

A few weeks ago I wrote a letter with 27 of our colleagues to our leadership, urging them that this Omnibus appropriations bill should not be the place for so-called policy riders. I heard Senator MIKULSKI talk about it during her comments. We were concerned that we were trying to legislate on an appropriation bill without the authorizing committees doing the work they are supposed to do. I am very pleased that most of these riders were excluded. So we are not going to be talking about potentially damaging provisions that could have been included in here—from restricting Planned Parenthood to affecting the clean water of this Nation, to affecting the ability of America to respond to the challenges of climate change, to dealing with protection of our workforce through labor laws, to public safety with restrictions that could have been put on gun safety legislation, to dealing with our refugees. All those areas and many more were subject to policy riders that could have been included in this omnibus budget but were not.

On the tax front, I have already thanked Senator WYDEN and Senator HATCH. I am very pleased that we were able to do some very important things in the tax provisions. We got renewable fuels for wind and solar extended and improved, particularly for solar. I think this will make a huge difference. But let me just quote from the Bloomberg New Energy Finance, or BNEF, report.

In the short term, the deal will speed up the shift from fossil fuels more than the global climate deal struck this month in Paris, and more than [the] Clean Power Plan that regulates coal plants. . . . This is exactly the sort of bridge the industry needed. The costs of installing wind and solar power have dropped precipitously. . . . By the time the new tax credit expires, solar and wind will be the cheapest forms of new electricity in many States across the U.S.

So these are significant. Am I satisfied? No. I would like to see them stronger, particularly wind. I thought wind could have been stronger. But I think we have made significant progress in dealing with renewables, which is what we have to do from the point of energy security, as well as our environment and as well as our economy. Having a more diversified energy portfolio and being more energy secure will help our environment, will help our economy, and will help our national security.

On the tax side, I was very pleased that we were able to make permanent several of the tax provisions that are critically important to families in the United States. We were able to make the child tax credit permanent, the earned-income tax credit permanent, and the American opportunity tax credit for higher education costs permanent.

Transit parity. Transit parity is where those—particularly Federal workers—who use the transit system to come to work don't bring their cars. We subsidize greatly the parking lots

and the ability of people to bring cars to work. When they take transit, they are helping us, and we have now made permanent the full limit on deductibility of the transit benefits. So that is a major step forward. I am very pleased that we were able to make that permanent. I thank Senator SCHUMER who took the lead on that, and I was proud to work with him on that.

The low-income housing tax credit improvements that allow it to be more effective in its use were made permanent. Conservation needs were made permanent, and the S corporation improvements, which help small businesses, were made permanent. There is a lot here that we don't have to worry about this next December or two Decembers from now or even five Decembers from now, saying: Gee, are they going to expire?

Now, we do have some success from 5-year reauthorizations. That does give us predictability and allows us to move forward. The new markets tax credits are extended for 5 years. The new market tax credits have been critically important for development in my State of Maryland. I could take you to East Baltimore where you see redevelopment occurring. The new markets tax credits are responsible for that. I could take you to Maryland, close to here, in Prince George's County and Montgomery County, and to the work they are doing there. So these are very important tools that help create jobs, and we now have more predictability.

Then we have the 2-year extenders, including the energy efficiency that I led the effort on.

So the bottom line is we now have much greater predictability.

Let me comment just very briefly as the ranking member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. I am certainly pleased, when we look at the budget that has been brought forward and passed now, for our foreign development assistance. I am pleased that we have the support for Israel included in this package and the economic aid for Ukraine.

As to refugee assistance, one of the great humanitarian crises of our time, funds are in here for the United States to work with our international partners to provide for refugee assistance.

There are many anti-corruption initiatives. There is \$2.5 billion in this budget for good governance and to advance human rights globally—a high priority of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, working with Senator CORKER. The two of us are working very closely together to make it clear that we won't tolerate corruption and that we will continue to work as countries develop good governance and respect for human rights.

As I said earlier, on the overall plan there are a couple issues in this budget that I am very disappointed about. One is the Visa Waiver Program, the discriminatory provisions against dual citizens. I don't think it has anything to do with safety. I don't think we are

safer because we are going to make dual citizens go through a separate process. And it will cause, I think, actions by our allies that will be counterproductive to Americans and could have some unintended consequences. That shouldn't have been in this legislation.

