

But I look forward to continuing to help Senator THUNE, the next whip, and the conference and the Senate in any way I can. He has my telephone number.

Of course, when you are whip—like any job—you rely on your team members. I couldn't have gotten through these 6 years without a lot of help. First and foremost, I owe a tremendous amount of gratitude to my mentor and friend, Leader MCCONNELL. There is no one in the country who has done more to advance the conservative cause in recent times than Senator MCCONNELL—no one. Robert Caro called LBJ the Master of the Senate. I would like to nominate another one: MITCH MCCONNELL.

Under MITCH's leadership in the last 2 years alone, we have bolstered our Nation's economy, fixed our Tax Code, and achieved real regulatory reform. We have transformed our Judiciary, improved veterans' healthcare, and addressed critical public health needs like the opioid crisis. And that doesn't even begin to scratch the surface.

We have certainly had our fair share of nail-biters—I seem to remember a certain debt ceiling vote, for example—and those accomplishments I mentioned were not easy, given the slim margins. But with Senator MCCONNELL's leadership and more than a few prayers along the way, we did it together. I am proud of our record, and I am grateful for his trust and confidence.

Of course, we couldn't have been successful without a strong and reliable team of deputy whips led by Senator MIKE CRAPO. I leaned on my deputy whip team regularly, and time and again, they delivered. So to Senators BLUNT, CAPITO, CRAPO, FISCHER, GARDNER, LANKFORD, PORTMAN, SCOTT, TILLIS, and YOUNG, thank you.

I also want to thank my whip staff, both current and former. This includes John Chapuis, Sam Beaver, Noah McCullough, Jody Hernandez, Emily Kirlin, Jonny Slemrod, and my first chief of staff, Russ Thomasson.

What has been so amazing to me is how seamlessly my whip staff also worked with my Texas official staff as well. We all worked, literally, as one team. I thank all of my Texas staff for their contributions to our successes.

We all rely on our staffs around here a great deal, and that is doubly true of my entire staff over the last 6 years. I have come to think of the whip operation as really an intelligence operation. These outstanding men and women have been my eyes and ears. They are all incredibly smart. They are devoted and hard-working.

I say to all of them: Thank you for everything you have done to serve the conference and the Senate as a whole.

As whip, you are provided with a security detail comprised of Capitol Police officers. These men and women are extraordinary professionals who have become like family. Their work often takes them away from their own fami-

lies and friends as they travel around the country and sometimes miss holidays and special occasions. They, like all of the Capitol Police, keep the people who work here and visit here safe. We all appreciate what they do for us each and every day.

Finally, I want to say a few words about my chief of staff, Monica Popp, who is the chief of staff of my whip office.

Monica is often the first person and the last person on my staff I talk to each day. If Beth Jafari, who is my chief of staff in my Texas office, is the glue that keeps our operation together and operating at maximum efficiency, Monica is the spark plug of the operation.

As impressive as her knowledge of the Senate is and of how the U.S. Government functions, that is not what sets her apart. She often, in her own gentle but determined way, has pressed me to make just one more call, to meet just one more time with a colleague, or to try just a little harder to nail down the winning votes. She is exactly the type of person you need to have in your corner, but it is her sunny disposition—her optimism—that is infectious. In addition to her extraordinary competence, that makes her indispensable.

Monica is known for cultivating and maintaining strong relationships not only in the Senate but in the House and in the executive branch. It is not just limited to my party; some of her closest colleagues work in the leadership offices of our Democratic colleagues. The big bipartisan achievements I mentioned earlier could not have happened without Monica and her ability to lead a team and work across the aisle. Part of the reason she is so effective is she wants to know everything. She even wants to know what Members have for breakfast because she knows how circumstances and small events can sometimes provide insight in unexpected ways.

Here is how our staff describes her:

"She is a problem solver."

"When you think you're stuck, she'll find creative ways to get a solution."

The most instructive, I think, is this: "You want to be around her just to learn."

