

their sleeves and go to work again on behalf of our great country.

I am not a Hoosier, but my favorite movie, at least top five, is "Hoosiers," and I also had the opportunity to travel a couple of times with Senator BANKS in his great State and had the opportunity to welcome him to ours for something he enjoys as passionately as I do, and that is pheasant hunting.

But you have been a great addition already to the U.S. Senate. You are a great leader for Indiana, and we look forward to working with you.

So welcome, and thanks so much for serving.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Tennessee.

#### TENNESSEE STORMS

Mrs. BLACKBURN. Mr. President, in recent days, Middle and West Tennesseans have faced severe storms that have truly upended the lives of many of our communities and our citizens. Over 4 days, parts of our State saw more than 12 inches of rainfall. This has caused rising rivers, flash floods, and it has forced people out of their homes and their businesses.

At the same time, we have seen devastating tornadoes that have destroyed homes, businesses, and entire communities. In Selmer, TN, one tornado reached winds of 160 miles per hour, leaving a path of destruction. In the words of one survivor, the storms have left the town "unrecognizable."

As a result of this devastation, we have lost the lives of 10 Tennesseans. My heart goes out to every single one of their families as our State mourns this loss and as the communities gather to grieve the loss of their citizens.

Right now, Tennessee remains in a state of emergency. Over the weekend in Nashville, I visited the State Emergency Operations Center and received an update from the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency, FEMA, Tennessee Department of Transportation, Tennessee Highway Patrol, and other agencies on our State's emergency response. I also had the opportunity to visit with nonprofits that are meeting the needs on the ground of our citizens.

I do want to say thank you to all of the first responders and the volunteers and the emergency teams who are working around the clock to meet the needs of so many.

With water still rising in our State, power lines down, and many roads blocked completely, it is imperative that Tennesseans listen to local authorities and take every precaution to keep themselves safe. My team is working closely with State and Federal and local agencies, and we are ready to assist anyone who has endured these awful, awful storms.

In the face of any crisis, Tennesseans always come together. As we start to pick up the pieces from these storms, I know you will see that volunteer spirit alive and well in Tennessee.

#### TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

Mr. President, since Inauguration Day, President Trump has been hard at

work addressing one of the biggest threats that our Nation faces; that is, our \$36 trillion debt. Unlike the last administration, the Trump administration has been very vocal. They are choosing to save the taxpayer money, and I will have to say that so far, they have had a tremendous amount of success.

Now, I know some of my colleagues want to complain about DOGE, and they are not fond of the Department of Government Efficiency. I think it is worthy to note that DOGE so far has identified more than \$140 billion in potential savings for the American people. They have found this by going into each Department, working with the Secretaries of the different Departments, the heads of the Agencies, and they are reviewing unused Federal leases, Federal contracts, and they are saving billions. They are even able to find savings in some of these anti-American DEI programs.

Every American should be celebrating this effort that saves them money. Government has not one penny to spend until the taxpayer sends the money. Every dollar is taxpayer money; it is not Federal money. The Federal Government does not create this; it is taxpayer money. So taxpayers should be celebrating the elimination of waste, fraud, and abuse.

It is essential that we go through this process, that we right-size government, that we utilize technology, and that we ensure that this country remains free, independent, sovereign, and solvent. Yet, for weeks, we have seen our colleagues on the other side of the aisle choose to stand up and attack President Trump's efforts to rein in Federal spending and to make government transparent and accountable to the people. Again, it is an issue of, who is paying the bill for this? It is the American people. And if you are paying the bill, you want to know what it is that you are paying for.

This has been so interesting to me to see my colleagues on the other side of the aisle object to DOGE and object to saving Federal money, object to wise stewardship of Federal resources, and then to attack, attack, attack. Many of these attacks are disconnected from reality.

Recently, the Democrats have landed on a new line, and we have heard them repeat this over and over. Now their new line is that Republicans and the Trump administration are using DOGE to cut Social Security benefits for our Nation's seniors. Well, nothing could be further from the truth. It is Republicans and President Trump that are seeking to save—to save—Social Security.

Last month in this very Chamber, the Senate Democratic leader claimed that "the goal of Trump and Elon Musk is to destroy Social Security from within." Well, nothing could be further from the truth.

