

FBI Director Comey testified under oath that President Trump said to him, "I need loyalty, I expect loyalty." President Trump publicly railed against former Attorney General Sessions for following the guidance of Department of Justice ethics officials and recusing himself from anything pertaining to the Russia investigation. During his confirmation hearing, Barr would not commit to following the advice of career ethics officials at DOJ if they recommend that he recuse himself from the Russia investigation to avoid any appearance of conflicts of interest. Instead, he said that he would rely on his own judgment. Mr. Barr is essentially asking Senators to trust him and his judgment. Why should Senators trust his judgment when there are systems and processes in place that were created for this exact circumstance? Mr. Barr cannot call himself an institutionalist concerned with maintaining the rule of law while seemingly being unwilling to submit to the rule of law when it applies to him.

It is not surprising that the President would select as his next Attorney General someone who not only refuses to recuse himself from the investigation but also believes that elements of Mueller's probe are "fatally misconceived."

Finally, during his confirmation hearing, Barr was repeatedly pressed by Republicans and Democrats on whether or not he would agree to release the final Mueller report in its entirety. Barr would not commit to do so. I believe that the report should be made available not only to Members of Congress but to all Americans so that they can see the evidence for themselves and reach their own conclusions. If we want Americans to trust their judicial system, we must insist on transparency and honesty.

Beyond those issues, I am concerned about Mr. Barr's commitment to civil rights. During his confirmation hearing, he seemed ignorant about the disparate treatment between Whites and Blacks in our criminal justice system. When he served as Attorney General under President George W. Bush, he advocated for policies that have in turn led to mass incarceration of nonviolent offenders. In 2015, he publicly opposed the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act, bipartisan legislation that would have reduced Federal mandatory minimums, and required the Bureau of Prisons to provide more rehabilitative programming to prisoners.

Last year, Congress passed the First Step Act with broad bipartisan support. The First Step Act included similar provisions to the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act. The First Step Act will not be successful without direction from the Attorney General. I intend to use my position on the Appropriations Committee to hold Barr accountable and to make sure he is proactively implementing this law.

Americans deserve to have an Attorney General who is loyal to the office

and not to the President. I do not believe Mr. Barr is that Attorney General.

Mrs. SHAHEEN. 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.

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

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

VOTE ON BARR NOMINATION

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is, Will the Senate advise and consent to the Barr nomination?

Mr. YOUNG. Mr. President, I ask for the yeas and nays.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there a sufficient second?

There appears to be a sufficient second.

The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk called the roll.

Mr. THUNE. The following Senator is necessarily absent: the Senator from North Carolina (Mr. BURR).

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. YOUNG). Are there any other Senators in the Chamber desiring to vote?

The result was announced—yeas 54, nays 45, as follows:

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[Rollcall Vote No. 24 Ex.]

YEAS—54

Alexander	Gardner	Perdue
Barrasso	Graham	Portman
Blackburn	Grassley	Risch
Blunt	Hawley	Roberts
Boozman	Hoeven	Romney
Braun	Hyde-Smith	Rounds
Capito	Inhofe	Rubio
Cassidy	Isakson	Sasse
Collins	Johnson	Scott (FL)
Cornyn	Jones	Scott (SC)
Cotton	Kennedy	Shelby
Cramer	Lankford	Sinema
Crapo	Lee	Sullivan
Cruz	Manchin	Thune
Daines	McConnell	Tillis
Enzi	McSally	Toomey
Ernst	Moran	Wicker
Fischer	Murkowski	Young

NAYS—45

Baldwin	Harris	Reed
Bennet	Hassan	Rosen
Blumenthal	Heinrich	Sanders
Booker	Hirono	Schatz
Brown	Kaine	Schumer
Cantwell	King	Shaheen
Cardin	Klobuchar	Smith
Carper	Leahy	Stabenow
Casey	Markey	Tester
Coons	Menendez	Udall
Cortez Masto	Merkley	Van Hollen
Duckworth	Murphy	Warner
Durbin	Murray	Warren
Feinstein	Paul	Whitehouse
Gillibrand	Peters	Wyden

NOT VOTING—1

Burr

The nomination was confirmed.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Arkansas.