I also think the restrictions on the closing of Guantanamo Bay are misguided. Guantanamo Bay should have been closed a long time ago, and I regret that those restrictions are continuing in place.

The bottom line is that I am very proud that we passed the omnibus bill. I supported it enthusiastically. I think it represents a compromise of the political balance of our Nation. We have resolved many policy challenges. We provided predictability to our agencies and predictability to policies that help private investment and our economy grow. It advances a cleaner environment, security of our homeland, education and welfare of our citizens, Americans' ability to compete globally.

It deserves our support, and I am glad to see that it was passed. Shortly, it will be signed by the President and will be the law of this land.

I note there are other colleagues here. So let me just very briefly ask to speak on a different issue.

NOMINATIONS

Mr. CARDIN. Mr. President, earlier today I took the floor. Senator CRUZ was here, and he raised an objection to a unanimous consent request that I had not yet made. I am not going to make that unanimous consent request, but I am going to mention, as the ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—and our Presiding Officer is one of the distinguished members of the committee—that there are 14 nominations that have been approved by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, some a long time ago, by unanimous vote. These are not controversial nominations. Each of the individuals is well qualified for the position. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee, under the leadership of Senator CORKER, reported these nominations out in a very timely way. Each of those in their own position is critically important to our national security. Having a confirmed ambassador in a country is critically important to our national security. Having the No. 4 person at the State Department confirmed is critically important in negotiating security issues.

It is our responsibility to take these nominees up and to act on them and to confirm them so that we can have confirmed positions.

I will just mention a few. As I said, I had given notice that I would ask unanimous consent, and Senator CRUZ indicated that he would object and actually came to the floor to object. But we have to get this done. The reason we are not voting has nothing to do

with these individuals—nothing, not one thing. These are qualified people. They are being held up for reasons unrelated to their important responsibilities to our country.

Thomas Shannon, a career person, to the position of Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs. This is the point person who negotiates globally.

Brian Egan to the position of State Department Legal Adviser. We all have questions on a lot of the legal issues on foreign policy, and yet we won't confirm a career person who has given his career to public service.

David Robinson to the positions of Assistant Secretary of State for Conflict and Stabilization Operations and Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization. This is a person who we need to deal with a lot of the human rights issues.

John Estrada to the post of U.S. Ambassador to Trinidad and Tobago. Drug trafficking—we need a confirmed ambassador. For months and months and months they have been on the calendar and no action.

Azita Raji to be Ambassador to Sweden and Samuel Heins to be Ambassador to Norway, our Scandinavian friends.

I was at the State Department this week for the holiday reception with the heads of missions that are stationed in Washington. Ambassadors from other countries came up to me and said: Will we get a confirmed ambassador? It is affecting America's security and reputation, and we need to have confirmed ambassadors. Norway has gone 2 years without a confirmed ambassador. We have a person who is eminently qualified. There is no objection to Samuel Heins being confirmed. Yet we can't get a vet on the floor of the Senate because an individual Senator is objecting. That is wrong. We have a responsibility to act.

David McKean to be Ambassador of Luxembourg, Cassandra Butts to be Ambassador to the Bahamas—that is eight of the total number who are being held that I mentioned. As I said, I intended to make the unanimous consent requests. Senator CRUZ has already come to the floor to object. I regret that.

I urge my colleagues to work out their problems, but do it in a timely way and don't hold America hostage, because that is what you are doing by not confirming these appointments. You are not holding the Obama administration hostage; you are holding America hostage. Who is hurt by not having a confirmed ambassador in Norway? There are Americans who get hurt who depend upon our relationship with Norway. There is a diaspora in the United States that is affected by not having a confirmed ambassador to Norway or to Sweden or to the other countries that we have not been able to get a confirmed ambassador.

I urge my colleagues who have problems to enjoy the holiday, get some rest, and come back here ready to vote

because I think that is what we were elected to do. I urge my colleagues to allow us, when we come back in January, to have votes on these very qualified people who are serving our country and are prepared to serve our country in a more significant way.

Mr. President, I wish all my colleagues a very happy holiday season.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from New York.

