

Judiciary Committee unanimously passed a bill to address the shortfall in the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund, which provides aid to the heroes and the families of the heroes who rushed to the towers selflessly on September 11, 2001.

Even in a divided Congress, even in a divided country, this issue is an absolute issue of moral clarity. On that fateful day, the men and women of the New York Fire Department, the New York Police Department, the EMS, and the construction labor unions who rushed to Ground Zero were like our soldiers. Like our soldiers, they rushed to danger for our safety without thinking of their own, and just as we don't leave soldiers on the battlefield behind, we must not leave the brave first responders behind when it comes to their healthcare. Yet, shamefully, it has always been a struggle here in this Congress to abide by that principle.

I have lived through the years when everyone said the first responders are getting respiratory illnesses and cancers they hadn't seen in such young people. They said they were crazy for thinking that it came from the pile. I lived through the years when, even though the science eventually confirmed that 9/11 was the cause, some in Congress complained that it was too expensive to provide these heroes with the healthcare they so very needed. Then, some said: This is a New York issue, and we are not going to help—as if we care about where our soldiers come from when they die on the battlefield.

After years of struggle, we eventually passed a healthcare program, but, initially, it wasn't even permanent. We have to fight every time when there is a problem, every time we need an extension, and every time it needs more funding. It is a painful and slow process, a difficult process, one that should never have been the way it has been. Every single one of the times, those brave first responders have had to come here to testify, wheeling through the halls of Congress, their bodies riddled with cancer, to beg Senators and Congressmen to help them get their healthcare.

My good friend, my dear friend Ray Pfeiffer—God bless his memory—who knew he was dying, would come down here again and again and again, not for himself—he knew it was too late for him—but to make sure his friends and their families got the help they needed.

It is shameful—there is no other word for it; shameful—that our great first responders have had to suffer the indignity of delay after delay after delay, of searching for some must-pass bill to tuck their issue into because this Congress, this Senate, did not think it was important enough to pass it on its own.

Let me tell you something. We are done with that. We are not doing this again—not this time. The House Judiciary Committee just passed the fix to the Victim's Compensation Fund. The full House will follow suit soon.

As soon as the House passes this bill, it should be on the floor of the Senate immediately as a stand-alone bill.

Once this bill passes the House, there will be only one person who stands between the brave first responders now suffering from cancer and illness and the money they need to save or extend their lives, and that one person is Leader McConnell.

So I say to Leader McConnell: This is not politics. This is not a game. These are our heroes—American heroes who are suffering and need our help. Your help, Leader McConnell, is needed now. I am imploring, pleading, even begging to Leader McConnell to put this bill on the floor immediately after it passes the House. I am imploring, I am pleading, I am begging Leader McConnell to give us a commitment today that, as soon as the House passes this bill, he will put it on the floor of the Senate as a stand-alone bill.

Once he puts it on the floor of the Senate, it will pass the Senate with strong bipartisan support. This is not a Democratic or Republican issue. The President will sign it. The brave heroes who have come down here time and again will breathe a sigh of relief, knowing they and their families, even if they are gone, will get the help they deserve.

We will reach the point soon—most likely this year—when more will have died from 9/11 related illnesses than on 9/11 itself. It has been over 17 years since 9/11, but, unfortunately, brave Americans are still dying. Brave Americans are still finding the cancers that were caused by their rushing to the pile, but only discovering them now. Let's do our job. Let's take care of them now.

ANNIVERSARY OF PULSE NIGHTCLUB SHOOTING

Mr. President, today marks the 3-year anniversary of the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, FL. On that horrible night, 49 people were killed, 53 wounded and many more forever changed in an unspeakable act of terror.

The shooting was traumatic not only as an act of brutal violence, but as a hate crime against the LGBTQ community. The shooter chose the Pulse nightclub; drove a long way specifically to Pulse. And he did it in order to target innocent people for the simple reason of being who they were.

Today, our hearts are with the victims' families, with the first responders, and with the city of Orlando. We also cannot help but remember that we are the only nation in the developed world where mass shootings happen with such regularity, many of them driven by hate. We will never be able to root out all the evil, malice, and hate in our society, but I also know that we will never see a great reduction in gun violence or in hate crimes if we do nothing. So as we remember the victims of Pulse, let us also act. Let us consider legislation to improve common sense gun safety.

We have a bill ready, sent to us by the House months ago, to fix loopholes

in our federal background check system. But Leader McConnell has not allowed it to reach the floor. Why not?

Why is it one of the many forgotten bills of his legislative graveyard? Are Republicans so unwilling to buck the gun lobby that they will ignore a bill supported of 90 percent of Americans, the majority of Republicans, the majority of gun owners? Something needs to change. My Republicans friends need to break out of the vise grip of the NRA.

