

\$1.1 billion response that passed the House—to pass the Senate and see to it that we tell the American people that we understand the dangers of Zika, and we are going to do everything we can to allow them the education they need to prevent it. We are going to respond to it, and do it in the right way.

As far as the VA is concerned, I have never understood how anyone can look at a veteran in the eye and say no. As chairman of the Veterans Affairs Committee in the Senate, I know what these people have done. As one who served in the military, I know what sacrifice means in terms of serving in uniform. To say no to the funding of VA health care is just unconscionable, and it is wrong. Our veterans volunteered. We don't have a draft anymore. We don't conscript people anymore. People volunteer. We have had 16 straight years of deployment in the Middle East of Americans who volunteer to protect this country. They deserve to know that when they come home, their health care is going to be provided for, their benefits are going to be provided for, and the promises we made to them to get them to volunteer to join our military are promises we keep to them, regardless of the condition they may be in or the difficulties they have.

So as one Member of the Senate, I can't say no to a pregnant mom, and I can't say no to a veteran. I don't think anybody in here really wants to say no to them at all.

I would encourage members of the Democratic Party to come back to the floor and join all of us in the Republican Party to vote for cloture on the MILCON-VA and cloture on the Zika virus, and do it as soon as possible. Time is wasting. Time is of the essence. Time is important. Our response is important. Our pregnant moms are important. There is nobody more important than the veterans of the United States of America.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Connecticut.

PUERTO RICO

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, I strongly agree with colleagues who have supported effective, real measures to confront the spreading toll that Zika is taking around the world and, I assume, will take an even greater number and magnitude in this country. But we need effective solutions that will provide funding for research, eradication of mosquitoes, and education of the public without harmful restrictions that prevent women from seeking family planning services that, in fact, help to prevent the spread of Zika.

Nowhere is the threat of Zika greater than in Puerto Rico. That island has been particularly hard-hit. In fact, the spreading financial crisis is combining with the spreading epidemic of Zika to create a true humanitarian crisis. That crisis will only be aggravated and deepened by a failure to deal effectively with the financial default that faces the island in just a few days from now.

On July 1, \$2 billion of loans will come due, and Puerto Rico simply lacks the resources to pay those debts. It is insolvent, so far as those debts are concerned. If the Bankruptcy Code applied, it could seek relief from its creditors and prevent the race to the courthouse and the enormous litigation costs and other expenses that will ensue.

We have an opportunity to act on behalf of the people of the United States who have a powerfully important stake in the people of Puerto Rico and the welfare of that island. It is Americans who live there—3.5 million American citizens, who have fought in our wars, given of their culture and heritage to all of us, and have helped make America the greatest, strongest country in the history of the world. They are American citizens who are part of the fabric of this Nation, and the people of Puerto Rico will be the ones who pay the price of a failure on our part to act effectively.

The simple fact is that Puerto Rico cannot afford to pay all of its creditors and continue to provide a basic level of services for its people. That fact is undisputed. The question is simply whether this situation is addressed in an orderly and productive way or permitted to enter the sea of chaos—financially and in humanitarian terms—that will ensue without action on our part.

Already we have seen the beginnings of this crisis. The island's only 24/7 stroke center has closed because too many Puerto Rican neurologists have left for the mainland. The Puerto Rican Department of Education has not paid hundreds of firms that provide education and transportation services. Hospitals are barely keeping the lights on. Schools cannot pay bus drivers.

My colleague from Florida, Senator NELSON, told the story yesterday of the neonatal dialysis center that is providing services only to customers who can pay cash up front. Imagine, in the United States—Puerto Rico is part of the United States—children in need of lifesaving services are being turned away and denied basic health care.

There is no need to guess as to what will happen on July 1. Creditors have told us—in fact, they have told us very explicitly in court papers already filed last week. They wrote: "It has long been settled law that Constitutional Debt is constitutionally required to be paid first in times of scarcity, ahead of even what government deems 'essential services.'" They will claim to be paid in advance and in priority over essential services. That is the stark, harsh truth of litigation, and a judgment in their favor will have lasting and irreparable effects on the people of Puerto Rico. If the creditors win, the people of Puerto Rico lose, and they lose tremendously and irreparably.

