

voice to the voiceless, making those who have died more than just a statistic. It gives us a perspective from which we can learn, and it pushes us to take action.

While thanking these families for their bravery is appropriate, it is simply not enough. Their bravery and their struggle must be marked by constant vigilance and urgent action. We must continue to focus on an “all hands on deck” approach at all levels of government and with those on the frontlines in order to make progress, save lives, and end this epidemic.

I am going to continue fighting and working with Members of both parties to combat this crisis, and I will continue sharing the stories of the people of my State. It is up to all of us to stop this from happening to more families.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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 President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

HEALTHCARE

Ms. WARREN. Mr. President, on September 30, the Children's Health Insurance Program expired. It has now been 25 days since the Congress has put our children's health and well-being on the back burner. My colleagues and I do not think that children's health belongs on the back burner. So we have come to the floor of the Senate to spend the afternoon speaking up for kids.

Thank you to everyone who joins me today to say that we should not wait any longer to make sure that children, community health centers, and new mothers have access to the healthcare programs that they need.

Republicans control Congress. It is up to them what we vote on and when we do it. So what was more important to the Republican leadership than the health of little kids? Republican leaders blew through the days before the children's healthcare deadline by trying to repeal healthcare for millions of Americans.

Once the Children's Health Insurance Program had already expired, Republican leaders burned through more time by holding a series of votes on a budget with giant tax cuts for billionaires and giant corporations that would also gut Medicare, Medicaid, and a bunch of programs that help working families. Republicans jammed through their terrible budget without a single Democratic vote last week, 19 days after blowing past the deadline to fund healthcare for kids.

Last night, 24 days past the deadline to make sure the kids had healthcare coverage, what were Republican leaders doing? Republican leaders stayed up late into the night holding a vote to make it easier for financial institutions to cheat people.

The days continue to tick by—24, 25. Tomorrow Members of Congress will leave for the weekend, 26 days past the deadline, and still there will be no vote to fund this critical program.

Senator Ted Kennedy and Senator ORRIN HATCH, a Democrat and Republican, wrote this legislation together back in the late 1990s. The Children's Health Insurance Program, also called CHIP, provides health insurance to low-income children and to pregnant women. Senator Kennedy and Senator HATCH created this program because they knew that providing healthcare coverage for children would make them healthier as children and healthier even after they grew up. They knew that some children were slipping through the cracks, and this was their solution. The children covered by CHIP didn't qualify for Medicaid, they weren't covered by employers, and they couldn't afford to buy private insurance.

In 1997, 15 percent of all the children in this country lacked any form of health insurance coverage. Today, because of the CHIP program and the Affordable Care Act, that number has shrunk to 5 percent of children. CHIP works with Medicaid to provide health insurance for one out of every three kids in this country.

States choose whether or not they want a CHIP program. Here is the deal. Every single State has chosen one because every single State recognizes the value of providing their children with healthcare coverage. In Massachusetts, the percentage of children with healthcare coverage is even higher than the national average. It is at 99 percent. We are doing something right here.

The original program was set for 10 years, and since then, every few years, Congress has had to act to reauthorize the program so that children can continue to get healthcare coverage. The CHIP program has been reauthorized four times since 1997, and not one of those times has Congress missed the deadline—not one—until now. In fact, in past years, Congress has made sure to reauthorize the program many months ahead of its expiration in order to give States the time they need to plan their budget. It sounds like a pretty sensible thing to do—but not this year. We are 25 days past the deadline for reauthorizing CHIP—25 days and counting. This isn't fair to States, to kids, or to their families.

So what actually happens now?

Well, the money runs out. Eleven States are set to run out of their CHIP funding by the end of 2017, and the others, soon after. Our Republican Governor in Massachusetts sent me a letter on day 3 past the CHIP deadline, and he wrote:

Parents are already afraid that their children's insurance may be lost in the near future. With each passing week, their fears continue to grow.

My Governor is right. States have to start making tough decisions. They

may have to decrease enrollment, turning away sick little kids who qualify for coverage but don't make it through the door on time. They could start kicking kids off of their insurance saying: Sorry, we just can't help anymore. Or they could be forced to make tough calls on benefits: We can't cover the wheelchair you need to get around. There is no physical therapy or no prenatal care until the funding comes through again.

