

Mr. DURBIN. I announce that the Senator from Arizona (Mr. GALLEGRO) and the Senator from Vermont (Mr. SANDERS) are necessarily absent.

The result was announced—yeas 53, nays 45, as follows:

[Rollcall Vote No. 145 Ex.]

YEAS—53

Banks	Graham	Moreno
Barrasso	Grassley	Mullin
Blackburn	Hagerty	Murkowski
Boozman	Hawley	Paul
Britt	Hoeven	Ricketts
Budd	Husted	Risch
Capito	Hyde-Smith	Rounds
Cassidy	Johnson	Schmitt
Collins	Justice	Scott (FL)
Cornyn	Kennedy	Scott (SC)
Cotton	Lankford	Sheehy
Cramer	Lee	Sullivan
Crapo	Lummis	Thune
Cruz	Marshall	Tillis
Curtis	McConnell	Tuberville
Daines	McCormick	Wicker
Ernst	Moody	Young
Fischer	Moran	

NAYS—45

Alsobrooks	Hickenlooper	Reed
Baldwin	Hirono	Rosen
Bennet	Kaine	Schatz
Blumenthal	Kelly	Schiff
Blunt Rochester	Kim	Schumer
Booker	King	Shaheen
Cantwell	Klobuchar	Slotkin
Coons	Lujan	Smith
Cortez Masto	Markey	Van Hollen
Duckworth	Merkley	Warner
Durbin	Murphy	Warnock
Fetterman	Murray	Warren
Gillibrand	Ossoff	Welch
Hassan	Padilla	Whitehouse
Heinrich	Peters	Wyden

NOT VOTING—2

Gallego Sanders

The nomination was confirmed.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. RICKETTS). Under the previous order, the motion to reconsider is considered made and laid upon the table, and the President will be immediately notified of the Senate's action.

CLOTURE MOTION

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Pursuant to rule XXII, the Chair lays before the Senate the pending cloture motion, which the clerk will state.

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. 48, Aaron Reitz, of Texas, to be an Assistant Attorney General.

John Thune, Chuck Grassley, James Lankford, Tim Scott of South Carolina, Ashley B. Moody, Ted Budd, Tommy Tuberville, Jim Justice, Steve Daines, Ron Johnson, Josh Hawley, John R. Curtis, Tim Sheehy, Marsha Blackburn, David McCormick, Mike Lee, Rick Scott of Florida.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. By unanimous consent, the mandatory quorum call has been waived.

The question is, Is it the sense of the Senate that debate on the nomination of Aaron Reitz, of Texas, to be an Assistant Attorney General, shall be brought to a close?

The yeas and nays are mandatory under the rule.

The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk called the roll.

Mr. DURBIN. I announce that the Senator from Arizona (Mr. GALLEGRO) and the Senator from Vermont (Mr. SANDERS) are necessarily absent.

The yeas and nays resulted—yeas 53, nays 45, as follows:

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NOT VOTING—2

Gallego Sanders

The PRESIDING OFFICER. On this vote, the yeas are 53, the nays are 45. The motion is agreed to.

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the nomination.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the nomination of Aaron Reitz, of Texas, to be an Assistant Attorney General.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Connecticut.

VETERANS' ADMINISTRATION

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, I am here on the floor because we are in a moment of crisis for our veterans. It is a moment of profound historic challenge to the Veterans' Administration, and what we need from Members of this body—and I am encouraged by the response so far—is a call to action. We need a plan for accountability. That is our job—to hold responsible officials who have the obligation and opportunity to serve our veterans at a time when Elon Musk and Donald Trump are slashing and trashing our Veterans' Administration, with real-life impacts on the healthcare and disability benefits that are afforded to our Nation's heroes. It is a disgrace, it is shameful, it is unacceptable, and we need to muster the courage and fortitude on the part of this body to call it out and call it off.

That is why I am here, and it is only the beginning of a plan for accountability that will include others—my colleagues coming to the floor this week and next—as well as hearings that we will organize, shadow hearings—not necessarily formal hearings of the committee but hearings that we will have on aspects of this challenge that call for us to highlight the need for action.

We are going to come to the floor as well to seek unanimous consent on measures that will stop the degrading and decimation of the Veterans' Administration. It is illegal. It is immoral. It is immoral because we have a solemn responsibility—I don't need to make a long speech to tell my colleagues about this responsibility. We recognize it rhetorically all the time. I am here not to make a speech but to have an impact.

Next week, we are going to be voting on the next VA Deputy Secretary nominee, Paul Lawrence, and I just want to be really blunt. I voted for Doug Collins to be VA Secretary. It was a mistake because Secretary Collins has not been forthcoming with facts. He has not been transparent. He has not been responsive to us or to veterans and his employees who are asking questions about what the future of the VA will be given the firing of 80,000 members of the VA workforce, projected, in the next few months without a plan, without a strategy, without any forethought about what its real-life impact will be.

