

are often abused as well. Paige Hodson from Anchorage is a survivor herself. She has been working for years with thousands of women as an advocate for women who are trying to get out of abusive relationships and women who are also trying to protect their children. These are complicated and often difficult issues and cases, but Paige has said it is critical for both the safety of the mom and the kids to make sure they are represented by an attorney.

So what does the POWER Act do? Every area of our country—every part of America—is represented by a judicial district that is represented by a U.S. attorney. Under the authority of the Justice Department, some States have several U.S. attorney districts. Alaska has only one.

Utilizing this national framework of all of our different U.S. attorneys throughout America, the POWER Act sets out a way to increase connections between lawyers and victims, between advocates and survivors. The bill, which has already passed the Senate, directs each U.S. attorney to hold at least one annual event, inviting lawyers and legal service representatives who want to provide their legal services and pro bono time to empower victims by representing them.

It also requires U.S. attorneys to plan and hold events with a focus on addressing these kinds of crimes—domestic violence and sexual assault—in Indian Country and among Alaska Native populations, where some of the abuse in the lower 40 and in my State is very, very high.

Another important point about the POWER Act is that it would not add a dime—not one penny—to the Federal debt. But here is what it would do: It would create an army of lawyers—thousands of lawyers—to defend survivors of abuse. Think about that positive vision. Think about that positive vision and goal. What a great way for Americans, especially attorneys, to rise up in a positive and constructive way in response to all the bad news we are reading almost daily about these issues and show the better angles, the better side of our country.

The model for this bill came from my State of Alaska. As I mentioned, we have the highest rates of domestic violence and sexual assault in the country—something that no Alaskan is proud of. When I was attorney general, working closely with our legislature, our Governor, and many of the victims advocacy groups, we launched a strategy called the Choose Respect Campaign. The Choose Respect Campaign highlighted this problem in our great State.

We did public service announcements about how real Alaskan men choose respect; we changed the laws to make the penalties for perpetrators much harder; and we provided increased services for victims. One way we did that was to hold what were called pro bono legal summits. I hosted those summits. We brought together lawyers and victims

advocacy groups, legal services groups, and this actually worked. It worked. By 2014, over 100 cases in our State were handled by volunteer attorneys providing thousands and thousands of hours of volunteer legal assistance to victims of domestic violence and sexual assault.

Think about that. Alaska has a little over 700,000 people, and we had over 100 attorneys come out—thousands of hours, just in our State, with a small population. If we could take this model to 300 million Americans, we literally would have an army of lawyers helping survivors with volunteer time and helping meet this significant unmet need throughout our country.

As I mentioned, the POWER Act passed unanimously in the Senate, but, unfortunately, it is being held up in the House. Ironically, it is stuck in the Judiciary Committee—the committee focused on bringing justice to Americans. It is stuck there. Remember, this is not going to cost a dime, yet it has been stuck for months in the Judiciary Committee. It is kind of ironic. These victims need help, and this bill will do that.

It is not only my bill to help victims and survivors of sexual assault that is stuck in the Judiciary Committee. My colleague, the majority whip from Texas, Senator CORNYN, has a very important bill that he came to the floor of the Senate just last week to talk about. It is called the SAFER Act and will help States ease the nationwide backlog of thousands of untested rape kits that currently sit untested in labs and on police storage shelves across the country. There are thousands. Ending this backlog could take perpetrators off the streets and provide victims and survivors the justice they deserve. We know this would work. We know that would help.

The SAFER Act passed the Senate under the leadership of Senator CORNYN. Let me talk about how important that bill is to the country. In my State, there are 3,484 untested rape kits, more per capita than any State in the country. Anchorage, my hometown, has one untested kit for every 164 residents. In Juneau, AK, it is one for every 160 residents. The backlog is all across the country. As Senator CORNYN pointed out in his speech, there are 2,000 kits that remain untested in his State, the State of Texas. In Virginia, where the State legislature has made this kind of testing a priority, there are also more than 2,000 kits sitting on police shelves.

The Detroit Free Press recently reported on how, in 2009, officials stumbled onto more than 11,000 untested rape kits. After they raised enough money to test them, 817 serial rapists were identified. That is why this is so important. Once these kits are processed, they often give us the evidence to go after the abusers, the criminals.

It is remarkable to me that both of these bills—the SAFER Act that Senator CORNYN has championed and the

POWER Act that Senator HEITKAMP and I have championed—are sitting in the House Judiciary Committee. Victims are not getting justice right now with these bills sitting there.

Why on Earth would such bipartisan legislation, which would literally end up helping thousands of survivors and probably bring to justice hundreds of criminals who commit these heinous crimes of sexual assault and domestic violence—why on Earth would we have bills, which have bipartisan support and little to no impact on the Federal Treasury, stuck in the House Judiciary Committee? It is beyond comprehension.

