



United States
of America

Congressional Record

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE 119th CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION

Vol. 171

WASHINGTON, TUESDAY, MARCH 25, 2025

No. 54

Senate

The Senate met at 10 a.m. and was called to order by the President pro tempore (Mr. GRASSLEY).

PRAYER

The Chaplain, Dr. Barry C. Black, offered the following prayer:

Let us pray.

God of all life, we seek You in a world filled with challenges. Today, prepare the Members of this body for the rigors of solving life's riddles. Give them the wisdom to seek common opportunities to accomplish Your will in our Nation and world. Teach them to spend and be spent for the good of others.

Lord, give them the spiritual tools for strength of thought, lightness of heart, sincerity of conviction, and clarity of purpose.

Renew their commitment to You, for You are their inspiration, their strength, their courage, their guide, and their Lord.

We pray in Your magnificent Name. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The President pro tempore led the Pledge of Allegiance, as follows:

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. MORENO). Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will be in a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak for up to 10 minutes each.

The Senator from Iowa.

RUSSIA

Mr. GRASSLEY. Mr. President, on this day in 1949, the Russian-Soviet regime occupying the Baltic countries rounded up 95,000 people, mostly women and children, and sent them to Siberia.

During Stalin's rule, more than 220,000 innocent people were deported to cold Siberia. This doesn't even include political prisoners sent to the gulag camps.

This day is observed by those Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania by lighting candles in the memory of these deportees.

The reason the Soviets did this is pretty simple: They wanted to crush civil society in newly occupied areas because they took over the Baltic countries in 1940.

The ultimate goal was to eliminate Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian national identity entirely, replacing it with, of course, a Soviet-Russian identity. The Soviets did not succeed in this effort.

Now, you may not remember this from history, but the United States never recognized the illegal Soviet occupation of these three Baltic States.

Now, the people of those three countries kept the flame of freedom alive by quietly telling their children the truth about how their countries were once free and independent.

Then, when the Soviet empire showed signs of weakness, their desire for freedom burst forth in what is called the Singing Revolution. It got the name because of the use of national songs banned by the Soviet, and this, by singing it, was their means of protest.

Fifty years of brutal Soviet occupation could not extinguish the flames of freedom and all Baltic countries are again free and prosperous and these three countries happen to be among the most pro-American allies.

I wonder if we can learn a lesson because we know that when Putin invaded Ukraine in 2022, he has since kid-

napped about 20,000 young people from Ukraine and taken them to Russia to "Russify" them, I guess you would say.

We don't hear enough of that. We ought to be reminded of what the Soviets did after World War II, and it seems like the world has not learned a lesson or Putin wouldn't get away with his kidnapping of 20,000 children to take them to Russia from Ukraine.

We should not allow this to continue, and the United States of America ought to be very cautious in any dealings with an international war criminal as Putin has been so condemned.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant bill 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.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority leader is recognized.

BORDER SECURITY

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, from the day he took office, President Trump made it clear that he would not hesitate to take action to deter our enemies and protect our Nation, and that is exactly what he has been doing, both here at home and abroad.

Needless to say, 4 years of record-breaking illegal immigration at our southern border, under President Biden, left a gaping hole in our national security. The chaos that raged at our southern border was an invitation to terrorists and criminals, and law enforcement was stretched thin trying to deal with the flood of illegal immigration.

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



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During his campaign, President Trump made it very clear that putting an end to our border crisis was going to be at the top of his agenda, and he has been delivering on that promise.

In just 2 months, his bold action to secure our border and enforce our immigration laws has led to a precipitous drop in illegal crossings at the southern border. U.S. Customs and Border Protection recorded just 11,709 encounters—apprehensions between ports of entry, plus inadmissible aliens—at our southern border for the month of February—11,709.

Just to put that number into perspective, in February 2024, with President Biden, Customs and Border Protection recorded 189,913 encounters at our southern border—189,913 to 11,709, a 93-percent drop.

President Trump and his administration have made incredible progress, and our Nation is more secure because of their efforts.

IRAN

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, meanwhile, on the international front, President Trump is taking a similarly assertive approach to protecting our country and our interests.

Over the last 18 months, since Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack on Israel, Iran-backed Houthis in the Middle East have carried out literally hundreds of attacks on U.S. international shipping and on U.S. forces. Airstrikes by the Biden administration failed to stop the Houthis' activities, and international shipping has been significantly affected. Ships now routinely avoid the Red Sea and the Suez Canal in favor of going around the southern tip of Africa, a route that means longer travel times for goods. And those ships that do traverse the Red Sea face significant danger to their cargoes and, above all, to their personnel.

