

If we let the gun sales lobby control this debate, we will never take the steps we need to keep our schools and neighborhoods safe from gun violence. Remember, the NRA doesn't like any proposal that might hurt gun sales. They don't want to close loopholes in our laws, instead, they would rather roll back gun laws already on the books. That is not the agenda America needs.

I stand with the 97 percent of Americans who support universal background checks for gun sales. I want to close the loopholes in our laws that make it easy for dangerous people to get their hands on guns.

I also stand with the significant majorities of Americans who want to take military-style assault Weapons, high-capacity magazines, and bump stocks off of our streets. These are weapons of war, and they have no place in our neighborhoods.

We cannot become numb to the shootings that happen in our communities, our churches, our movie theaters, our concerts, and our schools. All of us, especially lawmakers, have to step up and take actions that will reduce the epidemic of gun violence and save lives.

I hope my Republican colleagues will finally step up and help get this done.

#### SYRIA

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, I wish to speak about the ongoing horrific violence in the nation of Syria, which seems to have hit yet new lows in terms of barbarity and Russian enabling. The senseless violence—in service of nothing more than enabling Syrian strongman Bashar al-Assad to maintain ironfisted rule over a country he has personally driven to ruin—demands the world's attention.

Quite simply, President Trump, who lambasted President Obama's approach to Syria, has sat by as the regime continues to use chemical weapons, relentlessly bomb civilians, ignore the unanimous U.N. Security Council ceasefire, and allows Iran to build its radical foothold in Syria. One missile strike is not a long term policy. President Trump's silence as Russian President Putin not only continues to meddle in our democracy but also empowers and enables the Syrian butcher is simply inexplicable and diminishes American leadership.

Let me start with the horror that has unfolded in Eastern Ghouta in the last few weeks. This area has actually been under siege by Syrian Government forces since 2013, but last week, Assad's henchmen stepped up their attacks. For over 2 weeks, Syrian forces supported by Russian warplanes have relentlessly bombarded Eastern Ghouta in a campaign that has killed over 1,000 people, wounded almost 5,000, and left 400,000 civilians trapped without food or medicine.

The siege had already led to chronic food and medicine shortages, dev-

astating the population of Eastern Ghouta and leaving scores severely malnourished. The bombings have forced people to take shelter in their basements rather than risk death. Too frightened to venture outside to face the onslaught of mortar shells, barrel bombs, cluster bombs, and bunker-busting munitions, the civilian residents of Eastern Ghouta are being compelled to spend days without food or fresh air, suffocating in the heavily polluted air.

Despite the U.N. ceasefire, the number of dead climbs every day—from bombings, from ground assaults, and from hunger. Only yesterday, Assad's forces killed over 90 civilians and wounded over 300.

The number of casualties has overwhelmed rescuers and hospitals. Catastrophically, the Assad regime has chosen to re-employ one of its most heinous tactics and has bombed at least 28 hospitals and clinics. Doctors Without Borders said 15 of the 20 hospitals it supports have been destroyed or damaged, reducing access to emergency services just when they were most needed.

Doctors have run out of resources to treat patients. Doctors are being forced to make the most difficult choices and sometimes, tragically, leave critically wounded patients to die. A doctor in Eastern Ghouta said, "We have a horrible situation here. We're being targeted with all kinds of weapons non-stop. We lack everything, water, food, medical supplies, shelter. This is a disaster. Everyone is waiting to die."

I spoke to a deeply respected friend from Chicago the other day who knows this crisis all too well, Dr. Mohammed Sahloul, who leads the heroic Syrian American Medical Association. He and his brave colleagues regularly travel to Syria to help provide medical treatment to victims of the war. He told me horrific accounts of the latest bombing and disappointment at the world's seeming inaction amid such heinous cruelty.

U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres called Eastern Ghouta a "hell on Earth." United Nations human rights chief Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein called the onslaught in Eastern Ghouta a "monstrous campaign of annihilation." He added, "When you are prepared to kill your own people so easily, lying is easy too. Claims by the government of Syria that it is taking every measure to protect its civilian population are frankly ridiculous."

Most troublingly, Assad's ruthless regime continues using chemical weapons to attack its own civilians despite Syria agreeing to eliminate its chemical weapons in 2013. We are in 2018 now and have seen the repeated use of chemicals to attack innocent people on the streets of Syria.