The Senate has a choice. Instead of allowing a chaotic process that costs tremendously in scarce resources and benefits financially the lawyers and some of the creditors more than any-

one, we can pass legislation before us today. It is not the legislation I would have preferred. In fact, this deal is not one that I find attractive. There are defects and weaknesses in its provisions relating to minimum wage and overtime and pensions and the structure of the board, among others. But the question is, What is the alternative?

With PROMESA, the parties will have a workable judicial mechanism with a stay on litigation, ensuring that chaos is avoided and the current mess is resolved. If we devise a system that only the creditors like and works only for them, it will benefit a small group of wealthy investors that could threaten to block Puerto Rico's economic recovery. In fact, the longest lasting and most alarming effect will be the uncertainty that results from our failure to act, which almost clearly and unavoidably will cause a deep recession in that island. It will, in effect, impede investment in the island and quash economic recovery.

Representative NYDIA VELÁZQUEZ put it best. She has never stopped fighting for her homeland of Puerto Rico. Before PROMESA passed the House she said:

Some would have you believe that if we only yell louder, there will be a third option. But let me tell you, I have screamed so loud that I no longer have a voice.

Like the vast majority of her House colleagues, she voted for PROMESA because it is the best option available now that both sides can support. No amount of wishing or yelling will change that fact.

PROMESA has the support of experts across the political spectrum and editorial boards across the country. It has won support from Puerto Rico's Governor and its sole representative in the U.S. House. It has won support from business leaders in Puerto Rico and in the United States. And, crucially, the Treasury Department says it is an essential step—a first step—to avoid humanitarian catastrophe. We can come back next month, next year, or sooner to try to make it better. But there is no better bill available this week, before July 1, and the impending humanitarian crisis will most affect and most enduringly hurt the people of Puerto Rico. The choice is hope or disaster for the Americans who live in Puerto Rico.

PROMESA could be better, but at the end of the day, we cannot permit the perfect to be the enemy of the good. I will continue to work for a better bill, seeking to offer amendments that improve it, and fighting afterward for still more improvements in this measure.

Today I urge my colleagues to join in supporting PROMESA.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

#### RECESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate stands in recess until 2:15 p.m.

Thereupon, the Senate, at 12:45 p.m., recessed until 2:15 p.m. and reassembled when called to order by the Presiding Officer (Mrs. CAPITO).

TRANSPORTATION, HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES APPROPRIATIONS ACT, 2016—CONFERENCE REPORT—Continued

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from West Virginia.

Mr. MANCHIN. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent to speak in a colloquy with some of my colleagues concerning the Miners Protection Act.

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

MINERS PROTECTION ACT

Mr. MANCHIN. Madam President, as the Presiding Officer knows very well, we have been asking for passage of the Miners Protection Act not just for our State of West Virginia but for all miners across America, as well as the retired miners who have done everything that has been asked of them.

We have some of our colleagues here today. At this time, if I can—if my other colleagues will allow me—I will defer right now to Senator BROWN from Ohio, since he has other commitments. He will be coming back and forth. If he could go ahead and get started at this time, then I will come back and defer to our other colleague from Ohio.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Ohio.

Mr. BROWN. Madam President, I know everyone is squeezed for time, but I thank Senator MANCHIN for his leadership, the Presiding Officer, the other Senator from West Virginia, Mrs. CAPITO, and Senator PORTMAN, my friend from Cincinnati.

We all know how serious this is. We are all willing in this body to do—at least the four of us and I know also Senator CASEY and Senator WARNER—whatever it takes to get this fixed. We know we can do this for our Nation's retired coal miners who are on the brink of losing their health care and retirement savings. This Congress can pull them back from that.

The UMW health care and pension plan covers 100,000 workers, 6,800 people in Senator PORTMAN's and my State. The plans were almost completely funded before the financial collapse of almost a decade ago, but the industry's pension funds were devastated by the recession.

We know if Congress fails to act, thousands of retired miners could lose their health care this year and the entire plan would fall as early as 2017.

For every one of those years where mine workers worked for decades and decades in the mines, they earned and contributed to their retiree health care plans and their pension plans—benefits they fought for. Their situation is similar to Senator MANCHIN and I, prior to—we remember what it was like here during the auto rescue, the benefits they fought for, benefits they gave

up raises for, benefits they have earned, putting money aside, and now they have been betrayed, frankly, and that is why this is so important.