This is an unacceptable situation, and so President Trump is taking action. Within days of taking office, President Trump had redesignated the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization—after the Biden administration took them off the list—and 10 days ago, President Trump ordered extensive airstrikes against Houthi targets. Even more importantly, he has made it very clear to the Houthis that those strikes will continue, unless and until the Houthis cease their attacks on U.S. forces and commercial shipping in the Red Sea.

And because the Houthis do not act alone but with the support of Iran, President Trump is also making it clear to Iran that it needs to stop aiding and abetting Houthi terror. So much of the violence and unrest in the Middle East is carried out by groups funded, armed, and sometimes trained by Iran, and any response to this violence must recognize Iran's role, as well as that of its proxies, like the Houthis.

I am grateful for the long-overdue action that President Trump is taking,

both here at home, on our border, and against Houthi terrorists abroad. It is this kind of decisive action that will encourage our enemies to think twice before menacing our Nation or threatening our interests.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, I move to proceed to executive session to consider Calendar No. 43.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is on agreeing to the motion. The motion was agreed to.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the nomination.

The assistant bill clerk read the nomination of Paul Lawrence, of Virginia, to be Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

CLOTURE MOTION

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, I send a cloture motion to the desk.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The cloture motion having been presented under rule XXII, the Chair directs the clerk to read the motion.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

CLOTURE MOTION

We, the undersigned Senators, in accordance with the provisions of rule XXII of the Standing Rules of the Senate, do hereby move to bring to a close debate on the nomination of Executive Calendar No. 43, Paul Lawrence, of Virginia, to be Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

John Thune, Mike Crapo, Roger Marshall, Shelley Moore Capito, Tommy Tuberville, Jim Justice, James Lankford, John Barrasso, Markwayne Mullin, Tim Sheehy, Mike Rounds, Todd Young, Kevin Cramer, Ted Budd, Roger F. Wicker, Katie Boyd Britt, David McCormick.

Mr. THUNE. I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

The Democratic leader is recognized.

THE ATLANTIC REPORT

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, yesterday, it was reported that classified war plans were leaked by the Secretary of Defense over unsecured text messages. These text exchanges, confirmed by the administration as authentic, included the Defense Secretary, the National Security Advisor, the CIA Director, the Vice President of the United States, and, unintentionally, a journalist with no security clearance.

For the Defense Secretary to coordinate war plans in such a haphazard and dangerous way puts our national security, our troops, and every single

American at risk. They intentionally put highly classified information on an unclassified device.

Every single Senator, Democrat and Republican and Independent, must demand accountability. I am calling for a bipartisan investigation in the Senate of this mishandling. I am also calling for the Defense IG to fully investigate. This is too serious not to know exactly what happened, why it happened, and how to prevent it from ever happening again.

The Senate and the executive branch have an obligation to fully investigate how this mishandling of sensitive national defense information was allowed to happen. Republicans must not just shrug their shoulders and call this incident "one of those learning moments"—no, no, no. This is a serious matter—a potential breach of classified intelligence, of imminent war plans against America's adversaries.

The Senate as well as all relevant authorities within the executive branch must investigate this incident fully. We need to know how this conversation was allowed to happen in the first place on an unsecured channel. We need to know the potential damage it could have caused our national security. We need to know how to prevent this from ever, ever happening again.

Any Senate Republican who was up in arms years ago about emails and unsecured servers should be outraged by the Secretary of Defense's carelessness. What if Russian intelligence gained access to this text thread and shared it with their Iranian allies? What if the Iranians had shared it with their allies the Houthis—a terrifying thought, putting American lives, the lives of our Armed Forces, in jeopardy.

At best—at best—Secretary Hegseth showed a colossal lack of judgment. At worst, he put America's national security and perhaps American troops in danger. Once he got caught, did Secretary Hegseth take responsibility for this fiasco? Did he exhibit any kind of leadership Americans expect from the man who may deploy our troops into battle, from the man who may send our family members, our friends, our neighbors into harm's way? Did he show how he would do things differently next time? No, he did not. Instead of accepting responsibility, outrageously, Secretary Hegseth attacked the journalist and called him deceitful. He took the "deny till you die" approach even though these messages were already authenticated by the National Security Council spokesperson.

Secretary Hegseth's refusal to accept responsibility yesterday was eerily similar to the way he conducted himself during the confirmation process. I fear how he will react to future moments of crisis. Again, when Pete Hegseth came before the Senate as a nominee, Democrats warned something like this could happen.

These people—Secretary Hegseth and so many others—are clearly not up for the job. We warned that confirming