

the 55 counties that I represent but also being able to create an associated 1,400 jobs.

Federal grants like these help not only our communities but our universities, such as Marshall and West Virginia Universities, which provide great benefits to our communities.

These are tangible achievements over the last year—both more global, such as the tax reform, and more local, as in broadband deployment.

The Senate also plays an important role by giving advice and consent on President Trump's nominations and confirming them. This year, Republicans made significant progress in shaping the judiciary, most certainly starting with the confirmation of our Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch. His strong record and straightforward approach are just what we expect from a Supreme Court Justice. I was proud to vote for his confirmation this year. We have also confirmed 12 circuit judges—the highest number during a President's first year since 1891.

I am pleased to say that as of yesterday, we had confirmed both of our U.S. attorneys in the State of West Virginia. I am very grateful for that because this fight against opioids has to have the U.S. attorney's help. It has to have the U.S. attorney aggression—not just with law enforcement but also helping with treatment.

So this year, I am proud that we addressed a lot of America's concerns. We have tackled challenges head-on and delivered real results. I am proud that President Trump and his administration are listening to the needs of small States like mine, West Virginia, and working with me to deliver that relief.

It has been an honor for me to host some Cabinet members in the State of West Virginia—I didn't see that over the last 8 years—Secretary Perry, Secretary of Energy; Secretary Mnuchin, Secretary of Treasury; and also the Secretary of Labor. We went on a coal mine tour with Secretary Acosta. This helps them see the kinds of ups and downs of life in rural and central United States—in Appalachia in particular.

We have a lot we have to do. We have a lot on our plate. I think it is always this time of year that, in my personal life, I like to look back at some of the great things that we have accomplished as a family or for those whom I love or some of the things that happened to us that maybe haven't been quite as good as we would have hoped. I also take this time to be a grateful person, to be a grateful American, to be a grateful West Virginian because we are so blessed with where we live and how we live and the bounty of our friendships. But I also take the time to look forward to what we are going to be able to do. So when I see tax reform kicking in next year, in 2018, that is what I am going to be looking forward to for so many hard-working West Virginians, so many hard-working small business owners, and so many people

who have been waiting for years—decades, in some cases—for the kind of reform that we put forward.

With that, I would like to yield back my time, but first I would just like to say that I am grateful to be serving with the three Members who are in here with me today. I wish everybody here and everybody listening in this country a very wonderful holiday season.

Thank you.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Oklahoma.

Mr. INHOFE. Madam President, let me make a comment to the Senator from West Virginia. One of the problems we have right now is that during the last administration, there was a war on fossil fuel—which includes coal and nuclear also—and some of the damage has already been done. Unfortunately, we can't come in with a ready fix now and assume—because a lot of the generators out there had done field switching out of coal, so you can't switch it back. So I will say it was help coming not quite on time, but nonetheless it is here now.

VA ACCOUNTABILITY AND VETERANS HEALTHCARE

Mr. INHOFE. Madam President, let me mention something that is very significant to me personally. I remember it was 2 years ago today that I picked up USA TODAY, and in a USA TODAY article, they singled out my State of Oklahoma and said that we are not treating our veterans right. We were in shock at that time. In fact, the article detailed some really appalling things that were going on and were not going on in my State of Oklahoma. There were things the inspector general reported during the Obama administration that we had no way of knowing about.

We seem to have more veterans per capita in Oklahoma. One of the reasons is we have five major military establishments, and Oklahoma is a great place to live, so a lot of them retire there. They were not getting the help they need, and they were not getting the treatment to the highest standards that were available.

This isn't how we take care of veterans in Oklahoma. Senator LANKFORD and I and two of the House Members worked on this and talked to regional Veterans' Administration leadership. We talked to the veterans. We talked to whistleblowers. And we identified three key problems that we needed to fix. This is interesting because these are three problems in my State of Oklahoma, but they would be the same thing in Nebraska or any other State because it is not just in our State of Oklahoma.

The first one was that the VA couldn't fire bad employees.

This is always a problem. You go into an organization and you find that things are not going very well because there are one or two bad employees.