We just had a meeting of a group of Senators, and Senator REID played a film of what is happening in West Virginia—the flooding—and much of that flooding is in miners' country, most of it is. There were mine workers' homes—Senator CAPITO knows this too—mine workers' homes that were under water, as were other residents in these communities, proud communities that have done everything right, where people worked hard and played by the rules. They paid their taxes. They helped their community. They have lost so much, and this is the last thing they just simply should not lose.

My contention in the Finance Committee—and I know it is the contention of my colleague from Ohio too—is that committee should not do anything until we fix the miners' pension. Senator MCCONNELL, the Republican leader, seems to be the only one who doesn't want to move on this. All the rest of us do. The point a lot of us are making is, we shouldn't allow this body—as important as I think Puerto Rico is and as much as I want to help them—we shouldn't be voting on restructuring Puerto Rico's debt without lifting a finger to help our retired miners. I don't want to delay Puerto Rico. I want Senator MCCONNELL to commit to us: OK. We will move to Puerto Rico but promise a date for a vote so we can do what we need to do to move this money from the abandoned mine fund to the UMWA pension fund in a way that works for these miners, that works for the widows of miners, that works for people who are sick from working in the mines, and works for people who were injured working in the mines.

As many of my colleagues know, I wear on my lapel a depiction of a canary in a birdcage. All of us know in mining country, the mine workers used to take the canaries down into the mines. They had no unions in the old days to help them. They had no government that cared enough to help them. It is up to us to provide that. The canary in the mine has been tweeting mercilessly, and it is time for us to step up and do what we were hired to do in these jobs.

I thank Senator MANCHIN.

Mr. MANCHIN. Madam President, if I can, I will give a little background and then we will go right to Senator PORTMAN.

I thank the Senator from Ohio. I appreciate it very much.

The Presiding Officer understands very well. We are both from the same State, born and raised there, and tough times have always been a part of our DNA.

So people know the history of the mines, as to the coal that has been produced, we would not be the country we are today, we would not be the superpower of the world, if we didn't have

domestic energy in our backyard. Domestic energy was the coal we used to fuel the Industrial Revolution. We basically defended ourselves in every war with coal. It was so important during World War II that if you were a coal miner, you would be asked to be deferred from fighting in the war to provide the energy the country needed to defend itself. That is how important this product has been.

Today it is kind of taboo to talk about it. People don't understand we have the life we have because of it. There is a transition going on and we understand that, but, in 1946, President Harry Truman said that we can't have the miners go on strike. John L. Lewis was going to take the miners out on strike for unfair compensation and safety reasons. Harry Truman promised them if they would stay—it was so important for our economy after World War II to keep moving forward, and without the energy, we couldn't do it. So he said: If you all will settle this strike, I will make sure everybody who produces coal—all the miners will pay into a pension fund that will guarantee that you will have health care benefits when you retire and a very meager pension. We are not talking big money. We are talking very meager supplements.

That was committed to and paid for. It had been funded all the way up until the greed of Wall Street in 2008, and it fell apart. Now, here we have the time. We go right up to the end of the time. Every time we go up to this timetable.

Well, July 1 is Puerto Rico, and then let me tell my colleagues one thing: July 15, all the retirees will start receiving notices that they will start losing their health care benefits within 90 days.

If you have seen on television all the devastation to our State in West Virginia, all the flooding, all the misery, the loss of life—one of the largest losses of life in any flooding in U.S. history. It just happened this past week in the State of West Virginia, our beautiful State. Every one of those communities you are seeing on television, with houses on fire floating down the river, with all the businesses ruined, all the homes and all the people who are left with nothing, every one of those are mining communities. Every one of them have miners living in them. Every one of them have widows who probably lost their husband to black lung depending on the health care benefits. Yet we have so many other things, and we are just asking for a vote.

This is a bipartisan bill. Here we are standing on the floor, all of us, not being Democrats or Republicans, just being Americans trying to do the right thing. All we are asking for is a vote on this. It will pass. There are ways for us to pay for it so it does not cost the American taxpayers. That is what we are asking for. I don't think that is too much to ask for.

I have said let's vote no on cloture tomorrow. I am not saying to be for or