

rapt attention at the excellence of their presentations and the depth of their understanding of this problem.

I couldn't help but notice on the charts of the Senator from Oregon, often the source was NOAA or NASA, two Agencies where we have had to worry, in the last 2 years, about the attempted muzzling of science, of scientists, and the seeming putdown of science—not by the Agencies themselves because they are such great experts. As matter of fact, when I have held several hearings at ground zero, which is South Florida, where we are seeing the effects of climate change in the rising of the seas and now are seeing a mean high tide and the water sloshing over the curbs of South Florida cities—having these hearings there, it is often NASA scientists and NOAA scientists who testify.

So I want the Senator from Oregon, the Senator from Delaware who preceded him, several others, and the Senator from Massachusetts to know how much I appreciate their taking up the banner and keeping on this matter.

I also want to say that if we do not change our processes of putting a lot of carbon into the air—and, as the Senator said, it is often methane, it is often carbon dioxide—the Earth will continue to heat up. If it gets heated up to something over 4 degrees Fahrenheit more than the average annual global temperature, that is the point of no return. At that point, you can't stop the heating up.

If we know the disaster now that we see in the sea level rising, the greater cost to government with the additional infrastructure, the moving of water wells further inland to keep away from the encroaching sea water and salt-water intrusion—if we know that, why in the world would we not contemplate the ultimate destruction of the planet if it gets too hot? I would love to get the Senator's comments.

Mr. MERKLEY. I appreciate so much the comments of my colleague from Florida.

I had the chance to go down to Florida at the end of October at a rally to address the challenge of red tide, algae that was growing in the ocean that produces a toxin. The toxin is so powerful that it was causing a lot of respiratory problems for people who live along the gulf coast, and it was killing a lot of animals. People were talking about manatees, dolphins, turtles, and fish washing up on the beach. Not only did they have the toxins from the red algae, but they had the stench from the dying sea life.

The sense of people who gathered to talk about this was that dramatic action is needed; that this was completely compromising the quality of life, the health of the oceans, and the ability to harvest food out of the ocean. People were saying they were actually taking inland vacations; that is, leaving the coast until the air would get better. They said that, unfortunately, the circumstances had been in

that bad condition for 10 months of the last 12 months—meaning they might not actually want to go back, at least not keep a home there.

I thought of the parallel from your State in Florida to my State in Oregon because we have an area in Southern Oregon that has been deeply afflicted by fire smoke the last two summers. The smoke has tainted furniture being sold. It has shut down outdoor events. It has stopped people from hiking the Cascade Trail. It is affecting the economy. House prices are changing. People are thinking twice about booking for—there is a different set of economic impacts. These are only the indirect impacts.

There is the direct impact on the Panhandle of Florida. I just saw the pictures of complete devastation when the hurricane came across earlier this year. Of course, we saw the pictures of complete devastation for some of the communities that the forest fires on the West Coast burned to a crisp.

So our two States and our citizens know there is a problem. Not everyone wants to face the underlying cause of methane and carbon pollution driving it, but everybody knows there is a problem.

We are fortunate to have your scientists—your NOAA scientists, your NASA scientists—and all the satellite information they are feeding us so we can study it and stand on the floor of the Senate and say: We do know the cause, and it is our responsibility as leaders of this Nation, leaders in the Senate, to proceed to make sure we act aggressively in partnership with the world.

I just want to say I thank you so much for your service in this Chamber and your knowledge about the scientific facts and willingness to never look away from them and to confront what those facts mean for the policies we need to adopt.

Mr. NELSON. Mr. President, I will conclude my remarks by just bringing you back to the vision that I had in the window of a spacecraft orbiting the Earth every 90 minutes. An hour of that was in the daylight of the sun and about a half-hour of that in the shadow of the Earth, which is the nighttime, looking at how beautiful the Earth was, and yet it looked so fragile. You could look at the rim of the Earth, that bright blue band, but right underneath it you could see that very thin atmosphere that supports all of our life. With the naked eye, from that altitude in the spacecraft orbiting the planet, you could actually see how we are messing it up.