I voted for Doug Collins, and I regret it. I apologize for it. I am not making the same mistake with Paul Lawrence. There is no reason to believe he will be any different—not to mention any better—because he is the Deputy. I have respect for their service in the military, as I do for anyone who has worn the uniform, but I cannot—I cannot—vote for Paul Lawrence. I hope my colleagues will be as vigilant as I am seeking to be in voting against him. I will oppose his nomination.

Since taking office, this administration has shortsightedly shortchanged and systematically betrayed our veterans with policies that are against their interests. The goal here: save money so that tax cuts can be financed—tax cuts for the billionaires and millionaires that populate this administration and drive its policy.

They fired already 2,400 VA employees, many of them high performers. They have been promoted to provisional positions because they have been high performers. They are in those provisional positions for a time when they would become permanently in those positions, but because they are provisional, they have been fired; likewise, the younger members of the workforce who have just been recruited for positions that are open and where their talent is vitally needed. They are the future of our VA, younger VA employees who want to make a career of it, want to serve fellow veterans.

Thirty percent of all the fired workers are veterans because 30 percent of the workforce there is veterans. In fact, the newer employees may be veterans in a higher percentage. We are terminating the future workforce of the VA—again, simply to save money to finance tax cuts for Elon Musk and his fellow billionaires and the ultrawealthy.

Now, the workers who have been fired are in positions of healthcare and disability benefits processing. So what is at risk here is literally the everyday medical needs of our veterans. They are physicians, thousands of them; nurses; schedulers; counselors; the janitors who make sure the facilities are clean. The surgeon who goes into the operating suite can't do it alone; he needs his team. We are firing his team as well as the medical care providers.

On the disability benefits side, the increase in workforce that took place in recent years is to deal with the PACT Act increase in applicants for disability benefits, our veterans who have been exposed to burn pits and toxic chemicals. They are in need of screening, advising, consulting, as well as care and treatment.

We had bipartisan support for the PACT Act. The law is dead letter if it is implemented haphazardly, and we are betraying the goals and the trust we sought so proudly to espouse when we passed that PACT Act that recognized the sacrifice veterans are making—and their families—when they have cancer or hypertension or diabetes or any of the diseases that can result from exposure to those toxic chemicals.

VA Secretary Doug Collins has claimed falsely that there will be no impact to veterans' healthcare and benefits as a result of the administration's malign directive.

At the end of the Biden administration, the VA was delivering more benefits and more healthcare to more veterans than ever before as a result of the success of the PACT Act, for toxic-exposed veterans, and trust in the VA was at an alltime high.

We are risking the healthcare and benefits to veterans not just now but in the future because the credibility of the VA will be decimated, along with its workforce.

The cancellation of contracts eliminates another source of resources for our veterans. VA employees are the ones delivering healthcare. VA employees are the ones processing the PACT Act benefits.

I am disappointed and dismayed that so many of my Republican colleagues are seeking to minimize or diminish the human impacts of these cuts, firings, freezes—the cuts in funding, the freezes in hiring, the firings of employees who are there now—even at a time when there are 40,000 open positions. The VA is recruiting to fill them—3,000 surgeons, 6,000 nurses, thousands of counselors and schedulers—open positions. At the same

time that it is trying to recruit people to fill those positions, it is firing the workers who have similar or the same positions right now. It makes no sense.

But the human impacts are what trouble me the most. To my colleagues or anyone who claims there are no impacts, go host a veteran townhall in your State. Talk to the local VFW or American Legion or any of the other veterans service organizations. Go visit a local VA medical center or clinic or talk to employees who work there. When you meet face to face with your constituents, the immediate impacts of this administration's malign directives, whether it is out of malevolence or simply malign neglect, will become apparent, and either way, it is unacceptable.

I invite Secretary Collins to actually come to a townhall—make it Connecticut; make it anywhere—a townhall where you will meet face to face with a group of veterans who will tell you what these cuts, freezes, and firings mean in real life to the services that are supposed to be provided to them and will be denied because of these directives.

Let's be clear: The one behind this is Elon Musk. The one who is directing these cuts, freezes, and firings is an unappointed, unelected billionaire who has never contemplated wearing the uniform of this country, not to mention helping or serving our veterans in any way.

Elon Musk, you come to a townhall with veterans. You face them and tell them that they can't have the medical care they need and deserve to treat cancer or hypertension or any of the diseases or illnesses that result from exposure to toxic chemicals or burn pits.

I attended a veterans event last week. I talk to veterans all the time when I am back in Connecticut. I know firsthand what these cuts, freezes, and firings mean to them. The impacts caused by Musk and Trump—heart-breaking, heartless cuts and other damaging directives—are being felt in every corner of my State of Connecticut and every part of our country.