TRIBUTE TO RAY PFEIFER

Mrs. GILLIBRAND. Mr. President, I want to speak for a moment about a great man and a wonderful friend of mine. His name is Ray Pfeifer, and he is an incredible leader and an inspiration to many, myself included.

Ray was a New York City firefighter for 27 years and 220 days, by his count. He called it the best job in the world, and he said he was proud to put on the uniform. But Ray had to retire last September—years before he wanted to—because he has cancer. His cancer has spread throughout his body—to his ribs, his leg, and now to his brain.

We know that cancer can strike randomly, sometimes with nothing to blame, but there is nothing random about Ray Pfeifer's cancer. Ray now has cancer because he was a first responder at Ground Zero, because he was one of thousands who rushed to help after we were attacked on 9/11. He served in Engine 40, Ladder 35, in the 9th Battalion, and most of the members of his battalion were killed on 9/11. Ray spent months on the pile searching for his friends. He wouldn't leave. He spent months digging for bodies in the rubble. He spent months there, breathing in horrible, toxic air that hung over Ground Zero like a deadly mist.

Many Members of the Senate would actually recognize Ray because he has been down here so many times—dozens of times—working the Halls of Congress, asking Senators to do the right thing and support the 9/11 bill. He was a strong, smiling man in uniform, traveling in his wheelchair from office to office, with contagious optimism and unmatched grace. Ray Pfeifer has never wavered. He has never been deterred. He has never even given up his efforts to pass the 9/11 health program. But you must know, Ray was never doing this for himself; he was doing it so other first responders didn't have to.

Ray wanted to be here today to see this bill passed because he had worked so long and so hard, but last week Ray had to go back to the hospital because his cancer had spread to his brain. Ray is physically in New York right now, but Ray's indomitable spirit is with us in the Capitol. His strength is with us. His unmistakable grace is with us.

Ray, I know you are listening. We never ever could have gotten this done without you. You did it. But I must tell you, Ray, this speech isn't for you; this speech is for your wife Caryn and your son Terrance and your daughter Taylor.

Terrance was actually sworn in as a New York City firefighter earlier this year, just like his dad. This speech is for them because they shared you with all of us. This speech is for all the responders who fought for all these years so that our 9/11 heroes could have the health care for the rest of their lives.

The city of New York and the United States of America owe Ray and his family a debt of gratitude that can never truly be paid. Ray is the embodiment of everything we strive to be as Americans: selfless, kind, brave, optimistic, someone who fights for what is right and never gives in.

Ray, I know you are a fighter, and I know you will get through this. You have the prayers of more people than you know, and may God bless you and your family. I look forward to celebrating this hard-fought victory in person with you soon.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from New Mexico.

FRANK R. LAUTENBERG CHEMICAL SAFETY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY ACT

Mr. UDALL. Mr. President, last night was a historic moment in the Senate. After years and years of negotiations and collaboration, after working with stakeholders across the country, we made tremendous progress toward historic, bipartisan environmental reform. The Frank R. Lautenberg Chemical Safety for the 21st Century Act passed the Senate on a unanimous voice vote, with 60 bipartisan cosponsors and with overwhelming support. This is a great milestone.

First, I want to thank Senator VITTER. Senator VITTER and I introduced this legislation for one basic reason: to fix our Nation's broken chemical safety law. I remember that over 2 years ago we had a very quiet dinner, and we walked away from that dinner saying: We are going to form a team, and we are going to get this done. It was after Frank Lautenberg had passed away, and Senator VITTER is a man of his word. We stuck to it, and we are making significant historic progress. I thank him for that.

There were times when the bill was stalled from even getting introduced, and Senators like TOM CARPER stepped in and helped us get back on track. I thank Senator CARPER for that. His early leadership as an original cosponsor of this bill got us off on the much needed right foot. Other moderates joined in, and we had some momentum building up.

This has been a long road to get here today. I thank Chairman INHOFE for his calm, steady leadership, and Senator MERKLEY, Senator BOOKER, Senator WHITEHOUSE, Senator MARKEY, Senator COONS, Senator DURBIN, and many others. They all helped move this forward and all helped make this a better bill.

I also thank Bonnie Lautenberg. Senator Lautenberg fought hard for TSCA