

I am disappointed that Senator BLUMENTHAL's request to pass this bill was just objected to by my colleague from Utah. Some of my colleagues on the other side of the aisle have argued that we can't afford the cost of this legislation, but I heard no such objections when those same colleagues voted for a very partisan tax bill that gave huge tax breaks to the largest corporations and added \$1.9 trillion to our Nation's debt. Now, when it comes to doing right by our Vietnam veterans who served this country and are now dying from their illnesses, we don't have the money to spend to help get them better or to help give their families a little more time with them. That is simply wrong.

How much is it costing blue water Navy veterans who are trying to beat cancer? How much is it costing their caregivers who quit their jobs in order to take care of them? We have a moral obligation to fix this, and we have the opportunity to get this done right now.

These veterans fought for us and are dying from their service-connected illnesses. It is past time to do the right thing and pass this bill. We need to do it now, and we should not leave town until it is done.

Thank you.

I yield back to Senator BLUMENTHAL.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Connecticut.

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, in closing, I am grateful to my colleague from Wisconsin and my colleagues across the aisle. This measure was bipartisan. It was passed unanimously in the House of Representatives. It should be unanimous here. The money is not a problem. The money is there. The predictions about outlandish possible financial exposure are simply products of fantasy. I know my Republican colleagues almost unanimously on the other side of the aisle understand that simple fact. But even if the costs were higher than they are projected to be, we have an obligation to do the right thing. We have a moral duty to make sure we fulfill our promise.

I know the Presiding Officer has been a strong advocate for our veterans. I know my fellow members on the Veterans' Affairs Committee join me in this belief.

The costs of this program are the costs of war. They are the costs of keeping our troops on the DMZ in Korea. They are the costs of having sent them to Vietnam. They are the costs of sending our troops to Iraq and Afghanistan, and this measure would provide a study of the possible effects in terms of their health from those kinds of poisonous and toxic exposures. The modern battlefield is filled with toxins and poisons, and the injuries that result from them are the costs of war. We need to recognize that fact and refuse, absolutely reject the possibility that we will continue to delay even longer the justice these men and women deserve.

I can pledge to my colleagues that if we fail to do it this session, we will be back again next session. The costs to our conscience, if not to our budget, will rise in the meantime.

I am pleased to call on my very distinguished colleague and military veteran from Illinois, Senator DUCKWORTH.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Illinois.

Ms. DUCKWORTH. Mr. President, I thank my colleague from Connecticut.

Right now, tens of thousands of American heroes are suffering and even dying while some folks in government are looking the other way, refusing to heed their calls for help. Our blue water veterans answered the call when their Nation needed them in the thick of the Vietnam war. They left their loved ones, boarded ships, fought the Viet Cong, and risked their lives hour after hour, day after day, in service to the country they love.

We made a promise to them: Fight for us overseas, and we will fight for you when you get back home. When you step back on U.S. soil, we will bandage the wounds you earned in combat, making sure you never feel you sacrificed in vain.

I am ashamed to say that promise has been broken. For decades now, our government has refused to give them the healthcare and disability benefits needed to treat diseases linked to Agent Orange exposure despite the fact that they serviced the very aircraft that sprayed and spread the chemical. Despite that they breathed in the air and brushed their teeth with water that was likely laced with the poison, they have not been given the healthcare they need.

Those same healthcare benefits have been extended to other troops who fought in the same war during the same years, but because these blue water veterans fought the enemy on the water rather than on Vietnam soil itself, our government won't lift a finger to stop their suffering. Tell me that is fair. Tell me that makes a shred of sense. Tell me that our Nation should abandon the heroes who risked their lives for the rest of us, that we should leave them to die from cancer or heart disease or the litany of other diseases we know this chemical causes.

Look, I have also gone to war, and just as those Americans lost their health, I was wounded for this country. But from the moment I woke up in Walter Reed, I knew that the VA would give me the care I needed to recover. These nearly 90 thousand veterans deserve the same. It is long past time we pass legislation ensuring that these heroes are not left in pain.

Unfortunately, legislation that would recognize their sacrifice suffered a setback last week, but with the time remaining in this Congress, we still have the chance to make those veterans whole, to do the right thing, the obvious thing, the American thing.