To my colleagues in the House, let's move this. Let's move these bills before the holidays. Let's start focusing on bringing justice to people who really need it.

Helping victims and survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault is not a Republican issue, it is not a Democratic issue, it is not a women's issue, and it is not a men's issue. It is an issue that affects all of us. Working together—as Senators, as Members of the House, as Americans—we should clearly unite in this cause, which transcends politics or ideologies, because we can start changing the culture of abuse. That is what we have been trying to do in Alaska. It is going to take a long time. It is going to take a long time, but we need to act.

I am hopeful that my colleagues in the House—my colleagues particularly in the Judiciary Committee—recognize the urgency of these kinds of situations and will move the SAFER Act and the POWER Act out of committee and get it on 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. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

RUSSIA INVESTIGATION

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, I thank my colleague, Senator MARK WARNER from Virginia, for his powerful and eloquent remarks on the floor less than 24 hours ago. He talked about the threat that exists now—looming larger every day—of a constitutional crisis. It is a crisis that threatens the foundations of our democracy. It involves a potential confrontation and, indeed, a legal conflagration between the President of the United States and the special counsel who has been appointed to investigate wrongdoing in our government.

None of the facts that justified—indeed, required—the appointment of a special counsel has been controverted in any reasonable way by anyone since

the appointment of that special counsel. Now a campaign of mistruth and misdirection has been launched against that special counsel investigation. It is a campaign that is calculated, concerted, and coordinated. It is calculated because it is planned and pre-meditated; it is concerted in its consistency and vehemence; and it is coordinated among officials within the government, including the U.S. Congress and commentators and individuals outside the government.

The danger of a constitutional crisis is real and urgent, and we must come together in the U.S. Senate to face it and address it and deal with it.

This body has come together in the past when America has faced a foreign adversary that has sought to do our Nation harm. We have come together to hold our leaders accountable when they have broken faith with the American people. We have come together when forces of dissension and misdirection have sought to undermine or weaken respect for the law and law enforcement and, indeed, the rule of law. What is at stake here is nothing less than the rule of law.

Let's recognize what is happening. The President, in effect, is going down two tracks. On the one hand, he is saying that he has no present intention to fire the special counsel or to pardon anyone—yet. He adds that word very distinctly. The other track involves a coordinated, concerted, and calculated campaign that is continuing—indeed, rising—in intensity and volume.

The President's supporters, even in raising that volume, have reached extraordinary lows. Let's remember. At first, our Republican colleagues appeared to recognize that Robert Mueller was eminently—indeed, uniquely—qualified for his important task. Republican House Members called him a “man of the utmost integrity” and “someone we all trust.” Now we hear that the Mueller investigation is somehow biased. One commentator known to be close to President Trump suggested that the special counsel should not only be fired, he should be arrested. Even Members of Congress who once recognized Mr. Mueller's stellar record as a member of the Armed Forces, as well as in his capacity as the FBI Director, as a prosecutor, and as a public servant, have impugned his integrity. Indeed, they have begun to sow seeds of doubt.

A chorus of defenders and sycophants has launched this campaign—calculated, concerted, and coordinated—to smear the special counsel, to impugn the integrity of the FBI—to, indeed, directly attack this great and important institution. They have decided to do it in that concerted and coordinated and calculated way. The President, himself, has said that the FBI's reputation is in tatters.

An article that appeared today in POLITICO described an effort by a House Republican on the Intelligence Committee to initiate a sustained at-

tack on the Department of Justice and the FBI. The President's chorus of defenders and sycophants describes routine law enforcement activities as a “coup” and traffics in the kinds of conspiracy theories that we usually associate with fringe internet chat rooms.

What is their justification for this vituperative attack on the Department of Justice and the FBI?

One of the FBI agents expressed his political views in a private text to an FBI attorney, but the special counsel took swift and decisive and deliberate action to remove that FBI agent from the investigation.

More broadly, let's recognize the reality here. As a Federal prosecutor, as the U.S. attorney for Connecticut for 4½ years, and then as the State attorney general for 20 years, I know—and all of us who have been prosecutors know—that investigators, like FBI agents, have political views. Some are on the right end of the political spectrum; some are on the left. The mark of their professionalism is that they leave them at home when they go to work. They park them at the door, not just because it is what they are taught and trained to do, but they believe in unbiased law enforcement because they know that a criminal investigation, ultimately, comes down to facts and law. It cannot be based on political opinions. Investigations that are biased by political opinions are doomed to disaster.

Perhaps most importantly, there is not a scintilla of fact—not a shred of evidence—that the special counsel investigation has been impacted in any way by any political view of any FBI agent or, for that matter, anyone else in that investigation. There is, simply, no evidence that political views have impacted the special counsel's investigation.

