

new nuclear arms race with Russia and China, and new nuclear testing. All of this would make the world a more dangerous place and increase the risk of nuclear conflict.

If Trump asks Hegseth if he should do these dangerous things, the answer will be yes and yes and yes. That is where we are going to be.

Now, there is some possible good news, too. Trump, not surprisingly, gets along well with Russian President Putin. They might end the war in Ukraine. If they do, that could open up a path to negotiate a treaty, to follow a New START.

And as President Trump said just this week: We want to see if we can denuclearize. And I think it's very possible. And I can tell you that President Putin, if he wants to do it, we should take him up on it.

We should see. We should move in that direction.

As for Mr. Hegseth, the last thing President Trump needs is a yes-man for Secretary of Defense.

I will just add one final issue. As a national security threat, climate change, which the Pentagon and which the Joint Chiefs of Staff have said over and over and over again is a threat multiplier to our military and our ability to protect the world—it is a threat multiplier. Having a President who is a climate denier, coupled with the Secretary of Defense who is a climate denier, just ignores the reality of the world as it is unfolding in this climate era.

The whole defense budget is \$900 billion. Hurricanes Milton and Helene in October and November, combined with the fires in Los Angeles right now, \$500 billion of damage in three storms. That is half the entire defense budget for our country.

We can't have a Secretary of Defense who doesn't believe that climate change is a threat multiplier to our military and to the security of the planet. We need someone there who can speak truth to power to the President of the United States.

So I can't more strongly recommend a "no" vote on the floor of the Senate on this nomination. He is unqualified. His confirmation could be very dangerous to our Nation. We need military personnel who respects the Secretary of Defense. We will have none of that with Pete Hegseth.

So I very, very strongly recommend to this body that we vote no and tell the President to come back with someone who is worthy of this most important of all positions in his Cabinet.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

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

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

The Senator from Maryland.

TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

Mr. VAN HOLLEN. Mr. President, I come to the floor this afternoon to speak to some of the actions that President Trump has taken just in his first 3 to 4 days and speak to the nomination of Pete Hegseth as Secretary of Defense.

President Trump was sworn in at noon on Monday just down the hall a bit. As a candidate, he ran promising to help working men and women throughout the country. He talked about addressing their kitchen table issues. So let's take a quick look at some of the big actions that have been taken just in the last 4 days.

One very serious action taken was pardoning the men and women who were convicted of bludgeoning and assaulting police officers in this Capitol on January 6, 2021. For those of us who were here that day, we will never forget, because after losing that election, Donald Trump unleashed rioters on Capitol Hill, rampaging throughout the "citadel of democracy," clubbing police officers with baseball bats, and crushing them between doors.

Mr. President, 140 law enforcement officers from the Capitol Police and the Washington, DC, Metropolitan Police were injured that day. I remember their heroism, and I remember those who died in the days following those attacks.

To pardon people who were convicted of assaulting and bloodying and bludgeoning police officers demonstrates contempt for the men and women who help protect us every day—not just here in the Capitol but men and women in law enforcement throughout the country.

As the Fraternal Order of Police and the International Association of Police Chiefs have said, "Allowing those convicted of these crimes to be released early diminishes accountability and devalues the sacrifices made by courageous law enforcement officers and their families." They go on to say that this leniency "sends a dangerous message that the consequences of attacking law enforcement are not severe, potentially emboldening others to commit similar acts of violence."

The simple result of this is to send a terrible message that if you assault police officers in the name of Donald Trump, he will be there to pardon you.

Let's look at some of the other actions he has taken just in these first days back in the White House.

He issued an Executive order that rolls back initiatives to help reduce the costs of prescription drugs for more Americans.

He has been laying the groundwork here on Capitol Hill for a huge new tax cut that will disproportionately benefit the superwealthy and the biggest corporations at the expense of other Americans.

We heard him speak at that podium during his swearing-in of the golden age, and sitting right behind him were

the billionaire titans from the tech industry. He is going to deliver a golden age—an even more golden age for those who are already very wealthy and for the biggest corporations, but it is not going to trickle down and help others. We know that because we have seen this movie before.

We saw Trump tax cuts 1.0. They promised that investments in businesses would go up, the idea being that if you provide tax cuts to big corporations, they will take the additional savings and they will invest it in their businesses. Well, that has been looked at, and that didn't happen. What did go up were stock buybacks engaged in by the corporations to further benefit their shareholders, many of them already very wealthy people.

