

excused ZTE of these inexcusable violations.

What the President and Secretary Mnuchin are doing sends a dangerous signal to businesses around the world that the United States is willing to forgive sanction violations or reduce penalties. It emboldens foreign companies to play fast and loose with U.S. sanctions when we should be putting the fear of God into these companies, especially one that is as brazen as ZTE. If we don't uniformly enforce sanctions—a critical diplomatic tool used by administrations of both parties to pressure our adversaries—then, they will be far less effective. None other than Secretary of State Pompeo and Interior Secretary Zinke wrote a letter to President Obama in 2016 making this point, urging him to crack down on ZTE for this reason.

Imagine if Obama were President today and doing this? You can be sure that our Republican colleagues would be hollering. You can be sure that President Trump—he wouldn't be President then—would be hollering.

Even more important are the national security implications of removing the ban on U.S. companies selling ZTE components and software. This is the No. 1 reason that I am opposed to any change in the sanctions against ZTE. Allowing ZTE to make deals with U.S. companies to sell its products here would allow a foreign, state-backed firm access to our telecommunications network, prying open the door for ZTE to steal American data, hack our networks, and even conduct espionage, both economic and national security.

Don't take it from me. Here are what some of our leading Republicans have said in the administration.

The Republican-led FCC has said that allowing ZTE into the United States would pose a national security threat, saying it would give state-backed Chinese companies "hidden backdoors to our networks" that would allow them to "inject viruses and other malware, steal Americans' private data, spy on U.S. businesses, and more."

We all know that China is involved in stealing our intellectual property. There is no better way to do it than through ZTE, and we are going to let them be here and slap them on the wrist with a fine? That is a dereliction of our duty here in the Congress and the President's duty to protect us.

The Pentagon has banned ZTE phones, saying in a statement that "ZTE devices may pose an unacceptable risk to the Department's personnel, information, and mission." If our Defense Department is banning these phones, why are we allowing them to come into our country to do industrial espionage and steal our intellectual property from our companies?

Here is what FBI Director Chris Wray, appointed by President Trump, told the Senate Intelligence Committee in February. He was saying that we shouldn't use ZTE products or services, period. Here is what he said:

We're deeply concerned about the risks of allowing any company or entity that is beholden to foreign governments that don't share our values to gain positions of power inside our telecommunication networks. That provides the capacity to exert pressure or control over our telecommunications infrastructure. It provides the capacity to maliciously modify or steal information. And it provides the capacity to conduct undetected espionage.

The head of the FBI says letting ZTE in here will provide "the capacity to conduct undetected espionage."

After all those statements and so many more, every American should be alarmed by the reports that President Trump may allow ZTE into American markets. Putting our national security at risk for minor trade concessions is the very definition of shortsighted. Frankly, it would be a capitulation on the part of the Trump administration.

President Trump's instincts are to be tough on China. He should not let Secretary Mnuchin lead him astray, or others in the administration who may be urging it. I know that there are some—Mr. Lighthizer and Mr. Navarro—who understand the dangers here, and they are in the administration too. From press reports, they are arguing on the other side.

President Trump ought to come to his senses and stick with being tough on ZTE, stick with his instinct.

That is what I say to you, Mr. President. Please stick to your instincts and be tough on ZTE. Don't let these other members of your Cabinet lead you astray for short-term reasons that will hurt America dramatically in the long run.

The deal President Trump seems to be making is exactly the kind of deal that Donald Trump, before he was President Trump, would call weak or the worst deal ever. I hope these reports aren't true, but if they are, Democrats and Republicans must do something about it.

I know there are Members on the other side—I saw Senator RUBIO's tweets this morning—who are concerned about the national security of the United States with respect to ZTE. I will be reaching out to my Republican colleagues and to Members of my caucus and to anyone who is willing to turn this ship around to see what we can do legislatively.

The Chinese are worried about their security. It is a different type of security. They don't want their citizens to get information. So they exclude our best companies, our Googles, and our Facebooks. Now they are raising a fuss when we want to exclude ZTE, which has violated our sanctions and would allow the Chinese Government to spy on us—what hypocrisy. Are we going to go along with that? I hope not.

#### RUSSIA INVESTIGATION

Mr. President, over the past few days, the White House has put extraordinary, unusual, and inappropriate pressure on the Department of Justice and the investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 election.