You could see this in flight 34 years ago. As a matter of fact, our first launch attempt, 34 years today, took us five tries to get off the ground, but once we did, we could see with the naked eye how we are messing it up. Coming across Madagascar, the island nation off the southeast coast of the continent of Africa, you could see they had cut down all the trees. You could

immediately see the effects because when the rains came, there was no vegetation to hold the topsoil, and the topsoil was all running down. From that altitude, looking down, you could see that silt going out into the bright blue waters of the Indian Ocean. With the naked eye, you can see that. It is such a beautiful planet. We best take care of it.

Indeed, that was the effect upon me of having gone into space. I decided I wanted to be a better steward when I came back to Earth. Here we are, 34 years later, still fighting—fighting and fighting—to try to get people to understand what we are doing to ourselves. I thank this Senator, and I thank all the Senators who have spoken here, and I want your voices to keep strong and keep consistent and keep at it because sooner or later—hopefully, not after a catastrophe—the world's population is going to come around and understand that we have to be better stewards of our home.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Florida.

#### U.S. TROOP WITHDRAWAL FROM SYRIA

Mr. RUBIO. Mr. President, earlier today, this morning, the administration announced the intent to remove all American troops—not a large presence, but all Americans troops—from Syria. I want to be clear, as I have been all day about this, that I believe it is a catastrophic mistake that will have grave consequences for the United States, for our interests, and our allies in the months and years to come. I want to take a moment to come here and explain why.

The rationale behind the decision we were given today by the administration is that there is no longer a need for U.S. presence in Syria because ISIS has been defeated. Just a week ago, the President's own envoy to the global coalition on ISIS said this, and I want to quote from the statement that he gave last week to the press. He said:

[T]he end of ISIS will be a much more long-term initiative. Nobody is declaring a mission accomplished. We know that once the physical space is defeated we can't just pick up and leave.

This was a quote from the President's own envoy to the global coalition on ISIS—not 6 months ago, 6 days ago. We don't have time here or I could take up all the time of the Senate to outline statement after statement from military and diplomatic officials in the administration basically echoing the same point.

The point that we are making is this. ISIS still controls territory, particularly, in the Euphrates River valley of Syria. From the territory they still control, they generate money, they control the population, and they produce propaganda videos. Even if that is taken away, ISIS is on its way to turning into an insurgency—meaning, no longer an organization that

controls vast spaces of land or has a capital city—an insurgency like we saw in Iraq, an insurgency like what al-Qaida operated like and continues to operate like. Insurgencies in many ways are even harder to defeat because they don't wave a flag and tell you where they are, because they meld into the population by day and then wreak havoc and suffering by night.

I am not here to deny there hasn't been true progress made against ISIS. There absolutely has. If you look at what ISIS had, what ISIS controlled when this administration began and where they are today, this has been a substantial achievement, but we have to finish the job. The job is not finished.

Why has ISIS's presence in Syria been degraded? It is because the United States, with a very limited military presence—we are not talking Afghanistan here with tens of thousands of troops. We are not talking Iraq here with a massive surge. We are talking about a very capable but light footprint of American primarily trainers and people there to assist, although they most certainly can fight and have done so in the past.

Working alongside a ground force made up of the Syrian Democratic Forces—primarily Arabs—and the Kurdish forces from the YPG, who are highly capable fighters from the Kurds, they have been on the ground fighting with our assistance and our direction and sometimes our direct involvement against ISIS in the Euphrates River valley. They are the reason why in that part of Syria ISIS's control has rapidly degraded. They are the reason, but they are the ones fighting. That has been a difficult thing to achieve because the No. 1 objective of the Kurds is to protect Kurdish cities and towns in northern Syria.

There is a longstanding dispute between the Kurds and Turkey. There is a Kurdish organization in Turkey, and then there is one affiliated with them housed in northern Syria and in cities that are Kurdish cities. Their No. 1 priority is maintaining their cities. That is what they care about the most. Getting them to actually take time out from that interest and confront ISIS was not easy. It has been an enormous achievement to partner and colocate with them in fighting and in degrading ISIS in that area.

As I said, it has not been easy because ISIS is not their top priority. Their No. 1 priority is maintaining control of the Kurdish towns and cities in northern Syria and, more importantly, preventing Turkey and the Turkish military from taking it from them.

They have been threatening to pull out of this ISIS effort for a long time, most recently when Erdogan went around saying: I am on the verge. I am going to invade. I am coming in. Any day now I am going after the Kurds in Syria.