That is just flat out immoral. Tax cuts for billionaires shouldn't come before making sure that a sick kid gets the help he or she needs. Mothers are lying awake at night. Fathers are tossing and turning, worrying about their healthcare coverage. What is the Republican leadership doing? Tomorrow they will be heading home for the weekend without lifting a finger to fund a bipartisan program that has been reauthorized four times over the past 20 years.

If that isn't bad enough, September 30 wasn't just the deadline for Congress to reauthorize CHIP. We also blew past the deadline on several other healthcare programs to help children, to help pregnant women, to help older Americans, and to help the chronically ill. We blew past the deadline to reauthorize the Community Health Center Fund and the National Health Service Corps, which funds health centers and supports healthcare workers that provide children with high-quality primary care. We blew past the deadline to reauthorize the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program, which funds home visits to new and expectant parents to give them help keeping a new baby healthy and safe. We blew past the deadline to reauthorize the Special Diabetes Program, which funds diabetes research that could offer hope to many children living with diabetes.

When a kid is sick, moms and dads move Heaven and Earth to get them the care they need. They don't wait 25 days to go to the doctor and check to see if something is wrong. They stay up all night to make sure their little ones are all right. They wait outside the hospital room, pacing until they get an answer, but Republican leaders in Congress just don't seem to care. They don't seem to care if these families have the health insurance coverage they need so they can get an x ray or pay for an antibiotic or run some tests.

Twenty-five days, 26 days, 27 days—it just doesn't seem to matter to Republican leaders, but it sure matters to moms and dads and kids in Massachusetts and all over this country.

Senator Kennedy used to say: “The test of greatness for a nation is how it cares for its children.” Right now Republican leaders in Congress are failing that test. My colleagues have come to the floor today to say that time is up. We are here to fight for kids.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Delaware.

Mr. COONS. Mr. President, I rise in support of my colleagues who have come to the floor to urge the Senate to quickly pass funding for the Children's Health Insurance Program, known as CHIP.

CHIP provides comprehensive health insurance to 9 million low-income children who don't qualify for Medicaid, including 18,000 children in my home State of Delaware. Lots of other States would say that 18,000 children is a small number, but in Delaware that is a significant population. Bluntly, whether it is 1 or 100 or 1,000 or 18,000, how can we allow inaction in this Chamber to put at risk the healthcare of millions of children across our country?

It has now been more than 3 weeks since funding for CHIP expired. While some States have enough money in their accounts to carry them through to the end of the year or just beyond, the uncertainty about when or if CHIP funds will be reauthorized is causing chaos, concern, and anxiety across the country. Some States will have to start issuing notices to households that they will face the loss of CHIP coverage. Imagine the unnecessary fear this will bring to parents and families and struggling households across the country as they are facing other challenges in their life.

This is totally unnecessary. We can stop this uncertainty right now and bring needed stability for parents, children, and States and show some kind of leadership from our Federal Government. I am a proud cosponsor of the bipartisan KIDS Act, S. 1827, being led by Senator ORRIN HATCH of Utah and Senator RON WYDEN of Oregon. This KIDS Act would extend funding for CHIP for 5 years. I urge the Senate to do right by America's children and America's working families and swiftly take up and pass this bill.

While we are on the topic of programs desperately in need of reauthorization, I also want to draw attention to the expiration of the Community Health Center Fund, which ensures access to cost-effective primary and preventive care for 26 million patients across the country. In my home State of Delaware, about 50,000 Delawareans benefit from several community health centers that are widely respected, well run, and provide affordable, accessible, and preventive healthcare in communities up and down my State. Funding for this critical program also lapsed more than 3 weeks ago, and now, sadly, community health centers across my State and across the country are struggling to make key decisions—decisions like signing new leases or signing on new medical personnel to positions. Without certainty that the Federal Government will authorize their funding, how can we expect health centers to plan, to provide services, and to provide preventive healthcare that improves health and strengthens our community?

We should do everything we can to swiftly pass a 5-year reauthorization

for funding for community health centers, such as the bipartisan bill that Senator BLUNT of Missouri and Senator STABENOW of Michigan have introduced, the Community Health Investment, Modernization, and Excellence Act of 2017, S. 1899, which I am proud to support.

Folks, I urge that we work together in a bipartisan way. We should not be using children's access to healthcare as a bargaining chip. We should be taking up these two bills to provide reauthorization, funding, and certainty immediately for both CHC and CHIP funding now and without hesitation.

With that, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Pennsylvania.

