

I send our best wishes to our people back in Georgia and also to our people in South Carolina, North Carolina, and Florida. Florida was hit worse last night. But now the storm has passed Atlanta and is going over South Carolina, and then North Carolina, which just came back from almost the worst storm in history, in which we had 48 inches of rainfall in one county. I couldn't believe that much water fell in one day, but it did. They are recovering and doing it nicely. They have done a good job. But all of us know these acts of nature and acts of God we have gone through affect our citizens, and we need to keep them safe. I urge all of our citizens in Georgia and in every State in the Union to play close attention to what their Federal emergency management people say. If they tell them to evacuate, they should. If they tell them to hunker down, they should. They should do whatever they can to follow the rules the best they can. Everybody we have to rescue takes a law enforcement officer and a medical person out of play to help somebody else.

VETERANS

Madam President, as chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, I have the honor of representing the U.S. Senate to our veterans and responding, along with the House committee chaired by Chairman ROE of Tennessee, on veterans' issues. All of us are for veterans. There is one place you never have an argument on appropriations, and that is for veterans. We don't have partisan arguments about veterans either. On the battlefield, you don't see Democratic veterans or Republican veterans; you see American veterans. We are all for the veterans.

We have had some great successes with our veterans, but we have had some failures over the last decades. Sometimes they are on the front page of the newspaper, most recently last week when the hospital ratings came out. Two of the three hospitals servicing my State fell from three stars to one star, which meant they failed in their performance for our veterans, and we want to work to see that improve.

But we also want everybody to understand how big the problem is, what we have done the last 2 years to address the problem, and what is coming soon for all of us, which I think is good news for everybody.

First of all, starting 2 years ago, Senator TESTER, the ranking member on the committee, and I sat down and made a pledge that we were going to work together from the beginning to address the tough issues that had been put behind the backdoor for a long time and hadn't been dealt with. We have done that. In fact, we have tackled every single one of them, except one that we are going to tackle in a couple of weeks. In so doing, we have helped our veterans.

We had the help of the President as well. President Trump embraced our committee's work from the beginning.

We had to find a new Secretary because the old Secretary resigned, and we worked hard to do that. We had a few bumps in the road. The President gave us his full support. Robert Wilkie, who is the new Secretary of the VA, is a terrific guy. He has a family history in the military. He loves the VA and worked for DOD, or the Department of Defense, which is the precursor in working for the VA if you are a veteran, because you have to be in DOD first to be a veteran, second. In fact, Robert Wilkie is a godsend for us. In a few short weeks, he has already proven to be a big help for our veterans. He is not unwilling to tackle the hard problems. In fact, he is willing to tackle them.

Interoperative software for medical information has been a problem at the VA for years. The DOD and VA software didn't talk to each other.

We have a guy who left the battlefield in Afghanistan, came back to Georgia, and went to Fort Benning. He decided to leave the military and retire and go into veteran status, and we couldn't get his records transferred from Active Duty to veteran status because we didn't have interoperable software. We didn't have a way to do it.

This committee worked hard. We developed the largest contract in history with Cerner, a great software company. Cerner has a tremendous medical outreach product, and they are now installing that. Hopefully, over the next 15 years, we will have an interoperative system around the world that services our veterans who need medical service and have their records available instantaneously and immediately.

We have a 20th century soldier in the battlefield, but we have a 15th century VA when it comes to information technology. We have invested the money now with Cerner to put in the system, and we are going to get it done. I will stay on their back every day to see to it they do it.

I appreciate the cooperation of the employees of the VA. I tell them, as I make these remarks, that we are going to see to it they have every bit of backing they can get from us. We had too many vacant spaces in the VA. We had too many "acting this" and "acting that." I hate it when we appoint acting directors and acting bankers and acting soldiers. We don't need them to act. We need them to take action. We will start to do that as soon as we fund the places that go vacant, where it hurts our veterans.

I thank President Trump and Secretary Wilkie for their work and their support. It has been complete and seamless. We signed the VA MISSION Act in the Rose Garden a couple of weeks ago. The President came out and talked about his pride in the VA and what the veterans did for all of us and what he was going to do as President, as long as he was there, to see to it that he gave them at least the best of all of us like they have given us the best as veterans.