We already knew that if that happened, many of these YPG forces—the

Kurds—would abandon the fight on ISIS and immediately be pulled into defending the Kurdish cities. Now that are we are pulling out, now that we are retreating, now that we are abandoning this effort, I can guarantee you that the Kurdish forces are going to leave. They are going back to the Kurdish areas to prepare to confront the Turkish military activity that they have announced and that could be coming at any moment. You know what that means? That means that there will no longer be anyone on the ground in the Euphrates River valley attacking ISIS.

Let me tell you what comes next. Now the pressure is off from ISIS. Now they can really regroup. This is going to give them an enormous propaganda victory. As they take more and more territory, they are going to brag about it. That is going to help them recruit new fighters and resurrect themselves. It is going to give them more territory. It is going to give them access to more money.

All of that is going to allow them to expand their insurgency plan. They are going to have more people, more money, and more territory to do it from because, again, the Kurds are going to leave. Now that we are leaving, they are leaving, and no one will be fighting ISIS on the ground in the Euphrates River valley.

In fact, ISIS might even be able to restart its specialized military training in that area. We are allowing ISIS to come back. Before long, we are all going to be talking about ISIS again—producing videos, kidnapping people, beheading people, taking territory, terrorizing people, and doing it as an insurgency, which is even harder to fight, as I said earlier.

Why is that happening? Who are the winners of all this? Let me tell you, I think the one winner here has been Erdogan. He has absolutely played us on this. It is truly stunning. He has spent months pressuring the United States to abandon the Kurds—diplomatically and in phone calls to the President and to others. He has spent months doing that. He has been putting pressure on the one side while also threatening military action on the other, in essence, saying: I am coming into Syria—the Turks—and I am going after the YPG—the Kurds—and I know U.S. troops are embedded alongside them, and you should be careful because we are coming in.

He has been doing this for months. The goal of it the whole time was to separate the United States from the Kurds, to get us to break up this arrangement that we had with them to fight ISIS, and it worked. He has achieved it. It is truly unbelievable that he has been able to get us to back down.

I want everyone to think about this additional complication. Turkey is a member of NATO. Article 5 of NATO says that if a NATO member is attacked, you all have to come to their defense and it is attack on all of us.

While there is some wiggle room about what the appropriate response should be, the bottom line is that the Turks have in the past threatened to invoke article 5.

Think about this for a moment. Think about for a moment if after being attacked, the Kurds—both in Turkey and in Syria—decide to attack back, as they will to defend themselves. Turkey is going to say: We are under attack from Kurdish forces and the YPG. We invoke article 5.

I want you to think for a moment about what position that puts the United States in. We have a choice. We can stand behind our article 5 commitment to NATO, but if we do so, we are going to have to help the Turks defeat—meaning kill—the very people who we were just colocated with today and yesterday and for months. The very people we have been working with to defeat ISIS for over 2½ years are now people that, if we allow article 5 to be invoked by Turkey, we are going to have to join in trying to defeat them—meaning kill.

The other alternative is to not respect article 5 and not come to their defense, and then you have placed the entire NATO alliance in doubt because it will have been invoked for the second time in its history, and the United States didn't respond to it. We lose either way. We either help them kill the Kurds, our partners, as recently as today, or we ignore article 5. That sounds pretty dramatic, and there is some wiggle room as to what the appropriate response would be.

Let there be no doubt, Erdogan is the kind of geopolitical hardball player to trigger this sort of response, and he has threatened to do it in the past—truly, unbelievable.

Who is the other big winner? Russia. In fact, their embassy in the United States already put out a tweet celebrating the decision. Why? First of all, because America is now out. At some point, people are going to have to sit down and decide what is the future of a post-ISIS Syria. You know who will be at that table? The Turks will be at that table because they are going to have a military presence in northern Syria. The Iranians are going to be at the table because they are the closest allies Assad has. Assad will be at the table, and Putin will be at the table. Guess who will not be at the table? The United States of America. Vladimir Putin, of course, is celebrating this decision because America basically walked away and gave up its seat at the table. We have no presence there any longer, and we have turned over this country and its future and its meaning in the region to Vladimir Putin and Iran and Assad.

