

DEFENSE APPROPRIATIONS

Mr. ROUNDS. Mr. President, it is in that spirit that I bring this message to my fellow Members of the U.S. Senate. I rise today to ask for support for the Defense appropriations bill for fiscal year 2018.

I would like to start by thanking the majority leader for bringing the Defense appropriations bill to the floor. Now, just because the majority leader brings it to the floor doesn't mean we will necessarily get the opportunity to debate it. It requires either the unanimous consent of all the Members or at least 60 Members agreeing to have that debate. That is one of the reasons why we haven't had any appropriations measures on the floor. It takes 60 Members, Republicans and Democrats, just to begin the debate of each one of these 12 separate appropriations bills, which make up what we normally vote on during a year. This is also part of that process which has been broken for more than 44 years because it has only worked four times in 44 years. But you have to start someplace.

Providing long-term funding stability for our Armed Forces is vital to their ability to adequately train, equip, and maintain the force. In particular, under short-term, stop-gap funding measures known as continuing resolutions, which we are operating under right now, the Defense Department is restricted from starting new programs. These new programs are ones that we have already authorized through the National Defense Authorization Act on a bipartisan basis for 2018; we just haven't appropriated the money yet so that they can actually do the programs we have already agreed as a body are important to have in place. This is very concerning to me because in today's rapidly changing threat environment, these programs were designed to protect our Nation against those new threats.

If we are to adequately recover readiness levels that were lost over the last 8 years—really, in many cases, due to sequestration—as well as to modernize our Armed Forces in this increasingly dangerous and complex world, we must give them the funding, stability, and certainty that continuing resolutions fail to provide.

As a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Readiness, I am pleased that the subcommittee has held two hearings this year on our services' readiness posture. To put that in non-DC terms, it means just exactly what their conditions are right now and their need for modernization.

Today, I would like to share just a few examples of readiness issues facing our military force. The first are issues plaguing our Navy, and both demonstrate the need to adequately fund not only our Navy but all branches of our Armed Forces.

The first issue concerns the F/A-18 Hornet aircraft. For any Members who are wondering which aircraft it is, this

is the one that people see on a regular basis on film clips and so forth showing them taking off of the carriers. This is our primary Navy attack aircraft. This is the one that we use for aerial combat. We also use this one to do the attacks in both Iraq and Syria.

The first issue is plaguing our Navy—and what they do is they demonstrate the need to adequately fund not only our Navy but, as I said, all of the different branches. So this is not only the Navy; all of the branches need this assistance.

Vice Chief of Naval Operations, ADM William Moran, stated that our legacy F/A-18A and D Hornets today take twice as many manhours as originally planned for repairs and maintenance. He has also stated that “on a typical day in the Navy, about 25 to 30 percent of our jets and our airplanes are in some kind of depot maintenance.” Overall, just over half are unavailable for operations today. So it is not just the F/A-18 Hornet, it is all of their aircraft that are in need of upgrading.

To sum up the Admiral's comments, the Navy is putting in twice the maintenance manhours to maintain a fleet that is less than 50 percent available.

In a crisis situation, the Vice Chief said, “We can and we do put airplanes and ready air crews forward,” but “there's no depth on the bench behind them if we had to surge forces.” In other words, all of the aircraft that are available right now, we have on the frontlines. These are the ones that are serving overseas. We don't have backups in case they start to go down.

The Marine Corps is also experiencing serious readiness issues with its F/A-18 fleet, and there is a human cost. On December 8, 2016, the Marine Corps announced that yet another pilot had been killed as a result of a training accident in the F/A-18 Hornet. This was the third Marine Corps F/A-18 Hornet class A mishap—which is defined as an accident resulting in a death or the complete loss of aircraft—over a month-and-a-half time period. In the previous 22 months, the Marine Corps had experienced seven class A mishaps flying legacy F/A-18 Hornets. Sadly, some or all of these mishaps might have been avoided with the additional training and maintenance that would have been forthcoming with the additional funding that had been recommended in the National Defense Authorization Act, which this body, on a bipartisan basis, has already voted on.

