

Civil and Human Rights, the AFL–CIO, American Federation of Teachers, National Education Association, Consumer Federation of America, Student Veterans of America, and the NAACP, but there is one most recently that I want to share with you because I think it is important that Members of the Senate of both political parties realize that we now have a major organization—a nonpartisan organization—that speaks for the veterans of America who have endorsed this effort.

I have in my hand a letter submitted to me by James Oxford, who goes by the nickname “Bill,” national commander of the American Legion of the United States of America, sent to me on December 18, 2019. He tells the story of veterans who were exploited by these for-profit colleges and universities. They ended up serving our country, earning their GI bill of rights, then losing their benefits to these schools—these worthless schools—and going further in debt to pay for their education.

Commander Oxford sent this letter.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that this letter be printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

DECEMBER 18, 2019.

DEAR SENATOR DURBIN: On behalf of the nearly 2 million members of The American Legion, I write to express our support for Joint Resolution 56, providing for congressional disapproval of the rule submitted by the Department of Education relating to, “Borrower Defense Institutional Accountability.” The rule, as currently written, is fundamentally rigged against defrauded borrowers of student loans, depriving them of the opportunity for debt relief that Congress intended to afford them under the Higher Education Act. Affirming this position is American Legion Resolution No. 82: Preserve Veteran and Servicemember Rights to Gainful Employment and Borrower Defense Protections, adopted in our National Convention 2017.

Thousands of student veterans have been defrauded over the years—promised their credits would transfer when they wouldn’t, given false or misleading job placement rates in marketing, promised one educational experience when they were recruited, but given something completely different. This type of deception against our veterans and servicemembers has been a lucrative scam for unscrupulous actors.

As veterans are aggressively targeted due to their service to our country, they must be afforded the right to group relief. The Department of Education’s “Borrower Defense” rule eliminates this right, forcing veterans to individually prove their claim, share the specific type of financial harm they suffered, and prove the school knowingly made substantial misrepresentations. The preponderance of evidence required for this process is so onerous that the Department of Education itself estimated that only 3 percent of applicants would get relief.

Until every veteran’s application for student loan forgiveness has been processed, we will continue to demand fair and timely decisions. The rule that the Department of Education has promulgated flagrantly denies defrauded veterans these dignities, and The American Legion calls on Congress to overturn this regulatory action.

Senator Durbin, The American Legion applauds your leadership in addressing this critical issue facing our nation’s veterans and their families.

For God & Country,

JAMES W. “BILL” OXFORD,

National Commander, The American Legion.

Mr. DURBIN. Let me read one paragraph from Commander Oxford:

As veterans are aggressively targeted due to their service to our country, they must be afforded the right to group relief. The Department of Education’s “Borrower Defense” rule eliminates this right, forcing veterans to individually prove their claim, share the specific type of financial harm they suffered, and prove the school knowingly made substantial misrepresentations. The preponderance of evidence required for this process is so onerous that the Department of Education itself estimated that only 3 percent of applicants would get relief.

Whether you are a Democrat or Republican, don’t go waving that flag and tell everybody how much you love our veterans and ignore this letter. The leader of the largest veterans group in the United States of America—a nonpartisan group—told us these schools exploited veterans, and Secretary DeVos’s new rule means that these veterans will never get relief. Ninety-seven percent will never get any relief.

In a matter of a few days—maybe weeks—I will be calling this matter to the floor. I am asking my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to put the party labels outside, hang them up in the cloakroom, come on inside here, and stand up for students across America who did their best to get a college education and were deceived in the process, stand up for students who were loaded up with student debt, which could destroy their lives, and give them a fighting chance for a future by saying that Secretary DeVos’s borrower defense rule is unfair to veterans, unfair to students, and unfair to American families.

I ask my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to do the right thing when the time comes and give these borrowers a second chance at being financially independent Americans who can contribute to their families and our national economic growth. For our veterans, please join me in making sure that Secretary DeVos’s borrower defense rule is disapproved by both the House and the Senate.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. SCOTT of Florida). The Senator from Connecticut.

IRAN

Mr. MURPHY. Mr. President, at a time of international turmoil and crisis like this, all of us, I think, are sometimes prone to hyperbole. I count myself as part of that club. I endeavor to do better.

It doesn’t serve this body well to warn of bad decisions that could lead to war if we are only doing it to serve political ends or to bloody up a political opponent. Crying wolf also anesthetizes the public and risks dulling the country’s senses at a moment when

the peril is real. Anytime we are considering asking the men and women of our Armed Forces and their families to make further sacrifices for their country, we have to treat those moments with the gravity they deserve.

Let me state at the outset of my remarks that there are important reasons why I believe that both Iran and the United States do not want to enter into a conventional conflict that would likely involve the United States taking steps to remove the Supreme Leader from power and which would likely involve an invasion that would make Iraq in 2003 look like child’s play.