I just want to read a few sentences from *Sioux Falls Live*, a newspaper in South Dakota:

"Staffing cuts in the federal Department of Veterans Affairs are disproportionately affecting the veterans that the department preferentially hires," said members of a South Dakota veterans' advocacy group.

They worry the Trump administration's goal of cutting 80,000 VA employees will put more veterans out of work without a vetting process, and erode the quality of services provided.

Eugene Murphy, of Sioux Falls, is a past national commander of Disabled American Veterans and a Vietnam War vet who was paralyzed by gunshot wounds.

"How are you going to treat my brothers and sisters like that?" He said. "This is not right."

I hope those words will echo in this Chamber. It is not right. It is not right. These veterans in South Dakota have a

right to be angry, not to mention concerned and worried not just for themselves but veterans across the country.

We heard that a VA hospital in South Dakota is at risk of losing nearly 20 percent of its staff as a direct result of Trump and Musk's illegal and indiscriminate reduction-in-force plans.

And yet Secretary Collins continues to dutifully carry out the Musk plan with no buy-in, no consultation, no townhall with that.

Now let me read you an excerpt from an article in the *Spokesman-Review* that contained interviews with some of the VA employees that Collins illegally fired. VA employees like Ricky Noschese who worked at Lovell Federal Healthcare Center.

Here is what Ricky Noschese—I apologize for the mispronunciation—Ricky Noschese says about that Federal health center where he supervises a team of technicians in charge of keeping equipment running at the hospital—another corrective. He supervised them.

Lovell serves 90,000 patients a year, including veterans, Active-Duty servicemembers, and their dependents:

In less than a year on the job, Ricky had identified more than \$10 million in cost savings and had a long list of ideas to improve operations and complete long-delayed projects.

With the support of his boss, Noschese wrote a detailed four-page document to justify his employment. He described how he had helped save taxpayers more than \$10 million by using nearly two decades of experience as an HVAC technician to identify efficiencies and find cost-effective ways to extend the life of air-handling units.

He was head of a 12-person team responsible for ensuring clean water, fire safety, and other essentials required to maintain the hospital's accreditation.

Noschese and his bosses hoped he would be exempt from the mass firing, but after they sent the justification memo up the chain, they got a curt, simple, stark response: The document was too long. He should sum up his position in no more than three sentences.

Noschese was told a member of hospital leadership did that, but it made no difference. He had to turn in his badge and go home.

Now I tell you this story in some detail because it shows that efforts to eliminate waste when they are draconian and cruel and indiscriminate actually create more costs. Laying waste to the VA with across-the-board cuts without careful, selective consideration actually raises the expense, as it will in Noschese's job where there is nobody to do that excellent work based on his experience and expertise; and, ultimately, the costs will be higher as a result. But Elon Musk, apparently, doesn't care, nor does Doug Collins.

Take disabled veteran Megan Richelle Cole. She worked at Lovell, managing the supply of medications and ensured patients so that they would receive only the best drugs, not

expired or recalled drugs. When she was fired—simply on the basis of being a probationary employee—she was in the final stages of buying a house. Disabled veteran, doing work responsibly and well, about to buy a house—suddenly, she has no income.

Let me read a few more lines about her:

To make matters worse, the VA didn't provide her with a form required to file for unemployment benefits, and she had to withdraw from that home purchase. "Everything was going smoothly, like it was supposed to," she said, until the sudden termination left her feeling humiliated and lost. "Nobody knew anything. It was just heartbreaking." Cole's supervisors, again, tried to help her preserve her job to no avail.

Let's be clear: This administration's actions have a real lasting impact on veterans' care and benefits despite Secretary Collins' blatantly disingenuous claims that there have been none, there will be none. Elon Musk should know what those consequences will be, and Secretary Collins should be transparent with the administration and with us.

These heartbreaking and heartless cuts will destroy lives and livelihoods. VA Secretary Collins, Musk, and Trump are prioritizing a "fire first, analyze later" mindset and strategy at the expense of the very people they are supposed to serve—people who served and sacrificed for us: America's veterans. It is unconscionable. It is unwise and ineffective. It is immoral.

I will say this in closing: Nobody is claiming—certainly, I am not—that there isn't waste that we can eliminate, that fraud or abuse shouldn't be pursued. In fact, if this administration were serious about fraud and abuse and waste, they wouldn't have fired Mike Missal, the inspector general, whose service under both Democratic and Republican administrations has been exemplary.

He has been saluted and praised in Republican administrations, as well as Democratic, by my colleagues on the Republican side, as well as ours, but he was fired inexplicably, inconsistently with the goal of eliminating waste and fraud. It belies their claims and pretensions to want to eliminate abuse and fraud and waste to fire the watchdog who would call it out, investigate it, and refer it for prosecution as he has done saving tens of millions of dollars for taxpayers and benefits for veterans.