To help our Democrat colleagues to understand this issue, I have pulled to-

gether a fact sheet that makes one thing clear: While eliminating wasteful spending, improper payments, and fraud in the system, Republicans are protecting Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid for the beneficiaries for which it is intended.

See, our colleagues across the aisle have this completely backward, and they have been pushing these talking points off to the mainstream media, to some of the leftists that are out protesting.

If you accept the status quo on Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security, basically what you are saying is: Hey, I am OK if you waste money. I am OK if you make improper payments. I am OK if you allow fraud and deception. I am OK if you let the trust fund run dry. I am OK if you cut benefits.

In essence, that is what they are saying because they are accepting the status quo.

But repeatedly we remind people that it is Republicans who are trying to save Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid because we are rooting out waste, fraud, abuse, and making certain those benefits should go to the people who deserve them.

But this shouldn't come as a surprise to anybody. We have been saying: Let's preserve these programs, and let's make them stronger. Let's make certain that scammers and fraudsters don't have access to taxpayer money.

Just last month, the President said: I'm not going to touch Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid. Now, we're going to get fraud out of there. . . . Everybody wants us to get the fraud out, and therefore you'll make it better.

That is exactly what we are doing. By eliminating waste and fraud, the administration is strengthening these essential programs.

For example, DOGE confirmed that 1.3 million individuals who secured fraudulent Social Security numbers also received Medicare benefits. That is stealing money from individuals who are entitled, rightfully, to the benefits.

So if you have 1.3 million individuals who have fraudulent Social Security numbers and they have also signed up for Medicare, they should be removed from the program because they are not entitled to be on that program.

DOGE also sifted out 10 million cases where Social Security number holders were over the age of 120. Now, this should raise alarms. I don't know how many—if any—Americans are 120 years of age or older, but we do know that there are 10 million cases where there are Social Security number holders that are over 120 years old.

The right thing to do is to find out. If you have people who say they are 150, 165, 200 years, even one that is listed as 300 years old, we need to be investigating this and find out who is getting the check and who is cashing that check because that person is not entitled to that check—which, by the way, is paid with taxpayer money.

When I talk with Tennesseans, they want to make certain that people who

deserve the benefits are getting the benefits and that people who are scammers and liars and fraudsters and are ripping off the Federal Government, that they get prosecuted for the way they are ripping off the Federal Government.

Now, President Trump is determined to strengthen these programs, and Senate Republicans have promised to deliver relief to senior citizens by cutting taxes on Social Security benefits.

Today, nearly 56 percent of retirees pay taxes on their Social Security benefits as inflation pushes seniors' benefits into higher and higher income brackets. This is inexcusable because people have paid into that.

We had a Lieutenant Governor in Tennessee at one point. He would sum this up by saying: No one should ever be paying taxes on taxes.

People have paid into Social Security, and then, as they retire, they are going to get this money back.

And for the past few years, I have worked on legislation called the RETIREES FIRST Act. It would address this problem by lowering the tax burden on Social Security benefits for seniors by raising the provisional income threshold. Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid are essential programs for millions of Tennesseans.

It is appropriate that we exempt out seniors from paying income tax on those Social Security benefits. It is appropriate that we make certain that these programs are there for the beneficiaries for which they are intended. And it is appropriate that we ask our colleagues across the aisle to join us in making certain these programs are strengthened, not weakened.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Vermont.

#### AFGHANISTAN

Mr. WELCH. Mr. President, it has been 3½ years since August 30, 2021, when the last American forces withdrew from Afghanistan.

The withdrawal was, by any objective measure, a total fiasco. However, the Biden administration does deserve some credit for evacuating at least 120,000 Afghans in those chaotic days after the Taliban overran Kabul. It was one of the largest—if not the largest—humanitarian airlifts in history. Nevertheless, hundreds of thousands of Afghans and their families remain stranded in Afghanistan and other countries, especially Pakistan.

Many of these people had worked for our government or participated in programs funded by the United States, in women's rights, in education, judicial and economic reform, in counter-narcotics, and many other areas.

