

investing roughly half as much in defense today as a share of GDP as we were at the height of President's Reagan buildup in the mid-1980s.

In the dangerous world that surrounds us today, this is wholly inadequate. Decades after the Cold War, the famous Reagan maxim—"peace through strength"—still applies. But, unfortunately, the Biden administration's record on defending America, our partners, and our interests has been one of weakness and delay.

Take, for example, the President's approach to helping Ukraine fight Russian invaders. At seemingly every opportunity—from the guided rockets to drones, to Abrams tanks—he hesitated to put decisive capabilities in Ukrainian hands until they were several steps behind the pace of relevance.

Last month, the Biden administration finally authorized the transfer of F-16 fighter aircraft, but, as with the tanks, they waited too long for these highly capable systems to be ready for a counteroffensive anytime soon, making it more likely—more likely—that this conflict becomes a stalemate or worse, instead of a Ukrainian victory.

And the President continues to avoid authorizing other key capabilities, like longer range fires and cluster munitions, even though Russia is already using them against Ukrainian forces.

The consequences of these misjudgments are not limited to Ukraine itself. The same adversaries who watched President Biden's botched withdrawal from the battlefield in Afghanistan are watching the West for signs of weakness in Ukraine. America's friends in the Indo-Pacific know that along with robust investment in real military capabilities, the best way to deter aggression from China is to help Ukraine defeat aggression from Russia.

Tomorrow, the President will welcome Prime Minister Sunak of the United Kingdom to Washington. The special relationship between our two countries is a source of strength in the face of shared threats around the world. Anglo-U.S. cooperation, including with Australia in the Indo-Pacific, will help shape the next century of strategic competition. I hope President Biden will recommit to standing with America's closest allies and partners in confronting shared threats.

Congress must commit ourselves to equipping our military with the capabilities it needs to control growing threats from China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and terrorists emboldened by America's retreat from Afghanistan.

Keeping America safe, keeping America fed, and keeping the lights on—our responsibilities are crystal clear.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Illinois.

NATO

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, the strongest military alliance in the world is the NATO alliance. President Joe Biden has made that alliance stronger than ever since its creation.

Countries like Finland now want to be part of that alliance for their own safety because they share our values. Countries like Sweden feel the same way. They want to be part of this alliance, which President Biden has supported completely.

It has never been stronger since its creation, and the contributions made by the alliance members to the war in Ukraine are unprecedented. It has never happened before. Nations from all over Europe and nations that share our values are standing behind the NATO alliance.

To hear the suggestion on the floor of the Senate that somehow there is a weakness in the Biden administration when it comes to NATO is belied by the facts and the truth.

The fact of the matter is, as well, that when you look back at the previous President, named Donald Trump, chart what he has to say about Ukraine now. He questions whether we should be helping them at all. He questions whether or not we should make Vladimir Putin angry.

You all know and remember, as I do, as well, that during the 4 years of the Trump administration, there was this ambivalence, this bromance between Putin and Trump that no one could explain. And now to have someone come to the floor and say Joe Biden isn't strong enough when it comes to standing behind the people of Ukraine, that is just flatout wrong.

The support for the Ukrainian people against Vladimir Putin is universal across—I shouldn't say "universal." Let me strike that word. It is almost universal and should be universal across all Members of Congress. Democrats and Republicans alike in the Senate believe that we are doing the right thing as a nation standing behind the people of Ukraine.

As a cochair of the Ukrainian Caucus in the U.S. Senate, I believe this in my heart and soul: If the Ukrainians do not prevail over Vladimir Putin, I am afraid we are going to have more wars to fight. I can think of other countries that are vulnerable to his expansionist dreams: Poland, for goodness' sake; the Baltic States; Moldova. The list goes on and on.

President Biden has made a stand in Ukraine, and it is the right position to take. To suggest that the NATO alliance is not behind him is wrong. They are behind him in a way that is unprecedented in history.

I am happy to report that I am not only pleased to support the Ukrainians in this effort, but I think we have done everything that we should do.

Now, remember, President Biden has an important decision to make each time someone suggests a new weapons system: Will this be provocative? Will it lead to expansion of the equipment used in war, even to nuclear weapons?

That is an important question. I don't know if I could sleep at night if I had to worry about my decision the next morning and whether it would

trigger a nuclear war. But that is what President Biden faces day after day, after day. People who come in and say, "Just send every weapon system and don't think twice about it," don't understand the burden of the Presidency—to make sure we do the right thing to support the Ukrainian people, but not a provocative action that draws in American forces or runs the risk of nuclear war.