The simple fact that prosecutors know is that all such investigations must seek to uncover the facts and apply the law, and that is what Special Counsel Robert Mueller has done. The proof is in the results so far—two powerful convictions that have shattered the Trump Presidency and two indictments that indicate this investigation is just at its beginning, not at the beginning of the end but, simply, the end of the beginning. These trials of the two indictments will go well into next year, as will the investigation. That there will be more convictions and more indictments, I think, can be pretty reliably predicted to a near certainty.

Beyond this investigation, we all know in this Chamber—and, certainly, any of us who have been involved in law enforcement—that public trust and confidence are essential. The President, himself, has said he is “a true friend and loyal champion” for law enforcement and “more loyal than anyone else can be.” He has pointed out that law enforcement officials, like our police and FBI agents and DEA and others, “rush into danger every day,”

and he has criticized the folks who have subjected them to “relentless criticism.” He has promised to always stand with them. Those promises apply, apparently, to law enforcement as long as they are not investigating him.

The President has said that he has no present intention to fire the special counsel, but he has far from ruled it out. For anyone who thinks it would be too outside the bounds of normal standards, remember that the firing of Jim Comey as FBI Director was regarded as unthinkable. It was unthinkable until President Trump did it.

Equally important, this chorus of defenders and sycophants can undermine the Mueller investigation even if Mueller, himself, is never fired. They can poison the well of public opinion and, indeed, a jury pool. They can sow seeds of doubt regarding the special counsel and his team, and they can lay the groundwork for firing Robert Mueller as well as for issuing pardons.

Let no one have any doubt. Firing Robert Mueller would create a firestorm that would be every bit as vehement as the Saturday Night Massacre. It would provoke an uprising, an outcry, and outrage in the American people and in this Chamber. The time to make that fact clear is now, not just for this side of the aisle but with unanimity and force on both sides.

That chorus of defenders and sycophants may think or imagine it can prevent the special counsel from revealing his finding or reporting to the American people at the conclusion of his investigation or that it can discredit or demean those findings or that it can undermine his credibility before a jury. It would be wrong because this body and our colleagues are committed to uncovering the truth, to pursuing it wherever it leads, and to enforcing the law.

That is my hope and belief, but it must not only be a hope; it must be reflected in action—in real action. That involves passing legislation that will send a message about this body's resolute and unwavering commitment to making sure that the special counsel cannot be fired, that pardons cannot be issued, and that this investigation cannot be a victim of political interference.

The President has indicated that he is averse to hearing about Russia or considering its threat to this country. That aversion certainly sets back his ability to defend this country against the Russian threat by sanctions and other means and deterrents that will assure that Russia is made to pay a price so they do not do it again.

In conclusion, let me just say that that aversion must be overcome. We need to send a signal, as we did by passing sanctions, that we will take action against Russia to stop it from interfering again in this election, that we will make sure that Russia is made to pay a price, and that our constituents know that we will insist on a fair

and independent investigation without political interference, passing legislation that is bipartisan that has been offered by Republicans as well as Democrats, including myself, and should be moved through the Judiciary Committee and to the floor of this Congress. That message is all the more important now as this investigation penetrates the White House for the first time in the Flynn conviction, coming closer to the Oval Office itself. A real and robust congressional investigation of those efforts through the Judiciary Committee, as well as obstruction of justice, continues to be necessary, but we should combine our efforts to make sure that law enforcement and the judicial process moves forward without political interference that will undermine its credibility.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mrs. CAPITO). The Senator from Ohio.

Mr. BROWN. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that following my remarks, I yield the floor to Senators JOHNSON and MARKEY.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. BROWN. Madam President, I wish to thank my colleagues Senator WARNER and Senator BLUMENTHAL for their words on the Senate floor—Senator WARNER's words yesterday especially, defending Special Counsel Robert Mueller, in his leadership on the Senate Intelligence Committee's Russia investigation. Senator WARNER is absolutely right that we must protect the integrity of the Justice Department's independent investigation.

Congress needs to make clear that there are redlines. Any attempt to fire Robert Mueller, to shut down the investigation, or to presumptively pardon key witnesses essential to the investigation would be an abuse of power and a direct threat to the rule of law and to our constitutional system.

Ohio's Ukrainian community knows the impact of unchecked Russian aggression in Russia's effort to undermine democracy around the world. Getting to the bottom of Russian interference and protecting our future elections from that interference are critical.

My priority is getting to the bottom of what happened so that our democratic process is upheld and so we can move forward with the business we were sent here to do—creating jobs, combatting the opioid crisis, as Senators JOHNSON, MARKEY, and I will speak about in a moment, and helping middle-class families. Any efforts to delay that conclusion or interfere in the investigation, I believe, will not be tolerated by Senators in either party.