He has served both Republican and Democratic administrations, and there is nothing partisan about anything that I have said here, about the impact on veterans, the cruelty, and deeply heartbreaking consequences of these actions.

My Republican colleagues should join us when we begin next week with floor speeches and unanimous consent requests and the hearings—shadow hearings—that we will conduct and other actions that we will undertake in this call for accountability—a call for action.

Nothing partisan should deter them from joining us. This responsibility is

one that we share in this body to highlight and call out and call off the Musk-Trump disastrous and disgraceful cuts in benefits and healthcare for our veterans.

We are hearing from veterans, and again, I encourage my colleagues to hear more directly, immediately, personally from them. I invite Secretary Collins to join me in a townhall as soon as possible.

I invite him again, as I did in a letter recently, to appear on April 2 before a shadow hearing we will conduct in this Capitol. He can explain himself. He can tell me why I am wrong but, most important, he can answer to our Nation's veterans who deserve and need better from this administration.

America's veterans deserve nothing less than for every single Member in this body to call into question these damaging policies. They deserve nothing less than the gold standard in healthcare, as well as full and complete benefits of the PACT Act and in every other respect, the respect and responsibility that we have. To disrespect them is un-American.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. SHEEHY). The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

WAIVING QUORUM CALL

Mrs. BRITT. I ask unanimous consent to waive the mandatory quorum call with respect to the Faulkender nomination.

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

NOMINATION OF AARON REITZ

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, the Senate will soon vote on the nomination of Aaron Reitz, President Trump's nominee for Assistant Attorney General for the Office of Legal Policy.

Simply put, Mr. Reitz's nomination is a danger to the rule of law. At his confirmation hearing, I asked him a very simple question that should be a softball for any nominee seeking Senate confirmation.

When I asked him whether an elected official should be allowed to defy a Federal court order, Mr. Reitz said, "There is no hard and fast rule about whether in every instance a public official is bound by a court decision."

I was disgusted to hear these words come out of the mouth of a nominee aspiring to hold a key role at the Department of Justice.

Mr. Reitz's failure to unequivocally commit to following Federal court orders even prompted my colleague Senator KENNEDY to admonish Mr. Reitz, "Don't ever, ever, take the position that you're not going to follow the order of a federal court. Ever."

I couldn't agree more.

Despite that sage advice, Mr. Reitz repeated this equivocation in answers

to written questions, stating that, "Parties to litigation are bound by the lawful holdings of their respective court in most circumstances," but not all circumstances.

This administration has continued to undermine our system of checks and balances by pushing the boundaries of executive power, and, in turn, chipping away at the authority and legitimacy of the judicial branch.

Mr. Reitz has made clear his intent to aid the President in pursuing this agenda, regardless of whether it is in accordance with judicial orders.

But that is not my only concern with Aaron Reitz. He has attempted to hide his disturbing views on many topics, deleting approximately 4,000 social media posts. Nothing was off-limits in the posts the Judiciary Committee uncovered.

Reitz has condemned millions of Catholics and Christians who supported President Biden, writing that there was, "no excuse" for their vote.

He openly opposes the legality of same-sex marriage, calling the Obergefell decision, "anti-const[itutional]" and a "low point in SCOTUS history."

Mr. Reitz also has aligned himself with Matt Walsh, a self-proclaimed "theocratic fascist," who believes that, "the LGBT left indoctrinates and recruits children."

And despite the protections enshrined in the 14th Amendment, Mr. Reitz incorrectly wrote, "Friendly reminder that 'birthright citizenship' is not a thing."

Before Derek Chauvin was convicted of murdering George Floyd and despite the video footage of Chauvin kneeling on Mr. Floyd's neck for over 9 minutes, Mr. Reitz wrote, "No question in my mind that Chauvin is not guilty."

That is simply an offensive statement. Several Republican Members of the Senate rightfully spoke out about this horrific crime.

Even after Chauvin was convicted, Mr. Reitz called the jury's decision, "a bogus guilty verdict."

I guess it should come as no surprise that Mr. Reitz's disrespect for the finality of court orders is matched by his disrespect for the finality of a jury's verdict.

Mr. Reitz's online commentary demonstrates his penchant for fringe policy positions and extreme ideologies.

His failure to comply with Federal court orders should cause great concern for all of us who believe in our constitutional order, built on the foundation of three coequal branches of government.

Failing to unequivocally commit to following Federal court orders should be disqualifying for any nominee before this body.

Mr. Reitz is not fit for a role within the Department of Justice, particularly not one in which he will be charged with developing and implementing the Department's legal policy initiatives and vetting candidates for Federal judgeships.