Among his various and numerous atrocities, Bashar al-Assad has made routine the use of internationally banned chemical weapons. He has deployed them against his own people

nearly 200 times over 7 years. He has used them against very young children and the elderly, people who are clearly not fighters on the battlefield. He has targeted civilians repeatedly with sarin gas, a weapon notably developed by another abominable regime: the Nazis.

In 2013, Russia worked with a global coalition, including the United States, to ostensibly destroy Syria's stockpile of chemical weapons, but the world watched in horror as Assad barbarically unleashed sarin gas on civilians in the town of Khan Shaykhun again in April 2017. Maybe you, too, saw the very disturbing reporting a week ago on "60 Minutes."

While the United States responded to that incident, Russia has allowed Assad to conduct many other chemical attacks. In fact, in Eastern Ghouta, Assad has continued to attack civilians—among them at least 21 children—with chemical weapons. Just yesterday, doctors there said that at least 29 patients were showing effects consistent with exposure to chlorine munitions.

Instead of trying to stop this savage behavior, Russia stands by its client-state. Russia continues to obfuscate and deny these horrific attacks, despite much evidence substantiating the use of chemical weapons.

In fact, Russia has seemingly condoned Assad's cruel use of chemical weapons on innocent civilians. The United Nations was investigating Assad's chemical attacks until late last year when Russia repeatedly blocked continuing the investigation. The U.N. investigation seemed to be getting too close to the truth for Russia's comfort, so it used its vote to prevent the facts from being laid bare.

Unfortunately, Russia's negative influence doesn't end there. For 3 days, Russia blocked a ceasefire from taking hold in Eastern Ghouta. For 3 days, Russia delayed much-needed food, medicine, and emergency aid to reach the distressed civilian population. For 3 days, the entirety of the U.N. Security Council, save Russia, agreed an immediate ceasefire was necessary.

Even though the Security Council finally agreed to a 30-day ceasefire in Syria, Assad flouted international order as his warplanes continued to carry out airstrikes targeting civilians in Eastern Ghouta. He also launched a massive ground assault against Eastern Ghouta.

Hundreds of people have been killed since the ceasefire was supposed to have begun. The Assad regime has prevented humanitarian relief from reaching those who are hurt or sick, and no civilians have been able to leave because of the constant bombardment.

The man who runs the regional command in charge of U.S. troops in Syria, General Joseph Votel, has said that Russia plays "the role of both arsonist and fireman—fueling tensions and then trying to resolve them in their favor." Instead of reasoning with its vassal-

state and enforcing the ceasefire, Russia egregiously has prevented the ceasefire from taking hold.

Once again, Russia is abetting Assad's defiance and destruction for its own perverse purposes. At the very least, it is abdicating its role as a permanent member of the Security Council.

What can be done about this devastating situation? Regrettably, there are no easy answers.

But a President who previously argued that "heinous actions by the Bashar al-Assad regime are a consequence of the last administration's weakness and irresolution" has to demonstrate some resolve. I call on President Trump to put genuine pressure on Russian President Vladimir Putin to rein in Assad and end Russian obfuscation in the U.N. Security Council as the carnage and number of likely war crimes mount.

Any discussion with Putin must also address deeply troubling—and seemingly ignored—reports that Russian mercenaries controlled by Yevgeny Prigozhin attacked U.S. Special Operations Forces in Syria, with approval of the highest levels of the Kremlin. Prigozhin is the same Russian oligarch who was recently indicted on charges of running a troll farm targeting American voters.

Donald Trump has also called on "all civilized nations" to help end the "slaughter and bloodshed in Syria." I have to imagine that the United States is included in his exhortation. Unhappily, he has also recommended a 30-percent cut in our already minuscule foreign assistance and diplomacy budget. The United States must do more to meet the humanitarian needs of Syrians suffering the ravages of a dreadful war.

Incredibly, at a time when a long-term diplomatic and political solution will be needed in Syria, this administration has marginalized our top diplomatic expertise at the Department of State. This is wildly self-defeating.

We have taken a back seat to Russia and Iran in Syria long enough. We can see every day the devastating results: more violence and the further fracturing of a country and a region that have suffered at the hands of tyrants too long.

Despite the important achievement made by our military in destroying ISIS in Syria, Syria will remain a monumental security, humanitarian, and governance challenge for the United States and its allies, including Israel, for years to come. Russia and Iran are vying for the spoils of the civil war, with civilians paying the highest price. We don't want to leave U.S. forces in Syria indefinitely, but doing nothing to bring a lasting peace to Syria is the worst option.