These refugees worked with and for our government, our soldiers, our diplomats, and our intelligence officers. Some of these refugees have made it safely to the United States, thanks to the determined persistence of humanitarian organizations, including one in Vermont, the Vermont Afghan Alli-

ance, and the outstanding work of Molly Gray and her staff.

These organizations have advocated for refugees ceaselessly. They have not forgotten what those refugees did for our soldiers in Afghanistan. And these organizations have helped arrange for the practical needs that refugees face—housing, employment, and other social services—upon their arrival in the United States.

I so appreciate the work of the Vermont Afghan Alliance and the many other refugee assistance organizations around the country, including in your State, Mr. President. They have been indispensable in helping us meet our obligation to support the Afghans who helped our soldiers. That is our obligation.

But, ultimately, the resettlement is the responsibility of the Federal Government. In the end, the Biden administration did fall short in its promises to the Afghan refugee population. This population of refugees exists, I state again, because of their work with and for our government, for our soldiers, for our diplomats, and our intelligence officers. We have abandoned our partners in their time of need.

One of the things, the screening process for these refugees became hopelessly bureaucratic, opaque, and fraught with inexplicable delays, including the processing of long-delayed special immigrant visas for Afghans who supported the U.S. mission. Many of them were interpreters. Congress failed by not providing the necessary funds and authority to streamline the resettlement process.

And then, regrettably, in one of President Trump's first Executive orders, signed on January 20, he made the situation exponentially worse by suspending admission to the United States of Afghan refugees. And now Pakistan has threatened to deport them back to Afghanistan where many of them would face the risk of arrest and, literally, execution.

Today, thousands of Afghan refugees are facing total abandonment by the U.S. Government, and this is despite the fact that they completed or they have nearly completed the laborious and time-consuming process of obtaining the necessary security and medical clearances for themselves and their families.

I would like to share one example. For over a year, my office has tried to help an Afghan man, now in Vermont, who worked at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. This man is working to support fellow Afghans in finding employment for Afghans in Vermont. This man's father served as a Deputy Minister of Justice supporting U.S. rule of law projects.

Since 2021, the father and his family have been hiding in a third country, knowing they would face arrest and persecution if they are deported back to Afghanistan. Then, in December 2024, after years of waiting, they were finally cleared to fly to the United

States. He thought his father was coming home. The son had already signed the lease for an apartment and was paying the rent for this to happen. But since January 20, as a result of the President's order, the father and his family have remained in hiding, preparing for the worst as the son is continuing to pay rent on an apartment that was to be available for his father.

You know, this is really shameful. These are folks who were there for us and our soldiers and our diplomats and our intelligence officers. And the situation for this family is typical of the situation for so many Afghan families who served us.

I have long believed that the U.S. invasion and occupation of Afghanistan was a terrible mistake. Tracking down Osama Bin Laden and the other members of al-Qaida responsible for the September 11 terrorist attacks was justifiable and was necessary. But spending literally hundreds of billions of dollars to try to transform a country of warring clans, led by corrupt and ruthless warlords with no history of democracy, was doomed to fail. Yet we did do that.

And millions of Afghans believed in us, and they shared our vision for that country. And many of them served us, acting as interpreters for the U.S. military or faithfully serving our intelligence Agencies. And these men, some of whom now live in Vermont, risked their lives for us, something that our soldiers take very seriously and have expressed immense gratitude for. Thousands were rushed to the airport in the first frantic days of the evacuation. When they got there—and some who got out—they were told to leave their wives and their children behind and that their families would join them in the United States within 1 year.

This is an obligation we have to those folks who, as a result of the collapse in Kabul, were in serious physical jeopardy. It now is 3½ years later, and I am not aware of a single evacuation or reunification of family members of these men. They are here or elsewhere, and their families are still in Afghanistan.

These refugees, as I stated and will state again because it is the heart of the matter and the heart of the obligation, they worked with our government, they worked with our soldiers, our diplomats, and our intelligence officers, and we have abandoned our partners when they need us.

Some are still waiting on the SIV processing, others on their green cards, and most on the broken promise of reunification. This is really shameful.

These men continue to stand with the United States, working in our communities, paying taxes, and growing our economy. We owe it to them, the Afghans who made it here, and to our honor to bring their families to join them.

Yet there are alarming reports that President Trump plans to ban admission to the United States for citizens of