

payments to surviving military spouses. There are more than 60,000 Americans whose spouses have died on Active Duty or during retirement and, as a result of this legislation, this important payment will no longer exist on a year-by-year basis, but it will be preserved indefinitely.

Make no mistake, these are challenging times for our Nation as the world is becoming an increasingly complex place. Now more than ever, we are asking our military to tackle difficult problems and to face adversaries who consistently seek new ways to do us harm.

No matter the day, no matter the situation, America's Armed Forces stand ready to answer the call and protect our Nation. We need to uphold our solemn duty as Members of the Senate and keep faith with those who wear the uniform by giving them the tools they need.

The 55-year legacy of passing the National Defense Authorization Act did not happen by accident. It has happened because Members of this body know and Members of this body recognize that this bill represents a promise to our servicemembers. It is a promise that, as you stand in harm's way, far from your families and loved ones, we stand with you. When you are deployed during a holiday or a special occasion, as many members of our own Nebraska National Guard will be this Thanksgiving, we stand with you. During late nights and early mornings in the cold, in the heat, in battle, and in peacetime, we stand with you.

Passing the National Defense Authorization Act means keeping our end of the promise to those who serve. As a Member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, it has been my honor to play a part in helping to craft this year's bill, and I would like to thank our chairman, Senator JOHN MCCAIN, for his leadership in guiding the committee through the process. I would also like to thank America's men and women in uniform for all that they do to keep us safe.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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 President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION

Mr. SASSE. Mr. President, the consideration of Federal judges with lifetime appointments is perhaps the most important and long-lasting work this body will do between now and the end of the year.

Every Senator—Republican and Democrat—took an oath to perform this duty. Nobody took an oath to outsource this duty to any outside organization. Unfortunately, some of my

colleagues on the Senate Judiciary Committee are apparently willing to hand over their voting cards to the American Bar Association, based on the claim that the ABA is an unbiased, indifferent umpire that just calls balls and strikes.

The American Bar Association is not neutral. The ABA is a liberal organization that has publicly and consistently advocated for left-of-center positions for more than two decades now. The ABA has no right to special treatment by Members of this body.

It is pretty simple. If you are playing in the game, you don't get to cherry-pick who the referees are.

Take, for just a moment, a look at the amicus briefs they have filed in recent years.

In the District of Columbia v. Heller, the ABA supported denying an individual their constitutional right to keep and bear arms.

In Christian Legal Society v. Martinez, the ABA supported forcing Christian organizations on campuses to accept members that reject their faith.

In Medellin v. Texas, the ABA supported forcing States to recognize the judgments of the world court in order to stop the execution of a gruesome murderer.

In United States v. Windsor, the ABA supported the recognition of same-sex marriage through judicial fiat rather than through legislative debate.

In Arizona v. United States, the ABA supported a constitutional ban on State and local law enforcement assisting in enforcing Federal immigration laws.

The list goes on. In each of these cases, the ABA decided to weigh into divisive and contentious issues. This is their right, indeed, but it is definitely not neutral. In each of these cases, and many more, the ABA took what can only be described as a left-of-center position. In each of these cases, the ABA was picking a side.

Again—to be clear—they are absolutely allowed to do this. It is what makes this country great. But it is laughably naive to suggest that they are an objective and neutral organization. They are not.

The ABA cannot make liberal arguments to the nine members of the Supreme Court, and then walk across the street and seriously expect that the 100 Members of this body in the Senate will be treating them like unbiased appraisers. That is essentially what Attorney General Bill Barr said in 1992 when the ABA first began to openly take pro-abortion positions—which, by the way, led to thousands of members quitting in protest because those members knew that the ABA claims to neutrality about political issues were no longer even possibly defensible.

Then—U.S. Attorney General Bill Barr commented on the ABA's pro-abortion advocacy at the time by saying: "By adopting the resolution and thereby endorsing one side of this debate, the ABA will endanger the perception that

it is an impartial and objective association."

Twenty-five years later, Barr's words were right. His words ring true.

Again, I want to be perfectly clear. The ABA is allowed to have any view that its members want to have, and they are allowed to advocate and to protest on behalf of those views and on behalf of their members. This is America, and that is exactly what the First Amendment is about. That is fine. But what is not fine is that the ABA, which is a liberal advocacy organization, would masquerade as a neutral and objective evaluator of judicial candidates.

The ABA cannot take blatantly liberal positions on the one hand, and then masquerade as a neutral party on the other, and then demand a special seat at the table in the Senate Judiciary Committee and in the Senate—in this body—to try to tell us who is and isn't supposedly qualified to be a judge.