Mr. CASEY. Mr. President, as you know, the Children's Health Insurance Program expired on September 30, in large part because we spent much of this year and the days leading up to that date debating the repeal of the Affordable Care Act, instead of focusing on bipartisan priorities like the Children's Health Insurance Program. As a result, the program known as CHIP expired and the health of 9 million children, including some 340,000 Pennsylvania children, are now at risk.

CHIP is not just a bipartisan program but a successful program with a Pennsylvania history. It was modeled after a State program in Pennsylvania that was signed into law by my father when he served as Governor in the early 1990s. The program provides affordable health insurance to children whose family incomes mean they don't qualify for Medicaid but still struggle to find affordable health insurance options. It is a program that working families rely upon and that provides peace of mind to parents.

Many families turn to CHIP during times of economic hardship, such as when a parent loses his or her job. At such a stressful time, I have heard from parents over and over how they have peace of mind knowing that their children will get the healthcare they need.

Some parents who rely upon CHIP for their children are, in fact, students, working and going to school so they can make that leap into stable, middle-class life. They may not have a job with health insurance or they may not be able to afford the insurance, but they know their children will get the healthcare they need.

Regardless of what drives families to the CHIP program, it is thanks in large part to CHIP that the United States of America has the highest rate of insured children in our Nation's history. According to the Census Bureau, 95.5 percent of children had health insurance in 2016. CHIP is also a popular program, as repeated studies have demonstrated. Parents think CHIP is a valuable program, and they are satisfied with the coverage and with the care their children receive.

Unless the Senate acts and acts very soon, we will have betrayed all of those

children and all of those families. There is no reason for CHIP to have expired and no reason why we shouldn't pass the bill right now, if not in the next couple of days—certainly, in the next 2 or 3 weeks—to ensure that not one single child loses his or her health insurance.

We have taken important steps to extend the program. The Finance Committee marked up the bipartisan Keep Kids' Insurance Dependable and Secure Act of 2017, known by the acronym K-I-D-S, or KIDS. The KIDS Act came out of the Finance Committee, which reauthorizes CHIP for 5 years, and that happened some 3 weeks ago. I am proud to be a cosponsor of that bill.

So it is time to act. We have a commonsense, bipartisan, successful bill in the Senate that is ready to go. It is out of the Finance Committee. So I would urge my colleagues to join me and to join others who have come to the floor today and on earlier days to take swift action to pass the KIDS Act.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. LEE). The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. BROWN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

Mr. BROWN. Mr. President, healthcare for our Nation's children is something we ought to be able to all come together on, but this Congress, which has not done much of anything, is always able to find a way to help Wall Street. Think about the middle-of-the-night vote last night, where the Vice President of the United States came to the rescue of Equifax and the rescue of Wells Fargo and the rescue of Wall Street overall. Think of the celebrations last night on Wall Street because of that tie vote, which stripped consumers of their days in court. It stripped consumers of their consumer rights.

This Congress, when it came to the Children's Health Insurance Program, allowed it to expire at the end of last month. It left millions of families afraid they will lose healthcare for their kids. Think about what this uncertainty means for parents. Trying to make sure your children are safe and healthy is enough to worry about.

Families shouldn't have to fear losing coverage for their kids because of some politicians in Washington. All of us have taxpayer-funded health insurance. Some politicians in Washington don't seem to care much about these kids.

In my State, more than 200,000-plus children have insurance under CHIP. So even if something happens to their parents—even if they lose their job or their insurance—those 200,000-plus children in Ohio have insurance because of CHIP. But it expired on September 30.

Governor Kasich is a Republican. I am a Democrat. We stand together on

this, as we stand together protecting Medicaid and as we stand together protecting the Affordable Care Act. He tells us that there is still a little bit of money left over in Ohio to get us through these next few weeks until Congress does its job. But that doesn't mean parents don't worry about their children possibly losing their health insurance.

Kids on CHIP are a little more likely to have asthma or a little bit more likely to have an illness, in part because they are low-income kids and they may live near a bus line and the air they breathe may not quite be so good. Or they live in Appalachia, where they might not be able to get to the doctor quickly. Those kids are more at risk, and those parents are worried, even though Governor Kasich assures them and I assure them we are going to do this.

Congress worked into the middle of the night last night and debated for hours on a giveaway to Wall Street. They debated for hours on helping Equifax, which abused the public trust of 145 million people—5 million in my State. They bailed out Wells Fargo, which fraudulently attacked, for want of a better term, 3.5 million customers. Congress can bail them out, but it can't pass the Children's Health Insurance Program?