Returning to the Navy, its maintenance-related readiness concerns extend to its attack submarine fleet. Admiral Moran recently mentioned that attack submarines are sometimes sent to private shipyards for maintenance because government shipyards are already at capacity with higher priority work, especially and specifically on aircraft carriers and ballistic missiles submarines, but the private shipyards do not have the capacity to take on extra repair work. This lack of shipyard capacity is severely impacting our attack submarine fleet.

For example, the USS *Albany*, which is an attack submarine, spent 48 months in the repair yard due to repeated delays as the workforce focused its attention on aircraft carriers and on ballistic missile submarines. That means an entire crew spent years waiting for a deployment that never came.

Worse still, the USS *Boise* attack submarine wasn't even put in the shipyard last summer because the shipyard workload was so far over workforce capacity. As a result, that boat is currently sitting in Norfolk, VA, and is not certified to dive while it awaits maintenance. This is a taxpayer asset sitting at dock tied up, not being repaired, not even being worked on. Right now, it is so far out of shape, it is not even allowed to dive. In fact, the *Boise* will not be able to rejoin the fleet until 2020 or later. That means this vital Navy asset will be unavailable for at least another 48 months.

In fact, a maintenance backlog has docked 15 nuclear-powered attack submarines for a total of 177 months—or almost 15 years—in which those attack submarines have not been available in the protection of our country.

While I am discussing some serious Navy readiness challenges, all of our services face readiness challenges.

Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson recently said:

The fiscal year 2018 continuing resolution is actually delaying our efforts to increase readiness of the force, and risk accumulates over time. We are stretching the force to the limit, and we need to start turning the corner on readiness.

With a shortage of nearly 2,000 pilots, out of about 20,000 total, Secretary Wilson went on to say, current Active-Duty pilots were burning out because the Air Force was too small for what the Nation is asking.

“Our biggest need right now is for a higher and stable budget to provide security and solvency for the nation,” she went on to say.

According to Defense Secretary James Mattis, operating under a continuing resolution for 2018 runs the risk of delaying vital projects and increasing their costs, including 37 Navy projects, 16 Air Force projects, and 38 Army projects. The projects that could be impacted include progress on new trainer aircraft, weapons systems, and important training programs.

The most important things Congress can do to solve these problems are to provide funding stability and avoid arbitrary budget caps that constrain defense spending below that which is required to protect our Nation. This bill that is before us now does both. More specifically, only by removing these caps can we avoid the Department of Defense having to make difficult choices that are so devastating for our Armed Forces. In particular, we must avoid their having to make the false choice of paying for readiness while assuming the risk for modernization or vice versa.

The American people expect us to adequately defend America next year

and for every year to come. This requires us to put an end to continuing resolutions and remove arbitrary budget caps and the threat of sequestration. Only by doing so can Congress fulfill its No. 1 responsibility: keeping Americans safe.

I conclude by again thanking the majority leader for bringing the fiscal year 2018 Defense appropriations bill to the floor. He can't do it alone. He needs our cooperation. He needs our understanding as to just how critical this is. If there is not unanimous consent to move forward, it will require 60 of us to agree. It is time to bring this bill to the floor for full debate and passage.

I ask all of my colleagues to support it, get it to the President's desk as soon as possible, and finally bring an end to the defense component of a continuing resolution that, with arbitrary budget caps, is so severely impacting the readiness of our Armed Forces.

Thank you.

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

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

CHILD PROTECTION IMPROVEMENTS ACT OF 2017

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I understand that the Senate has received a message from the House to accompany H.R. 695.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority leader is correct.

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I move that the Chair lay before the Senate the message to accompany H.R. 695.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is on agreeing to the motion. The motion was agreed to.

The Presiding Officer laid before the Senate the following message from the House of Representatives:

Resolved, That the House agree to the amendment of the Senate to the title of the bill (H.R. 695) entitled "An Act to amend the National Child Protection Act of 1993 to establish a national criminal history background check system and criminal history review program for certain individuals who, related to their employment, have access to children, the elderly, or individuals with disabilities, and for other purposes." and be it further

Resolved, That the House agree to the amendment of the Senate to the text of the aforementioned bill, with an amendment.

