

some of those people in what we have termed our “Alaskan of the Week” celebration, to talk about community, to talk about so many Alaskans who are helping not only their State and their community but their country, generous yet tough and competitive people who make up our Wonderful State.

Many of them get very excited when the snow starts to fall. They strap on their skis and they fly through the snow. One group of Alaskans who every winter strap on their skis and train—actually train all year round and compete on the hundreds of miles of Anchorage’s trail system—is the Alaska Pacific University Nordic Ski Program. Hands down, it is the very best ski team in America. They are our Alaskans of the Week.

Let me tell you a little bit about the APU Nordic Ski Program. Led by Coach Erik Flora, Alaska’s APU Nordic Ski team year after year produces some of our Nation’s finest athletes, who compete in races all across the world, including the upcoming Winter Olympics in Korea. As I mentioned, year after year, APU athletes are simply the best cross-country skiers in the Nation. Their depth of talent was put on display earlier this month at the U.S. Cross Country Championships in Anchorage, where they took 11 out of the 24 podium spots in the senior races and 8 out of the 24 junior podium spots. Think about that. One team dominated the U.S. Cross Country Championships this year.

They train year-round. In the summer, the ski team trains on Eagle Glacier, accessible by a 10-minute helicopter ride from Girdwood, AK. As the Anchorage Daily News put it, this unique training area has “been a springboard to APU’s international and domestic success [and dominance]. Flora and his staff have groomed serpentine, undulating trails there that mimic [international] courses” on a glacier in Alaska in the summer. That is great training. It is year-round.

In addition to training and coaching these world-class athletes, the APU Nordic Ski Center also has a popular junior program, which helps develop the next generation of Olympic skiers.

I have had the honor to get to know some of these skiers, these wonderful athletes, over the past few years. They certainly would make Alaskans proud, but I think they would make all Americans proud. They are great young men and women who are dedicated, disciplined, humble, hard-working, and very smart. They are students; they are very, very good students. I even had the opportunity to go and train with them occasionally. I am more of a downhill skier than a cross-country skier. I went with them in the fall, when there wasn’t any snow on the ground, to do some mountain interval training, running with them up and down the mountains. To witness and train with these world-class athletes was an amazing experience. I must

admit, it was a difficult experience for me. I think I was smoked after about 10 minutes with them, and they had about a 2-hour workout session on the mountain. It gave me a sense of how hard they work and what dedicated, world-class athletes we have in my hometown.

Next month, several of these APU skiers will travel to Korea to represent the United States of America at the Winter Olympics, the way they have in previous Olympics. They are top skiers for America. Let me name a few.

First and I would say foremost, Kikkan Randall, America’s most decorated cross-country skier in U.S. history and an Alaskan icon—she will participate in her fifth Winter Olympics. Let me say that again. She will participate in her fifth Winter Olympics. That is an incredible record for any American athlete, winter or summer games. She is also a wonderful person. She is very, very community-oriented. Alongside her will be APU teammates Sadie and Erik Bjornsen—they are brother and sister—Rosie Brennan, and maybe, hopefully, even a few more. Additionally, their APU teammate Jess Yeaton, who was born in Australia but grew up in Alaska, will ski for the Australian cross-country ski team. You are getting the picture. This is a group of people who are going to do very, very well in the Olympics and are going to represent our country and other countries proudly.

Cross-country skiing is woven into the fabric of Alaska’s winter community. It brings people together, and it helps build community. So many of our skiers, including and especially the APU team, are also generous and kind in helping others learn how to ski and graciously host skiers from all across the country, as was on full display during the recent U.S. Cross Country Championships.

On behalf of all Alaskans—really, on behalf of all U.S. Senators—I wish the team good luck in Korea. We will be watching. I know you will make Alaskans and our fellow Americans very proud as you compete on the world stage once again. Once again, thanks for all you do. Thanks for your tremendous hard work and dedication. And to the APU Nordic ski team, thanks again for being our Alaskans of the Week.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

(The remarks of Mr. HATCH pertaining to the introduction of S. 2344 are printed in today’s RECORD under “Statements on Introduced Bills and Joint Resolutions.”)

## CONFIRMATION OF SAM BROWNBACK

Mr. HATCH. Now, Mr. President, turning to another subject, I would like to speak for a few minutes on Sam Brownback’s recent confirmation as Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom. I’ve known Governor Brownback for many years, and I am confident he will serve our Nation well in advancing and defending religious freedom across the world.

Throughout my Senate service, it has been my privilege to defend religious freedom. In 1990, for example, I served as one of the principal authors of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, or RFRA, a crucially important piece of legislation that prohibits the government from substantially burdening a person’s exercise of religion unless doing so is necessary to further a compelling government interest.

The bill passed the Senate 97 to 3 and passed the House without recorded opposition. This remarkable, broad support demonstrated that religious liberty is a rare issue that unites Americans of all stripes.

That unity of purpose extends to our commitment to protect this fundamental right abroad. In 1948, the United States was one of the original signers of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which proclaims that every person has the right to freedom of religion.

Fifty years later, Congress unanimously passed the International Religious Freedom Act. I was proud to support this act, which declares religious freedom to be a universal human right, a pillar of our Nation, and a fundamental freedom. The law established the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and created the position of Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, the position to which Governor Brownback was just confirmed.

As evidenced by his work here in the Senate, Governor Brownback truly understands the need for leaders who will stand up for religious liberty and ensure that all people—no matter where they live—are able to worship how, where, or what they may.