I urge Leader McConnell to get this Chamber working again for the good of the American people. Commonsense background checks would be a great place to start—today of all days.

HONG KONG

Mr. President, finally, 30 years and one week ago, democratic protestors gathered at Tiananmen Square, where the Chinese Communist Party brutally suppressed the will of the people.

Today, in Hong Kong, a similar scene is playing out. The Chinese government is once again showing its true colors, suppressing democracy, denying the will of the people, trying to claw back more power and control.

The people of Hong Kong are rightfully protesting the Chinese government's interest in remanding potentially innocent people to mainland China in order to put them through the corrupt Chinese prison system.

America stands with the people of Hong Kong in their protest against this blatant abuse of power by the government in Beijing.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. ROMNEY). The Senator from Alabama.

EQUALITY ACT

Mr. JONES. Mr. President, today I rise to talk about a matter that is very close to my heart and rooted in my faith and belief that we are all God's children created in God's image. It is an issue of fundamental equality, of basic human dignity, and it is consistent with the values we strive to embody as American citizens.

I stand today to honor the contributions of LGBTQ Americans—the contributions they have given so selflessly to our Nation—and to remind all of my colleagues of the great risks these Americans still face simply because of who they love and who they are.

It was 50 years ago this month that the gay community finally rose up. The Stonewall riots were a product of a brutal police force cracking down on the gay community. They found a voice that others had in the previous years. This Pride Month, June, we celebrate that 50 years of a rise in the voice of people to be treated just basically as everyone else. It is an important issue for me. It is an important issue for a number of reasons—first and foremost, because I am a father, but also, I am a product of the Deep South in which I was raised. As a kid, I came of age during a very tumultuous time in our Nation's history, a very tumultuous time in Alabama.

When I was a kid, our schools remained segregated for years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, and my Black peers faced very difficult and different prospects for their future in life, which was a direct result of the Jim Crow laws that were still on the books in my childhood.

Men, women, and children were regularly targeted for violent attacks simply because of the color of their skin, the way they were born, and their audacity—their audacity to yearn for freedom and love and acceptance and respect.

The wounds of those years left scars that are still visible in many places today—many places not just in Alabama but across the country. The inequality and divisive rhetoric of the time and the tensions it fomented fueled the violence and tragedy that were wrought upon so many innocent people, especially in the 1950s and in the 1960s in Alabama, in the Deep South, and so many other places across this land.

I raise this because history has shown us time and again that when our government sanctions discrimination or merely turns a blind eye to it, we cause irreparable harm to those people. In doing so, we also turn our backs on the fundamental promise of this great country—that we are all endowed with certain unalienable rights, “all” being the key word in that phrase. We are all endowed with certain unalienable rights.

Without exception, policies of legalized discrimination that are fueled by fear always become a black mark on our Nation’s history. Today, we can reflect on those incidents from the civil rights movement with more clarity and take pride in the significant progress we have made over time, but what we cannot do is delude ourselves into thinking this work is nearly concluded. There is still work to be done with regard to gay rights. There is still work to be done when you consider that LGBTQ people in this country are still not guaranteed permanent Federal protection against discrimination—they are still not. There is still work to be done when we see that the LGBTQ community youth are five times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers—five times more likely to commit suicide. And we know there is still work to be done when LGBTQ youth are more likely to become homeless and to face physical and sexual exploitation.

Our former colleague in this body who was here for such a long time—he was here when I worked in the Senate in 1979 and 1980—Republican Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah spoke passionately on this floor last year, making an important point about the scope of the challenge we still face. He said:

Ensuring that our LGBT friends feel loved and accepted is not a political issue; we all have a stake in this. We all have family or loved ones who have felt marginalized in one way or another because of gender identity or

sexual orientation, and we need to be there for them.

Senator Hatch. I miss him, even though I am glad my friend from Utah is here.

Instead of love and acceptance, however, too often the LGBTQ community still faces hate, violence, and discrimination in the workplace, in the classroom, in the housing market, and, more and more, in our society.

In fact, today we remember the lives of 49 innocent people who were senselessly murdered in Orlando, FL, 3 years ago at Pulse, an LGBTQ nightclub.

Just last week, a Detroit man was charged with first-degree murder for killing three LGBTQ people in an apparent hate crime.

In my home State of Alabama, a local mayor recently made headlines around the country for advocating the killing of LGBTQ people, claiming it was the only way to “fix” the problem.

In Washington, DC, over the weekend, a panic ensued and thousands fled for their lives when it was believed there was an active shooter targeting the city’s annual Pride parade.

