

I just would only add that time is of the essence. This bill has been pending before the Senate for a while and, before that, in the U.S. House of Representatives. But it has been a conversation by our veterans service organizations, their members; it has been a conversation by veterans organizations across the country now for decades: Solve this problem.

We are on the cusp of doing so, and we should not let this moment pass. There are veterans who are dying every day. There are veterans who have died since this legislation was introduced. I would like to make certain that there is no veteran, even if he or she is nearing that time of the end of their life, worried about whether their children or their spouse is going to receive the care and treatment and the benefits that they earned by their service.

So, Mr. President, please, my colleagues of the U.S. Senate, please, let's make certain we do our work to honor their service.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Mississippi.

VLADIMIR KARA-MURZA

Mr. WICKER. Mr. President, I rise this afternoon to make sure that the plight of Russian leader Vladimir Kara-Murza is not forgotten, that the outrageous imprisonment of Vladimir Kara-Murza by the Russian dictator Vladimir Putin is not forgotten.

We remember three decades ago what hope we had for a new Russia. Russia had entered a new age of possibility some three decades ago. After more than 70 years of communist repression, the Soviet order had collapsed, and with it, the Iron Curtain that kept freedom away from millions was torn down.

As the red flags came down in Moscow, the free world watched with anticipation, hoping that democracy and the rule of law might finally take root in a free Russia. Regrettably, that has not happened. Instead of democracy and freedom, the Russian people got Vladimir Putin, a man who has used his office to murder, imprison, and force into exile anyone who threatens his grip on power, all the while enriching himself beyond anyone's wildest imagination while ordinary Russians, especially out in the countryside of Russia, live in squalid conditions.

One of his latest victims is Vladimir Kara-Murza, a Russian patriot and a friend I had the privilege of hosting in my office just 4 months ago. As a matter of fact, I have hosted him several times.

Today, Vladimir Kara-Murza spends his days in a prison cell, where the only thing he can see through the window is a barbed wire fence. What was his crime? He simply spoke the truth about Putin's war on Ukraine. His trial—if it can even be called a trial—was held in secret. No journalists, no diplomats, or spectators of any kind were allowed to be there. And for his offense of talking about the Russian

war against Ukraine, he now faces up to 15 years in prison.

This is not the first time the Russian dictator has tried to silence him. Mr. Kara-Murza has been poisoned twice—in 2015 and 2017—and almost died in both cases. Since then, his wife and three children have had to live abroad, although he himself has chosen to spend most of his time in Russia.

In a recent interview with National Review, his wife Evgenia explained why he insists on working in Russia:

He believes that he would not have the moral right to call on people to fight if he were not sharing the same risks.

As Mr. Kara-Murza put it in a recent CNN interview the day of his arrest, he said:

The biggest gift we could give the Kremlin . . . would be to just give up and run, and that's all they want from us.

What a contrast in character to the man currently running the Kremlin.

The National Review story goes on to describe Mr. Kara-Murza's courageous work for democracy through the eyes of his wife Evgenia, as well as the costs that he and his family have endured, along with so many other Russian dissidents.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent at this point to have printed in the RECORD the National Review story that I referred to.

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

[From the National Review, May 31, 2022]

IN DARK TIMES, A BRAVE MAN

(By Jay Nordlinger)

On March 15, Vladimir Kara-Murza gave a speech to the Arizona legislature. "These are very dark times in Russia," he said. "These are times when we have hundreds of political prisoners, and that number is only going to grow." Less than a month later, Kara-Murza himself became a political prisoner.

Born in 1981, he is one of the most prominent opposition figures in Russia. (Given the state of things, we should probably return to the word "dissidents.") He is a politician, journalist, and activist. A proponent of democracy. For 15 years, he worked alongside Boris Nemtsov, the opposition leader. They became the closest of friends. Nemtsov was godfather to one of Kara-Murza's children. ("In Russia," Kara-Murza once told me, "that makes you family.")

Together, they worked for passage of the Magnitsky Act in the U.S. Congress. This is the act that allows the government to sanction individual human-rights abusers rather than whole peoples or societies. Nemtsov and Kara-Murza were sitting in the gallery on November 16, 2012, when the House passed the act. Nemtsov commented, "This is the most pro-Russian law ever enacted by a foreign government." At last, the persecutors of Russians would face consequences.

On February 27, 2015, Boris Nemtsov was murdered—gunned down within sight of the Kremlin. This had a deep impact on the Russian democracy movement, and it had a deep impact on Vladimir Kara-Murza, personally. He told me, "My life is divided into before and after February 27, 2015."