Because of CHIP, 209,000—I said more than 200,000 before; more precisely, 209,000 Ohio children have access to affordable healthcare today—healthcare they may not have received otherwise. That is the importance of this program. It used to be bipartisan until this Congress, always in its rush to help Wall Street, forgot about these children.

This program provides peace of mind for parents. Regardless of income, when a parent knows that a daughter or a son has health insurance, it provides peace of mind. They know if their child has a sore throat or earache, they don't have to wait until the child is so sick they take her to the emergency room. They won't have to hesitate or wonder if they can afford the doctor visit or antibiotic. They get the care their kids need.

Most of us in this body are parents. Most of us in this body have insurance provided by taxpayers. Wouldn't you think that this would be important enough to Leader McCONNELL and the leaders of this body and to President Trump and to Speaker RYAN? Wouldn't you think it would be important enough?

We all talk about loving our kids. We talk about grandchildren. Most of us are at the age where many of us have grandchildren. We don't care enough about these children as we get insurance from taxpayers. We don't care enough about these kids to do this?

It has already been 3 weeks now since CHIP expired. CHIP means a child in Cincinnati or Dayton or Portsmouth or Akron or Youngstown or Mansfield can see a family doctor when they need it,

preventing a costly ambulance ride and emergency room visit. CHIP means getting vaccines and shots. It means having dental coverage. We know what happens to low-income kids who don't get good dental care.

The State of Ohio probably has enough money to help protect CHIP kids through the end of the year, but Congress needs to act now.

I have met with CHIP families across Ohio. Let me tell you some stories. Josh, whom I met in Cleveland—his children were covered by CHIP when he was laid off from his job. He said, "The ability to take health insurance out of the equation, feeling confident that my family will continue to get the same quality of care they had while I was working, was a huge weight lifted." Think about that.

This father, knowing that he has insurance—he had plenty of things to worry about. He lost his job. Who knows what that means about their home and their lifestyle and their family? But at least he knew he could rely on insurance—until now. Look what this Congress has failed to do.

Think about Noble from Columbus, who came to my office earlier this year with his mom to talk about how important CHIP is. Noble relies on CHIP for coverage for the five pediatric specialists he sees at one of America's great hospitals, Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus.

My colleagues need to think about Josh and his kids in Cleveland and Noble and his mom in Columbus. We need to think about the mother of a son with diabetes, worrying about whether her son will be able to see the same doctor next year or about a father with a daughter with asthma, praying she doesn't lose her inhaler on the playground because in a few months they might not have insurance to pay for that inhaler.

My wife has asthma, and I know what that means. She had a father who had health insurance through his union plan with the Illuminating Company in Northeast Ohio. He worked maintenance. It was a good blue-collar job. It didn't pay enough to send her to college, but it did pay enough with good insurance that it gave them a decent lifestyle. They didn't have CHIP back then. More people had union plans. More people were protected.

We used to have CHIP until September 30, when this Congress didn't care enough to provide it. We should not be playing politics with families' lives.

Two years ago, I led the fight in this body to protect CHIP. Because of that work, with the support of advocates all across Ohio—and there are so many of them across the country—we extended funding for CHIP for 2 years. Again, this was with bipartisan support, back when Congress operated that way.

We have already come a long way this year. We passed a 5-year extension of CHIP out of the Senate Finance Committee. It had every vote in that

Committee, with the exception of one. I thank Senator HATCH and Senator WYDEN and my colleague from Ohio, Senator PORTMAN, and so many of our colleagues for their help with that.

But this process is taking too long. Josh and Noble and the 209,000 Ohioans and 9 million children across the country are in a situation in which their parents are unsure of whether they will have insurance through the end of the year and next year and the year after.

It is time for us to come together to ensure that the families we work for have the healthcare they need for their children.

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. HIRONO. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

Ms. HIRONO. Mr. President, Donald Trump and the Republican Congress have spent most of the past year pushing their misplaced priorities, no matter the direct and collateral damage it causes for millions of Americans across the country.

There are many examples to choose from to illustrate this point. Just last night, the Vice President had to come in and break a tie to protect huge corporations from the victims of the frauds they perpetuated. Now they are putting together a huge tax cut for the wealthiest people in our country, and they are trying to sell it as a raise for the middle class. In Hawaii, we call this shibai—or B.S.

