



United States
of America

Congressional Record

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE 119th CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION

Vol. 171

WASHINGTON, TUESDAY, MARCH 11, 2025

No. 46

Senate

The Senate met at 6:40 p.m. and was called to order by the Honorable JOHN R. CURTIS, a Senator from the State of Utah.

APPOINTMENT OF ACTING PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will please read a communication to the Senate from the President pro tempore (Mr. GRASSLEY).

The legislative clerk read the following letter:

U.S. SENATE,
PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE,
Washington, DC, March 11, 2025.

To the Senate:

Under the provisions of rule I, paragraph 3, of the Standing Rules of the Senate, I hereby appoint the Honorable JOHN R. CURTIS, a Senator from the State of Utah, to perform the duties of the Chair.

CHUCK GRASSLEY,
President pro tempore.

Mr. CURTIS thereupon assumed the Chair as Acting President pro tempore.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The majority leader is recognized.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the morning hour be deemed expired.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

JOURNAL OF PROCEEDINGS

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Journal of proceedings be approved to date.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the time for the two leaders be reserved for their use later in the day.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate be in a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

MEASURES PLACED ON THE CALENDAR

The following bills were read the second time, and placed on the calendar:

S. 924. A bill making further continuing appropriations for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2025, and for other purposes.

H.R. 1968. An act making further continuing appropriations and other extensions for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2025, and for other purposes.

MEASURES PLACED ON THE CALENDAR EN BLOC—H.R. 1968 and S. 924

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, I understand that there are two bills at the desk due for a second reading en bloc.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The leader is correct.

The clerk will read the bills by title for the second time.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (H.R. 1968) making further continuing appropriations and other extensions for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2025, and for other purposes.

A bill (S. 924) making further continuing appropriations for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2025, and for other purposes.

Mr. THUNE. In order to place the bills on the calendar under the provisions of rule XIV, I would object to further proceeding en bloc.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Objection having been heard, the bills will be placed on the calendar.

ORDERS FOR WEDNESDAY, MARCH 12, 2025

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that when the Senate completes its business today, it stand adjourned until 11 a.m. on Wednesday, March 12; that following the prayer and pledge, the Journal of proceedings be approved to date, the time for the two leaders be reserved for their use later in the day, and the Senate proceed to executive session and resume consideration of Calendar No. 31; further, at 12 noon, the Senate vote on cloture on the Miran nomination, and if cloture is invoked on the Miran nomination, the postcloture time expire at 2:15 p.m. and the Senate vote on confirmation of the Miran nomination; further, if cloture is invoked on the Sonderling nomination, the postcloture time expire at 5:15 p.m. and the Senate vote on confirmation of the nomination; finally, if any nominations are confirmed during Wednesday's session, the motions to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table and the President be immediately notified of the Senate's action.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

ORDER FOR ADJOURNMENT

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, if there is no further business to come before the Senate, I ask that it stand adjourned under the previous order following the remarks of Senator BLUMENTHAL.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

• This "bullet" symbol identifies statements or insertions which are not spoken by a Member of the Senate on the floor.



Printed on recycled paper.

S1677

The Senator from Connecticut.

VETERANS SERVICES

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, my thanks to Senator THUNE for yielding and the Presiding Officer for presiding over the balance of the day.

I am here with sadness—not for the first time and, tragically, not for the last, I fear—because I am here to speak to the decimation and destruction of veterans services ongoing in real time, right before our eyes, affecting real people in their daily lives. And it is a tragedy and a travesty because the people affected are our Nation's heroes, whom we all say we respect, but in practice, right now, Elon Musk and Donald Trump have launched an assault to degrade and denigrate.

Donald Trump has called veterans suckers. Elon Musk shows the same kind of disrespect in the cuts, in hiring freezes, and in reductions in amounts of research—a panoply, a tsunami, of cuts in both resources and workers that are essential to the VA's functions in providing healthcare as well as PACT Act benefits that veterans have earned. They deserve them without delay. And this assault on veterans is unprecedented in our Nation's history.

We had a hearing this morning in the VA Committee on various pieces of legislation, some of them probably positive in the effects that they may have if we pass them. I have cosponsored some of them and will support others. But their meaning and effect will be absolutely eviscerated if these cuts—including 80,000 workers in addition to the 2,400 already fired—are, in fact, discharged in the future.

The plan that the Secretary of the VA has stated—it is his word, "plan"—is to fire 80,000 workers. It is his goal. He said it in an interview, and I ask unanimous consent that that interview be printed in the RECORD.

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

[From Fox News, Mar. 11, 2025]

CHANGES THAT ACTUALLY HELP OUR VETERANS: VA SECRETARY DEFENDS PROPOSED 15% WORKFORCE REDUCTION

(By Deirdre Heavey)

Veterans Affairs Secretary Doug Collins has been steadfast in his commitment to shake up the department. And, despite firing at least 2,400 employees, Collins pledges to maintain the VA's commitment to preserving and improving healthcare benefits for veterans.

"VA's biggest problem is that its bureaucracy and inefficiencies are getting in the way of customer convenience and service to veterans. As I have said before, we owe American veterans and hundreds of thousands of amazing employees solutions. And mark my words, that is what we will deliver," Collins said in a video posted on X last week.