The United States, of course, remembers the Iraq war—at least, I think we do. Our military leaders know that a short-term fight in Iran would be much bloodier and would be much more costly than the initial invasion of Iraq. Iran, for instance, has twice the population of Iraq. A long-term counterinsurgency in Iran would be endless, potentially costing hundreds of thousands of lives.

The Iranian leadership also knows that the United States might never defensively defeat a drawn-out insurgency on Iranian turf, but Iran’s leaders also know they likely wouldn’t be around to see that eventual conclusion because the United States would, at the very least, likely be successful in ending the existing regime.

So neither side is likely war-gaming for victory. Even those of us who are deeply critical of President Trump’s Iran policy should acknowledge this, but as a student of history, I know that the annals of war are replete with cataclysmic conflicts that began not by choice but by accident, negligence, and incompetence.

So today, when I warn of the United States being on a potential path to war with Iran, that is my concern, that the utter lack of strategy, the complete absence of nuance, the abandoned communication and coordination with our allies, and the alarming deficiency of experienced counsel will end up getting thousands of Americans needlessly killed.

This is not the first warning of this kind I have presented. A year and a half ago, the President ignored the advice of his first Secretary of State and his first Secretary of Defense, and he unilaterally pulled the United States out of the Iran nuclear agreement, despite the fact that every expert agreed that Iran was in compliance. Then, to make things worse, President Trump enacted a series of devastating unilateral sanctions on Iran. No other nations joined with us. In fact, most of our allies actively and aggressively worked against us, trying to undermine and work around those sanctions in order to save the nuclear agreement. That fact, in and of itself, is simply extraordinary and a sign of how weak President Trump has made America abroad.

The sanctions still took a dramatic toll on Iran's economy, and like everybody predicted, the Iranian Government didn't sit still. They began to push back, attacking Saudi oil pipelines, capturing European oil tankers, and ratcheting up threats against U.S. forces in Iraq. During this time, the President changed his story every week. Some days he said he would sit down and negotiate with the Iranians without preconditions. Other days his top people said they wouldn't sit down unless Iran met an absurdly long list of preconditions. Other days, President Trump said he wanted to blast Iran off the map. It was a comedy of diplomatic errors, compounded nearly weekly with conflicting message after conflicting message that made it difficult for Iran to approach negotiations with us, even if they wanted to.

By this winter, the situation was spiraling out of control. Iranian-backed militias launched a rocket attack that killed a U.S. private contractor in Iraq. The United States responded by killing at least 24 Iraqi militia members. Then Iraqi militia, supported by Iran, stormed our Embassy, culminating, for now, in the drone strike that killed General Qasem Soleimani last week in Iraq. There is no reason things had to get to this point. When President Trump came into office, Iran had stopped their quest for nuclear weapons capabilities, and Iran was complying with an intrusive inspections regime that made sure they didn't cheat.

Iranian-backed militias had stopped firing rockets at U.S. personnel in Iraq. In fact, they were actually working on a U.S.-led project in Iraq—the eradication of ISIS.

President Obama had united the entire world against Iran. Even Russia and China were working side by side with the United States to constrict Iran's nuclear weapons program. And with the nuclear agreement secured, this global coalition was teed up and ready to be mobilized by President Trump to pressure Iran to make the next set of concessions on their ballistic missile program and their support for terrorist proxies across the region.

But Trump's bizarre and nonsensical Iran policy threw all that leverage away willingly, voluntarily. Despite the economic sanctions, Iran today is more powerful, is more menacing than ever before. Just weeks ago, Iran had been wracked by anti-government protests, but President Trump's recent actions have united the country against America and against our allies in one fell swoop. One only needs to look at yesterday, when millions of Iranians took to the streets for Soleimani's funeral—a mass outpouring of support that the Iranian regime could never have hoped to inspire on its own.

Compared to 3 years ago at the end of the Obama administration, today Iran is closer to restoring its proxy state in Syria, Iran is more influential in Yemen, Iran is more threatening to

U.S. troops in Iraq and across the Middle East, and Iran is closer to a nuclear weapon.

The simple truth is that Iran is stronger and we are less safe today than when President Trump was inaugurated, but it gets, implausibly, even worse.

Because the strike on Soleimani is so destabilizing and so unstrategically provocative, the U.S. position in Iraq—where we are still battling ISIS—is unraveling. All U.S. civilians have been ordered to evacuate. All U.S. counter-ISIS operations have been suspended. NATO has stopped its ongoing efforts to fight ISIS. The Iraqi Parliament has begun the process of kicking out all U.S. forces from the country—exactly what Qasem Soleimani had worked for years to achieve.

All of that, on the back of Iran's newfound strength in the region, is the reason there is so much head-shaking happening right now about why President Trump has so willfully bungled Iran policy, emboldening Iranian hard-liners and putting our Nation's safety at risk.

With that for context, we come back to the crisis moment of today and the real possibility that more of President Trump's stumbling will lead us into a world-changing conflict with Iran.

We, the Senators, have seen no evidence that the assassination of Soleimani was necessary to prevent an imminent attack on the United States. I remain open to seeing that intelligence, but 5 days later, Congress has not received a briefing from the administration. We are apparently going to get that tomorrow. But both President Obama and President Bush had the ability to kill Soleimani. They didn't because their experts believed that executing the second most powerful political figure in Iran—no matter how evil he was, no matter how many American deaths he was responsible for—would end up getting more, not fewer, Americans killed.

We don't know in what form the reprisal from Iran will come or when, but it will come. And, listen, we shouldn't be afraid of reprisals in the wake of truly necessary military actions by the United States to protect our interests abroad. But when that attack arrives, President Trump has telegraphed that he is preparing to respond by committing war crimes against the Iranian people. He says he will bomb cultural sites, filled with civilian visitors, in retaliation. I can't believe this needs to be said on the floor of the U.S. Senate, but that is something terrorists do, not the United States.

Although this administration keeps saying they don't want war, there is no logic to their circular theory of Iran policy. Trump believes that to change Iran's behavior, we need to escalate our own actions. Then when our escalation begets more escalation from Tehran, Trump and his Iran hawks come to the conclusion that this must be due to the fact that our escalation wasn't serious

enough. The theory becomes unprovable because the Iran hawks just contend, failure after failure, that we just need one more escalation and one more escalation and one more escalation. This is the exact behavior that could land us in a kinetic conflict with Iran that costs American lives.

As I said at the outset, this is likely not going to be a full-on conventional war—at least I hope it is not. It may be that Iran sends missiles into Israel or ramps up the temperature in Yemen. They may try to assassinate American military or political leaders or use cyber warfare to go after critical infrastructure. And maybe we don't invade Iran. Maybe we just blister their countryside with bombs or try to disable their military from above.

Of course, no matter the scope of the conflict, no matter how long this escalatory cycle lasts, the one thing we know is this: None of this has anything to do with making us safer. This cycle started with Trump's rejection of a diplomatic agreement with Iran that he didn't like just because it had Barack Obama's name on it.

A political grudge set off a series of events that now has us lodged in a crisis of harrowing scope, a crisis that this President—so unstable, so reckless, so capricious—likely cannot handle. Unfortunately, his rejection of diplomacy and lack of concern for our allies has left America more isolated than at any other perilous time in our history. At a moment when we cannot afford to be out on a limb, out on our own, we are.

Politics is part of what got us here, but maybe politics is part of how we get out of this mess. Congress can cut off funding for President Trump's war of choice with Iran. We can make clear, Republicans and Democrats, that the President cannot take military action without congressional consent. And of course the American people can have their say too. They can rise up, as they did in many cities this past weekend, and cry out in protest over President Trump's decision to put politics over our Nation's security. That public pressure may push allies of the President's here in the Senate to stand with Democrats in opposition to this reckless risk to our Nation's security. It is not too late to put a stop to this madness.

Iran is an adversary. I don't want anything I have said today to paper over all of that nation's misdeeds in the region. It is in our national interest to conduct a foreign policy that weakens Iran's ability to threaten us, our allies, and our interests. But for the last 3 years, President Trump has done exactly the opposite. Iran's nuclear program is back on. Iran has restarted attacks against the United States. Iran is more influential in the region. Everything the President has done has worked to degrade our Nation's safety and has worked to make Iran stronger.

The order to strike Soleimani has already been given, but what happens

next is not predetermined. My fear—my belief—is that last week's killing of Qasem Soleimani will end up fitting into this pattern. But we have serious choices to make in this body, and we can choose to get off this path of escalation and make decisions that correct this President's recklessness and keep America safe. I hope we step up to that challenge.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

Mr. BLUNT. Mr. President, Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force, was killed by U.S. forces last week. That has already been well discussed and well understood. The failing regime in Iran has done everything it could, between his death and right now, to make the most of it, to make him a martyr to the cause of terrorism.

I think we should all understand that the cause of terrorism was his cause. He is not a general in any traditional sense of what that would mean. He has been described a number of different ways. He has been referred to as Iran's top general. Don't think for a minute that means anything like almost any other country's top general.

One newspaper called him Iran's "most revered military leader." That might be true, but remember Iran's purpose as a State is to encourage terrorism all over the world.

I heard one news broadcast where he was referred to as "an irreplaceable figurehead," though they went on to explain that he was a significant person. There apparently are no editors anymore because the term "figurehead" doesn't mean what they were suggesting. If they meant he was an irreplaceable figure, I hope that he is. I think he is hard to replace, and I hope he is hard to replace. I would like to think that in many ways he will not be able to be replaced, but that doesn't mean he deserves our sympathy, respect, or our grief.

He was, in fact, a bad person. He spent his career largely outside the boundaries of what any civilized nation would consider a military context. He led Iran's terrorism agenda around the world.

Iran funded and provided weapons to the Shia militias in Iraq. They provided arms depots and military forces to the Assad regime in Syria. They supported Hezbollah terrorists in Lebanon. They provided advanced weapons to the Houthi rebels in Yemen. Hundreds of U.S. military personnel in Iraq were either killed or injured by the IED attacks encouraged and funded by Iran in Iraq. That is what the Soleimani agenda was all about.

Over this past year, Iran has continued its campaign of aggression against

the United States and our allies. In almost every report of these activities, Soleimani was one of the persons mentioned as, again, structuring, masterminding, encouraging, or taking credit for these things as they happened in some cases and denying responsibility in others for activities for which he and Iran were responsible.

Last June, Iran shot down a U.S. intelligence drone flying in international space. In July, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps captured a British-flagged commercial vessel in the Strait of Hormuz. Iran was behind the attack on Saudi oilfields last September using drones and cruise missiles. Iran was behind an earlier attack on a Saudi airport used by civilians. The Quds Force also launched a crackdown on Iranian citizens who protested oil prices and are vigorously seeking out others who are complaining about the failing economy in Iran's failing system.

Someone has already been named to replace Soleimani as the head of the Quds Force, but hopefully no one really can fully replace him.

I am not at all sympathetic to the idea that this action to eliminate this individual somehow came out of the blue. I think the President has been presented multiple times with this option as one of the things we could do if we wanted to send the clearest possible message to Iran. The President was criticized last year because when going down the list of things I mentioned, he was hesitant to act—until last week. The same exact critics in many cases decided, after a year of thinking what would be the best response, that when the President did act it was suddenly a hasty action. They went from calling his actions hesitant to calling this hasty, looking for a way to criticize the President.

The President took this action after an American contractor was killed by forces associated with Iran and Soleimani, after the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad was attacked and weapons were used to get into the building.

There have even been some suggestions that we shouldn't have done this because we should be afraid of how Iran will react. We do have to be thinking about how Iran would react. We need to be thinking about what their next aggressive act might be. It would not be their first aggressive act, and I have already gone down a pretty long list that others can expand upon of the aggressive acts Iran has done up until the last few days.

We do have to be thinking about what is an appropriate response, but maybe it is now time for Iran to be thinking about what our next response may be to their next aggression. The aggressive list is long, the response that the U.S. Government took was significant, but we can't fail to act decisively just because it might upset our terrorist enemies. We can't fail to act decisively just because it might upset the No. 1 state sponsor of terrorism, Iraq.

Soleimani was not a high-ranking military official in any acceptable military structure. If your idea of a leading general is a general who leads in terrorist efforts, I think you have the wrong idea of what a military leader is supposed to do.

Soleimani was not a high-ranking government official in any job that a responsible government would have. Soleimani was the mastermind of terrorist activities of the No. 1 state sponsor of terrorism in the world today. Soleimani has been eliminated and hopefully will be impossible to fully replace.

I would say, in response to that decision, good job to the U.S. forces that executed the strike, and good job, Mr. President, in being willing to make the call. A bad person and a determined enemy of freedom and democracy in the United States of America has been eliminated. It is time for the Iranians to be thinking about what our next action might be instead of quietly and vigorously planning on what their next action might be.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

IMPEACHMENT

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, many of us here in the Senate thought we would be opening the new year with an impeachment trial, but that is not what is happening this week because the Senate is still waiting—waiting for Speaker PELOSI to actually send over the Articles of Impeachment.

Democrats rushed impeachment through the House, throwing fairness and due process to the winds in their haste to impeach the President, but now they are apparently content to just sit on the Articles of Impeachment for the foreseeable future. If Democrats really believe that this impeachment is a serious matter, that there is literally a crime spree in progress, as they have claimed, they would have already sent over the articles. The truth is, Democrats' impeachment efforts, which basically started before the President had even taken the oath of office, have been politically motivated from the start. Democrats thought they could damage the President politically by rushing to impeach him, and now they think they can damage the President politically by stalling a trial.

Speaker PELOSI is also attempting to force the Senate to conduct the trial she would like it to conduct in hopes of getting the outcome she would prefer—demonstrating once again the fundamentally political nature of the Democrats' impeachment quest. Here in the Senate, we will continue working on the business of governing until