

of freedom today. Our Founding Fathers would cringe to see our Constitution treated more and more like the one from which they sought so furiously to gain independence at the genesis of our nation. Thus, the Constitution is indeed a structural embodiment of those famous truths which we held then and hold now to be self-evident. However, the oft-forgotten grievances in the Declaration render the need for a government and a people that hold to the original meaning of that Constitution equally self-evident to any who dare to dig deeper.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. GARDNER). The Senator from Mississippi.

#### GUATEMALA

Mr. WICKER. Mr. President, yesterday the Government of Guatemala took a decisive step toward regaining sovereignty. Guatemala revoked the visas of and deported 11 U.N. personnel working for the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, better known by its Spanish acronym CICIG.

Chartered in 2006 to help the Guatemalan state fight corruption, CICIG morphed into a modern-day United Nations proconsul, selectively administering justice and abusing power in ways never intended.

Voices on the political left, both here and overseas, will no doubt decry the decision by the duly constituted Government of Guatemala. I take the floor of the Senate this afternoon to state plainly my emphatic approval of this action by our Guatemalan friends.

Prior to yesterday's action, Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales had previously announced that CICIG's mandate would not be renewed after September 3 of next year. The President's decision marks a logical and welcome step toward ending CICIG's presence in Guatemala. Ultimately, an independent country has the right to decide if, and under what terms, a supranational institution can administer justice within its borders. CICIG was never meant to be permanent, and no country could accept an unending infringement on its sovereignty. Certainly, we in the United States would never consent to having an international body—accountable to no one—run our judicial system. Our Guatemalan friends have determined it is time for CICIG to leave, and they have a right as a sovereign nation to make that decision.

The initial reasons behind CICIG's presence in Guatemala cannot be disputed. Like many Latin American countries, Guatemala had suffered from pervasive corruption, and its government was in ruins from a decades-long civil war. Criminal enterprises colluded with politicians, military officers, and other government officials to bribe, cheat, and steal. Mafias, with deep tentacles into the state, acted with such impunity that Guatemala felt compelled to ask for outside help. In 2006, Guatemala and the United Nations signed an agreement meant to

"support, strengthen, and assist" Guatemalan institutions responsible for investigating crimes committed by so-called "illegal security groups" and "clandestine security organizations." Although CICIG enjoys complete functional independence, the agreement stated that CICIG must discharge its mandate in "accordance with Guatemalan law and the provisions of the Constitution." Regrettably, this provision has not been followed.

Despite noble goals, it has become apparent that CICIG is not being held accountable to either Guatemalan law or the United Nations. As the largest financial contributor to the United Nations, the United States has an interest in investigating the credible allegations that CICIG was grossly overstepping its mandate. After all, the American taxpayers were largely financing this enterprise.

The questionable practices of CICIG and its unelected leader have been reported in our national papers. The Wall Street Journal's Mary Anastasia O'Grady has been a close observer of Colombian jurist Ivan Velasquez, who serves as CICIG's Commissioner. Ms. O'Grady states:

Under his leadership, there is strong evidence that CICIG routinely flouts the rule of law and tramples civil liberties in violation of the Guatemalan constitution. His methods can't be supported by a republic that pledges allegiance to transparency and human rights.

Powerful institutions have a tendency to amass more powers to themselves and stretch their authority far beyond their legal mandates. Even its most strident supporters have acknowledged that CICIG now essentially answers to no one and needs to be reformed. Nowhere is this contention better supported than the CICIG-backed persecution of the Bitkov family on behalf of the Russian Government. For all its flaws, which are numerous, CICIG's decision to conspire with Russia is the most outrageous.

Igor and Irina Bitkov built a successful paper mill company, the Northwest Timber Company, in Russia's Kaliningrad enclave. This rare example of successful private enterprise in Russia was once valued at nearly half a billion dollars, but success comes with a price in Putin's Russia.

In 2005, a senior officer of the state-owned Sberbank demanded that the Bitkovs sell him a controlling stake in their company. Imagine. It is an offer the Bitkovs refused. Two years later, the Bitkovs' 16-year-old daughter, Anastasia, was kidnapped, drugged, raped, and held until the Bitkov family paid a ransom.

In April 2008, three Russian state banks—the VTB, Sberbank, and Gazprombank—forced the Bitkovs' company into bankruptcy by calling in the immediate repayment of nearly \$160 million in loans. Traumatized and threatened with detention and death, the Bitkovs decided to flee Russia. More death threats followed as Moscow opened a criminal case in 2009.