His wife, Evgenia, confirms the importance of Nemtsov's murder to her husband. "He will never come to terms with it. I just know him all too well. Boris Nemtsov was his teacher, his mentor, and then he became his close friend." Plus, "he was family."

Three months after Nemtsov's murder, Vladimir Kara-Murza himself was nearly murdered. He was subject to a poison attack, of the kind for which Vladimir Putin's agents have become infamous. After he recovered, Kara-Murza kept working, not scared off. Approximately two years later—in February 2017—he was again almost murdered. Again in a poison attack.

On the floor of the U.S. Senate, John McCain made a statement about Kara-Murza, a friend: "Vladimir has once again paid the price for his gallantry and integrity, for placing the interests of the Russian people above his own interest." Congressman Ed Royce, then the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, called Kara-Murza "one of the bravest people I know."

For the record, lots of people have called Kara-Murza "one of the bravest people I know." Also for the record: McCain asked Kara-Murza to serve as a pallbearer at his funeral, which he did, when the time came (September 2018).

After the second poison attack, doctors told Kara-Murza, "If there's a third one, you won't survive it."

Last year, a team of independent investigators was able to identify the exact unit of the Russian secret police that poisoned Kara-Murza—and Alexei Navalny and others. (Navalny is the current Russian opposition leader, and also a political prisoner.) The investigators pinpointed the agents who carried out the attacks.

Wrote Kara-Murza, "My emotions are difficult to express with words. It's one thing to know intellectually that someone has tried to kill you—and it's quite another to see the names and photographs of the actual people who did this."

For some years, Evgenia Kara-Murza and the couple's children have lived abroad. "Obviously, it's not an ideal situation," Vladimir told me in 2017, "but it has to be this way. I go back and forth, but I spend most of my time in Russia." He was willing to put his own neck on the line, but he was not willing to do the same with his family's.

Many people asked him, or pleaded with him, to work in the West, rather than in Russia itself. That way, he would be safer, if not entirely shielded from danger. Nemtsov was dead. Kara-Murza almost died, twice. Wasn't this enough? Hadn't he paid his dues, so to speak? Did he really need to be on Russian soil, making it easier for Putin's men? Kara-Murza rejected all entreaties, saying that he belonged in Russia.

"What does Evgenia think of all this?" I asked him in 2017. He answered, "If you ask her, she'll say, 'I knew what I was signing up for.'" Then, with a hint of a blush, he said, "I'm grateful to have such a woman in my life."

Today, Evgenia tells me the following: "When we were dating, 20 years ago, I was looking at him and thinking, 'You know, I can imagine spending my life with this man. He's smart, he's funny, he's honorable. He has so much integrity.' Later, when the poisonings and persecutions began, I thought, 'I wish our lives could be a little more boring.' But I do admire Vladimir. I've always admired and respected him for his principled stand, and I would never have him any different."

Explaining Vladimir's insistence on working in Russia, Evgenia says, "He believes that he would not have the moral right to call on people to fight if he were not sharing the same risks."

Back in 2017, I asked Vladimir whether his name would protect him. He was a friend of U.S. politicians, he had been featured on 60 Minutes, he had spoken at forums around the world. He was a bit of a celebrity. Kara-Murza looked at me and said, in effect, "Are

you kidding?" Then he said (I will quote directly), "If they can kill the leader of the opposition on the bridge next to the Kremlin"—he was speaking of the Nemtsov murder—"they can do anything."

Vladimir Putin launched his all-out assault on Ukraine on February 24 of this year. Kara-Murza, naturally, cried against this assault. On March 15, he gave his speech to the Arizona legislature. On April 11, he appeared on CNN, from Moscow. He spoke of the Putin regime's history of murder. Mincing no words, he said, "This regime that is in power in our country today—it's not just corrupt, it's not just kleptocratic, it's not just authoritarian. It is a regime of murderers. And it is important to say it out loud."

He went on to say, "It's tragic, frankly, that it took a large-scale war in Europe for most Western leaders to finally open their eyes to the true nature of this regime."

His interviewer asked him about being in Russia, after all that had happened to him, and others. Wasn't he afraid of being killed? Kara-Murza answered, "Look, I'm a Russian politician, I have to be in Russia, it's my home country. I think the biggest gift we could give to the Kremlin—those of us who are in opposition—would be to just give up and run, and that's all they want from us."

He was arrested that night. Five or six agents rushed at him when he was returning to his apartment building and parking his car. They dragged him into a van and took him to a police station. He was denied the right to call a lawyer. The next day, the authorities sentenced him to 15 days in prison for resisting arrest (something Kara-Murza had not done). It is typical for the government to sentence a dissident to 15 days on some little charge, while they cook up a bigger charge. Agents took Kara-Murza to a detention center.