I couldn't agree more.

To Monica, I say thank you. We couldn't have done it without you.

Even though I will no longer be serving as the majority whip, I am not going anywhere. Believe me—serving 28 million Texans here in the Senate is a big enough job for anyone. To borrow a phrase from a great American leader, our late President George Herbert Walker Bush—he said: I am a Texan and an American. What more can a man ask for?

Indeed, it is an honor and a privilege to represent the great people of Texas, and I believe my time as whip has only taught me to be a better representative of my fellow Texans. As an elected leader, I have learned that sometimes you have to do things nobody else

wants to do because they are controversial or they are risky, but I stand ready to continue to take risks and accept controversy in the pursuit of worthy causes.

I close simply by saying it has been a privilege to serve as the whip for Texas, for the Republican conference, and for the Senate.

Often, when I am introduced to audiences here and at home, the introducers will refer to me as the No. 2 person in the Senate. Occasionally, they will call me the second most powerful person in the Senate—obviously an exaggeration. Yet I have never been quite able to bring myself to correct them in public if only to save them the embarrassment. Let me just say I will now return to my previous life as the second most powerful person in my household and to my continued service to Texas and the world's greatest deliberative body.

I yield the floor.

(Applause, Senators rising.)

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the question occurs on the confirmation of the Maguire nomination.

The question is, Will the Senate advise and consent to the Maguire nomination?

The nomination was confirmed.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The President will be immediately notified of the Senate's action.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from South Dakota.

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

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

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Georgia.

SENATE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Mr. ISAKSON. Mr. President, I rise for a couple of moments in morning business to pay tribute to the Senate and what we have done this past year. We think we are easing towards going home. We think we are easing towards finishing the year, and everybody is excited about that. We have talked about a lot of things we haven't done. Let's talk about what we have done, because I think this has been the most successful time I have had in Washington for 20 years.

As chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, we have had the best success we have ever had for the most important people in the country we love—our military in the United States of

America. I want everybody to remember four things to take home that you have done to see to it that our men and women who fight for us and keep us safe get treated the way they should every day.

No. 1 is the VA MISSION Act.

After a number of years, when we started moving towards a way to get better appointments, better timing, and better results for our veterans, we finally came together with the VA MISSION Act. We saw to it that if a veteran needed health needs met, he got them when he needed them, not when it was convenient for him to get them. If the VA couldn't provide them, the private sector could. He could go to the private sector. We have done everything we can to expand accessibility to quality healthcare. Our vets are the most important assets we have.

The second is the accountability bill. For a lot of years, we saw on the front pages of the newspapers that the VA had done stupid things and that a lot of VA employees had done stupid things. The way they got corrected—the way they got punished—was to be transferred to another VA office. We finally passed a bill whereby if you don't do your job, if you hurt the people you are there to protect—meaning our vets—then you get fired. You have a 10-day appeal, and then you are through. You don't get paid forever. You don't get moved. You don't get switched around. We make sure you have pure accountability. Because of that, the VA is more responsive today than it has ever been.

With that, we had to put in whistleblower protection to allow our vets who find out something is going wrong but who are afraid to say something to have the protection that everybody has with whistleblower laws we have passed.

The third biggest problem we had and the No. 1 headache we have is seeing to it that veterans' benefits are timely and that they get a good appeal. The timeliness in approving veterans' applications for that had gone to as much as a year and a half to 2 years before they had gotten decisions. Now we have better accountability with the improved results we are seeing in giving our veterans their benefits and their approvals in a more timely way. I hope, before I leave the Senate, whenever that will be, we will get it down to almost zero. They don't get the luxury of waiting when they are on the battlefield. They have to pull and fight when they are confronted. So we need to make sure they get that benefit today.

Lastly and most importantly, as we have said, our veterans are our most important people. We now have the Agency focused in the right direction. We have a good Secretary in Secretary Wilkie. We have a good focus in what we are doing, and we have passed the types of acts that are necessary to get a bureaucracy to become a responsible organization. We have seen to it that the benefits we are supposed to protect

are not only protected but are delivered as well.

