

TRIBUTE TO RICHARD C. SHELBY

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, yesterday afternoon, RICHARD SHELBY delivered his farewell address here in the U.S. Senate.

It is difficult to think of the Senate without some of our retiring Members; it is nearly impossible to think of it without RICHARD SHELBY.

Like JIM INHOFE, he is a Senate institution. He has proudly served the State of Alabama for six terms in the Senate. That is 36 years of tireless work to make life better for the people of Alabama and for the American people as a whole.

He is currently the longest serving Senator in Alabama's history, as well as the longest serving Member in the history of the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs.

Throughout his Senate career, RICHARD has always kept his eye on getting things done for the people of Alabama, whether that is supporting Alabama military installations or the work NASA does in his State. He is a longtime NASA advocate, and as chairman and ranking member of the Subcommittee on Defense at the Senate Appropriations Committee, he has worked to ensure robust funding for our national security priorities.

He has also been a champion of funding to support Ukraine in its fight for freedom.

He has been a supporter of scientific research at various government Agencies, as well as in partnership with research universities.

RICHARD is also notable for being one of the tallest United States Senators. And that is significant to me because, as a tall guy myself, I don't often run into people I can look up to, but I look up to RICHARD, both literally and figuratively.

RICHARD's record of service and his dedication to people of his State are an inspiration to me and to many others as we carry out our work here in the U.S. Senate.

And I will miss his presence and his example as well as his sense of humor, which has lightened the mood around here on many challenging days.

But if anyone has earned his retirement, it is RICHARD SHELBY. And I wish him and Annette, his wife of 62 years, some very well-deserved relaxation and the very best of everything in the years ahead.

TRIBUTE TO PATRICK J. TOOMEY

Mr. President, later today, Senator PAT TOOMEY, my longtime time colleague on the Senate Finance Committee, will deliver his farewell remarks.

PAT is known for, among other things, his steadfast commitment to pro-market policies—to fiscal responsibility, pro-growth tax policy, free trade, limited but efficient regulation—and, above all, for his command of these issues.

He has a tremendous grasp of finance, banking, and the economy and an equally tremendous understanding

of what the ins and outs of the Tax Code mean for business, saving and investment, and entrepreneurship.

And he is able to break down these oftentimes Byzantine subjects and explain them in plain language. And that, around here, is a gift.

These attributes made PAT the indispensable man during tax reform 5 years ago. His expertise and commitment were key to passage of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act—the wide-ranging reform of our Tax Code to put more money in American families' pockets and made American businesses more competitive.

Beyond tax policy, PAT has consistently fought protectionism in its many forms.

He has pushed back on financial market regulations that restrict fair competition, and he has fiercely advocated for market-opening initiatives that benefit Pennsylvania families, workers, and businesses.

He is going to be missed in the Senate—and on the Senate Finance Committee in particular—for his knowledge and his experience and for his practical approach to getting things done for the American people.

I admire PAT for his economic expertise, but I especially admire him for his thoughtfulness, his decency, and the fact that he is very principled.

He stayed committed to the causes he believes in, from improving economic opportunity for American families to reducing government waste to protecting taxpayer dollars.

And while I don't know what he will do next, I am confident that whatever he does will continue his commitment to building an economy that works for the American people.

I want to wish PAT and his wife, Kris, the very best on his retirement. I hope they are able to enjoy some well-deserved rest in the coming months, and I look forward to seeing all that PAT will do in the future.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. BOOKER). Without objection, it is so ordered.

COVID VACCINE

Mr. LEE. Mr. President, Winston Churchill said:

We sleep safely at night because rough men stand ready to visit violence on those who would harm us.

The men and women of the U.S. Armed Forces sign up for no small task. They join to serve their country; not for money, not for fame, not because it is glamorous in any way. They sign up because they understand that Winston Churchill was right—that the blessings of a free society are possible only if there are those willing to put the safety and well-being of their coun-

try ahead of their own safety and ahead of their own lives when necessary.

That solemn, sacred responsibility, the responsibility that every member of our Armed Forces has committed so nobly to upholding, deserves our utmost respect.