To every one of my fellow Senators, please, if we actually want to honor

their service, we can't just give them an ovation on Veterans Day; we need to take action to help them lead full, healthy lives every other day of the year too. Right now, that means joining me in working to pass the Blue Water Navy Veterans Act before even one more hero dies a preventable death on our watch. It is the right thing to do.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Connecticut.

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, I wish to close by thanking my colleagues, Senator DUCKWORTH and Senator BALDWIN, and say that I would like to end this session on a positive note. I am going to be proud to yield to one of my very good friends and one of our most distinguished colleagues, Senator SHELBY from Alabama, who has done such important work on appropriations and our budget. I thank him for it.

I hope that in the next session, this great body will see it in its heart, as well as mind and conscience, to do the right thing—not sometime in the next 2 years but in the first days and weeks so that these veterans have simple justice. I will champion it. I know colleagues on the other side of the aisle will join us, and we can get it done. We must.

Thank you, Mr. President.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Alabama.

#### TRIBUTE TO SENATOR HATCH

Mr. SHELBY. Mr. President, I wish to start here this morning by thanking my good friend, Senator ORRIN HATCH, who happens to be in the Chamber, for his more than four decades of service in the U.S. Senate. We have served together in the Senate for 32 years; he was here before then.

I remember that Senator HATCH was first elected to the Senate in 1976 when I was still serving in the Alabama State Senate. This was his first run for public office but more to come.

Senator HATCH, as we know, is the longest serving Republican Senator in U.S. history. He is one of only two sitting U.S. Senators to have served during the Presidency of Gerald Ford. He is one of only two remaining Republican U.S. Senators who served during the Presidency of Jimmy Carter.

Senator HATCH, as we all know, serves currently as the President pro tempore of the U.S. Senate—one of the highest honors in the Senate. He has chaired three Senate class A committees during his tenure in the Senate, including the Finance Committee, of which he is currently the chairman. He has chaired with distinction the Judiciary Committee and the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions.

Some of his major accomplishments—these are just a few—include

passage of the historic progrowth, middle-class tax reform, the most significant tax reform in a generation. His accomplishments also include confirmation right here in the Senate of conservative judges to the Federal bench—hundreds and hundreds—including playing an instrumental role in the confirmation of Supreme Court Justices Antonin Scalia, Clarence Thomas, Samuel Alito, and Brett Kavanaugh, as well as, as I said, scores, if not hundreds, of district and circuit court judges.

One of Senator HATCH's particularly noteworthy achievements, among others, on the Judiciary Committee is the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993, a bill he authored and cosponsored with the late Senator Ted Kennedy. It was landmark legislation allowing Americans to live, to work, and to worship in accordance with their beliefs.

Senator HATCH's reputation as a statesman and his record of fiscal responsibility even earned him the nickname "Mr. Balanced Budget" from President Reagan.

Senator HATCH is also widely known for his musical career and film appearances. He plays the violin, the piano, and the organ. Think of the talent this man has.

Senator HATCH and his wife, Elaine, have been married for more than 50 years. They have 6 children, 23 grandchildren, and many great-grandchildren. Think of a lifetime achievement, and he has, I believe, many years left.

He will be truly missed here in the Senate, and I wish him all the best in the next chapter of his life.

I yield the floor.

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.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Iowa.

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

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

#### FIRST STEP ACT

Mr. GRASSLEY. Mr. President, today is a good day for representative government, it is a good day for the taxpayers, and it is a good day for safe streets and strong families. It is also a good day to emphasize that many times Congress acts in a bipartisan way, and probably not enough so we get credit for it. But last night, one of these bipartisan pieces of legislation passed by a vote of 87 to 12. That happened when the Senate adopted the FIRST STEP Act.

Today, the House is expected to send it to the President, who is waiting with a pen in hand to enact once-in-a-generation criminal justice reform. I am confident that the President is ready to do that because I attended the news

conference about 5 weeks ago when he endorsed this legislation.

The FIRST STEP Act will help keep our streets safe, and it offers a fresh start to those who put in the work when they were in prison to get right with the law while paying their debt to society. It also addresses unfairness in prison sentencing and revises policies that have led to overcrowded prisons and, of course, ballooning taxpayer expenses.