The President has to make the careful decision with every weapons system. So if it takes an extra day or week, do it right, Mr. President. Don't be pushed into it by those who really can't understand the gravity of each of these decisions. Stand behind the Ukrainian people. Do it through the NATO alliance. Do it in a way that doesn't expand this war to include American troops or to make it a nuclear conflict. That, I think, is the bottom line.

GUN VIOLENCE

Mr. President, it was 10 years ago, roughly, when the inauguration of Barack Obama took place. It meant a lot to me. He was my colleague in the Senate for a number of years. He was my friend. I endorsed him for President. I was the first Senator to endorse him, and, for 14 months, I was the only Senator who endorsed him.

I traveled to Iowa many times to campaign for him as President. And, of course, I remember that glorious, cold, cold day when he took the oath of office out here on the steps of the Capitol. It was cold, but there were huge crowds. I will never forget it. I was lucky enough, being in the Senate and a friend of his, to be on the platform when he took the oath of office. And when my friend Barack Obama reached his hand over and put it on the Bible of Abraham Lincoln to take his oath of office, I was witnessing, along with America, a moment in history I had never dreamed of.

It meant a lot to many other people too. There was a class from a school in Chicago that decided to send out their students and their band to march and to honor the new President. They were as proud of him as I was, maybe more so. It was an African-American school class, and it included in its rank a young lady named Hadiya Pendleton.

After she witnessed that swearing-in, she went back to Chicago. Sadly, 2 weeks later, she was senselessly shot down and killed on the South Side. She was 15 years old. President Obama's wife Michelle Obama came to her funeral in Chicago to honor this wonderful little girl—young girl—who came to that capital to be part of history and only lived a few weeks afterwards.

Friday would have been Hadiya Pendleton's 26th birthday. I joined community members in Chicago at a violence prevention center called BUILD. The people I spoke to were united not only in wearing orange to signify their unity but in sharing the belief that we have to do more to protect our communities from gun violence.

In the more than 10 years since Hadiya was killed, America's crisis of gun violence has gotten progressively worse. Today, gunfire is the No. 1 killer of America's children. Think about that for a second—gun violence, the No. 1 killer of America's children today, of all the things they face in life.

One in five Americans now say they have lost a loved one to gun violence—one in five. Many Americans say they live in fear of sending their kids to school or the local grocery store or church, that they will become targets of the next mass shooting.

Last weekend, sadly, at least 46 people were shot in the city of Chicago during the weekend. Ten died. This includes a horrific mass shooting in the Austin neighborhood, where seven people were shot and one died just blocks away from where the new mayor lives.

Some politicians claim, well, that is part of American life; we have to accept it. I think they are wrong, and nearly 90 percent of Americans who support new gun safety laws agree it is time for Congress to do something. That is why it is unbelievable to me, having served in this body for a number of years, that this week the Senate Republicans want to take us backwards and weaken an existing gun law, one that has been on the books since 1934, almost 90 years: the National Firearms Act.

Congress passed this law almost 90 years ago to set strict rules around particularly dangerous firearms like machine guns, sawed-off shotguns, and short-barreled rifles, but right now, the Republican effort on the floor wants to wipe away a regulation from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives which restricts devices that can convert pistols into short-barreled rifles.

The device is known as a stabilizing brace. When you attach one to a pistol, you can hold the weapon against your shoulder to fire it. It is accurate like a rifle but easily concealed, more like a handgun. That is exactly why, for almost 90 years, short-barreled rifles have been regulated in the United States. This kind of weapon is still being used. It was used by the mass shooter who killed 9 people and injured 17 others in Dayton, OH, in 2019 and by another mass shooter in Boulder, CO, in 2021 who killed 10 people.

Now, ask yourself, is this what America needs in the year 2023: weakening gun laws that have been on the books since Franklin Roosevelt was President, making it easier to conceal short-barreled rifles in your handbag or backpack? Absolutely not. But this Republican proposal, at this moment of gun violence and bloodshed in America, would make it easier for mass shooters and criminals to access these dangerous weapons.

Under the ATF rule, gun owners have a number of ways to comply. They can take the brace off their pistol or put a longer barrel on it, but they cannot

have a short-barreled rifle without being subject to regulations from that 1934 National Firearms Act, which included registration and limits on transfers.