Also, another reason why Putin is a big winner is because you can just imagine those meetings now when Putin goes to the Middle East and meets with the Egyptians and the Saudis and the Jordanians, and, frankly, even the Israelis. You know what he

will say to them? He will say to them: I don't know why you are counting on America. I don't know why you are relying on America. They are unreliable.

Vladimir Putin will say: Look at me. I stood by Assad. Even after the whole world came after him, I stood by him. I didn't retreat. Look at America. They abandoned these Kurds to be slaughtered by the Turks and maybe by the regime, and you are going to put the future and the security of your country in the hands of an unreliable and erratic partner like the United States?

It is a huge victory for Putin in that regard.

By the way, put yourself in the position of the Kurds facing an onslaught from the Turkish military.

You have now given them two choices. They can partner up with Russia as their protector against Turkey or they can partner up with the regime in Iran. That is the choice we have left them with.

The other big winners in all this are Iran and Hezbollah.

For a long time, Assad has allowed Iran to use Syria as a transit point to arm Hezbollah in Lebanon so Lebanon can threaten and attack Israel. They will now be able to step up those efforts.

There is no U.S. presence in Syria. There is no U.S. seat at the table, and you can fully expect that Iran is going to step up their engagement in Syria with Hezbollah.

Let me tell you why that is a problem. I will get to that in a moment. It has to do with Israel, but here is the bottom line. You can fully expect now that Iran is going to step up its own presence through the IRGC and through Hezbollah and through the militias they have empowered in the region right on the border with Israel.

Iran now has the ability to put weaponry and killers right across the Golan Heights, right on the border with Israel.

The other big winner in all of this, of course, is Hezbollah. As I said, they now have expanded their area and their supply route.

So I would be remiss if I didn't mention that with all this talk of ISIS, there is still an al-Qaida presence in Syria. They were called Nusra Front. Now it is Hurras al-Deen. They can change their name all they want, it is al-Qaida. They have operatives in Syria, and al-Qaida spends a lot of time planning external operations. We thank our men and women in Homeland Security, in the military, in our security systems and intelligence systems for protecting us, but al-Qaida spends all day long plotting and thinking about how to strike the United States around the world and here in the homeland, and the lack of a U.S. presence in Syria means that the Syrian branch of al-Qaida, Hurras al-Deen, now has the ability to operate in a space that is even more desirable than what they have today.

The last winner in all this is surprising because you may ask: What

does it have to do with Syria? It is China. You can just imagine the meetings now that China is going to be having throughout Asia. You have all these countries in Asia which see this sort of growing conflict between the United States and China, and they are trying to figure out how do we stay out of this fight, but if we are forced to pick, which side do we pick? They prefer us. We are more reliable. We are more capable. We believe in democracy and human rights and respecting them and that sort of thing, but China in those meetings is going to say: America is a power in decline. America is unreliable. America is erratic. The same argument that Putin is going to use in the Middle East and in Europe is the argument China is going to use against us all over the world and particularly in the Asia-Pacific region.

Those are the implications of these kinds of decisions. They will increasingly go to places like Japan and South Korea and others and say: You know, do you really want to put all your eggs in the American basket because they are an unreliable ally. Look at what they did to the Kurds in Syria.

Now, of course, there are losers, and obviously Israel, in this part, is one of them. The statement from the Prime Minister of Israel is pretty telling. He said: It is an American decision. We are not going to interfere with it, but we are going to do whatever it takes to protect our interests in this area. Translation? They are going to step up their attacks. They are already conducting strikes inside Syria. Every time they see a dangerous rocket system moving toward Hezbollah, anytime something that looks like it could threaten Israel from Syria pops up, they go in there, and they blow it up.

They are going to have to step up those efforts now because as those efforts increase, they are going to have to get more aggressive, and eventually they are going to kill Iranians. They are going to kill a lot of people in Hezbollah, but they are going to kill Iranians, and the Iranians are going to respond. Hezbollah is going to respond, and they are probably eventually going to respond by launching a vast volume of rockets coming over from Lebanon, and Israel is going to have to respond to that.

