Senator BLUMENTHAL and I go to meet with the leadership of the VA to see what they are doing and to share with them the frustration we

have in the House and the Senate about things that aren't going right, but to share with them the joy we have with the things that they are doing to improve.

Then we have set goals for next year, a full implementation of the Veterans Choice Program and a consolidation of all veterans' benefits and VA benefits to see to it that veterans get timely appointments and good-quality services from the physicians in the VA or physicians in their communities.

We are going to improve the experience of our servicemembers in transitioning from Active Duty to Veterans Affairs. Quite frankly, today that is the biggest problem we have in the country. Active-Duty servicemembers who leave service and go to veteran status fall into a black hole. There is no interoperability of VA and DOD health care records and electronic records. There is no transition in the handoff. We are going to see that change.

We are going to improve the experience of women veterans, including protecting victims of military sexual trauma.

We are going to combat veteran homelessness and meet the goal of the President to get it to zero. We have already reduced it by a third.

We are going to ensure access to mental health so no veteran who finds himself in trouble doesn't have immediate access to counsel. On that point, I commend the Veterans Administration for the hotline. The suicide prevention hotline that they established has helped to save lives in this country this year, and we are going to continue to see to it that we have more and more access for our veterans.

Simply put, we are going to make the Veterans Administration work for the veterans and work for the American people. We are going to have accountability of the employees. We are going to reward good behavior, and we are not going to accept bad behavior. In the end, we are going to take the veteran of America, who served his or her country, and make sure that they get every benefit that is promised to them and that it is delivered in a high-quality fashion. We are going to do it working together as Republicans and Democrats and as Members of the Senate to do so.

As we close this year, I wish to pause and thank the Members of the Senate for their unanimous bipartisan support for the significant changes we have made to address the problems of the Veterans Administration and to remember this season of the year in Christmas the great gift we have had to all of us of our veterans who have served us, many of whom have sacrificed and some of whom have died to see that America remains the strongest, most peaceful, and freest country on the face of this Earth.

With that, I pause and yield back the remainder of my time.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. SASSE). The Senator from Oklahoma.

EXTENSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. INHOFE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate be in a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

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

Mr. INHOFE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that at the conclusion of my remarks, we have joint remarks from myself and the Senator from New Mexico, Mr. UDALL.

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

OMNIBUS LEGISLATION

Mr. INHOFE. Mr. President, I will not go into the detail I was planning to go into as to what we are faced with and what we are going to be voting on tomorrow, but I think it is very important—because I have heard a lot of erroneous things coming out of various talk radio shows and elsewhere—as to how we got into the mess we are in where we are going to be looking at a major spending bill instead of the normal way of doing things.

Historically, in both the House and the Senate, the order has been to do an authorization bill, and that is followed by an appropriations bill. That works out fine in the House. In the Senate, it is not quite that easy because we have some rules in the Senate that allow the minority—whether that be Republican or Democratic—to object to a procedural basis. So it actually takes 60 votes, not 51 votes, to pass appropriations. This has created a real problem.

I remember that on June 18, we passed the Defense Authorization Act. Given that we are in a time of war, it was incredibly important to provide our Defense Department what in the regular course of business would be appropriated to it. However, we have been trying to appropriate that since June 18, and the minority has kept us from doing that. I can say the same thing about other appropriations bills, such as Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, Energy and Water, and others.

One might say: Why would they be doing this? In the case of the appropriations bill for defense, it is very simple: The President and a lot of the Democrats want to make sure that as we are coming out with additional spending to avoid sequestration, an equal amount be used for domestic purposes instead of military, where we really have a crisis right now.

Let me say something about the House. This morning on a talk show, I heard everyone criticizing the House and the new Speaker of the House. In reality, they did their job over there. That is a bum rap for those guys. They passed their appropriations bills. They passed them on the floor. They passed appropriations bills on the floor. So they did what was supposed to be done. However, you can't pass legislation

with just the House; it has to be in the Senate also.

So I think we need to look at that. I don't like the idea of a situation where we are faced with a "take it or leave it" deal at the end of the year. That doesn't really allow us to offer amendments. It is done behind closed doors by a limited number of people. This is not right. This is not the way it is supposed to be.

I would just say there is a way out. I am going to suggest that this should be the last time we should have to do this. If we had a system where we could reform it and have it so you could make an exception to some of the motions to proceed for appropriations bills, then we would be able to go ahead and get this done. That is the simple solution. That is what I would recommend. However, there is a lot more detail in that. It happens that there is a committee taking place right now in the Senate. JAMES LANKFORD, my junior Senator from Oklahoma, CORY GARDNER, LAMAR ALEXANDER, and I think two other Senators are looking to propose rule changes, and I think it is overdue.

I want to mention one other thing too. I said back in 2006 that I would never vote for another omnibus bill like the one we are preparing to vote for. I said: That is the last one; I am going to serve notice—thinking that if enough people did this, we wouldn't find ourselves in this position. However, we are still in this position.

The reason I am standing here today is to get on the record why I am going to support this. Back when I had the highway bill, we were trying to put additional things on the highway bill. One was to lift the ban on exports of oil and gas, and we were not successful. So at that time, I made the announcement—we had a couple of other chances, the last one being the omnibus spending bill. We got a commitment that would be on that bill. So I said at that time that if that is the case, if we end up lifting the ban on that bill, then I will change from my original 2006 commitment and I will vote for and support this.

When we stop and think about what we are doing, does it make good policy that we in the United States can say to Russia and say to Iran, people who don't look after our best interests: It is all right for you to do that, but we in the United States cannot export oil.

We have all the former Soviet Union countries. I went to Lithuania and participated in an opening of a terminal there so they could get out from under this restriction. It was a joyous occasion.

In my State of Oklahoma, we have lost 20,000 jobs because since we have had success in getting oil and gas out, we have been encumbered by the fact that we can't export it. This has been a real hardship. I would say the most important thing in this bill in terms of my State would be that we are going to be able to correct that and we are going to be able to do that.