Eventually, he did have lawyers, and very good ones: Vadim Prokhorov and Olga Mikhailova. (The latter is also lawyer to Navalny.) Kara-Murza does not have access to a phone or the Internet or anything like that. But, in detention, he was able to dictate a column to one of his lawyers.

On this matter of resisting arrest, Kara-Murza said the following:

Sofia Kalistratova, the legendary Moscow lawyer who defended dissidents in the "anti-Soviet" trials of the 1960s and 1970s, told her charges: "Everyone else may cross the street on a red light, but you must always cross on green." She knew that her clients couldn't give the authorities the slightest excuse to accuse them of breaking the law.

I have always tried to follow this principle.

In the column he dictated, Kara-Murza also reported a very interesting detail. When agents brought him to the detention center, they rang the doorbell and said to the person opening, "Here's a political for you. They should have called you from headquarters." (By "a political," they meant a political prisoner, not a common criminal.)

"Among the inmates in the special detention center," said Kara-Murza in his column, "are a young man and woman who had staged a protest in response to the murders in Bucha, Ukraine." Also, there were "students of the Higher School of Economics who were detained for an antiwar demonstration."

Altogether, some 15,000 Russians have been detained for protesting the assault on Ukraine. These people have assumed great risks and have exhibited notable bravery. In a column before his arrest, Kara-Murza recalled the seven people who protested in Red Square against Moscow's invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. (Horrible things happened to them, naturally.) The Kremlin of the time was saying that the whole nation supported the invasion. One of the pro-

testers, Natalia Gorbanevskaya, a poet, reflected on those days, many years later.

"A nation minus me," she said, "is not an entire nation. A nation minus ten, a hundred, a thousand people is not an entire nation." So, thanks to the Red Square protest, the government "could no longer say that there was nationwide approval for the invasion of Czechoslovakia."

On April 22, when Kara-Murza had been in prison for a week and a half, the authorities lodged their bigger charge against him. They accused him of violating a new law, instituted on March 5. This law essentially criminalizes any criticism of the Ukraine war whatsoever. It is punishable by up to 15 years in prison.

Before the war, there were a few independent media outlets left in Russia—the venerable radio station Echo of Moscow, for example, and the venerable newspaper Novaya Gazeta. (Over the years, six of the paper's correspondents have been murdered.) Now all independent media have been shut down. Social media have been blocked. In another of his pre-arrest columns, Kara-Murza wrote, "Near-total darkness has descended on Russia's information space with frightening speed."

The first person charged under the new law—the March 5 law—was a blogger, Veronika Belotserkovskaya, who does not live in Russia, but in France. Her response: "I was officially recognized as a decent person!" In Kara-Murza's case, the authorities cited the Arizona speech in particular. As of this writing, he is awaiting a court date.

Earlier this year, I talked with Kara-Murza about what seemed to me the increasing, galloping re-Sovietization of Russia. The government had shut down Memorial—the leading civil-society organization in the country. Memorial was founded at the urging of Andrei Sakharov in the late 1980s. Sakharov—the great scientist and dissident—was its first chairman. The purpose of the group was to uncover and tell the truth about the past, and to promote freedom and democracy in the present.

As Kara-Murza pointed out to me, plenty of Soviet men are in the Russian government now—starting with the KGB colonel at the top. Who wants to be reminded of his past crimes? Or his present ones?

In Russia's supreme court last December, the chief prosecutor, Alexei Zhafyarov, said, "Memorial creates a false image of the Soviet Union as a terrorist state." He also said that Memorial "makes us repent of the Soviet past, instead of remembering glorious history"—and "probably because someone is paying for it."

Over the past eight years—since Putin's initial invasion of Ukraine—Kara-Murza and I have had several conversations about just that: Ukraine. Kara-Murza's view is that Putin is very, very nervous about a democratic example in that country. It's one thing if New Zealand, let's say, is a democracy. New Zealand is far away, and, besides, it's "Anglo." But Ukraine? There are many ties between Ukraine and Russia: cultural, religious, linguistic. Millions of families have direct ties across the border. And if Russians see that Ukraine has a decent, open, democratic society . . . they may demand the same for themselves, which makes Putin and his men very nervous indeed.

In one of our conversations, Kara-Murza put it this way: "A successful democratic experiment in Ukraine presents an existential threat to Vladimir Putin's authoritarian kleptocracy in Russia."