Just as the ABA has every right to advance its liberal policy positions, every Senator has the right—and indeed, the duty—to give our advice and consent on judicial nominees. If Senators decide that they like and value the ABA's policy positions and they like and value the ABA's rating, they are free to give them due deference and consideration, but don't hide behind it.

Don't pretend that the ABA is something that it is not. Do not ignore the facts of what the ABA has become. The American people deserve honesty, not thinly veiled partisanship.

Thank you.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Rhode Island.

NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION BILL

Mr. REED. Mr. President, I rise to discuss the fiscal year 2018 National Defense Authorization Act.

After several months of negotiations, the House and Senate Armed Services Committees have arrived at a completed conference agreement. Earlier today, we passed the NDAA for the 56th consecutive year.

Let me highlight some of the important issues that we addressed in this agreement. This conference agreement authorizes a total of \$692 billion, which includes \$626.4 billion in base budget funding for the Department of Defense and certain security activities of the Department of Energy and \$65.8 billion in overseas contingency operations, or OCO, funding.

Of course, we could not have done it without the cooperation of all the members of the committee, including the Presiding Officer, and I thank him for his contribution and his service.

This includes the administration's \$5.9 billion budget amendment we received earlier this month, which seeks an additional \$4.7 billion in base budget funding to bolster missile defense and to repair two Navy ships after recent collisions, as well as \$1.2 billion in OCO funding for operations in Afghanistan and for additional capabilities in the Central Command area of operations.

The conference agreement includes significant increases in additional resources aimed at restoring full spectrum readiness, as soon as possible, across the military services. Specifically, operation and maintenance funding, widely known as the lifeblood readiness, was increased by \$1.16 billion for the Army, \$277.9 million for the Navy, \$82.3 million for the Marine Corps, and \$1 billion for the U.S. Air Force.

This conference agreement supports the topline of \$700 billion for national defense, or 050, activities, which is roughly \$150 billion over the Budget Control Act cap. If the cap is not adjusted and if this amount is fully funded by the appropriators, then we would trigger the harmful across-the-board cuts of sequestration, just at the time when we are trying to restore readiness.

I want to be clear. I agree that the DOD needs additional resources. But we must address the caps for both defense and nondefense activities.

I remind my colleagues that under the Budget Control Act, or BCA, national defense activities include certain programs at the FBI and the Coast Guard, while nondefense activities include the State Department, veterans' care, Customs and Border Protection, and the TSA. We need to look at our Nation's needs holistically, and we must remain vigilant over the amount of money the DOD can effectively utilize. We have to look at national security, and that includes both sides and both caps.

With regard to our overseas operations, the conference report authorizes the entirety of the funding request for our efforts in Afghanistan, including \$1.7 billion to invest in critical aviation capabilities, such as close air support platforms and modernized rotary wing assets, and to continue to sustain and train the existing fleet.

The report also authorizes 3,500 special immigrant visas to continue to uphold our commitments to the many brave Afghans who have provided critical support to the U.S. mission in Afghanistan. In this regard, let me thank Chairman MCCAIN and Senator SHAHEEN, without whose efforts this provision would not have been included, I believe, in the final conference.

The conference report continues robust support for our counterterrorism efforts against ISIS, al-Qaida, and the other violent extremist groups, including approximately \$1.8 billion for the Train and Equip Programs in Iraq and Syria. It also fully funds the Department's budget request for U.S. Special Operations Command.

With this bill, we will enhance public transparency and congressional oversight of military operations and the policies that underpin them. Most notably, it requires a public articulation of the legal and policy frameworks governing the use of military force outside of declared war zones, as well as additional reporting on civilian casualty

incidents and DOD efforts to prevent them.

The conference report includes a requirement for the Secretary of Defense to appoint a senior official in the Department to lead an effort to harness and integrate all of the Department's capabilities to confront and defeat the kind of strategic influence operations that Russia has conducted against us and our allies over the last 2 years. It is vital that the Defense Department integrate its cyber capabilities with its information warfare experts to provide capabilities and options in time for next year's election cycle in the United States and to support our allies in Europe against Russian operations directed against them.

Additionally, the conference report includes a requirement for the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State to develop and report to Congress on a comprehensive, whole-of-government strategy to counter the Russian malign influence threat. Such a detailed strategy must include measures to defend against and deter Russian activities related to national security, including hybrid warfare, cyber attacks, and information operations.

The 2018 NDAA also authorizes the Secretary of Defense to establish the Indo-Asia-Pacific Stability Initiative, which will be used to improve our posture in the Asia-Pacific region and provide additional resources to increase partner capacity and multilateral exercises in the region.

The Chief of Naval Operations' Force Structure Assessment from last winter identified a goal of 355 ships, including 66 attack submarines. This bill makes a good downpayment on that goal by adding five ships to the budget, including one DDG-51 destroyer, two littoral combat ships, one LX(R) amphibious ship, and one expeditionary sea base.