As such, President Trump, I call on your administration to come up with a real Syria strategy to bring an end to a war—and the senseless suffering—that has gone on for too long.

#### REMEMBERING MATT NIEMEYER

Mr. PORTMAN. Mr. President, I want to recognize and celebrate the life of a friend, a colleague, and a trusted adviser whom we tragically lost last week.

That is what Matt Niemeyer was to me, but Matt would say that he was a husband and a father first. Everything else was secondary. Matt leaves behind his beloved wife, Amy, and their two beautiful children, Anna and Peter.

I first met Matt in 2005 when he was an Assistant U.S. Trade Representative. He was well known in the trade community, and he stood out as a substantive expert in his field. Matt would say that his time at USTR was the most fun he had ever had in government. That says a lot as Matt also worked on Capitol Hill for the National Republican Congressional Committee and as a congressional liaison for a number of private companies and organizations throughout his life.

Matt played a key role in our successful efforts to pass the Central American Free Trade Agreement. He was a happy warrior in that he loved trade, USTR, and getting things done. I think his thick skin and constant hopefulness was a credit to his upbringing as a long-suffering and then long-celebrating Boston Red Sox fan. He always found a way to get his mission accomplished and always had a quick wit.

I was lucky to remain close with Matt after our time together at USTR had ended. He would go to any length for his friends, and he was always thoughtful, kind, and jovial. He never passed at the opportunity to joke about one of his earliest experiences in politics, when he worked for the first primary opponent I ever faced. He would generously tell me how happy he was that, for one of the only times in his career, he wasn't successful in that job.

While Matt is no longer with us in person, his memory lives on through his family who love him dearly and friends and colleagues like myself who will forever cherish his impact on our lives.

#### TRIBUTE TO JANET JONES

Mr. TESTER. Mr. President, I wish to honor Janet Jones for her distinguished public service to the U.S. Senate.

Janet began her Senate career in the Office of the Senate Chief Counsel for Employment in 2006 as a litigation paralegal. Not long after that, she took on the tremendous responsibility of getting Senate offices prepared for their mandatory OSHA inspections by the congressional Office of Compliance.

During the 114th Congress alone, Janet pre-inspected almost a half-million square feet of office space, assisting Senate offices with identifying potential hazards and potential safety violations.

Janet's tireless work with Senate offices over the past 12 years has contrib-

uted to making the offices that serve this body safer for our employees, our visitors, and our constituents. With Janet's assistance, many Senate offices, including my own, have earned Safe Office Awards.

We will miss Janet's institutional knowledge and unparalleled professionalism.

Janet, thank you for your service, and I wish you great happiness in retirement.

#### ADDITIONAL STATEMENTS

##### TRIBUTE TO BILL GALT

• Mr. DAINES. Mr. President, this week I have the honor of recognizing a hard-working Montana rancher for his contributions to the community in Meagher County. Bill Galt is a third-generation Montana rancher; he has been ranching all his life. His dedication to White Sulphur and the surrounding community, however, extends far beyond his work in agriculture.

Bill has rescued numerous folks from plane crashes and accidents on the Smith River as part of his volunteer search and rescue work. He has served on the White Sulphur Springs Airport Board, the Meagher County DUI Task Force, the Conservation District Board, and the Mountainview Medical Center Foundation, just to name a few.

Bill has been a volunteer firefighter and has volunteered with organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club and 4H. I would be remiss to not include his service in the U.S. Army Military Police Corps during Vietnam as well.

Bill is humble and civic-minded in all he does, and his service to Meagher has not gone unnoticed.

Thank you, Bill, for exemplifying what it means to be an active member of a Montana community. •

#### MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

A message from the President of the United States was communicated to the Senate by Ms. Ridgway, one of his secretaries.

#### EXECUTIVE MESSAGE REFERRED

As in executive session the Presiding Officer laid before the Senate a message from the President of the United States submitting a nomination which was referred to the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation.

(The message received today is printed at the end of the Senate proceedings.)

#### MESSAGES FROM THE HOUSE

##### ENROLLED BILL SIGNED

At 9:50 a.m., a message from the House of Representatives, delivered by Mrs. Cole, one of its reading clerks, announced that the Speaker has signed the following enrolled bill: