

make sure that we were passing commonsense laws so that nothing like that could ever happen again. So, in the State of Nevada, when I was the attorney general, I introduced legislation to ensure that when our courts would adjudicate an individual who was mentally ill, the information would get to our law enforcement by way of a background check. We passed that legislation. Yet I am here to tell you that more needs to be done.

I agree with my colleague in that I would have hoped that the Virginia Tech shooting would have been the last that we would have ever seen in this country, but it was not. Almost 2 years ago, hundreds of people were wounded, and 58 were killed in my hometown of Las Vegas at the Route 91 Harvest music festival. It remains the deadliest mass shooting in modern American history. It is not something for which we would have ever imagined citing a statistic in the State of Nevada nor could anyone ever want that.

Two weeks after that shooting, I delivered my first official address on this Senate floor. My maiden speech, I called it. I called for action to prevent the next mass shooting. Among other things, I asked for universal background checks on firearms.

Americans support these virtually unanimously, and you have heard the statistics from my colleagues on the floor today—that 97 percent of them want sellers to look closely at who exactly is trying to buy a gun. Yet the Background Check Expansion Act, which is supposed to close loopholes on background checks, hasn't received a vote in this Chamber. Not only has it not received a vote, but we can't even debate it. We can't even come to the floor and debate the issues about which we know Americans across the country want us to do something. Not only have we not had a vote on the Background Check Expansion Act, but neither have we had a vote on dozens of other vital pieces of legislation that would make us safer.

I have sat here for the last 2 years and watched as the Republican leadership has been perfectly happy to have stopped the Senate from voting on these laws. In fact, I have heard, unfortunately, Senator MITCH MCCONNELL jokingly call himself the Grim Reaper, whose job it is to bury legislation. That is why we have this legislative graveyard. I will tell you that the American people don't think that it is funny. The mothers and fathers of children who have died as a result of gun violence aren't laughing, and neither is my hometown of Las Vegas—a community that is still healing from the pain of that night. It does not have to be this way.

In the State of Nevada, we have closed the loophole that lets private sellers skip background checks before they hand over a gun. I am so proud of my State. Voters in Nevada approved this commonsense reform in 2016 for universal background checks. Thanks

to our newly elected Governor Sisolak, Attorney General Aaron Ford, and other fierce leaders in the Nevada State Legislature, as well as the incredible people in the State of Nevada, we have finally made it law. This is just basic common sense. It is supported by Americans throughout the political spectrum and households with and without guns.

Listen, I support the Second Amendment. We own guns in my family. My husband is former Federal law enforcement. I come from a family of sportsmen. Throughout Nevada, we have friends who are sportsmen. But I will tell you, those Nevadans who are gun owners and almost every American agree we need to keep guns out of the hands of terrorists, violent criminals, domestic abusers, and others who may pose a threat to themselves or their communities. Nevada, with a strong western history of self-reliance and a culture of safe, responsible gun ownership, has done this.

It is long past time for the Senate to do what the House has done and what the American people demand and pass commonsense gun reform. The Senate majority leader must stop putting a roadblock in the way and let us act. At the very least, let us have a debate and move this issue forward—a debate the American people want us to address and an issue they want us to find a solution for.

Listen, we can't take back what happened that day in Las Vegas or Orlando or Sandy Hook or Charleston or so many cities and towns all across this Nation that are scarred by mass shootings and daily gun violence. We can't heal the pain of those whose friends and family members were killed. We can't erase the trauma so many survivors continue to endure. But we can save lives in the future, and isn't one life saved worth it? Isn't one life saved worth it?

So I ask all of my colleagues, let's stop the delays and denials and excuses, and let's pass this bill. Let's bring back to the floor of the Senate the time for debate on important policy issues that address the problems we see in this country. At the very least, let's save a life.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from New Hampshire.

SYRIA

Mrs. SHAHEEN. Mr. President, I am here today with my colleague Senator GRAHAM to express my profound concern about the humanitarian tragedy that is currently unfolding in Idlib and northern Hama in Syria.

It is hard to imagine that after 8 years of war, the greatest humanitarian disaster in Syria might still be before us, because clearly what we have seen in the past 8 years is a horrible humanitarian tragedy, a civil war that has involved, really, international players and that has led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Syrians and to the displacement of millions

more. But with the escalated attacks that have occurred since late April, the Syrian regime and its Russian and Iranian allies are threatening a population of approximately 3 million there in Idlib. Of those 3 million, 1 million are children. This is a region that is strained by hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people who have already fled from Assad's forces in other parts of Syria and neighboring countries. Just last Thursday alone, observers counted over 50 airstrikes in this region from early morning to early afternoon, and that was on top of artillery-shelling that was going on.