Perhaps not as dramatic, but no less important, is the addition of \$698 million in the budget request to allow the Navy to begin expanding the submarine industrial base. Achieving the CNO's force structure goal will require adding 18 attack submarines to the previous force structure goal of 48 boats.

This will be no small challenge since retirement of older submarines will exceed deliveries of new submarines. During the 10-year period of 1991 to 2000, we ordered only four attack submarines—Connecticut, Jimmy Carter, Virginia, and Texas—so we have to do some catching up.

Providing the resources for the Navy to expand the submarine industrial base in an orderly fashion will be a critical element of efficiency and a critical element in building up our fleet.

The conference fully supports the budget requests for the modernization of the triad and its nuclear command and control to ensure we can deter existential threats to our homeland. Our triad of submarines, ICBMs, and bombers have been in service for decades and must be replaced.

Secretary Ash Carter put the situation eloquently when he said that a failure to do so, in his words, "would mean losing confidence in our ability to deter, which we can't afford in today's volatile security environment."

In the area of technology and acquisition, I am pleased that this bill shows strong support for the Department's network of labs and test ranges, which help drive efforts to maintain our battlefield technological superiority. In particular, I think this bill makes significant strides in enabling DOD to develop and buy the modern software and IT systems that are integral to every system, platform, and business system in the Department of Defense. Additionally, it reauthorizes the Defense Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research to expand the number of universities capable of working with the Pentagon on advanced research.

The bill also pushes DOD to make use of advanced "Big Data" techniques to manage its business functions and processes. New ways of collecting, analyzing, and applying the lessons of data are revolutionizing the commercial world. It is time that DOD applied these same techniques to lower costs and save money and time.

The conference report also includes a provision that would allow the Army to transfer all excess firearms no longer actively issued for military service to an organic facility for the purpose of melting and repurposing. This provision not only allows the Army to divest itself of these weapons, but it will also provide a steady stream of work to our organic foundries. These are an important part of our arsenal system.

Furthermore, the provision will authorize the Secretary of the Army to annually designate additional excess firearms that are no longer in military use to be repurposed. This common-sense approach will allow the Army to save money on storage costs, as well as repurposing these excess weapons for higher priority needs identified by the Army.

I am also pleased that the conference report builds on a markup amendment by Senator NELSON that directs the Department to conduct a threat assessment and deliver a master plan for climate change adaptation.

The conference report includes House language from my colleague Congressman JIM LANGEVIN that codifies several findings related to climate change and expresses the sense of Congress that climate change is a threat to our national security.

In the area of military personnel, the conference agreement accomplishes much on behalf of our servicemembers and the Department of Defense. The bill authorizes a 2.4-percent across-the-board pay raise for our troops and extends authority to pay over 30 bonuses and special pays to encourage recruitment, retention, and continued services.

It also includes authority for service Secretaries to extend by an additional year the time that the recruits may remain in the Delayed Entry Program to ensure that background checks are completed, so that they are not unnecessarily separated due to the fault of government. These are individuals who are here illegally. Their status is a result of their joining the MAVNI Program. If this program were terminated, we would lose their service to our military forces and they would be forced to leave the country.

Additionally, the bill permanently extends the special survivor indemnity allowance under the Survivor Benefit Plan, which was due to expire early next year. This ensures that widows of our veterans and servicemembers who die of service-connected causes will continue to receive their monthly benefit and authorizes annual cost-of-living adjustments to this benefit going forward.

With regard to military family care, the report authorizes \$50 million for impact aid, including \$40 million in supplemental impact aid and \$10 million—twice the usual amount—for military children with severe disabilities. For military families and for local school systems all across this country, this impact aid is absolutely essential. Furthermore, it requires the Department to improve pediatric care and related services for children of members of the military.

This bill will also improve military family readiness by addressing the shortage of qualified childcare workers, requiring that the realities of military life be considered in setting the operating hours of childcare centers, and by increasing flexibility for families when the military requires them to move.

Let me conclude by stating the obvious. The reason this bill passed was because of the extraordinary bipartisan leadership of Senator JOHN MCCAIN and also because of the extraordinary bipartisan leadership of Chairman MAC THORNBERRY of the House Armed Services Committee and Ranking Member ADAM SMITH. I look forward to working with them in the future.

Finally, the conference agreement would not have been possible without the hard work of the entire committee staff, who worked diligently to help finalize this agreement. I thank Chris Brose, Eric Swabb, and all the majority committee staff for their hard work this past year. On the minority side, I thank my staff director, Elizabeth King. I also thank Gary Leeling, Creighton Greene, Carolyn Chuhta, Maggie McNamara, Jonathan Clark, Jonathan Epstein, Jorie Feldman, Ozge Guzelsu, Jody Bennett, Kirk McConnell, Bill Monahan, Mike Noblet, John Quirk, Arun Seraphin, and Jon Green.