But there is perhaps no issue in which Donald Trump's dangerous agenda has caused more harm than his quest to deprive millions of Americans the healthcare and the health insurance they need. His first attempt at repealing the Affordable Care Act would have thrown as many as 30 million people off of their health insurance. Thanks to the combined efforts of so many people—active people, engaged people across the country—we defeated this proposal.

A few months later, continuing the assault on healthcare, Donald Trump renewed his attack on our healthcare system under the so-called Graham-Cassidy bill. But once again, the combined outrage of millions kept the bill from coming to the floor.

In the time they spent on their single-minded, unrelenting quest to repeal the Affordable Care Act, Donald Trump and Republicans in Congress have allowed authorization for the Children's Health Insurance Program, or CHIP, to lapse. Nearly 30,000 children in Hawaii and more than 9 million across the country depend on CHIP for their healthcare. You heard just now my colleague from Ohio tell you stories about the children in Ohio—children with asthma. In Hawaii, we have children with asthma, children with diabetes.

Nearly 30,000 children in Hawaii who rely on CHIP for their healthcare are being affected by our inaction. Primarily covering children from low-income families who earn too much to qualify for Medicaid, CHIP provides critical and much needed care for children with complex medical conditions.

Although existing funding has allowed States to stretch budgets to keep the program in place, money is quickly running out. If we don't take action soon, as many as 4 million children could lose their health insurance entirely—4 million children.

Congress cannot and should not be complicit in what I would call gross negligence. It is not negligence; it is gross negligence.

CHIP has traditionally enjoyed bipartisan support. In fact, it emerged from the committee with bipartisan support. I am glad Senators Wyden and Hatch have come together to create the KIDS Act, which I have cosponsored. This bill would extend CHIP's authorization and funding through 2022 and provide much needed certainty to millions of families across the country.

If we brought this bill to the floor right now, it would pass. It would clearly have the votes to pass. The only question is, Why don't we do it? Why don't we provide healthcare to millions of children in our country, for Heaven's sake?

I cannot believe that my colleagues on the other side of the aisle are afraid to risk incurring the wrath of a vengeful President. I cannot believe that is what is keeping them from doing the right thing.

I encourage the majority leader to bring this bill to the floor for a vote as soon as possible.

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.

Mr. MARKEY. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

Mr. MARKEY. Mr. President, this summer the Children's Health Insurance Program, or CHIP, turned 20 years old.

I served on the House committee that created this bill and was proud to support providing the affordable comprehensive health insurance to low-income children and pregnant women. It is a bipartisan program, and it is an effective program. Last year alone, CHIP covered nearly 9 million children throughout the country. In Massachusetts, CHIP has been instrumental in achieving near-universal coverage for our children in the Bay State.

Yet, instead of celebrating CHIP's successes over the last two decades, congressional Republicans have placed CHIP in programmatic purgatory. That is because they allowed CHIP to expire at the end of September. Instead of fo-

cusing on reauthorizing this critical healthcare lifeline, Republican leadership chose to waste months of time trying to repeal the Affordable Care Act. They let just one of these successful programs lapse while they tried unsuccessfully to end another. They were more interested in ripping healthcare coverage away from millions of Americans and taking a machete to Medicaid rather than protecting our Nation's children.

We should not forget that CHIP stands on Medicaid's shoulders. Any fundamental changes to how Medicaid operates—whether it is block-granting or capping the program—will hamstring CHIP's ability to serve children as effectively and efficiently as it was intended to do, but instead of immediately returning attention to ensuring that this lapsed deadline is not effective, House Republicans have further delayed action by inserting partisan policies to pay for the program. This has not only caused an unnecessary delay in passing a bill to reauthorize CHIP, but it has dragged CHIP onto the political game board, turning it and our children into pawns in their ruthless game of partisan chess.

CHIP has historically been and should be above such games because CHIP is not just an insurance program, it is a reassurance program. It reassures States that they can provide comprehensive healthcare coverage to some of their most vulnerable, it reassures doctors that their patients will be able to access care and treatment, it reassures teachers that their students can be healthy enough to learn, and it reassures Mom and Dad that their children can still get well in the face of financial hardship.

Continued inaction on CHIP is dangerous and damaging. Every day we delay reauthorizing CHIP is another day parents across the United States live in fear that their children may soon lose their health insurance. They panic at the thought of leaving their child's asthma untreated, skipping a trip to the dentist, or delaying a doctor's visit because they can't afford to pay for the treatment or medication that may be prescribed. If we don't act soon, this fear may become a terrible reality for families. In Massachusetts, CHIP funding will expire early next year. This could impact coverage for 160,000 children in the Commonwealth, potentially delaying access to treatment and services that could have ramifications into adulthood.