Several decades ago, Congress passed well-intentioned laws imposing harsh mandatory sentences to stop the flow of drugs into our communities, and it happened that I voted for those laws, but they have also had some unintended consequences. Our prison population has exploded, and the taxpayers' burden to house inmates has followed suit. Today, taxpayers pay more than \$7 billion a year on our Federal prison population; however, despite that high cost, nearly half the inmates released today are rearrested.

As a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee for the last 38 years, I consider myself—then and now—a law-and-order Republican. I am also a taxpayer watchdog, and I believe in the redemptive power of rehabilitation. So in 2015, I began to take a closer look at our prison and sentencing laws. We needed to make the system work better for the taxpayers, help law enforcement fight crime, and put a stopper in the revolving prison door. I was led to that effort by the efforts of Senator LEE and Senator DURBIN, who had been working on similar legislation for probably 3 to 4 years before my entry into this debate.

Several States across the country have developed these education, treatment, and training programs. The result has been a significant decline in recidivism. This means fewer crimes, fewer victims, and fewer tax dollars spent housing inmates.

The FIRST STEP Act is carefully crafted to provide opportunities at redemption for low-risk inmates, while ensuring that dangerous and career criminals stay behind bars. It does this through a multilayer system that filters out dangerous criminals and those likely to commit new crimes.

The bill rewards those who take personal responsibility for their mistakes and want to put in the time and effort to turn their lives around.

It improves fairness in sentencing while preserving important law enforcement tools.

It reduces some mandatory minimum sentences, but it also expands their application to include violent felons.

It grants judges additional discretion to sentence low-level, nonviolent offenders to less lengthy sentences as long as they fully cooperate with law enforcement. Finally, it eliminates the disparity in sentences for crack and powder cocaine offenses, which disproportionately impacts communities of color.

Passing these reforms has been a team effort years in the making. It

couldn't have been done without the stalwart commitment by a somewhat unlikely cadre of colleagues and advocates. We have had to compromise to make this possible, to seek to understand the other's points of view. In so doing, I think we made the bill better, and we accomplished something of historic significance that will reduce crime, make our system more just, and improve lives for generations to come.

Senators DURBIN and LEE, as I previously stated, were instrumental in this effort. Their interest in criminal justice reform dates back beyond my getting involved in it in 2014. The exact date, I don't know, but probably after Senators LEE and DURBIN joined hands, probably soon after Senator LEE came to the Senate. Their efforts inspired the Senate to take a fresh look at our sentencing and prison laws.

Senator GRAHAM, the incoming chairman of the Judiciary Committee, Senator CORNYN, and Senator WHITEHOUSE have also been with us since the very beginning of this effort.

Senators BOOKER and SCOTT both share a passion for criminal justice reform and have been vocal advocates, shining a light on the shortcomings and societal impact of our current system.

Credit is also due to our House colleagues—Chairman GOODLATTE, Ranking Member NADLER, and Congressmen COLLINS and JEFFRIES, who introduced the FIRST STEP Act in the House. And thanks to Speaker RYAN for his support and pledge to bring this to the House floor so quickly.

At every step along the way, we have stuck together. We pitched this bill to our colleagues and made changes based on their suggestions. We also relied on input and expertise from a variety of groups from across the political spectrum. In the end, this campaign earned the support of several top law enforcement and tough-on-crime champions, such as President Trump.

I think it is important to acknowledge the President's leadership on this issue. When he got involved, he closed the deal, and we got this done. He was helped in that effort by Jared Kushner. Early in President Trump's administration, I happened to be in the Oval Office of the new President. Jared Kushner was there, and we discussed taking up criminal justice reform. I just asked him if he was interested in it. I wanted to give him a phone call, so we had that phone call. He took the issue and ran with it and helped find a way forward to accomplish something previous administrations had tried and failed to do. Brooke Rollins and Ja'Ron Smith at the White House were also instrumental in this effort, working with Jared Kushner.

I would also like to thank the majority leader for staying true to his word and bringing this bill to the floor when we demonstrated the support for our effort that he demanded. In the end, I appreciated his vote for this bill.

Thanks also is due to the Senate floor staff on both sides of the aisle