Yet it takes you a year before you are able to get rid of these people. Despite having been identified, it takes forever to terminate an employee.

Well, we fixed that this past summer when President Trump signed the VA Accountability Act that included our language to allow the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to immediately fire employees for misconduct or poor performance. That was successful. We did it. That is history.

I have to say that during President Trump's administration so far, he has used this firing authority on over 500 bad actors from the VA, and we are finally creating a culture of accountability in the VA, which is having positive results. That is the first reform.

The second one: Too many veterans were forced to receive care from VA facilities that were hours away or didn't provide specialized care.

This is a problem. A lot of these veterans don't have the capability to move around and get the care they need, and they didn't have the choices. So we actually had to make a change, and we did. We worked with the President and reauthorized the bipartisan VA Choice Program.

The VA Choice Program is great because it allowed our veterans to actually, in those hard-to-reach areas, get high-quality healthcare, regardless of where they had to travel to get it done. That was a success.

Finally, after the USA TODAY article, we requested an accredited third-party look at the problem at our VA facilities because previous reports from the Obama Veterans Affairs inspector general failed to identify and correct these problems. Well, my request was denied. It is just like any bureaucracy. They don't want someone looking over their shoulder, so they said: No, we are not going to allow you to have a third party accompany the VA to look into the problem that you have.

Some are not aware of this, but in the Senate, when someone is nominated, we can put a hold on them and not allow them to go through confirmation—at least for a long period of time. At that time, the President—our current President—had nominated a person to be the inspector general of the Veterans' Administration. We put a hold on him until they allowed someone to come in and monitor the evaluation that the VA was doing of their own bureaucracy in Oklahoma. That worked, except the problem with that is it was a one-time authorization. We needed to make that a permanent part of our structure. I am pleased to say we did that.

When we signed the Enhancing Veteran Care Act, it permanently granted the VISN directors—that is one of the director levels of the VA—and gave the medical center directors the authority to request, at their request, an outside oversight in order to evaluate what they had done. It has been very successful.

It is important for the regional directors to have the authority because

they have the best idea of the reality of care at their facilities.

I appreciate the work of my colleagues, Senator JAMES LANKFORD, Congressman MARKWAYNE MULLIN, and Congressman STEVE RUSSELL. It turned out to be a real good team, and we are able to get these things done. We are already starting to see real progress in improving the veterans' care in Oklahoma and across the country because as we are improving the system we had in Oklahoma, that same system can be improved in Nebraska or any other State.

We need to get our VA facilities from their current ratings to the highest standard. The highest standard rating is five stars. We are now up to three stars in Oklahoma. We were at one star when we first discovered this problem on that fateful day 2 years ago today in an article in USA TODAY.

President Trump will continue to be an important partner for Oklahoma as we continue to improve our veterans' care.

SUPPORTING OUR MILITARY

Mr. INHOFE. Mr. President, President Trump's commitment to our veterans is only matched by his commitment to our servicemembers and our national security. You can't really segregate it out and say, well, we are going to take care of our veterans' activities and then still say we are not going to allow our country to have the national security they fought so hard for.

We saw that earlier this week when the President outlined his national security strategy, charting a new course for American foreign policy, leaving behind the failed policies of the Obama administration. With his national security strategy, President Trump has been clear that he is committed to protecting the homeland, promoting American prosperity, and advancing peace through strength. Have you ever heard that before, peace through strength? I am one of the few who is old enough around here who remember our great President we had who talked about peace through strength when he had to rebuild the military after the Carter administration. It was actually as bad—or as downgraded as our military has become from the last administration.

Now he is asserting America's leadership in the free world. We saw how under President Obama the military was forced to divert resources for priorities that weren't even about defending America. He used the military to advance his liberal agenda, which led to the wasteful spending on what they call the green Navy and the green bullets. The idea that climate change was the largest threat to our national security, all of that has changed and not a moment too soon.

President Trump is focused on what matters, rightfully taking out things like just worrying about climate

change as opposed to rebuilding our military, and he is building it at a very rapid rate right now.

We passed the bill, the Defense authorization bill, and we have made a great start on this.