It is Kara-Murza's strong belief that Russia, one day, will be free and democratic. People should avoid "cultural condescension," he says. That is a phrase he borrows from Ronald Reagan. In his Westminster

speech of 1982, Reagan said, "Democracy already flourishes in countries with very different cultures and historical experiences. It would be cultural condescension, or worse, to say that any people prefer dictatorship to democracy." Earlier this year, Kara-Murza told me, "I have absolutely no doubt that one day we will have a normal, modern, accountable democratic government in Russia. There's no reason that our nation is destined to be an outlier in Europe or the world, and to live under the yoke of a dictatorship."

At the moment, Vladimir Kara-Murza sits in prison, and faces many years of it. His friends and allies are making as much noise as they can. Charles Krauthammer once told me about something that Meg Greenfield had said to him. She was the editorial-page editor of the Washington Post. When the life of Sakharov hung in the balance, she wanted something about him in her pages at least once a week, she said. That way, the Post might help keep him alive.

Chief among the shouters, or campaigners, today for Kara-Murza is his wife. I think of Avital Sharansky, who campaigned for her husband, Anatoly (later Natan), during his nine years in the Gulag. She had obtained a visa to go to Israel, he had not. Sharansky told me a few years ago, "The biggest mistake the KGB made was letting Avita I out."

"I've never been a public person," Evgenia Kara-Murza says, "and I've never enjoyed being in the public eye. I am a quite introverted person, so I like working from home, and I like taking care of the kids, but unfortunately the situation sometimes changes, and I emerge when my husband is either poisoned or thrown in jail, because this is my partner, my soulmate, and I am prepared to do everything I can to bring my children's father home."

Mr. WICKER. Mr. Kara-Murza's imprisonment is part of Mr. Putin's larger assault on what remains of political freedom in Russia. In Mr. Kara-Murza's words, Putin's regime has gone "from highly authoritarian to near-totalitarian almost overnight."

In March, Russian officials passed a new censorship law forbidding all criticism of Mr. Putin's war in Ukraine. That law has been the basis for more 16,000 arrests since the war began in February, including that of Mr. Kara-Murza. Another 2,400 Russians have been charged with administrative offenses for speaking out against the war. Meanwhile, Putin's propaganda machine is ramping up. Independent Russian media outlets have all but vanished, having been blocked, shut down, or forced out of the country by the Kremlin.

The last embers of freedom in Russia are going cold. Putin's crackdown on domestic freedom began in 2003, when Mikhail Khodorkovsky was arrested on trumped-up charges of tax fraud after he simply criticized the government. A former member of the elite, Mr. Khodorkovsky had successfully led the Yukos Oil Company through privatization after the Iron Curtain fell. And contrary to the Kremlin's claims, the company consistently paid its taxes. But that didn't stop Vladimir Putin from plundering its assets and throwing Mr. Khodorkovsky in jail, where he stayed for 10 years.

I would note that just before his arrest, Mr. Khodorkovsky displayed the

same courage and patriotism that we now see in Vladimir Kara-Murza. Like Mr. Kara-Murza, he knew very well he could go to jail for speaking out against the government, but Mr. Khodorkovsky did so anyway and refused to flee the country, saying:

I would prefer to be a political prisoner rather than a political immigrant.

Of course, by then, Mr. Putin had already shown himself willing to violate the international laws of war, having leveled the Chechen capital of Grozny in his own Republic of Russia in 1999. In 2008, he launched a new assault on international law with the invasion of Georgia. In 2014, he started a bloody war in eastern Ukraine. In 2016, Russian dictator Putin and his forces attacked the Syrian city of Aleppo, killing hundreds of civilians and prolonging the rule of Bashar al-Assad.

Meanwhile, Putin ramped up his attacks on domestic freedom as well. In 2015, Boris Nemtsov, leader of the democratic opposition, former Deputy Prime Minister of Russia, was shot to death in broad daylight just yards away from the Kremlin. Three months later, Mr. Kara-Murza was poisoned for the first time. More recently, in 2020, Alexei Navalny, the current leader of the opposition, was himself poisoned and had to seek treatment in Berlin. This is Vladimir Putin's Russia today. When Navalny recovered, he chose to return to Moscow, knowing the risks, and immediately upon landing, he was arrested.

This is the deplorable state of Russia and freedom under Vladimir Putin. Time and again, he has shown that he is bent on stamping out the aspirations of his people for freedom and the rule of law.

As leader of the free world, America must continue to condemn Putin's lawless acts and stand in solidarity with our Russian friends who are courageously fighting against all odds for a better future in Russia and are suffering as a result.

These are modern-day heroes—Alexei Navalny, Vladimir Kara-Murza—and we should not forget them.