Mr. BOOZMAN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table and that the President be immediately notified of the Senate's action.

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

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

MORNING BUSINESS

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

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

VETERANS' AFFAIRS OVERSIGHT

Mr. BOOZMAN. Mr. President, it is no secret that the 116th Congress got off to a rocky start as we tried to address the ongoing partial shutdown. Despite that, I remain optimistic that we can work together to get things done for the American people.

Those looking for an example of how to find common ground should look no further than the important work Congress has done, and continues to do, for our veterans. The hearing room of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee is traditionally one of the most bipartisan places in Washington. It is also one of the busiest.

Last Congress, under Chairman ISAKSON's leadership, we held 30 hearings, considered 56 pieces of legislation, and sent to the full Senate 17 of President Trump's nominees to serve our veterans.

That spirit of cooperation continued here on the floor. During the last session of Congress, the Senate passed 23 major pieces of veteran-related legislation. As a result, the President signed into law bills that significantly enhance healthcare, education, retirement, and other benefits for our veterans.

I want to talk briefly about two of the more notable measures—the VA MISSION Act and the Forever GI bill—to underscore why it is so important for Congress to operate in a collaborative manner. Bipartisan oversight of the Departments and Agencies that implement the laws we pass in that Chamber is critical to ensuring that the executive branch follows the intent of Congress. These two laws highlight just how important that is.

Let's start with the VA MISSION Act. This law was passed to replace the Veterans Choice Act, which was created in response to the VA Health Administration scandal of 2014. This was a good first step. The Choice Program addressed many shortcomings within the VA system. However, my colleagues and I quickly learned it had its own share of troubles. Specifically, we heard repeated stories of difficulties navigating the complex and confusing bureaucratic process. Despite the new reforms, many veterans were still facing unacceptably long wait times at VA medical centers.

Through our oversight of the Choice Program, we recognized that more needed to be done to strengthen and streamline VA healthcare services and its community care programs. That was the genesis of the VA MISSION Act. One of the key reforms in the VA MISSION Act is that it enables veterans to seek quality healthcare services in their own communities, whether inside the VA system or from a private sector provider.

Specifically, the law requires the Department to establish access and quality standards that will be used as the framework for the VA and the veteran to decide when to get care in a VA facility and when to get care in the community. If the VA is unable to meet certain designated access standards, veterans will be given the option to receive care in the community. Last week, the VA announced the proposed new access standards to determine a veteran's eligibility for the community care that will take effect this June.

I am pleased that the VA maintained the spirit of the law in its proposed access standards. We understood that by providing additional access to community healthcare resources, there would be an added cost. As chairman of the Appropriations subcommittee that has jurisdiction over the VA, the entire committee will be closely working with the Department and my colleagues. Together, we will have the responsibility of making sure that the allocation of resources to support veterans' healthcare is spent wisely.

Oversight is also crucial to uncover negligence on the part of the Agencies charged with implementing the law. This is exactly what happened when the VA failed to fully comply with the housing stipend rates set by the Forever GI bill.

Passage of the initial GI bill after World War II was seen as a turning point in the way our Nation treated those who have served. The program is designed to give service men and women the building blocks they needed to succeed after leaving the military. The problem is, those building blocks have changed in the 70-plus years since the GI bill was first instituted. Since then, Congress modernized the GI bill when it passed the post 9/11 GI bill. After 17 years of war, it was once again time for an update.

The Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act—also known as the Forever GI bill—brings educational benefits to veterans so that they can receive them in this modern era. It became apparent, however, that the VA was implementing key provisions of the law incorrectly. When Secretary Wilkie testified before the VA Committee last September, I pressed him about the Department's failure to fully award the housing allowances for more than 340,000 Forever GI bill beneficiaries.

According to the statute, the VA should have used the Department of Defense's 2018 basic allowance for hous-

ing rates. This should have been calculated based on the ZIP Code where the student takes the majority of classes, rather than on the ZIP Code in which the school's main campus is located. Instead, some GI bill recipients were receiving housing stipends at the 2017 rate and based on the school's ZIP Code. This was clearly unacceptable.