On Sunday the President demanded a counterinvestigation of the Russia investigation, breaking longstanding and critical norms against political interference in law enforcement matters. Then, yesterday the President summoned the leaders of the Russia probe to the White House to pressure them into releasing sensitive and classified documents pertaining to the investigation by congressional Republicans. The White House planned to arrange a meeting where "highly classified and other information" will be shared with Members of Congress. It is highly irregular, inappropriate, and unprecedented. The President and his staff should not be involved in the reviewing or the dissemination of sensitive investigatory information involving any open investigation, let alone one about the activities of his own campaign. It is amazing. It is what you hear happening in third world countries. The leader says: No, I am above the law, and interferes with the process of law.

Congress has a right to oversight and to know what is going on after an investigation is complete. While an investigation is open and active, demands for oversight are tantamount to interference, especially when the folks demanding the information are the most biased, irresponsible actors. A man like DEVIN NUNES—I hear privately from my Republican colleagues that they think he is off the deep end—is going to get hold of this? We think that is fair, unbiased oversight?

Give me a break. If such a meeting occurs—and I don't believe it should, but if it occurs—it must be bipartisan to serve as a check on the disturbing tendency of the President's allies to distort facts and undermine the investigation and people conducting them.

Democratic Members of the House and Senate, the analogs of the Republicans selected to be in the room, should be in the room as well. So if DEVIN NUNES is there, ADAM SCHIFF should be there. To me, it is just amazing that it is happening.

One further point on this, again, the contradictory statements and opinions—the virtual hypocrisy of President Trump on these issues—are just mind-boggling.

President Trump, for instance, has been peddling the myth that a deep-state bias against his Presidency has animated the Russia probe. Of course, the idea is ridiculous. If there was such a deep state aligned against President Trump, why then was the active investigation into his campaign communications with Russian intelligence kept secret during the campaign? The deep state could have killed him in the election. If there was such a conspiracy against Donald Trump, why was the FBI investigation of his campaign under wraps, while at the same time, the FBI investigation into his opponent was in full view of the public eye? Whether or not you agree, Secretary of State and Presidential nominee Clinton believes that those comments by

the FBI about that investigation hurt her chances to win the Presidency. You may agree or you may disagree, but one fact is incontrovertible: The FBI talked publicly about the Clinton investigation and was silent about the Trump investigation. Yet the President says the deep state is out to kill him. It is not fair. It is not right. It is contradictory.

The truth is that the President and his allies only concoct these conspiracies—totally contradicted by well-known facts—to kick up dust, to obscure and obfuscate, to distort and distract, and when that is not enough, the President and his team directly interfere with the Russia investigation by asking its leaders to turn over documents to the most irresponsible actors in Congress—his ardent political allies. It ought to stop. It ought to stop.

The Justice Department doesn't take demands from the President. The special counsel's investigation must continue in search of the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

#### TEACHERS

Mr. President, finally, for the better part of the 20th century, being a teacher in America meant being a part of the middle class. You worked hard, and you received decent pay and benefits—enough to afford a home, a car, a vacation, and to raise a family. But for the past 20 years, teachers' pay has been falling behind.

A 2016 report from the Economic Policy Institute found that teachers take home weekly wages that are 17 percent lower than comparable workers. That is why thousands of teachers across the country have organized and staged walkouts to demand fair pay, adequate resources, and better working conditions.

I have always felt that teaching is a vital profession. I know how my teachers at P.S. 197, Cunningham Junior High School, and James Madison High School affected me in such a positive way. They are great. So I believe that in the 21st century, teaching should be an exalted profession, sort of like a doctor or lawyer was in the 20th century. It is that important to the future of America, to the future of our children, and to the future of our grandchildren. But the pay sure doesn't reflect that.

That teachers' pay has fallen so far behind matters a great deal not just to teachers but to all of us. Education is the catalyst for economic mobility. It puts rungs on the ladders of opportunity. We need great teachers in every classroom so that our children have every opportunity to succeed.

As I said, in my view, teaching should be an exalted profession in the 21st century the way medicine and law were in the 20th century, and teachers' pay should more closely reflect their value to society.