Last December, Senator GRAHAM and I came to the floor to warn about the dangers of President Trump's decision to withdraw U.S. troops from northeast Syria. I felt very strongly about that because last summer I had a chance to travel with Senator GRAHAM to Syria, and we saw the important work that the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve and its Syrian partner forces were doing there. We saw communities like Manbij city that had recovered after 3 years of occupation by ISIS. We saw that Syrians were returning to that northeast region of Syria where it was peaceful, and they were growing crops again. We visited the market. We walked around without any fear that terrorists were going to bomb us.

Local multiethnic residents saw the positive presence of U.S. troops and the value of U.S. global leadership. In fact, as we drove down the road and went by children, they flashed a "V" sign for "victory" when they saw it was the U.S. military.

Together with our partners, the Syrian Democratic Forces, we made significant gains against ISIS, but that progress, sadly, is not guaranteed. Unfortunately, what we are seeing now in Idlib is the result of a confused U.S. strategy in Syria.

When I spoke on the floor here in December, I warned that a hasty and ill-informed withdrawal could embolden ISIS and threaten the gains that U.S. partners have made. We discussed the fact that it would also cede the accomplishments of U.S. forces and our allies to Assad, Russia, and Iran.

What we are seeing now in Idlib and northern Hama is Assad's and his foreign supporters' military solution. We are seeing indiscriminate bombing and shelling that destroys schools and hospitals and that sets fire to farmers' fields. The latest surge in violence has killed dozens of people. It has destroyed thousands of acres of crops. It has forced another 300,000 people to flee their homes.

I would urge President Trump to listen to his military and diplomatic advisers and to recognize that an absence of U.S. leadership in Syria would give a free hand to Assad and to his Russian and Iranian allies, because clearly they are not our allies.

The people of Syria face danger at the hands of ISIS and of their own government. Unfortunately, they have

very few options left, but what they do have is the voice of the international community, and it is now up to us to stand against the carnage in Idlib once and for all.

I urge President Trump to use U.S. leadership to oppose the humanitarian disaster that Syrian and Russian forces continue to create in Idlib and northern Hama and to work with our allies to truly bring an end to this civil war and this disaster that has been created, the humanitarian disaster that has been created.

I yield to my colleague from South Carolina.

Mr. GRAHAM. Mr. President, I want to compliment Senator SHAHEEN for doing her homework on Syria—traveling, understanding the strategic implications of losing in Syria for the United States and our allies.

In New Hampshire and South Carolina, there is not a lot of talk about Syria. It is not that people don't care; it is just that we have our plate full here at home with all of our needs in our own backyard. The thing I can tell people throughout the country: You ignore these problems at our own peril.

The wave of refugees that came out of Syria when the civil war first began is going to replicate itself—or I guess we can all sit on the sidelines and watch 3 million people be killed. I hope we don't do that.

Idlib is a province in northwestern Syria. The opposition is basically in a corner near the border with Turkey. Assad, with the help of Iran and mostly Russia, is trying to break their will and literally destroy them.

Within this group of people—about 3½ million—there are some really hardcore al-Qaida types—Al-Nusra, all kinds of names associated with the groups—but they are radical Sunni Islamists, and they would bring ISIS back roaring. We don't want them to win the day, and we sure as heck don't want Iran to control Syria.

I think it would be a huge mistake for the United States to let Assad prevail in this war, and let me tell you why: It never ends with him. Every radical Sunni Islamist group in the world will use Assad's presence in Syria as a recruiting tool. He is a proxy of Iran. Without Iran, there would be no Assad. So you create a great recruiting opportunity for radical Islam if you let Assad prevail.

On multiple occasions, our country has said Assad must go. Why? Because he is a war criminal. He has lost all legitimacy. Russia will have basically trumped the United States—no pun intended—in the backyard of the Middle East, Syria.

President Trump, to his credit, changed his decision to withdraw all forces in northeastern Syria and have a holding force with more international involvement to prevent ISIS from coming back in the Manbij area, making sure that Iran doesn't come down and take over, with Assad, that part of Syria and that Turkey doesn't come

into northeastern Syria to deal with the Syrian Democratic Forces, the Kurdish elements of the YPG.

A small American contingent force has brought some stability to northeastern Syria. Our Kurdish allies who stepped up to the plate feel like they are in a better spot—we have to realize that Turkey has a legitimate concern about the YPG elements—but to keep everybody apart and make sure ISIS doesn't come back.

Nobody is talking about Idlib. President Trump, to his credit, did tweet on June 2—just a few weeks ago—“Hearing word that Russia, Syria and, to a lesser extent, Iran, are bombing the hell out of Idlib Province in Syria, and indiscriminately killing many innocent civilians. The World is watching this butchery. What is the purpose, what will it get you? STOP!” Good tweet.