Let me state the obvious: They do the work. Sometimes we get the credit, but the work is theirs. I am deeply appreciative of all of their efforts.

Again, let me indicate what is obvious to all our colleagues. Without the

inspirational, practical, dynamic, and unrelenting leadership of Chairman MCCAIN, we would not be at this moment today—the 56th consecutive passage of the National Defense Authorization Act.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. BLUNT). The Senator from Maine.

Mr. KING. Mr. President, before addressing the topic that I want to take up—and I know it is one that is near and dear to the Presiding Officer's heart—which is rural healthcare, I want to express my admiration and thanks to Senator REED, the Senator from Rhode Island, and Senator MCCAIN for their incredible leadership of the Armed Services Committee. They show us what it is like to lead. They show us what it is like to take on difficult issues and to work out difficult problems, and I would like to express my appreciation to them for that.

I see the Senator—

Mr. SASSE. Will the Senator from Maine yield for 30 seconds?

Mr. KING. Absolutely.

Mr. SASSE. I would just like to associate myself with your comments, sir, in praising the ranking member.

Senator REED went through a long list of people who have gotten the NDAA across the finish line for more than half a century in a row.

As a newbie rookie in this body, I have to say that serving with the two of you on the Armed Services Committee is a real privilege and honor. Much of the body doesn't work very well right now, but that committee works incredibly well.

So I want to agree with the Senator from Maine that the ranking member is a huge part of why the Armed Services Committee works so well.

Thank you, sir.

Mr. KING. I thank the Senator.

I say to Senator REED, I appreciate your leadership.

Mr. REED. I thank the Senator from Maine and the Senator from the great State of Nebraska.

Mr. SASSE. I thought you were buying time.

Mr. REED. No. Once again, we have been following Senator MCCAIN, and he took us all the way. Thank you.

HEALTHCARE

Mr. KING. Mr. President, I did a mathematic calculation a couple of years ago, and it resulted in an interesting conclusion. The Senate is a rural body. Eighteen Members of the U.S. Senate represent a majority of Americans. That means 82 percent—or 82 out of 100 Senators—represent smaller States, more rural communities.

Today, I want to talk about a disastrous development that is headed for our rural communities that we have the capability to fix, and it is one we should fix sooner rather than later. I am talking about Federal funding for federally qualified health centers, which expired on October 1. Seventy percent of the funding for the FQHCs expired on October 1. One hundred per-

cent of the National Health Service Corps funding expired on October 1.

These are vital programs that serve rural America and provide incredibly important healthcare services. They are an overlooked part of our national healthcare system, in part because they are traditionally in rural and out-back locations.

In Maine, we have 20 centers and 70 facilities scattered all over our State, and they are providing services every day to over 200,000 people. This is a vital part of our healthcare system. Yet the funding expired at the end of September, and so far nothing has been done.

How important is it? In Maine, there are 1,700 employees at these facilities; a total economic impact of over \$300 million a year; \$8 million in State and local tax revenue and \$32 million in Federal tax revenue. They provide \$16 million worth of uncompensated care that goes to Maine people who need the help. They are efficient. In Maine, they have saved Medicaid over \$100 million, and \$257 million is the estimate for what they have saved the overall healthcare system. Again, FQHCs provide 1,700 jobs and support another 1,000 jobs in their communities.

But this isn't only about economics and economic development and jobs; it is about healthcare. One in six people in Maine gets their healthcare from FQHCs—210,000 people. They accept everybody who comes to their door. I have been to them all over the State. They use a sliding-fee scale for people who are low income, who don't have insurance, and they provide all manner of services. It depends on the center; different centers have different services. They have medical, behavioral health, dental, substance abuse treatment and support, case management, optometry, podiatry, OB/GYN, prescription assistance, outreach and enrollment, pharmacy, radiology, and school-based healthcare services. These are the healthcare providers for rural America. And it is not only Maine; it is across the country. There are 10,000 sites across the United States. Some 26 million patients are at risk.

Well, what is the big deal? The big deal is that people are going to lose their healthcare services. We estimate that in Maine, we are going to lose about 400 clinicians and administrative and support staff who will have to be laid off at the beginning of the year unless we solve this problem in the immediate future. At least 25 of these sites will be forced to close, and we believe there will be almost 30,000 Maine residents who will lose access to their healthcare system.

Most of the FQHCs—federally qualified health centers—are getting by on their funding from last year, so the expiration of the funding hasn't hit them yet, but it will begin to hit them on January 1. That is what we have to respond to.

It is also already having an effect just by creating uncertainty. I got an