My friend the distinguished senior Senator from Maryland, Mr. CARDIN, and I, along with Congressmen STEVE COHEN and JOE WILSON, are the four House and Senate leaders of the Helsinki Commission, which monitors human rights in former Soviet countries. We recently sent a joint letter to President Biden calling on the administration to name and sanction all of those who have been involved in the arrest, detention, and persecution of Vladimir Kara-Murza. I issue that call again today, and I invite my colleagues from both parties to stand with Vladimir Kara-Murza and work for his release.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Hawaii.

Ms. HIRONO. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to be able to complete my remarks.

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

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST—EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Ms. HIRONO. Mr. President, I rise today in support of the confirmation of Dr. Lester Martinez-Lopez to be an Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs, or ASDHA.

The Defense Department is responsible for the health and welfare of over 1.3 million Americans who are entrusted with protecting our Nation. In order to ensure they get the care they need and deserve, the DOD must have an Assistant Secretary of Defense in place to lead their health affairs.

This position is the principal adviser to the Secretary of Defense for all health and force health protection policies, programs, activities, and the Integrated Disability Evaluation System. The ASDHA is responsible for the execution of the DOD medical mission, to provide and maintain physical and mental health readiness for medical services and support to members of the military services, their families, and those held in the control of the military services.

Dr. Martinez-Lopez is eminently qualified for the position and has an impressive history of public service. Dr. Martinez-Lopez graduated from medical school in 1978. He retired from the U.S. Army as a major general and was the first Latino to head the Army Medical Research and Materiel Command at Fort Detrick, MD. He is the former director of the Army's worldwide medical research, acquisition, and logistics program, overseeing a vast research portfolio that included cancer, trauma, infectious diseases, aviation medicine, and telemedicine research.

Dr. Martinez-Lopez also directed the premier national biological and chemical defense laboratories and research program and led the development of the National Biodefense Campus at Fort Detrick.

He served as the commanding general of the Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine, where he directed a worldwide public health organization and was responsible for preventive medicine, health promotion and wellness, global medical surveillance, occupational and environmental health, and health risk communication.

Dr. Martinez-Lopez has an extensive military and medical background that makes him eminently qualified to fill this critically important role. But Republican obstruction has left us without a confirmed Assistant Secretary for Health Affairs for nearly a year, endangering the health of our servicemembers and the safety of our Nation.

Unfortunately, Dr. Lopez is not the only critically important civilian DOD nominee Senate Republicans are blocking. Just yesterday, Chairman REED came to the floor to ask for unanimous consent on the nominees to serve as inspector general of DOD, Assistant Secretary of the Navy, and a judge of the

U.S. Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces.

This unprecedented obstruction must end, and we must fill these important positions, including Dr. Martinez-Lopez, as quickly as possible.

I urge my colleagues to confirm this nominee.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate consider the following nomination: Calendar No. 779, Lester Martinez-Lopez, of Florida, to be an Assistant Secretary of Defense; that the Senate vote on the nomination without intervening action or debate; that the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table; and that any statements related to the nomination be printed in the RECORD.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

The Senator from Kansas.

Mr. MARSHALL. Mr. President, reserving the right to object, I rise in objection to this nominee due to his support of President Biden's irrational and now proven foolish vaccine mandates for our military.

Last August, the Biden administration imposed a COVID-19 vaccine mandate across the entire military. This led to the expulsion of thousands of qualified, honorable servicemembers who elected not to receive the vaccine. This DOD mandate failed to account for immunity to the virus many troops gained through natural infection, which we now know is equal to or greater than the effectiveness of the vaccine. The mandate also failed to account for the fact that these men and women are our bravest and healthiest Americans, with strong immune systems.

Recently, we learned that the Army cut roughly 60,000 National Guard and Reserve members from pay and benefits for refusing to take the COVID vaccine at the beginning of July. This decision was made at a time when more than 30 percent of its recruitment slots are not fulfilled.

The recruiting crisis has gotten so bad that the Army is now placing enlistees who exceed body fat standards into a dietary and exercise program in order to lose weight. This manpower shortage could result in undermanned units and potentially longer deployments as well as greater dependence on National Guardsmen to meet mission goals.

These personnel shortages are clear and obvious, and they are getting worse. Yet the ideologues in charge of this administration refuse to drop the vaccine mandate for the military. There is no longer any rational basis to persist in this demand other than as a deliberate campaign to punish dissenting opinions and oppress political enemies.

The Department also appears to be going out of its way to deny religious accommodations for our troops. More than 24,000 members across the branches have submitted religious accommodation requests. Almost all have