Today, Democrats in the House and Senate will come together to announce our plan to offer our Nation's teachers a better deal.

I yield the floor.

I again thank my dear friend from Georgia for waiting and for listening to me.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Georgia.

Mr. ISAKSON. I say to the Democratic leader, it is a pleasure.

#### VA MISSION BILL

Mr. President, I rise today to talk about a vote we will take in the Senate sometime later today, after 12 o'clock. It will be a cloture vote on the VA MISSION Act. After we adopt cloture, later this week, hopefully, it will lead us to the final vote to adopt the VA MISSION Act, which will be the final mosaic in the picture that was put together by the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, and the administration and both the House and the Senate to address the VA benefits program for all of our veterans. We all know we have had the challenge to do better, and I submit that this is us doing our very best for those who have given everything for us.

Next week, on Monday, we will celebrate Memorial Day, where we honor those who have sacrificed their lives so that we can all be here today—you, Mr. President, as the Presiding Officer of this body and I as a representative of the people of Georgia. If it weren't for our veterans, we might be speaking Japanese or German today. We are speaking English today because we won those wars because our best and brightest volunteered their lives and sacrificed so that Americans can survive and be here. There is nothing less that we need to ask of ourselves than to see to it that they have the healthcare benefits we have promised them for so long.

The VA MISSION Act is an act that puts together and answers all of those questions that have been long on the front page of the newspapers for the last 2 or 3 years.

I thank JOHN MCCAIN. JOHN MCCAIN was really the inspiration for the Veterans Choice bill, which we started 4 years ago when I was on the committee. We finally passed a part of that program, and it has been in operation until now, but it has had a need for reform, a need to be fixed, and a need to be funded. With the passage of this legislation, we will do all of those things and make it even better.

I thank JON TESTER, the Senator from Montana, my ranking member on the committee, who has done everything one could ask. He was a team player who saw to it that we got through all of the minefields and sticky wickets you have to go through in the legislative process to get there. Senator TESTER has been an invaluable partner in putting together the VA MISSION Act and in making the VA a better organization.

I thank my staff, his staff, and my members of the committee from the Republican Party and his members from the Democratic Party. This is as

close to a unanimous effort as any effort we have done in the committee for some time. I thank them for their hard work and their effort.

I thank in advance the Members of the House and Senate for being with us on this venture today. I ask for your vote for cloture, and later in the week, I will ask for your vote for final passage.

Briefly, let me tell you what we are doing because what we are doing is critical.

One, we are making choice better for our veterans by repealing the 40-mile rule and the 30-day rule, which we passed 4 years ago. People will remember that veterans were waiting in some cases years to get their appointments with the VA, so we passed a rule that said: You can go to the private sector if you can't get an appointment within 30 days or if you live more than 40 miles away from the VA center that provided that service. But it became cumbersome and difficult. We had a number of problems with the third-party contractors we dealt with who were making the clearances and opening the gates for the veterans to go. Although we improved service and access for our veterans, we didn't make it everything it should be.

The MISSION Act does that because it makes the choice the veteran's choice in concert with the veteran's primary care doctor at the VA. If a veteran, because of quality, timeliness, distance, urgency, or need, needs to go to the private sector or wants to exercise that choice rather than go to a VA doctor, if there is one—or if there isn't one, go to the private sector because that is the only choice they have—they will be able to do so in concert with their VA primary care doctor.

So Choice is truly the veteran's choice. The VA continues to have the responsibility of keeping up with the veteran. The veteran has the choice he or she needs to make to see to it that they get timely, professional, and quality care. That is a huge step forward for us. That is a great step forward. Although the 30-day rule and the 40-mile rule were great starts, this is a great improvement for access for our veterans.

I am a Vietnam-era veteran. Vietnam-era veterans are now mostly in their late sixties or early to midseventies. They served our country a long time ago. The signature injuries of the Vietnam war were some of the most tragic in warfare that were survived for the first time ever because of our healthcare. There are a lot of those veterans living today who can't take care of the basic functions of life. They need assistance with eating, making their bed, getting up and down stairs, getting anywhere they need to go.

We have veteran programs for caregivers for almost every veteran around but not for the Vietnam-era veterans. This bill, the MISSION Act, applies the VA caregiver benefits to all veterans. So if a veteran needs that assistance,