In Congress, we are celebrating the 20th birthday of a successful children's insurance program by effectively threatening to end it. That is what Congress is now doing to the State of Massachusetts. That is what they are saying to the State of Massachusetts; that they are going to effectively try to shut down a program that for 20 years has served the children in our State. That makes no sense.

I urge my Republican colleagues to put their partisan games aside to pro-

vide certainty and stability to States, to providers, and to reassure families by reauthorizing CHIP. When President Trump says he wants to make the healthcare system in America better, when President Trump says he wants to make sure families are able to take care of their children, we have a program that does that already. It is successful, and families and the States love it. All we need is Republicans in the Senate to work together in order to make sure that program continues for the health of all children in our country.

I yield the floor.

Mrs. FEINSTEIN. Mr. President, the Senate is currently considering the nomination of Scott Palk to a lifetime appointment as a Federal district court judge on the Western District of Oklahoma. I voted against Mr. Palk's nomination in the Judiciary Committee, and I will oppose his nomination on the floor.

While his nomination was pending for a lifetime appointment to be a Federal judge, Mr. Palk changed his membership with the National Rifle Association to take out a life membership in the organization. When I asked Mr. Palk about this change, he asserted he expects to maintain this "lifetime member" status, even if he is confirmed, and he refused to commit to recuse himself from any cases where the National Rifle Association has taken a legal position.

What I find disconcerting about this is Federal judges must be impartial. Federal judges must not have any appearance of conflicts of interest. When individuals come before a court, they need to trust that their case will be heard fairly and on the merits.

Every American must believe that they will get a fair, unbiased hearing no matter who their judge is. Federal judges must follow applicable laws and regulations that severely limit the kinds of organizations they can participate in.

For example, the code of conduct for Federal Judges says, "[A] judge should not participate in extrajudicial activities that detract from the dignity of the judge's office, interfere with the performance of the judge's official duties, reflect adversely on the judge's impartiality, lead to frequent disqualification, or violate the limitations set forth below."

That is why members of the Senate Judiciary Committee often ask judicial nominees at their hearings what steps they will take to prepare for the bench. It is the committee's duty to determine whether a nominee is prepared to leave their former roles and personal beliefs at the door and instead serve in an impartial arbiter.

In fact, when nominated for lifetime appointments, most nominees try to rid themselves of conflicts and limit their affiliations, especially with advocacy organizations. However, Mr. Palk not only chose to maintain his membership with the NRA, he chose to extend his membership for life.

The fact that we are considering this nominee, given this issue with his background, just 3 weeks after the Las Vegas shooting, should really give us all a reason to pause. Las Vegas is now the deadliest mass shooting committed by an individual in the United States. It has only been a year since the Pulse Nightclub massacre in Orlando, which was previously the deadliest mass shooting in our Nation's history. It has been only 5 years since 20 6-year-olds and 6 adults were murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT. What happened after each of those shootings?

After Sandy Hook, the NRA opposed any legislation that would have restricted high-capacity magazines or military-style assault rifles.

After the Pulse Nightclub shooting, the NRA opposed any legislation to expand background checks on gun buyers or to prevent gun sales to people on terrorist watch lists.

After the Las Vegas shooting, the NRA, despite initial statements to the contrary, has come out opposed to any legislation to ban "bump-fire stocks," even though such devices allow guns to function as machineguns, which are already banned under the law.

The NRA has never supported any commonsense gun legislation. The NRA's views on gun control issues could not be clearer, which is why it is so problematic that a judicial nominee chose to double-down on his NRA membership while his nomination was pending, rather than extricate himself from his prior commitments and then refuse to commit to recusing himself on cases where the NRA has made its views abundantly clear. This should trouble all of us.

Our job in evaluating judicial nominees is to ensure our Federal courts are an independent part of our system of checks and balances. To do that, we need confidence that judicial nominees will safeguard their own impartiality. I think all of my colleagues feel that way.

That is not what Mr. Palk has done. Instead of taking steps to separate himself from strong political views, he has proactively taken steps to increase his commitment to specific views of the law.

I will vote against Mr. Palk's nomination and urge my colleagues to do the same.