The ATF's regulation on pistol braces is just common sense. More importantly, it will save lives. The only question is, Why are the Republicans bringing this up at this moment in our history? Why? Is it for the gun lobby or for the American people?

VENEZUELA

Mr. President, on another topic, last month, a few of my colleagues and I had a memorable meeting with the former interim President of Venezuela, Juan Guaido. After a heroic and determined effort to bring some semblance of democracy and stability to the once-proud nation of Venezuela, he and his young family fled in fear for their safety and future. He showed me the harrowing photos of his wife and two young daughters fleeing secretly over land and across a dangerous river into Colombia—a story that, sadly, isn't unique or even the worst I have heard.

Under the current Maduro regime, Venezuela is a politically repressive failed state. I visited with this President in Caracas before the discredited 2018 election, and what I saw and what continues today is heartbreaking. There are people starving and fainting at work from malnutrition, hospitals without electricity and basic medicines, brutal political repression and torture, and staggering corruption and the dismantling of what is left of that country's democracy. It is not surprising, then, that over the last decade, more than 6 million Venezuelans have fled their country in despair and fear, traveling to neighboring nations and some onward to the United States.

Yesterday, I went to the Piotrowski Park shelter in Chicago, and I met with a number of these Venezuelan immigrants, some of whom were bused into Chicago from Texas. It is not the first time I have sat down with these immigrants to hear their stories. The city of Chicago, like many other cities, is doing the best they can to provide good, humane care for these people and these families.

I asked one woman about the journey she made. She sat right next to me with three little boys, the cutest kids you have ever seen—7 years old, 5 years old, and 3 years old—and she told me what it meant to take them through the jungles in Panama and realize that at any moment they could perish. That is how desperate she was for freedom, how desperate she was to get to the United States. Hers is not a unique story; it is a story repeated over and over.

I want to especially thank Kate Maehr at the Greater Chicago Food Depository and the New Life Community Church, Matt DeMateo, for his leadership and helping this woman's desperate family and so many other migrants arriving in Chicago.

Previously, I, along with several colleagues, urged the previous administra-

tion and then President Biden to grant temporary protected status to these Venezuelans. TPS is a temporary immigration status provided to foreign nationals if returning to their country would pose a serious threat to their safety because of ongoing conflict, environmental disaster, or other extraordinary conditions. It is the kind of commonsense move self-confident nations and leaders take to demonstrate global leadership and compassion—one I was glad President Biden made early in his Presidency.

The original designation covered Venezuelans who arrived in the United States by March of 2021. Today, I call on the administration to make a similar designation for more recent Venezuelan arrivals. The Venezuelans I met in Chicago will tell you that conditions have only worsened since 2021. A new TPS designation would not provide permanent immigration status but, instead, a measure of American decency and solidarity with those who face violence and chaos in Venezuela.

U.S. SUPREME COURT

Mr. President, you have all heard the story, I am sure, about the U.S. Supreme Court and Justice Clarence Thomas. It was published about 6 weeks ago. It turns out that Justice Thomas was receiving lavish gifts from a Texas billionaire named Harlan Crow.

Harlan Crow and his family made a lot of money in real estate and other investments. He is pretty well known because, as recently as this last summer, Harlan Crow had been providing transportation for a Supreme Court Justice, Clarence Thomas, and his family, and sadly the Justice failed to disclose that gift as required by law.

The highest Court in the Nation must not have the lowest ethical standards. Sadly, I am afraid that is the case today. Every Federal judge in the United States of America is bound by a code of ethical conduct and a set of ethics rules and enforcement mechanisms—every single judge in America except for the nine across the street in the Supreme Court.

It was 11 years ago, February 2012, when I first wrote Chief Justice Roberts and urged him to address this problem. I urged him to have the Supreme Court adopt a binding code of conduct that applies to all Justices, just like every other Federal judge in America. He refused, and the ethics problem, which was already swirling around the Court a decade ago, has grown progressively worse.

The Senate Judiciary Committee, which I chair, is currently seeking information to understand the full extent of the ethical problems in the Supreme Court because of their lack of a binding code of conduct. The committee must engage in this work because Chief Justice Roberts refuses to do what is within his power to do today: adopt a resolution binding the nine Justices to an enforceable code of ethical conduct, just like every other Federal judge.

The polling data on the reputation of the Supreme Court tells the story. It