In Alabama, young Nigel Shelby, a high school freshman from Huntsville, ended his life this past spring after enduring bullying from his peers and struggling through bouts of depression. Mourning her son, his heartbroken mother called him the “sweetest child.” She said Nigel was “always full of joy, full of light.” As a father, I cannot begin to imagine the pain she and her family have experienced at this sudden loss. But I will tell you, as the father of a gay son, I have had to imagine the pain and uncertainty her child must have felt in a world in which he didn’t feel fully accepted.

These incidents are just a few of the most recent examples I could share. Quite frankly, I have hesitated to even mention incidents in Alabama because we sometimes have the stigma of discrimination in my State.

Most recently in Alabama, the Alabama Legislature passed a most restrictive law dealing with abortion and women’s rights. It was a callous law, and once again people are looking at Alabama and saying: What is going on? They look at this smalltown mayor and say: What is going on? But let me tell you, folks, for anybody who is listening to this, that is not Alabama. That is not the people of Alabama. That may be a gerrymandered legislature that represents only a small segment, but that is not the good people I know across the State of Alabama. Regardless of their political persuasion, regardless of their age, regardless of their religion, those instances do not represent the great State of Alabama.

Those are the most recent examples, but it is clear that the fear LGBTQ people can feel is by no means unfounded.

In this Pride Month, while we celebrate the LGBT community and the right for everyone to live and love as they choose, we cannot forget that for

this community, there is still much work to be done. That is why I have cosponsored and I am so proud to cosponsor the Equality Act, and I urge my colleagues to do the same. Our colleagues in the House of Representatives have already passed this legislation, which fills a gap in our Nation’s Federal civil rights laws by providing permanent protections for the LGBTQ community regardless of where they live.

This act is an important step. It is not a silver bullet, but it is an incredible, important step forward in what we can do to recognize the dignity of all people in this country.

Right now, these protections are simply a patchwork of State laws and other regulations. In 30 States, including Alabama, LGBTQ people are at risk of being fired, evicted, or denied other services because of their sexual orientation or gender.

I urge my colleagues to look at who is supporting the Equality Act. This is not a bipartisan issue; this is a non-partisan issue. If you look at the over 500 organizations, a couple of hundred major corporations—the U.S. Chamber of Commerce has endorsed this bill and is urging its passage because so many across the country recognize the importance of these protections.

How many times have you seen businesses and how many times have you seen the chamber—and I mean no disrespect to them—endorse a law that bans discrimination when they know it puts certain burdens on their members? This is a historic opportunity that we have here—a historic opportunity—and we need to take advantage of it.

According to the Public Religion Research Institute, a majority of people in every State support a law like this, including a majority of the folks in Alabama. Those majorities extend across party lines, religion, and demographics, but despite most Americans being on the same page about this, the minority in opposition to this bill and in opposition to the LGBTQ community in general seems to be firm. It seems to be solid. It seems to be vocal. Opposition to such expansions of civil rights protections usually is.

From where I sit, this is not a zero-sum game. My view on this is informed by my experience. Most of what we do here is informed by experience, and my view on this issue is informed by my own experience as a father, as someone who loves his son very much—as any parent loves their son. It is informed by my experience as a lawyer, having spent my career working for justice. No matter where the downtrodden might be, I have spent my career working to make sure people are treated the same under the law, knowing that if you can change those laws and you can get treated the same under the law, hearts and minds will follow. We have seen it happen time and again.

My view is informed by my religion, my religion as a Christian and my belief that we are called upon to love one

another. It is the same and similar view expressed by our colleague Orrin Hatch in his floor speech last year.

We are called to stand up and fight for equal treatment and dignity of our fellow human beings—dignity and respect—to fight for people like my talented and compassionate son Carson and for all other sons, daughters, nieces, nephews, grandsons, granddaughters, friends, and neighbors, all out there who deserve to pursue a full, free, joyous, and loving life.

Today the Senate has an opportunity to stand up and make a very clear statement that we will not allow State government-sanctioned discrimination of LGBTQ people. We will not continue to allow that discrimination to continue, but we have to make that stand, and that stand can start right here. It has already started in the House.

The time is now to send a message. The time is now to send a message to all people—to all people across this country—that we in the U.S. Senate believe that all people deserve to live with dignity, free from the fear of discrimination.

As I prepared these remarks and I read through them and made changes, I thought about my old boss whose seat I now fill, Howell Heflin. It was in the 1990s that Howell Heflin from Alabama, a son of the South whose relatives fought in the Civil War, stood before this body and said that it was time to remove the Confederate battle flag from all Federal Government-sanctioned emblems. It was a bold statement. Now we have a son of the South standing up for what in the Bible Belt is that love and respect, a son of the South who is now talking about his family, talking about discrimination, and reaching out to people across the aisle and within my own party to say that it is time; it is time to make that move.

So I ask my colleagues to take this step with me, to do the right thing by calling on Leader McConnell to bring this legislation to a vote in the U.S. Senate. Let all 100 Senators stand up and be counted one way or another. Every voice counts. Let every U.S. Senator say where they are by a vote on the Equality Act and to do it sooner rather than later.