Once it was evident that the VA was not following the statute, Congress had an obligation to act. That is why Senator SCHATZ and I introduced the Forever GI Bill Housing Payment Fulfillment Act to demand an immediate fix from the VA. That bill became law within a matter of weeks from its introduction.

With this law, what we are asking of the VA is really threefold. The first is to make every unpaid or underpaid veteran whole. The second is to be accountable for the errors that have happened and prevent them from recurring in the future. The third is to fix the problems to prevent them from recurring so that we will not go through this problem again. It is promising to see that the VA has begun to carry out some of the requirements that have been dictated in the Forever GI Bill Housing Payment Fulfillment Act.

The VA recently announced the members of the tiger team that the VA is required to assemble per the statute. For those who are unfamiliar with the term, a tiger team is a team of specialists tasked to achieve a specific goal. In this case, it is comprised of six senior benefits and IT officials at the VA who will be tasked with providing Congress a detailed plan to correct this egregious error. Hopefully, the move to quickly establish this team is reflective of the seriousness with which the Department takes this mandate. It is frustrating that it has taken another act of Congress to get to this point, but all of us are committed to ensuring that the VA follows the law as written.

In a spirit of cooperation, the leadership of the congressional committees who oversee the Department recently sent a letter to Secretary Wilkie to request that the VA work collaboratively with Congress throughout the implementation process. This message was echoed during a recent subcommittee hearing I chaired about the VA's implementation of a modern, commercial, electronic health record. It is important to ensure that the VA is able to share information with the Department of Defense and community healthcare providers while it undertakes the largest health record modernization project in the Nation's history. With all of the reforms getting underway simultaneously, it is vital for the VA to share information openly, even predecisional information, so that we can work together and have a common understanding of the impact of changes, including costs, and can assess the challenges that may arise.

The laws we pass in this Chamber are a key part of our legacy, but our oversight responsibilities are of equal im-

portance. The bipartisan manner in which the Veterans' Affairs Committee works to uphold that oversight responsibility sets an excellent example for the rest of Washington to follow.

We appreciate the hard work of Secretary Wilkie and that of his team and all of those in the VA system who work so very hard on behalf of our Nation's veterans. In working together, we can ensure that veterans receive the benefits they deserve and were promised.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Connecticut.

#### VICTIMS OF GUN VIOLENCE

Mr. MURPHY. I thank the Presiding Officer.

Mr. President, from time to time, I come to the floor of the Senate to share with my colleagues stories of the victims of gun violence. I had hoped the statistics that consistently show this country has a gun violence rate that is 10 to 20 times higher than those of other similar high-income nations—data that shows this continuing epidemic of mass slaughter during which we average a mass shooting almost every day—would have compelled my colleagues to action. It hasn't. So I have tried to come down to the floor as often as I can to explain who these people are and to explain the genius that has been lost from this world when lives are cut so short by gun violence—gun violence that is largely preventable in this country.

I come to the floor with an unusually heavy heart because I want to talk about some of the lives that were lost a year ago today at the shooting in Parkland, FL, at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. It was a year ago that I was actually walking to the floor to give a speech on immigration when I learned of another mass shooting. It hits hard for those of us who represent Connecticut because we are still working through the ripples of grief that never ever disappear in a community that has been shattered by an episode of catastrophic gun violence—in our case, in Sandy Hook, CT.

In February of last year, 17 students and teachers were gunned down in their classrooms at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. One of them was Peter Wang.

Peter was 15 years old. He was a U.S. Army Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps cadet. He was getting ready to celebrate the Chinese New Year with his family. His two younger siblings and many other friends called him a natural leader.

When the shooter entered the high school, Peter had a choice to make: He could run and protect himself or he could try to help his fellow students in need. He chose the latter. He chose to hold a door open to help his classmates escape. He saved other people's lives while he lost his own.

Classmate Jared Burns said: "For as long as we remember him, he is a hero."