Mr. MARKEY. 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. INHOFE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

AFRICOM, FOREIGN POLICY, AND OUR MILITARY

Mr. INHOFE. Mr. President, I came back just a week ago from visiting our troops stationed all around the world, in all the commands—AFRICOM,

EUCOM, CENTCOM—and talked to them about the threats in all these regions.

At a time when I hear colleagues across the aisle and political pundits ask the question, Why do we have troops in various places like Africa, it is important to remember the strategic importance of Africa.

I remember 10 years ago we didn't have a command for Africa. It was part of three commands: Pacific Command, Central Command, and European Command. Now we have AFRICOM. It is its own command. It seemed a little unreasonable that we were treating Africa as somewhat of a stepchild when that is the breeding ground out there for a lot of the things happening in terms of terrorism.

Despite our military's reach and influence, our Nation's shrinking defense budget has put AFRICOM at risk during a time when commanders are saying we face the most dangerous world we have ever faced, and we have.

I have often said that I look wistfully back at the days of the Cold War, when we had two superpowers and they were predictable. We knew what they had. They knew what we had. You have people from all over the world who are putting together equipment that we never dreamed they would have.

We have just gone through 8 years of another administration. I don't say this critically of him, but one thing about President Obama was that he was a committed, sincere liberal. Liberals generally don't pay a lot of attention to the military. Now we find ourselves in a situation where we are hurting. A lot of people assume that we don't have any problems militarily.

Sometimes I remind people that up until about 1962, we spent more than half—52 percent in 1962—of all of our revenues on defending America. What is it today? It is 15 percent. When I tell people that, they are in shock that we are in the situation we are in. We have terrorist groups in Africa—such as ISIS, al-Shabaab, and Boko Haram—and they are all growing in capability and have expanded their areas throughout Africa. This year we have seen horrific events occurring at the hands of these extremists. On October 14, a truck bombing killed 300 people in Somalia's capital. In Niger—it just happened—we had four of our U.S. soldiers who were killed in action on October 4 by an ISIS group.

We know that we have serious problems. I think it is a great disservice for people to say that we must have known that we had the threat that was out there in Niger, when in fact we didn't know it. They even compare it sometimes with Benghazi. I remember Benghazi. I was there at the time. I remember Chris Stevens. Chris Stevens was the Ambassador who went there. He was in my office right before he left, talking about the threats that were there, talking about the Taliban, his training there, and talking about organized terrorist activity.

I have to remind people that the persons who are responsible for advising the Secretary of State, who at that time was Hillary Clinton, and the President, who was President Obama at that time, are the DNI—that was James Clapper at that time—the Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. When the Benghazi event happened, the annex was blown up. They all said at that time—they advised us, the President, and the Secretary of State—that they were forewarned by more than a month that on the anniversary of 9/11 things would blow up, and it was going to be an organized attack.

Right now there is an investigation going on to determine whether or not there is any way that we could have anticipated that in Niger this would be happening, and so far, that hasn't come up.

Despite the best of intentions, many of our partners in the region lack the capacity and the effectiveness to adequately defend themselves. People say: What do we have to gain there? This is exactly the same situation that we saw in Afghanistan prior to the war there. The terrorists have to have a safe harbor to train in, and that is what has happened.

During my travel, I had the opportunity to meet Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. I have to say this about him. I have never seen him so ecstatic. A lot of us were looking back at what they were trying to do during the Obama administration. It was disheartening to think that they put together this Iran deal, and our Secretary of State at that time, John Kerry, talked about how great it was and all of these concessions that were made when, in fact, that wasn't the case. Nonetheless, when our President came out and said that he was not going to recertify the Iran deal, that was kind of neat because people don't realize that it takes a recertification every 30 days by the President in order to keep the Iran deal together. He has not done that.

Shortly after that, I happened to be talking to Prime Minister Netanyahu. It was an incredible relief to him that we were going to be looking at this. Still today, I think we all understand that Iran is the one that is financing terrorism all around the world. We discussed the shortcomings and looked forward to working with my colleagues in the future so that Iran does not become a nuclear nation, not now or ever.

What is perhaps the most encouraging is the message that this approach sends to the rest of the world, specifically to North Korea. President Trump's approach shows me—and, more importantly, shows Kim Jong Un—that an America-first foreign policy means that we refuse to take a single-minded approach to global threats.

I recall the changes taking place 8 years ago when our new President, President Obama, started his appeasing tour by going over and talking about