Suddenly, we have the next Israel-Hezbollah war, except this one is going to be much deadlier than the one 10 years ago because now Hezbollah has more rockets, better rockets that have longer range and precision in their guidance. So even if Israel has this incredible defense system, it can be overwhelmed by volume. It is such a small country. What do you think is going to happen when population centers in Israel cannot be protected from these attacks? Israel is going to respond, as they always have had to do in their self-defense, with disproportionate force, and we are going to have an all-out war potentially between Israel versus Iran and Hezbollah, and who knows where that leads.

I assure you, the United States is going to be called upon to help in that regard, at a minimum, by supplying Israel and maybe more. Who else could that pull in? This is not a game. There are serious repercussions if you think forward about what could happen next and how quickly this could destabilize the region and how quickly the pullout of a small American presence could lead to a much larger one down the road.

Ultimately, Israel is an enormous loser here because by the United States retreating, we have given the green light for Iran to expand its presence right on their border. This is the closest—other than Lebanon and Hezbollah—this is now the closest Iran has ever been to Israeli territory, just across the Golan Heights.

So think about it for a moment. You are Israel. You have problems in Judea and Samaria with the Palestinian Authority, you have issues in Gaza, you have Hezbollah in Lebanon, and now you have Iran with a growing presence just north of you in Syria. You are encircled. This is the predicament this helps creates.

By far, the biggest loser in this endeavor is the United States of America. We have surrendered our influence in the outcome of this conflict in Syria. At some point, nations are going to sit down and figure out what Syria looks like moving forward, and we will have zero role to play in it. It will be decided by the Turks and the Russians and primarily the Iranians and Assad, and we will have no role to play in it.

We have also undermined other nations' trust in the reliability of the American alliance, and the implications of that are extraordinary. If you think about the world today and nations like Japan and South Korea and Saudi Arabia and Egypt, these are countries that either can immediately or may in the future decide they need nuclear weapons to protect themselves: South Korea from North Korea, Japan from China, Saudi Arabia from Iran, Egypt from Iran. The reason many of these countries have been willing not to develop nuclear weapons is because the United States has, in the case of South Korea and Japan, directly assured their security, and that has kept the peace.

What happens when more and more nations develop weapons of mass destruction the way India and Pakistan have—about each other. Well, you have more weapons of mass destruction, and then it creates the possibility of miscalculation or, even worse, that a government—for example, in Saudi Arabia or in Egypt—is overthrown and some radical regime takes hold and they have nuclear weapons or they proliferate and sell it to people and that is used.

This is far-fetched for some people. This is reality. This is how foreign policy should be made, not just thinking about what is in front of you today but what could happen and the chain of

events that could be triggered by a decision. This is not a game. This is serious stuff.

On top of all that, losing the trust of our allies and nations around the world, losing our influence in a solution in Syria—ISIS is going to reemerge. It is not going to be the same ISIS it was before, controlling vast amounts of territory, but I will tell you what, al-Qaida never controlled vast amounts of territory. Operating from caves and hideouts throughout the Middle East, they carried out 9/11 and other threats against the United States and the homeland that were thwarted.

ISIS is going to reemerge now. They are once again going to be able to recruit people. They are going to have an insurgency that is going to be able to strike and perhaps externally plot. They are going to be able, from that presence they have in Syria, to influence their affiliates everywhere from the Philippines to Central Africa, to other countries in the region.

That is why I am here to tell you this is a catastrophic decision. Forget, for a moment, about no one being notified; it was just announced at the last minute. I haven't heard a single member of the administration—not one, not the Secretary of Defense, not the Secretary of State—who is going to own this decision? Who is willing to step forward and tell the American people or Congress, here is why we are making this decision, and here is the strategy it is in furtherance of? Someone explain that. It is important. The American people deserve to know. I haven't heard that today. We haven't heard it before.

We thought we had the outlines of some strategy here. All that has been taken away. Why are we doing this? What is the rationale and what comes next? What is the plan to keep ISIS from reemerging? What is the plan to keep Iran from growing its presence in Southern Syria and threatening Israel? What is the plan to deal with the al-Qaida element that already exists there? What is our role? What role are we going to play in a post-ISIS and post-al-Qaida Syria—and particularly as it relates to whether it can be used as a base of operations against our interests and our men and women in uniform stationed in the region. None of that has been outlined.

Is anyone in the administration going to own this and explain it? Because so far we haven't heard it, and this is an important public policy decision.