During his 14 years in this body, Governor Brownback was involved in a wide range of issues related to religious freedom. Governor Brownback knows firsthand how crucial the Commission is in keeping our Nation and world leaders informed about the status of religious freedom throughout the world.

It seems unfathomable in this day and age, but thousands and even hundreds of thousands of our brothers and sisters throughout the world are being imprisoned, tortured, and even executed for their personal convictions. In recent remarks, Secretary of State Tillerson discussed the prevalence of religious persecution and intolerance. He noted that almost 80 percent of the global population lives with restrictions on their freedom of religion.

As a nation, we must act to protect this most fundamental, inalienable right for all people.

At his recent confirmation hearing, Governor Brownback pledged to “stand for liberty and stand with the persecuted [and] to promote respect for religious freedom by all governments and peoples.” I believe he will fulfill this pledge, and I thank him for his willingness to serve our country as Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. YOUNG). Without objection, it is so ordered.

## EXECUTIVE SESSION

### EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to executive session for the consideration of the following nomination: Executive Calendar No. 474.

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

The clerk will report the nomination.

The bill clerk read the nomination of Jonathan H. Pittman, of the District of Columbia, to be an Associate Judge of the Superior Court of the District of Columbia for the term of fifteen years.

Thereupon, the Senate proceeded to consider the nomination.

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate vote on the nomination with no intervening action or debate; that if confirmed, the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table; that the President be immediately notified of the Senate's action; that no further motions be in order; and that any statements relating to the nomination be printed in the RECORD.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Without objection, it is so ordered.

Is there further debate?

If not, the question is, Will the Senate advise and consent to the Pittman nomination?

The nomination was confirmed.

## LEGISLATIVE SESSION

### MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to legislative session and be in a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

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

(At the request of Mr. SCHUMER, the following statement was ordered to be printed in the RECORD.)

### VOTE EXPLANATION

• Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, I was necessarily absent for the confirmation vote on the nomination of R.D. James to be an Assistant Secretary of the Army.

On vote No. 24, had I been present, I would have voted yea on confirmation of the James nomination.●

(At the request of Mr. SCHUMER, the following statement was ordered to be printed in the RECORD.)

### VOTE EXPLANATION

• Mrs. McCASKILL. Mr. President, I was necessarily absent for vote No. 24 on January 25, 2018, on the confirmation of Executive Calendar No. 552, R.D. James to be an Assistant Secretary of the Army, Army Corps of Engineers. Had I been present, I would have voted yea.●

### 10TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE YELLOW RIBBON REINTEGRATION PROGRAM

Ms. KLOBUCHAR. Mr. President, today I wish to recognize the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program. The National Defense Authorization Act of 2008 established the Department of Defense Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program to assist National Guard and Reserve servicemembers as they transition between their civilian and military roles and back again. The program ensures the readiness of Reserve Component members, their families, and communities before, during, and after deployment.

National Guard and Reserve servicemembers are the backbone of our Nation's military, comprising nearly half of our total force. We have relied on them to support combat missions abroad, and we will continue to rely on them. Nearly 1 million guardsmen and reservists have deployed since September 11, 2001, with nearly 35,000 currently mobilized.

Not only do National Guard and Reserve servicemembers support combat operations, security, and humanitarian missions around the world, they also ensure our safety when unforeseen disasters and emergencies occur. Just this past year, Reserve Component members have responded to Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria, providing relief and emergency services to hundreds of thousands of Americans. Through their compassion, professionalism, and courage, they protect our way of life, not just abroad, but also here at home.

In establishing the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program, Congress recognized that National Guard and Reserve servicemembers face challenges throughout the deployment cycle that

are uniquely different than those confronting their Active-Duty counterparts. Most notably, Reserve Component members often live far from military installations and other members of their units, decreasing their opportunities for support during each stage of deployment.

The Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program bridges this gap by connecting National Guard and Reserve servicemembers and their families with resources where they live and provides a support network to aide their unique challenges. Through the program, Reserve Component members and their families gain access to relevant information and resources, including family and marriage counseling, financial planning and education, small business planning, legal benefits, healthcare information, employment training opportunities, and veterans benefits education.

I had the distinct pleasure of working with Congressman John Kline and Senators Norm Coleman, Saxby Chambliss, and JOHNNY ISAKSON in introducing the legislation that created the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program in 2008. I am pleased to say the Minnesota National Guard's program, Beyond the Yellow Ribbon, sought to improve how Minnesota's servicemembers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan experienced reintegration and became the model for the national program we are recognizing today.

Since its launch, the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program's pre, during, and postdeployment events have supported more than 1.5 million servicemembers and their families. These 10 years have demonstrated the necessity of the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program's mission in maintaining the readiness of National Guard and Reserve servicemembers, their families, and their communities.

I am sure the entire Senate will join with me in congratulating the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program on the successes that have brought it to its 10th anniversary and supporting its continued success moving forward.

### ADDITIONAL STATEMENTS

#### TRIBUTE TO DANIELLE HIGHLEY AND JAXON AGEE

• Mr. DAINES. Mr. President, this week I have the honor of recognizing two of Montana's 24,000 children who benefit from the Children's Health Insurance Program, better known as CHIP. Jaxon Agee of Helena was diagnosed with Leigh syndrome as a baby. Access to a pediatrician is absolutely critical for Jaxon. Despite having a team of medical professionals who work to ensure he remains healthy, he has had to be flown from Helena to Community Medical Center's pediatric intensive care unit in Missoula several times. Jaxon's family is committed to caring for their son no matter what,