Thanks to Senator WARNER for making that clear. Thanks to my colleagues in both parties who take this seriously. All of us have had serious conversations with Members of both parties to discuss what all this means, and thank you for all of us working to-

gether to complete the independent Senate investigation. It is important that we make clear to the American people that this is not a partisan issue. It is about the integrity of our elections, about protecting our country from foreign powers.

Any attempt to discredit Robert Mueller and his investigation and to turn it into a partisan issue makes us less safe as a nation. Let's allow the Justice Department and the special counsel to do their jobs. Let's get back to doing ours.

INTERDICT ACT

Mr. BROWN. Madam President, as we await Senator MARKEY's and Senator JOHNSON's remarks, I wish to set the stage. The CDC released a new report last night showing a massive increase in the number of Americans dying from drug overdoses.

My State is second to the Presiding Officer's State. It has the second highest rate of deaths per capita in the country. In my State of Ohio, unfortunately, far too many people die from opioid overdoses than any other State in country. Families are torn apart. Children lose parents. Parents lose sons and daughters.

The CDC pins much of the blame of this epidemic on this relatively new deadly synthetic fentanyl. Fentanyl is 50 times stronger than heroin. Senator CAPITO knows that, as do Senators Johnson and Markey. All of us in the Senate are aware of that.

This drug is being illegally trafficked into this country from Mexico and China. We have a bill to stop this today. The INTERDICT Act. I want to thank Senator MARKEY for his leadership on this bill and also my colleague Senator PORTMAN for his support. Senator PORTMAN and I have been working on a number of issues across party lines for months and months. It would provide more funds for Customs and Border Protection to screen packages effectively and safely, to stop fentanyl whenever possible before it reaches Akron, Toledo, Dayton, or the smaller cities of Chillicothe, Mansfield, and Zanesville.

This passed the House with only two or three negative votes. It has the support of major law enforcement organizations, including sheriffs and police officers. Our law enforcement officials, better than anybody, see the devastation that fentanyl causes our communities. They know the risk our officers face dealing with this deadly substance. That is why this bill needs to pass into law.

Just this week, the National FOP, the Federal Law Enforcement Officers Association, the Police Assisted Addiction Recovery Initiative—a recent phenomenon, unfortunately—all publicly asked us to pass the bill.

Americans are dying in record numbers. Life expectancy in our country—I believe, for the first time in the lifetimes of any of us—actually dropped last year. Think about that.

We have made progress, as I mentioned, in this body. I wear a pin on my lapel of a canary in a bird cage. The mine workers in West Virginia, Ohio, and elsewhere would take this canary down to the mines. If the canary died, the mine worker was on his own. He didn't have a union strong enough or a government that cared enough to help him. In those days, people lived 45 years on average—for a person born in the United States in 1900.

Today we live 30 years longer for a whole host of public health reasons—from Medicare to Medicaid, to safe drinking laws, to clean air, to minimum wage—all the things that we do. For the first time, I believe, in our lifetime, life expectancy actually has dropped because of drug overdoses for the second year in a row, and it is in large part because of these overdose deaths.

Why shouldn't we take steps today to stop this? We can do this by putting the INTERDICT Act on the President's desk, immediately giving law enforcement the tools they need to keep fentanyl out of the country and off our streets.

Mr. MARKEY. Will the Senator yield?

Mr. BROWN. Of course.

Mr. MARKEY. I thank the Senator for yielding, and I thank the Senator from Ohio for talking about this very important issue.

Fentanyl is a killer that is descending upon every single community in the United States. Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is 50 times stronger than heroin and 100 times more powerful than morphine. Fentanyl is the Godzilla of opioids.

Senator BROWN represents Ohio; I represent Massachusetts. The fentanyl epidemic has a bull's-eye on Ohio and a bull's-eye on Massachusetts. The deaths from fentanyl are skyrocketing. In 2016, upwards of 70 to 75 percent of all of the opioid deaths in Massachusetts were because of fentanyl. Fentanyl was found in the blood system of those people who died. Last year, 2,000 people in Massachusetts died of overdoses. Three-quarters of them had fentanyl. If the epidemic had been hitting the rest of the country at the same rate that it has been hitting Massachusetts, last year 75,000 people would have died with fentanyl in their blood systems.

Last night, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released shocking new numbers on drug overdose deaths in the United States. These numbers show the spike in deaths caused by fentanyl and other synthetic opioids.

Here are the new numbers nationwide. More than 42,000 Americans died from an opioid overdose last year. That is a 27-percent increase over the number of Americans who died from an opioid overdose in 2015. It went up 27 percent from 2015 to 2016. Of the 42,000 lives lost to opioids last year, nearly half of them nationwide—just over