President Trump has been a great leader for our VA, and he understands the problems and has been supportive of our trying to make the changes we want to make.

Senator TESTER has been a great ranking member and a great partner with me on those things, and we made sure everything we did was bipartisan. To be honest with you, we passed 22 pieces of legislation and made 14 appointments. We had one "no" vote on one bill. We had complete unanimity on the committee—Republicans and Democrats—all the way through because we worked together, we set our goals, and we decided to make this work as seamlessly as our military works for us.

Let me talk about a few of those things we have done because I think they are impressive when you look at them. We passed 22 pieces of legislation, which include the VA MISSION Act, most recently passed a month ago. We redefined the mission and the actions of the VA to see that it does everything it needs to do to be a 20th century benefit program, like the new modern-day GI bill, which is a part of that.

The new GI bill says the old rule in the VA that you have to use your VA benefits within 15 years or you lose them on education is gone. We all know people's skills are changing about every 5 years or 6 years. If a person doesn't keep up with their continuing education, they are going to lose their job. They would lose their benefits because they have been in the VA 15 years. That is ridiculous. We removed that cap. Now they can take new courses and new training with their GI benefits for 25 years if they want to, if they are still eligible. We are not putting any time limit on it. There is no time limit on education. Education is the necessary product we have to use to produce the military of the 21st century.

It used to be that we drafted our soldiers. We can't draft the soldiers anymore. The average draftee can't operate the type of equipment our men and women operate in the battlefield. You have to have people who understand technology, understand the STEM subjects, and are good with games. Video games is one of the biggest qualifications now for pilots because all of our airplanes are like video games. It looks like Pac-Man when you get in the cockpit. It is because of high technology, and they are training for that. We have to have an attractive job for them and attractive VA benefits for them if they want to come to work for the United States of America and stay with us, or else we will never be able to keep the military we have today as strong and powerful as it is.

We also put a new law in on accountability. I served in the National Guard, and I understand accountability. In the military, you really understand accountability. You don't ask questions in the military. You give answers. If

your drill sergeant tells you to do 20, you drop and you do 20. If you can't do 20, you practice until you can and you get it right. That is what we have to do in the military because you don't fight wars for people who say: I am not interested today; I am not going to fight. You have to know what we are doing and do it right.

We have to do the same thing and provide services to those veterans once they leave. We don't need to be casual about it. We need to be committed about it and make sure we are doing everything we can to see our veterans get the services they want, the services they need, and the information they need.

Veterans Day is coming up in about 4 weeks. Every Veterans Day we are usually here, but I don't think we are going to be here on Veterans Day this year, if I understand the calendar right. I will be making speeches back home. Every year I have been here, I have made a speech on this floor about our veterans and how important they are to us. I try to point out a few people I have known in my lifetime who are veterans of the U.S. military and made a difference in my life forever.

I talked about my friend Jack Cox, of the U.S. Marine Corps. He was killed by a sniper in Vietnam in 1968. He was my best friend. He volunteered. He came to the fraternity house. He was 2 years older than me. So I was still in school when he got out and graduated.

After graduating, he went from the University of Georgia into the Marine Corps recruiting office and signed up for OCS. He went to Parris Island. From there, he went to Vietnam. On the 12th month of his 13-month assignment, he was, unfortunately, killed by a sniper in Vietnam.

He went to Vietnam because he wanted to represent his country, fight for his country, pay his price, and do his due diligence. Jack was a great man.

I have a bracelet on—two, as a matter of fact. One is a bracelet for Matt Cooper, a law enforcement officer who was killed a couple of weeks ago. The other one is for John McCain—John McCain, a former Member of this body, who a few weeks ago was buried at the Naval Academy, and his funeral was at the National Cathedral. He was a pilot in the Vietnam war and was captured. He was held captive by the North Vietnamese for 6 years. When he got out, he was badly wounded, badly injured, badly hurt. He came back to the military, rehabilitated himself, and went into the VA healthcare, and they rehabilitated him from his broken arms, his broken back, and all the other problems he had. He ran for the U.S. Senate, came to the U.S. Senate, and was a star, as you know, in this Senate Chamber from the day he got in the Senate until the day he died. He had a pervasive commitment to his country. He was exactly for our country what I want all of us in the Senate to be for this body—committed to the job, committed to the task, always ready, al-

ways prepared. Marines are that way. The Army is that way. The Air Force is that way, and the Senate ought to be that way. We are committed that way to our veterans in what we do today.