The Bitkovs eventually immigrated to Guatemala in 2009 after paying a legitimate law firm for Guatemalan passports with new identities for their protection. The Bitkovs settled into a new life that was blessedly free from Russian harassment and intimidation. Igor and Irina began teaching at a local school. Anastasia began to heal from her ordeal. A son, Vladimir, was born in 2012.

The reprieve was short-lived. VTB, one of the Russian banks, collaborated in 2015 with CICIG and the Guatemalan Attorney General to arrest the Bitkovs for passport violations. Detained in appalling conditions, Anastasia was denied medication and had a nervous breakdown. Three-year-old Vladimir was sent to an orphanage for 42 days without having contact with his parents or appointed guardians. Eventually freed by a court order and with an upper respiratory infection, conjunctivitis in both eyes, and clear physical and psychological abuse, Vladimir returned to his family. This is modern-day CICIG in Guatemala.

Under the direction of CICIG, the Bitkovs were sent to trial in February of 2017. The Guatemalan Court of Appeals, however, enjoined the Bitkovs' prosecution and stated that the family was not criminally liable for passport violations. Despite this injunction, a lower court, at the behest of CICIG, went ahead with the case and eventually sentenced Igor Bitkov to 19 years and Irina and Anastasia to 14 years in prison. Let me repeat—19 years and 14 years for passport violations. They were passports that they believed to be legitimate based on legal advice they had been given. These were infractions that are usually settled with a fine at worst, but this was all in collaboration with CICIG and the Russian accusers.

Following more convoluted legal wrangling, Igor Bitkov was released on house arrest in May, but, inexplicably, Irina and Anastasia remained in jail—more injunctions, more appeals, more tortuous legal proceedings. Irina and Anastasia were finally released on bail in mid-June. This is CICIG in Guatemala. Pushed by CICIG, the Constitutional Court, which is the highest court in Guatemala, ordered a retrial for the Bitkovs. It began last week and supposedly continues.

American taxpayers who are footing the bill for CICIG have a right to ask Commissioner Velasquez and his CICIG team: Is this the way to fight corruption in Guatemala? In short, CICIG, under the direction of Commissioner Velasquez, has gone from fighting corruption to doing Vladimir Putin's dirty work even. He has gone even so far as to persecute victims, like the Bitkovs, of corruption.

The Bitkov affair demonstrates how badly CICIG has gone astray and why President Morales is right to want it out of his country. CICIG was established to help investigate and prosecute Mafias who were entrenched in the state and able to act with impunity. Yet it gets involved in a passport

violation case against a family that is clearly fleeing Russian persecution.

CICIG is supposed to be above reproach. Yet it collaborates with a state-owned Russian bank that, incidentally, is currently under U.S. sanctions. The CICIG is doing the bidding of Putin's henchmen in its acting as the long arm of Russia's dictatorship. The intervention of a Kremlin-controlled bank shows that influencing CICIG is a part of the Kremlin's broader campaign to exert pressure across Latin America, and we ought to be concerned about that.

Earlier this month, in the Wall Street Journal, Ms. O'Grady wrote that the creeping intervention from Moscow is designed to damage U.S. interests by destabilizing liberal democracy.

ADM Craig Faller, the commander of the U.S. Southern Command, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that Russia is flooding Latin America's internet, social media, and television outlets with original and reproduced propaganda to sow doubt about U.S. intentions. Russia has also provided crucial financial support to the infamous Maduro regime in Venezuela, and it competes with the United States to provide military support for regional partners.

Another strategic competitor, China, is also seeking to influence important U.S. partners in Latin America. China has provided more than \$140 billion in Belt and Road Initiative loan commitments. Beijing is now Latin America's second largest trading partner.

Although CICIG once played a significant role in exposing and prosecuting serious corruption, it has now fallen victim to Lord Acton's famous observation—that power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

President Morales has made a decision, as the duly elected head of a sovereign country, that he will no longer tolerate an increasingly neocolonial force. The United States should stand behind this decision. The CICIG was never supposed to stay indefinitely.

This move by the Guatemalan Government does not absolve its own responsibility to fight corruption. Indeed, we should demand a redoubling of these efforts. As a critical country in the Western Hemisphere, a return to pre-CICIG conditions would be unacceptable. This is the chance for Guatemalans to work toward the justice that CICIG abandoned with its complicity in Moscow's vendetta. This should begin with an end to the Bitkov family's long nightmare. Their ordeal has gone way beyond a miscarriage of justice, and with CICIG's being gone, Guatemala must do the right thing without further delay or excuse.