The only way it is going to stop is for Russia and Iran to pay a price for helping Assad. It is Russian jets with Syrian jets that are indiscriminately bombing civilians in Idlib.

If Idlib falls and these people flush out of Syria, you are going to have another wave of refugees coming to Turkey, which is saturated, and eventually Turkey is going to open up the floodgates back into Europe, and we are going to repeat this all over again.

To my European friends and allies, you have been reluctant—except the French and the British—to help us in northeastern Syria with a holding force. How many times do you have to see the same movie to understand we need to do something different?

What do you tell the European population? That we don't have the will to put a few thousand troops in Syria to make sure that we are not flooded in Europe with people fleeing for their lives? It just never ceases to amaze me how quickly we forget the lessons of the past.

As to Idlib, they have broken the agreement we had. Turkey, to its credit, has been trying to find a political solution in that part of Syria.

Senator SHAHEEN and I both know that the only way you end this war is through a political negotiation in Geneva. By having some American forces with our partners in northeastern Syria, we have leverage over the outcome. If we could stand Assad down in Idlib, we would have more leverage to allow the Syrian people to heal their own country.

As these attacks escalate—and they will—the President and his team, in conjunction with the civilized world, needs to come up with an Idlib plan.

What I want to do with Senator SHAHEEN is come up with some sanctions or some policies directed at the impending disaster called Idlib. I want us to put on the record our objection to what Russia, Iran, and Assad are doing and try to craft some consequences and actually work with the administration to stop what will be inevitable if we don't send the right signal, which will

be the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of innocent people, a new wave of refugees, and putting radical Sunni Islam on steroids, because they will come to the fight if you don't.

So here is your choice, to the free world: If you don't get involved in Syria and try to end this madness, radical Sunni Islam will gladly take your place, and that is not a good outcome. There is no winning in that situation. If Assad wins, we lose. If the radical Sunni Islamist al-Nusra types win, we lose.

The good news is, the best way to win is to help the Syrian people. The Syrian people don't want to be dictated anymore by Assad, which is how this all started. They are tired of living under his control. They are not radical people by nature. They are not turning to ISIS as the answer to Assad. Give them a choice. It is in our interest to be involved to some extent.

We are not the world's policemen, but we are the glue that holds the world together, and Syria can be put back together only through peace negotiations where the parties have some leverage over their adversaries. It is not just a humanitarian crisis in the making. This is going to change the balance and the power in Syria and the Mideast in a very bad way. You are going to have a never-ending conflict between Iranian proxies and radical Sunni Islamic groups in Syria unless you defang both. Doing nothing sounds good on paper, until you realize what happens when you ignore a problem.

I will end with this. On September 10, 2001, America did not have one soldier in Afghanistan, not one dime of aid to Afghanistan. We didn't even have an ambassador to Afghanistan. We just watched as the Taliban took over. They put women in soccer stadiums and killed them for sport because they wore the burka too short, and they blew up statues of Buddha. We were under the illusion, well, that is their problem, not ours. Well, it eventually became our problem because the people doing this stuff to women and religious artifacts of other cultures are compelled by God to deal with us.

If you think leaving them alone ends this conflict, you don't understand what the conflict is about. They are driven by a religious ideology that has no place for anybody in this room, our friends in Israel, or moderate Muslims. So you can deal with them now or you can deal with them later.

Assad is in a different category but is just as evil and uses the same kind of butchery. I am here to tell you—to Europe: You had better up your game when it comes to Idlib because you are going to pay a heavy price.

To the Trump administration, I really appreciate what you have done in northeastern Syria. I appreciate the tweet of the President on June 2. But we have to do more than tweet. We, in

the Senate, need to offer some assistance to the administration and our allies, and, working with Senator SHAHEEN, we will try to find a way to move forward. I appreciate her interests.

There is not a whole lot of upside in talking about things like this in modern American politics. But you are always going to be viewed well by history when you address a problem, when you stand up against evil, and when you try to do something about it. It may not be popular for the moment, but time will prove you right.

I thank Senator SHAHEEN.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

VA MISSION ACT

Ms. ERNST. Mr. President, one of the most sacred promises our Nation makes is our pledge to care for our men and women in uniform when they return home.

When it became clear that the VA was falling short of that standard, I am proud to say that we here in the Senate put politics aside, rolled up our sleeves, and actually got to work.

The result was the VA MISSION Act, a bipartisan bill that aims to ensure our veterans are receiving the quality care they have earned and deserve. I was honored to have been on hand in the Rose Garden representing Iowa, its veterans, and its military families, as President Trump signed this bill into law.

This month, the more than 200,000 veterans across Iowa will begin to see the benefits of those reforms as the VA begins to implement the VA MISSION Act. That is because one major focus of the bill was to make sure it would help the VA do a better job of taking care of our veterans in rural and underserved areas.