This is a matter of civil rights, this is a matter of human rights, and this is a matter of being on the right side of history. We have an important opportunity right now to get it right. It is right now. It is the right time.

Thank you.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Maine.

(The remarks of Ms. COLLINS pertaining to the introduction of S. 1803 are printed in today's RECORD under "Statements on Introduced Bills and Joint Resolutions.")

Ms. COLLINS. I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from South Dakota.

NOMINATIONS AND BORDER SECURITY

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, to borrow from Yogi Berra, it is *deja vu* all over

again in the Senate this week. Once again, the Senate is taking up a lot of judicial nominations, and, once again, we will spend a lot of time considering noncontroversial nominees.

Now my colleagues across the aisle have started to complain about the Senate's focus on nominations. I am pretty frustrated myself, not because we are considering these nominees—it is our constitutional duty, after all—but because we are being forced to spend so much time on their nominations, but that is what my Democratic colleagues have obliged us to do.

Back in the day, most of the judicial nominees we are considering would have been confirmed without the time-consuming cloture vote process. By this point in President Obama's first term, Republicans had required cloture votes on just three of President Obama's judicial nominees—three, Mr. President.

Contrast that with today. As of June 5, Democrats have required cloture votes on 76 of President Trump's judicial nominees—76 to 3. Now, of course, some might leap to the conclusion that this is not obstruction for obstruction's sake. They might assume that President Trump has been nominating unqualified or deeply controversial candidates for judicial office, and the Democrats have no alternative but to obstruct and delay the nominations—except that is not the case because Democrats have repeatedly made it clear that they have no problem with many of the President's nominations by turning around and voting for the same people they have obstructed.

That is right. Again and again, Democrats have voted in favor of the very same nominees they have delayed. Take Monday and Tuesday's confirmation votes on two nominees for district judge. Democrats forced cloture votes on both nominees. Yet when it came time to confirm them, Democrats turned around and supported the nominations. One nominee received the support of 24 Democrats, including the Democratic whip, while the other nominee was confirmed with the support of 39 Democrats, almost the entire Democratic caucus.

Democrats aren't obstructing because they oppose all or even most of President Trump's nominees; they are obstructing because they still can't get over the 2016 election. It has been 2½ years since the last Presidential election—2½ years. We are closer to the next Presidential election than to the last. Yet Democrats still can't let the 2016 election go.

I realize their preferred candidate did not win, and I realize they are not fans of President Trump, but Democrats act like they are the only people who have ever lost an election, like they are the first to have to deal with a candidate they don't like.

To my Democratic colleagues across the aisle, I would like to say: Welcome to life in our democracy. Welcome to life in a free country. While it is never

fun, sometimes your candidate is going to lose. That is what happens when you have free elections.

I am not suggesting that Democrats should start rubberstamping every item on the President's agenda. They have serious philosophical disagreements with the President's policies, and it is right that they should air them, but to reflexively oppose everything the President says or does simply because he is the President is deeply irresponsible. There are serious consequences to pointlessly delaying nominees, such as backlogs in our court system or a government that isn't functioning the way it should because of vacancies in leadership positions.

There are even more serious and immediate consequences to obstructing other measures. Right now, Democrats are holding up desperately needed funding for the serious humanitarian and security crisis at our southern border simply because it is the President making the funding request. The security of our country and the well-being of tens of thousands of immigrants are at stake, and Democrats are refusing to address the situation because they don't like the President.

In the first 8 months of this fiscal year, nearly 411,000 unaccompanied children and families have crossed our southern border, more than in any previous full year. Resources are stretched to the breaking point. Shelters are overloaded, and providing adequate medical care is becoming more and more difficult. Federal agencies are simply running out of money. Money appropriated for the care of unaccompanied children could run out by the end of this month. That means caregivers for these children would have to work without pay, and private organizations with Federal grants to care for these children would go without their funding.

Democrats like to style themselves as the party of openness and compassion, and yet they are willing to ignore a humanitarian crisis of massive proportions out of political spite—not to mention the serious security issue.

The Department of Homeland Security is being forced to divert resources to deal with the humanitarian crisis pulling more than 700 Customs and Border Protection Officers from legal points of entry to assist with the surge of migrants.

I don't think there is a Member in this body who wouldn't agree on the importance of fully staffing our ports and cargo processing so we don't create new vulnerabilities, but Customs and Border Protection is left with little choice.

After 2½ years of unprecedented partisanship and obstruction from Democrats, I would like to think that the Democrats would finally turn their focus to the business of government. Unfortunately, I think it is more likely that their obstruction will continue and that we will see a lot more pointless delays when it comes to nominees