Regrettably, on August 9 of 2021, the Secretary of Defense issued a message to the force indicating his intent to require COVID-19 vaccination for all servicemembers. This mandate went into effect on August 24, 2021.

There were a lot of promises made at the time—promises suggesting that individual needs would be taken into account; individual needs including good faith, sincerely held religious beliefs that might make it impossible for a servicemember to be vaccinated without violating his or her sincerely held convictions.

Unfortunately, it hasn't really panned out that way, as I will explain in a moment.

But in a nutshell, since the implementation of this vaccine mandate over almost the last year and a half, the United States military has dismissed 8,200 servicemembers for declining to receive the COVID-19 vaccine.

That is over 8,000—more than 8,200—individuals, and it is not just the individuals themselves. Many, if not most, of these individuals themselves are mothers or fathers. They have got mouths to feed, families to care for—all of whom are placed in a really unfair position as a result of this mandate. Serving our country shouldn't require you to surrender your fundamental right to make medical decisions that are right for you, no matter the reason, and yet that is precisely what the Department of Defense continues to do.

My office has received hundreds of accounts from brave members of our Armed Forces detailing the hardships and the retaliation they have experienced for declining to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. One first sergeant in the Air Force writes:

I was involuntarily separated and my enlistment was curtailed. I was a First Sergeant with the U.S. Air Force Reserves at the time the COVID mandate was put into place. I did everything I could to be allowed to continue to serve my country. I filed my Religious AR, and when it got denied, I also filed an appeal, and that got denied.

She goes on:

All I wanted to do was to continue to take care of the members of my squadron and continue to serve this great country.

Likewise, a Marine officer writes:

My family was forced to move on very short notice back to the U.S. from Okinawa, Japan due to the loss of a job and the threat of travel restriction if we remained unvaccinated. . . . Many are far worse off than me.

Another lieutenant colonel with the Marine Corps Reserve was placed on "inactive status" with "no warning or notice that this would happen" and in the process lost TRICARE health insurance that his family relies on to

provide expensive medical supplies for his special needs daughter, even though his appeal for a religious exemption was and is—remains still today—pending.

It seems in this and other circumstances, the Department of Defense has issued something of a pocket veto, not acting on these requests for an exemption but instead refusing to act and therefore leaving the servicemember with few options.

This person writes:

My entire family was—was without notice or warning—dropped from TriCare left scrambling to find health insurance.

These brave men and women represent just a tiny fraction of the servicemembers who have reached out to my office. Many are in desperation. They are pleading for someone to recognize the injustice they are experiencing. They deserve better, and we owe them more than this.

So, as we consider this year's National Defense Authorization Act, the blueprint for the defense budget that directs policy for our military, we should adopt this simple amendment that would: No. 1, immediately repeal the COVID vaccine mandate; No. 2, prohibit DOD from replacing the current COVID-19 vaccine mandate with a similar mandate absent express congressional approval; No. 3, provide remedies for any servicemember negatively impacted by the mandate, including the right to reinstatement, if desired, and to petition for a change in status if they received a negative discharge based on whether or not they were vaccinated, correcting for any loss of rank, pay or retirement benefits; and, No. 4, require the DOD to make every effort to retain unvaccinated servicemembers.

We, of course, can't take back the hardship that the military vaccine mandate has inflicted on countless servicemembers. We can't do that. That is in the past. But there are some things we can do. By adopting this amendment, we can recognize an injustice and take steps to restore the affected brave men and women who deserve our best.

We owe them that, and we owe them so much more. So I urge my colleagues to support this amendment and stand with those who themselves "stand ready to visit violence on those who would harm us."

It is the right thing to do.

LIEUTENANT RIDGE ALKONIS

Mr. President, while we are on the topic of actions taken by the Department of Defense that don't show adequate, appropriate, and necessary respect for those who stand in harm's way to protect us and defend us, I want to tell you the story of a brave young man, a U.S. Navy lieutenant named Ridge Alkonis.

Ridge Alkonis is one of the best and the brightest that our Navy has to offer, that America has to offer: a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, a decorated officer who served his coun-

try well, who goes above and beyond the call of duty by every account that I can find or that I have access to. Lieutenant Alkonis, who is also the father of three young children and a devoted husband to his wife Brittany, sits today languishing in a Japanese prison.