Now, when the President came into office, our military was facing a readiness crisis, and Americans didn't really understand this. They didn't know. They had not been told this. We had a biased media that didn't allow this information to get out. As an example, our Air Force today, right now, is short 1,500 pilots, and 1,300 of those are actually fighter pilots. Only 50 percent of the Air Force squadrons are trained and ready to conduct all of their assigned missions. I have to repeat that. Only 50 percent of our Air Force squadrons are trained and ready to defend America.

The Navy is the smallest and least ready it has been in years. It currently can only meet 40 percent of the demand for regional combat. The commanders in the field include only enough personnel to man six and a half of our nine carrier air wing.

A carrier air wing is something a lot of people are not familiar with. A carrier air wing has approximately 75 combat aircraft. Currently, we have manned only 6½ wings and are 8,000 sailors short.

This is an air wing. They have F-18s, they have EA-18s, they have F-35s, they have C-2As. Again, just a little over half of ours are actually ready. Well, that is the problem we are faced with right now. More than half of the Navy's F-18s are grounded because they are awaiting maintenance or lack of necessary parts. If you look at our Marines, our Marines are using F-18s, and 62 percent of F-18s will not fly. People are just shocked when they find out about it. It is because we don't have the spare parts. Well, we are getting busy on that. We are going to make sure we correct those problems.

The Army has said that only about one-third of their brigade combat teams, one-fourth of their air aviation brigades, and one-half of their division headquarters are currently ready.

A brigade combat team consists of 7 battalions, approximately 4,500 students. I wish I had time to come up with a chart on this, but the carrier wing is one that is absolutely necessary to get folks straight, and we plan on doing that.

Faced with the most dangerous threats I have seen in my lifetime, these are critical gaps in our military we simply cannot accept.

I often say, when I look back at the good old days of the Cold War, where we had two superpowers—and the superpowers, we knew what they had, they knew what we had. It is totally different now.

You have a country like North Korea, which has demonstrated that they have the capacity now to reach an American city. We learned that on November 28, when they actually dem-

onstrated a range that would reach one of our continental U.S. cities.

They tried to give us a little bit of comfort in saying, well, we don't know that they would be able to carry a warhead. We don't think they would have the capacity to do that. Well, we don't know that. That is not much comfort.

When they say: We don't have the capacity to be accurate on a reentry because of what a missile has to go through on a reentry, well, that is not very comforting that this would happen.

Anyway, the NDAA—the bill we passed, that the President signed into law—would be a good step in correcting the readiness shortfalls. I look forward to continuing to work with him on this critical process.

We have a committee that already is having hearings about the problems we are having. We had one, actually, in the subcommittee hearing I chaired just this week. We are busy correcting these problems.

Meanwhile, back to our VA problems in Oklahoma, we put two new great directors in the VA clinics. We have a level of veterans' care Oklahomans are proud of. Only yesterday, President Trump signed the Enhancing Veteran Care Act to ensure that we continue to give our veterans the best care. They deserve it, and they are going to get it.

At the same time, we are going to restore and rebuild the military as our Nation's No. 1 priority. Our troops deserve it, and they are going to get it.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. SASSE). The Senator from South Carolina.

TAX REFORM BILL

Mr. SCOTT. Thank you, Mr. President.

This week, we took a major step toward helping the middle- and working-class family by passing the first significant tax reform package in a generation.

I wanted to take a few minutes to thank a lot of folks for their efforts, hard work, and dedication to this process. At the Member level, both Leader MCCONNELL and Chairman HATCH did amazing work leading us through this process.

I also had the privilege of working as part of the Core 4, with PAT TOOMEY, JOHN THUNE, and ROB PORTMAN, over the past year developing this bill. Those three guys are some of the hardest working Members we have.

I also thank MARCO RUBIO for his dedication to improving the child tax credit, as well as MIKE LEE and Ivanka Trump.

We were also able to include my Investing in Opportunity Act as a part of the legislation. This is legislation that will help distressed communities throughout the country. More than 50 million Americans today live in those distressed communities, and the Investing in Opportunity Act can usher