I hope I am wrong about all this. I hope this all works out, but it is not going to, and I am telling you, these are the kinds of decisions that define Presidencies. These are the kinds of mistakes that end up haunting a nation for years and years and years thereafter.

It is the hard lesson of Iraq. It is the hard lesson of decisions made at other times in our history. I hope this can be

reversed. I hope this can be reexamined because I honestly believe—put politics aside—I honestly believe this is a catastrophic decision for America's national security interests. If this stands, we in this Congress and we as a nation are going to be dealing with the consequences of it for years to come.

We will remember this day as the day that started it all. We will remember this day as a major blunder, in which by ignoring the advice of every diplomatic and military official who has spoken about this publicly for the last 2 years, we made a decision, for reasons that have not yet been explained, that triggered—that triggered—a series of events that no one foresaw at the time but proved to be much more dangerous and much costlier than anything we are doing there now.

So I honestly and sincerely hope someone in the administration is listening and that there is a chance to reverse or amend this decision before it is too late.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Kansas.

#### LIVER TRANSPLANT POLICY

Mr. MORAN. Mr. President, I am here to speak tonight because something is not right. I want to express my real concern with the recent decision of the national liver allocation policy made by the Organ Procurement Transplant Network made on December 4.

This sounds like something that is far away and perhaps of no real consequence, but the decision that was made has huge consequences on every American and should be receiving more attention than it has to date because the number of organs that are available for transplant and where those organs will be available is being determined by this small group of people.

The decision they made throws aside expert advice from transplant surgeons and hospitals on best practices. It also carries the risk of decreasing organ donation rates, as donors learn their organs will not be used in their own communities but will be shipped someplace in the country. Places in the country today have donor programs designed to encourage donors to donate their organs, and part of that is the understanding that those organs are going to be available for your family, your friends and neighbors, and people within your community.

This decision limits the availability and access to donated organs in areas that currently have low wait times and damages the ability of our major transplant hospitals to perform these services for patients. In December of 2017, following two rounds of public comment period and extensive deliberation by the OPTN board, that board approved a compromise allocation policy that served the transplant community's best interests. This served as a policy reform that was worked out over

years to better benefit the entire country based upon compromise by transplant experts, patients, and stakeholders.

However, the next year in 2018, a lawsuit was filed based upon the HRSA allocation policies, and in the face of that single voice of criticism, they disregarded years of work and compromise that was reached the year before. It is unfortunate that the basis for this policy change was litigation, not a determination of how best to improve the Nation's organ transplant, procurement, and allocation process. HRSA has rushed to respond to this lawsuit by abdicating their duty to implement good policy, instead allowing a single case to divert liver allocation policy across the entire United States.

In October, I had a meeting with Dr. George Sigounas, the Administrator of HRSA. He described to me the importance of the comment period on these policies and how seriously his Agency would take them, especially considering that they were the very institutions and doctors who would go on to perform these transplants.

Shortly thereafter, I was disappointed to learn these comments were not comments made by the public, by these institutions, the doctors who perform transplants—that these comments were not even considered by the individuals tasked with crafting and advising the latest policy. In fact, Sue Dunn, the president of OPTN, has informed a number of commenters in the transplant community that their concerns over new policy were not even read by the board that approved the new policy. The reason these comments were not considered was due to the fact that OPTN's comment system was so overloaded in the days leading up to the decision that it caused a complete shutdown of that process.

So many transplant hospitals, surgeons, and medical professionals had deep enough concerns that they took the time out of their day to express them. These are the people tasked with saving lives through transplants each and every day. Yet their opinions, in essence, were deemed invalid. So many comments were submitted that the entire system shut down, and OPTN's response was simply to ignore them.

Further, OPTN did not choose to reconsider their damaging policies in the face of widespread opposition from the medical community. OPTN continues to push forward against all common sense in their pursuit to radically alter the way organs are distributed across the United States. Decisions on national organ allocation should be grounded in expert opinions rather than in a response to a single lawsuit. HRSA and OPTN are making a grave mistake in pushing this damaging policy that carries a significant cost—human lives.

In the meeting I had with Dr. Sigounas, as I indicated, he told me these comments should not just be comments but present actual suggestions of what the policy should be. I