Collins said the VA dismissals are part of President Donald Trump's commitment to making government more efficient and effective, in conjunction with Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). The VA announced that last month's personnel moves will save more than \$83 million

annually, and they will "redirect all of those resources back toward health care, benefits and services for VA beneficiaries."

Collins, who has faced criticism for his proposed 15% workforce reduction, confirmed the VA's goal to cut 80,000 jobs during a "Fox & Friends" interview with Brian Kilmeade on Monday.

"Please, before Democrats or anybody else start on this path, this is going to be a deliberative process that's going to take some time that's going to include career VA employees. It's going to include senior executives. It's going to include all across, even bringing in people if need be, to take a look at: are we being efficient?" Collins told Kilmeade.

Collins has shut down criticism from the mainstream media and Democrats who have slammed VA cuts, reminding Kilmeade on Monday that operational issues have long plagued the VA.

"Let's all agree on something that for the past 10 years, the GAO has reported that the VA healthcare has been at a high-risk. In other words, they're on the high-risk list for not only the possibility of fraud, waste and abuse, but also in patient quality, patient care. This has been going on for 10 years. It's interesting to me that they're looking at wait times. These are things that have preceded me coming in. I've been here for weeks, but it's interesting that there's no solutions being proposed," Collins said.

Veterans have reported poor healthcare conditions at the VA for decades, including long wait times, delayed care, slow processing times and corruption. While the Trump administration's VA has only investigated 2% of their contracts so far, Collins said they have already identified 600 non-mission-critical or duplicate agreements to save almost \$1 billion. Collins said that money can be reinvested into making "changes that actually help our veterans."

"The money we're saving by eliminating non-mission critical and duplicative contracts is money we're going to redirect to veterans facing healthcare benefits and services, resulting in massive improvements in customer service and convenience. Improving services to the veterans is exactly why the VA exists. That is what everyone—Congress, the media and VA employees—should be focused on," Collins said.

Collins has emphasized there will be no cuts to healthcare or benefits for veterans.

"We're going to accomplish this without making cuts to healthcare or benefits to veterans and VA beneficiaries. VA will always fulfill its duty to provide veterans, families, caregivers and survivors the healthcare and benefits they have earned. That's a promise. And while we conduct our review, VA will continue to hire for more than 300,000 mission-critical positions to ensure healthcare and benefits for VA beneficiaries are not impacted," Collins said.

Despite Collins' reassurances, Democrats have slammed the Trump administration and DOGE for VA cuts. House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, D-N.Y., led a press conference with fellow Democrats on the issue last week at the U.S. Capitol.

"Why lay off veterans? I mean, 30% of the federal workforce is veterans, including a lot of people who've been laid off at the CFPB. Can you at least show some compassion to veterans?" Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., told Fox News Digital following a meeting with Consumer Financial Protection Bureau employees who were impacted by federal workforce reductions.

"They're going to gut the Department of Veterans Affairs, jeopardizing the health and well-being of millions of veterans," Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., said at a rally in Wisconsin on Friday.

"Cutting the VA and some of the proposals I've seen are going to hurt service to veterans. So let's agree that that's a bad idea. Bipartisan. It's a bad idea to do that," Sen. Elissa Slotkin, D-Mich., told NBC's "Meet the Press" on Sunday.

"I go to the VA myself, so I see every day the waiting lists, the long lines to get care, how long it takes to get an appointment. All of that is going to get worse," Rep. Seth Moulton, D-Mass., told MSNBC on Saturday.

Veterans have been speaking out against the proposed VA cuts as well. Veterans are organizing a protest against VA cuts and "Project 2025" on Friday, March 14, in Washington, D.C., and at state capitals across the country.

VoteVets, a progressive political action committee, released a memo last week outlining the "extensive damage in the department's ability to process and pay out benefits." However, Collins said firing non-essential employees and reevaluating contracts is how the Trump administration is "finally going to give the veterans what they want."

"The VA has been a punching bag among veterans, Congress and the media for decades. Things need to change. We owe America's veterans and the hundreds and thousands of excellent VA employees solutions. For many years, veterans have been asking for a more efficient, accountable and transparent VA. This administration is finally going to give the veterans what they want," Collins said.

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, but we did learn in this legislative hearing that, in fact, there is no plan. The 80,000-worker target for firing is in the absence of any plan. It is the target. It is the goal. It is the intention: Fire now, plan later. No plan, no metrics, no methodology, no strategy for right-sizing the VA.

Now, we know a right-sized VA needs every one of those 2,400 workers who have been discharged now. It needs every one of the 80,000 that are targeted in the next few months to be fired. And we learned this morning that there are, in fact, open positions—36,000 of them, including more than 3,000 positions for doctors, thousands others for nurses, thousands for the custodians who maintain the VA healthcare properties.

We are talking about real people who will be fired who are on the job doing essential work right now, and we are talking about discharging people when there are open positions, a need for more doctors, nurses, and others. How is that going to work for recruiting? Not so well when the VA is firing exactly the people whose positions it is trying to fill. That is absolutely a disgrace, and it will be seen as a disgrace by anybody wanting to serve in the VA.

We also learned today that the VA is focusing on legislative measures that will make it easier to fire people, that will more readily enable it to discharge people without stating a reason, without a performance-related reason for firing them.

So we are seeing the biggest attack and assault on veterans' access to care and benefits at least in a generation and maybe in our history, and Trump and Musk have already fired more veterans than any administration before now.