MOTION TO CONCUR

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I move to concur in the House amendment to the Senate amendment to H.R. 695.

CLOTURE MOTION

I send a cloture motion to the desk on the motion to concur.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The cloture motion having been presented

under rule XXII, the Chair directs the clerk to read the motion.

The bill clerk read as follows:

CLOTURE MOTION

We, the undersigned Senators, in accordance with the provisions of rule XXII of the Standing Rules of the Senate, do hereby move to bring to a close debate on the motion to concur in the House amendment to the Senate amendment to H.R. 695, a bill to amend the National Child Protection Act of 1993 to establish a national criminal history background check system and criminal history review program for certain individuals who, related to their employment, have access to children, the elderly, or individuals with disabilities, and for other purposes.

Mitch McConnell, John Cornyn, Mike Crapo, Jerry Moran, Richard Burr, David Perdue, Tom Cotton, Shelley Moore Capito, Deb Fischer, James M. Inhofe, Pat Roberts, Roger F. Wicker, John Hoeven, John Barrasso, John Boozman, Steve Daines, Mike Rounds.

MOTION TO REFER WITH AMENDMENT NO. 1922

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I move to refer the House message on H.R. 695 to the Committee on Appropriations to report back forthwith with instructions.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the motion.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

The Senator from Kentucky [Mr. MCCONNELL] moves to refer the House message on H.R. 695 to the Committee on Appropriations to report back forthwith with instructions, being amendment numbered 1922.

The amendment is as follows:

At the end add the following.

"This Act shall take effect 1 day after the date of enactment."

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask for the yeas and nays on my motion.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there a sufficient second?

There appears to be a sufficient second.

The yeas and nays were ordered.

AMENDMENT NO. 1923

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I have an amendment to the instructions.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

The Senator from Kentucky [Mr. MCCONNELL] proposes an amendment numbered 1923 to the instructions of the motion to refer.

Mr. MCCONNELL. I ask unanimous consent that the reading of the amendment be dispensed with.

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

The amendment is as follows:

Strike "1 day" and insert "2 days"

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask for the yeas and nays on my amendment.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there a sufficient second?

There appears to be a sufficient second.

The yeas and nays were ordered.

AMENDMENT NO. 1924 TO AMENDMENT NO. 1923

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I have a second-degree amendment at the desk.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

The Senator from Kentucky [Mr. MCCONNELL] proposes an amendment numbered 1924 to amendment No. 1923.

The amendment is as follows:

Strike "2" and insert "3"

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

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

OFFSHORE OIL AND GAS DRILLING

Mr. COONS. Mr. President, I come to the floor today to join my colleagues, both Republican and Democrat, in raising the alarm about a decision I believe represents politicized policymaking at its very worst. Just a few weeks ago, we were notified that the Trump administration's Interior Department seeks to open up 90 percent—90 percent—of America's waters to oil and gas drilling.

This was startling news for Americans everywhere but particularly for those of us who come from States along the Atlantic and Pacific coastlines who had no expectation that our coastal waters were about to be subjected to the search for oil and gas. The objections to the Trump administration's decision came swiftly from elected officials in both parties, Republicans and Democrats, because protecting America's fragile coastlines isn't—or shouldn't be—a partisan issue.

This decision by President Trump and Secretary of the Interior Zinke was not rooted in public input or scientific analysis. This decision was not based on concerns about community safety or economic prosperity. This decision was our administration putting their "energy dominance" goals above all else.

I know several of my colleagues have already spoken out to discuss what this means for their States and how it will impact their constituents, but I am here today to raise my voice for mine, to fight for Delaware. In Delaware, our coasts are critical to our local environment and our robust economy. Delaware has 28 miles of Atlantic coastline—some of the most pristine, most beautiful beaches in the entire country.

As you can see in this graphic of our boardwalk at Rehoboth Beach, DE, our 28 miles of coastline employ 10 percent of our total State workforce. That is a remarkable amount of economic activity in a very small space. Our coastline generates \$6.9 billion in economic activity every year and hosts thousands of acres of protected land. It includes on our bay shore side two national wildlife refuges that serve as critical