We also have to hold them accountable in the military. Accountability is important. Veterans want us to hold the VA accountable. That is why we put in the accountability bill, which, among other things, allows us to fire senior executives in the VA for not doing their job. You can't do that in many government jobs. As a matter of fact, people were surprised that we were able to pass it, and we passed it bipartisan. It passed bipartisan because everybody knew if your job wasn't subject to your doing your job, you didn't have accountability.

The first person taken to court for violating the law by not doing their job was in Georgia. I saw to it we prosecuted that case and used our lawyers to be able to do it. I wanted people at the VA to know we are not going to take bad behavior—break-the-law behavior—or bad attitudes in the VA. We are only going to give the best to our veterans.

We have a number of title 38 veteran leaders who have been suspended, moved, or otherwise fired because they weren't accountable for their job. We have some openings now that need to be filled because we got rid of them. We got rid of people who weren't doing the job and put in people who did the job. In the military, your accountability is doing the job, and there are no excuses if you don't.

We have done a lot of other things to help our veterans and help our country. I commit that we will continue to do so and make sure this Congress is as helpful and beneficial as we can.

There are three quick things I want to talk about. I want to thank the private sector for its support of our veterans. Morehouse School of Medicine in Atlanta, GA, is helping the Atlanta VA now with our doctor shortage in the VA. Yes, we have a doctor shortage. We need the doctors to do the jobs. Some of these waiting times you have heard about from a lot of our veterans are not because we are making them wait because we are slow. We are making them wait because we don't have enough doctors. We are working on joint ventures with medical schools to do so.

Seventy-two percent of the doctors in the United States did a residency or an internship at the Veterans Administration. It is the key training center of all our doctors, and we have to expand that and improve it.

On the appeals process for benefits, there are people who are having to wait 2 and 3 years. We have one veteran whose case has been on appeal for 25 years. You can keep it on appeal as long as you file new information every year. He has found a way to file new information for every year. For 25 years, he has been putting something new in his file. He is blocking other veterans

who need to get their attention to get their service because he is making the line longer than it should be.

We put an accountability on the Veterans' Administration, as well, to see that our benefits are handled quickly and expeditiously and that the appeals are fair, and veterans can get an answer. We are cutting the average time of wait, and we are going to get it down to below half a year pretty soon. Pretty soon, we will have it as instantaneous as you can make it. You shouldn't have to wait to have a benefit paid if you didn't wait to complete an order from the officer whom you worked for.

Lastly, I want to thank Shepherd Center in Atlanta, GA. That is my hometown and my home State. Shepherd takes the most seriously injured veterans in the United States who we no longer can help because we don't have the expertise. They take them and help them. More often than not, they turn their lives around and make it where they can communicate, they can work, and they can do their job. In other words, the veterans are getting the best of care and the best of attention because the Committee on Veterans' Affairs in the Senate is giving 100 percent of their attention to them.

I am proud of what we have done, proud of what the Senate has done, and I am proud of our military and proud of our country. I hope we continue doing in the Senate as we have always done: do our job, do it well, and support our country.

May God bless the United States of America.

I yield back.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. DAINES). The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Oregon.

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

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

NO INTERNMENT CAMPS ACT

Mr. MERKLEY. Thank you, Mr. President.

Today I rise to bring attention to the No Internment Camps Act. This is an important bill to make sure that America does not repeat the mistake of World War II and develop and expand internment camps here in the United States of America.

One may think that this is something that is farfetched, that of course the United States would not establish internment camps, but the fact is, we already have 3, and the House passed a bill to greatly expand those internment camps. We have 35 sponsors of a bill here in the Senate to expand internment camps. We have the President issuing an Executive order asking Congress to expand internment camps. Recently, the President put forward a draft regulation to expand internment