Thank you for the time I have been given to address the Senate. I hope all of us go home and remember that our most important people are our veterans. Also remember what each of you has done in passing these improvements—seeing to it that the GI bill is now permanent for everybody in that there are no more caps on their time; seeing to it that veterans in the Reserves and veterans on Active Duty are treated the same; and seeing to it that we have accountability and benefits for our veterans so no one is left behind and so the United States of America will continue to be the greatest country on the face of this Earth.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Connecticut.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST— H.R. 299

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, I thank my colleague and friend Senator ISAKSON, as well as the ranking member, Senator TESTER, for their leadership on the Veterans' Affairs Committee in this past session. I have been proud and honored to work with them, and I look forward to doing so in the next Congress on issues so important and challenging. We have a responsibility to meet the needs of our veterans.

In that spirit, I ask unanimous consent that the Veterans' Affairs Committee be discharged from further consideration of H.R. 299, the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2017, and that the Senate proceed to its immediate consideration; that the bill be considered read a third time and passed; and that the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table with no intervening action or debate.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

The Senator from Georgia.

Mr. ISAKSON. Mr. President, reserving the right to object, my apologies to those on the floor who wish to speak. We have spoken a couple of times about this on the floor. I want to do it one more time.

I appreciate the motion by the gentleman who had been my ranking member on the committee for 2 years before this current session of the Senate. The blue water Navy has been an issue that has been controversial. It has almost been passed a few times, and it has been defeated a number of times.

Our veterans, today, who served in Vietnam and who have ended up contracting cancer—non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and things like that—do not have the luxury of presumption of cause on their service in Vietnam unless they served on the land. If they served on the land in the battlefield, they get the benefit, but if they served at sea, where most of this napalm and all of the other agents were delivered—

on those ships—they don't have that benefit.

The VA bifurcated a benefit of healthcare to our veterans—many of whom contracted cancer and many of whom have died—and said: If you are on the land, you get it. If you are on the sea, we will not let you have it.

It is the wrong thing to do. No veteran who served on the land is more important or less important than the one who served at sea. We have a chance to do this, and we ought to do it. I am going to vote in favor of adopting the motion by the gentleman from Connecticut.

Let me just say one other thing. There is a letter floating around about the cost of this and about the cost estimates we had. We got a new cost estimate yesterday after our having spent years in the committee trying to get a better cost estimate. We got one yesterday that was higher than the day before. I don't know what its credibility is. I am not going to cast aspersions on the credibility of the CBS. Obviously, nothing should surpass a promise we have made for healthcare coverage to our veterans that they are not getting. That is what we owe to them, and I hope everybody will vote to support the blue water Navy benefit with regard to the motion by the Senator from Connecticut.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Utah.

Mr. LEE. Mr. President, reserving the right to object, I have great respect for my distinguished friends and colleagues, including my colleagues from Connecticut and from Georgia. I will also add that there is no doubt that all of us owe a great debt of gratitude to the brave men and women who fought and served in the Vietnam war. There is no question that they endured unspeakable hardships there and, of course, for many decades following their service.

For some, one of these hardships involved exposure to Agent Orange. This very potent chemical was widely used by the U.S. military during the Vietnam war as part of its herbicidal warfare program, and it has proven to have been something that has caused major health problems for the service men and women who were exposed to it. So Congress passed the Agent Orange Act of 1991 to provide health benefits for those servicemembers who were affected by it.

The act presumes the service connection for diseases caused by herbicides for Active military, naval, or air servicemembers when, and only when, there is scientific and medical evidence to support it.

In 2002, the VA removed the blue water Navy veterans from the presumption of exposure, as they had looked at the data repeatedly under multiple administrations and had not found evidence to grant the presumption.

The bill now under consideration would restore this presumption to the