You may ask: What has he done? What put him there? Why is he in prison in Japan? Did he steal something? Did he harm someone?

No, none of the above. No, at the end of May—May 29, 2021—Lieutenant Alkonis and his wife Brittany, along with their three children, decided to take a brief road trip to go see Mount Fuji. While descending from Mount Fuji, he suffered a most unfortunate, most unforeseen and unforeseeable medical emergency, one that caused him to lose consciousness while driving.

His young daughter, seeing that he had lost consciousness, tried to wake him up. She kicked the seat. She yelled. She did everything she could to wake him up.

You see, he wasn't asleep. He lost consciousness. He suffered from a rare medical condition he didn't know he had. He couldn't have known that he had this medical condition that caused him to lose consciousness at that moment.

Tragically, while he was unconscious, the car he was driving was involved in an accident, one that took the lives of two Japanese nationals.

My heart breaks for them, for the family members of these individuals whose lives were lost on May 29, 2021, in Japan. I know that Lieutenant Alkonis, with whom I have spoken as I visited him in prison in Japan—his heart breaks for them as well.

Our entire country extends our thoughts, our prayers, and our well wishes to the family members of those victims.

This was not a criminal act. This was a medical emergency, one that resulted in a tragedy—and I am so sad that it did—and no one is more sad about this than Lieutenant Alkonis and his family.

You see, in Japan, they have a different system than ours. In the United States, this wouldn't result in someone going to prison. This wouldn't result in criminal charges of any kind. This would be regarded for what it is, which is a tragedy resulting from a medical emergency, an accident that wasn't foreseen or foreseeable. We wouldn't send someone to prison for that here in the United States.

We understand that different countries have different systems of law, and we do our very best to respect the laws of other countries. But that is why he is in prison today.

My purpose in raising this today is to talk about how our country handled it, not how Japan handled it. We can talk about that perhaps another day, but today I want to talk about how the U.S. military is handling this tragedy.

When a U.S. military officer or enlisted person isn't able to be present

for duty, he or she will stop getting paid. They stop getting paid if they are absent from their work. It is not surprising. Pretty much any job works that way. Like most jobs, if you are absent from your work, your employer can make a decision about whether the absence was unavoidable and should therefore be excused.

An employer in the private sector might, for example, decide to continue to pay someone for a period of time if the circumstances warrant it. They might warrant it particularly if the absence was brought about as a result of the conditions in which the person was working on the job.

For example, imagine you were running a business and you had an employee whom you assigned to work somewhere in a foreign country for a period of time and something like this happened. I would imagine that many, if not most, if not all, sane employers would do everything they possibly could to take care of the family and of that particular employee and that employee's family if something like this happened in a country where they were present only as a result of their work assignment.

In fact, there is a statute that deals with this very thing for employees of the Department of Defense. That statute is codified at 37 U.S.C. 503. Here is what it says:

A member of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Space Force, Coast Guard or National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, who is absent without leave or over leave, forfeits all pay and allowances for the period of that absence, unless it is excused as unavoidable.

"Unless it is excused as unavoidable."

That is exactly what the Department of Defense should do right now, is excuse as unavoidable Lieutenant Alkonis's absence. It seems to me that if ever there were an instance perfectly tailored for this statute, if ever there were an absence that needed to be excused as unavoidable, it is that of Lieutenant Ridge Alkonis.

So, with that in mind, and with the needs of his wife Brittany and their three young children who are still in Japan, Lieutenant Alkonis filed the paperwork for an exception to the policy with the Department of Defense. Now, that application was filed many, many months ago, and we now find ourselves in a situation in which that application has not been granted.

They filed this, I believe, back in June. It was transferred from one office to another in July. It was transferred—sent over to the Office of the Under Secretary of the Department of Defense a few months later. It still hasn't been acted on formally.

I have spoken with more officials within the Department of Defense than I can even count at this moment. I have been on this pattern of making phone calls since just a few weeks after this was filed in June. I have spoken with officials within the Office of the