In conclusion, the duly constituted Government of Guatemala has made the right decision and should be congratulated for yesterday's action. The country's leadership took a necessary step in asserting its sovereignty and in ending a dysfunctional relationship

with CICIG, a well-intended agency that has exceeded its mandate and outlived whatever usefulness it may initially have had.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. WICKER). The Senator from Colorado.

#### RECOGNIZING OUR MEN AND WOMEN IN LAW ENFORCEMENT

Mr. GARDNER. Mr. President, I come to the floor to honor our men and women in law enforcement. As Members of Congress and their staffs head home this holiday season, we must remember the sacrifice of those who make our communities safe, those who make our safety possible.

This year, across the United States, 143 law enforcement officers have paid the ultimate price.

In Colorado, we honor three fallen officers. We honor Deputy Sheriff Heath McDonald Gumm, whose final act was to bravely pursue an armed suspect. We will never forget the courage and bravery of his action. We honor Deputy Sheriff Micah Lee Flick, who was killed in the line of duty in February of this year after serving in the El Paso County Sheriff's Office for 11 years. We also honor the memory of Sergeant Matthew Moreno, who was killed in the line of duty in Las Animas County just last week. He was responding to reports of domestic violence when his cruiser and that of another officer's crashed into a civilian's vehicle that was headed in the opposite direction. Unfortunately, the occupants of the other vehicle, including a 1-year-old child, also lost their lives.

The pain of losing loved ones this close to the holidays is unimaginable.

Sergeant Moreno ends his watch after having served honorably for 5 years. He is survived by his loving family, including his three beautiful children, Summer, Morgan, and Jared. He has been described as being a superhero to his kids. It seems very fitting given the bravery that he showed throughout his career. He is also remembered for his sense of humor and his love for hunting and fishing—something all Coloradans can relate to. Our prayers are certainly with Sergeant Moreno's family and with the families of those in the other vehicle. I also offer my sincere condolences to the entire Las Animas County Sheriff's Department. The officers have not just lost a fellow officer but a brother.

All of the officers whom we lost this year were neighbors, beloved family members, and extraordinary Coloradans who gave their lives to protect their communities. Although the need is great, so few of us are blessed with the level of bravery and courage shown each and every day by the men and women in law enforcement.

As we all enjoy the warmth of this holiday season, law enforcement officers around the country will stand guard in cold and uncertain streets. This includes the selfless men and

women who serve right here in the U.S. Capitol, who work through the holidays to ensure that every American who visits the Nation's Capitol can do so safely. It is important that we keep them in our thoughts as we gather with family and friends this holiday season to celebrate.

I would also like to take a moment to thank the families of these brave men and women whose sacrifices must not be forgotten. They endure time apart from their loved ones so that families, like millions across this country, will know peace and security during their holiday celebrations.

When thinking about the brave men and women who defend that thin blue line, I am always reminded of the words of LTC Dave Grossman, who said, "American law enforcement is the loyal and brave sheepdog—always standing watch for the wolf that lurks in the dark." It is my hope that the thoughts and prayers we all offer to those who wear the blue uniform will bring them comfort as they carry out this solemn duty. I am thankful for their service and thankful to their families for their continued sacrifice.

I am also reminded of the words of Joe Rice, a former State legislator in Colorado, with whom I served. He served multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan and wrote how he prays for his fellow soldiers and their safety each and every day by saying and praying:

For all of those around the world in harm's way, we pray with you. Please God, just not today.

Each and every day, we echo that same prayer.

Thank you to the men and women in blue.

I also thank my colleague from New Jersey, Senator MENENDEZ, for allowing me to speak out of turn. I greatly appreciate it.

I thank the Presiding Officer for taking the Chair.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. GARDNER). The Senator from New Jersey.

#### CLIMATE CHANGE

Mr. MENENDEZ. Mr. President, I am going to be shortly joined by my distinguished colleague from Rhode Island, Senator WHITEHOUSE, for an exchange we will have, but in order to preserve the time on the floor, I will start.

I come to the floor today to once again join the Senator from Rhode Island in calling attention to the crisis that is climate change. I want to thank my friend Senator WHITEHOUSE for his passion, his persistence, and his refusal to let the Senate be silent in the face of one of the greatest threats to ever confront our Nation and the world.

Some say we can't afford to invest in clean, renewable, American-made energy. I say we cannot afford not to. The fact is, every year that goes by without a comprehensive strategy to reduce the