Toward that end, one significant reform that is going into effect this month aims to allow rural or disabled veterans to receive care from the comfort of their own home by increasing telehealth and telemedicine services provided by the VA. This was a provision I pushed for, starting with my VETS Act, and I am so glad it made it into the final package.

You see, we in Iowa know that rural and disabled vets face an even harder uphill battle when it comes to getting quality healthcare. This is because doctors aren't right down the street or a short drive away. These folks have to drive many miles just to see a caregiver and sometimes many more for followup treatments or procedures.

The law includes a lot of other great reforms. It expands VA caregiver benefits to pre-9/11 veterans. It takes steps to modernize VA facilities, increases

resources to hire more providers, and helps ensure prompt payment to community providers. It is just another example of how, despite what folks may see on television, the Senate is passing legislation that is making a positive impact on Americans' lives.

Our veterans have selflessly sacrificed in defense of our freedom and our great way of life. They deserve nothing less than the benefits they were promised and better access to quality care.

With the VA MISSION Act, the Senate has given the VA the tools it needs to work toward keeping that promise. I am so thankful for the other Members who will be joining me here today on the floor to talk through the successes of the implementation of the VA MISSION Act.

Of course, a strong leader who brought this bill over the finish line is the chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee.

I yield to the wonderful Senator from the great State of Georgia, JOHNNY ISAKSON.

(Mr. PERDUE assumed the Chair.)

Mr. ISAKSON. Mr. President, just for the record, a staff sergeant just addressed a lieutenant colonel. She is beautiful, and she is also very smart. I am glad to be in the military with her. I am glad to have served our country and proud of the service she has given our country and the service she gives to the U.S. Senate and the great State of Iowa.

As chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, I have had a great experience the last few years pretty much lined up with what Senator ERNST said.

When we got here 4 years ago in the Senate and took this committee, the VA was a mess. Veterans services were not being met. There was story after story of veterans not getting appointments kept, the wrong tooth being pulled, the wrong leg being set, the wrong disease being treated. Lots of hospitals had sanitation problems. There were just a whole lot of things, and I said "What have I gotten myself into?" because I came here to go on the committee and try to help our veterans get better healthcare. Instead, I thought I was presiding over the end of healthcare.

So we all set our minds—Senator ERNST and I, Senator PERDUE in the Chair now, and Mr. SCOTT from the great State of Florida—all of us rallied and said: We are going to make this right. We are going to go on a mission. Our mission is to make the VA work and make it work for our veterans. We are not going to take no for an answer.

On the 6th day of June, a week and a half ago, we all celebrated the 75th anniversary of D-day. But it was the first anniversary of a renewed VA—a VA on a mission. I am proud to tell you now that on the first anniversary of the VA MISSION Act, which passed last year, we have fewer complaints, more compliments, better reserve, and better outcomes. We are working toward see-

ing to it that we have the best possible healthcare we can have for our veterans.

I am glad to join Senator ERNST and the other Senators who will speak about the promises of the VA system now being met for those who have sacrificed and risked their lives for us, being sure they are given the healthcare they want. We are doing it by applying the right types of principles and the right type of can-do attitude.

Care in the community, which is a major portion of the MISSION Act, was the most important part. Care in the community is basically all of the services we put together to make healthcare accessible to our veterans. We were having a problem with veterans getting appointments within 30 days of making the appointment. We were having trouble with veterans who live more than 40 miles from a VA hospital or VA CBOC to get appointments in time in the system. We have had problems with certain rare diseases and difficult problems only from the types of warfare we are in today with IEDs and things like that to get the right doctors with the right veterans at the right time.

Then, we had the problem of America being a country spread out all over the place, 48 contiguous States from Montana to Florida. A lot of doctors have to be utilized to get care to the veteran. It is the same thing with Hawaii, the same thing with Alaska.

But we put the whole thing together in a care in the community package, which started during last year and now is in full swing, and I am proud to tell you—and I am sure I am going to regret saying this—but we didn't have a complaint in the first week after the inception last year about the system failing to work.

The access standards have been looked at and improved. We took the mistakes we made a year ago and put the answers in place, solutions in place. We did everything we could to make our mission a winner for the veterans, and we did. I am here today to join my other colleagues who are going to speak about the MISSION Act and about our veterans. We are very proud that we took the challenge to see to it that something we had promised them years ago—our vets—works and worked better for them, and we will continue to keep that pledge in the years to come.

We owe no greater obligation than we do to those who served our country in the military. Our obligation is to see to it that what we promised them when they joined is what they get when they are in the veteran status. As long as I have the ability to serve in the U.S. Senate and as chairman of that committee, I will remain committed and remain on a mission to see to it that we make that a reality for all of our veterans.

With that said, I suggest the absence of a quorum.