They promised that those savings would be used by corporations to increase wages. In fact, they said that on average, it would be \$4,000 a worker. It just didn't happen. What went up were CEO bonuses.

What else went up was the deficit and the debt. The claim that these would somehow pay for themselves was just once again a pure falsehood disproved by reality.

So here we are embarking on 2.0, Trump tax cuts 2.0—same story unfolding, although now we already hear our colleagues talking about how everybody else in America and many other millions of Americans are going to have to pay for the tax cuts for the folks at the very top.

Just take a look at some of the proposals made by the chairman of the House Budget Committee, a Republican Member of Congress, talking about trillions of cuts in things like Medicaid—a very important health program that helps kids with disabilities, helps lower income individuals, helps seniors in nursing homes; talking about cutting programs in—food and nutrition programs.

So everyone seems to be all in with President Trump on the idea of another round of tax cuts for the very rich, but they are going to ask everybody else in the country to pay for it.

Let's look at something else the President did in his first 3 or 4 days. He issued an executive order called schedule F. What is schedule F? In a nutshell, schedule F is an attempt to convert our merit-based civil service into a political cronyism-based civil service.

Since the late 1800s and the Pendleton Act, we have had a civil service based on merit. Civil servants—people who work for the Federal Government in regular, ongoing positions—have to pass a test, show that they are qualified, that they are experienced, that they have the know-how. It is what you know, not who you know.

What President Trump and his team are proposing in schedule F is to convert that merit-based system into a politics-based system where you have a political litmus test not for competence but for your politics.

I should point out that of course Presidents are entitled to lots of people in their administration as political appointments. In fact, there are about 4,000 political appointments in our current system. Obviously, you have the Secretaries of various Departments—I am going to talk about one of those in a minute—but you have the Deputy Secretaries, and you have many Assistant Secretaries.

So you have 4,000 political appointments already available to be made by President Trump, but that is not enough, apparently. They are talking about converting approximately another about 16,000 additional positions that are currently merit-based systems, based on your qualifications, to political cronyism-based systems.

That is a recipe for corruption. It is a recipe for reducing the quality of services to the American people from coast to coast. You do not want somebody who is chosen just because of who they know and what their politics are to be the people doing your food inspection or working on policy on all sorts of important things that impact the American people.

A lot of those positions will be at the Department of Defense, so I want to turn now to the nomination of Pete Hegseth to be the Secretary of Defense.

NOMINATION OF PETER HEGSETH

Now, I mentioned that Presidents have the flexibility to appoint many political folks to positions in the U.S. Government, but for the top ones—for the Secretary of Defense, for example—the Founders of this country—those who wrote the Constitution—put a little bit of check and balance in that. They said the Senate has the right to advise and consent on those very top positions because those are incredibly consequential decisions, and we want people of good judgment and good character in those positions. So that is what the Senate is engaged in right now, is a debate under the advice and consent clause of the U.S. Constitution.

I think we all recognize that we are here at a very perilous moment in the world. We have Putin's war of aggression against Ukraine. Our allies are watching closely to know whether we are going to stand with the people of Ukraine. Other people are watching too. President Xi of China has one eye on what is happening in Ukraine and he has another eye on Taiwan. We have huge challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. We have a very combustible Middle East, with the malign actions Iran continues to take. We have a very fragile cease-fire in Gaza, with the return of hostages. If you look around the world, it is in a very, very sensitive and explosive moment.

We should keep that in mind as we decide whether we are going to provide advice and consent to Pete Hegseth for Secretary of Defense—somebody who will be overseeing 3.4 million servicemembers and employees; someone who will be second to the President in mak-

ing decisions on the operation of our nuclear forces; someone who will oversee what represents over half of the entire discretionary budget of the United States of America—\$850 billion.

So in this moment, it is especially important that we look at his qualifications because what we don't want is somebody who is untested and incompetent and someone of low character running the Defense Department in the highest position of that Department. Yet, as we have heard from ample testimony, that is exactly what will happen if Pete Hegseth is confirmed to be Secretary of Defense.

As our colleague, Senator REED of Rhode Island, the ranking member of the Senate Armed Services Committee and someone who served in the 82nd Airborne, has said, servicemembers with Mr. Hegseth's record would be disqualified not just from the highest position of the Defense Department but any position in the military.

This Secretary of Defense would be overseeing all of those men and women whom we ask to uphold the highest tradition and values of our country, and yet the person who would be in charge, if confirmed, would be somebody who would be disqualified from being one of them. That is a terrible message to send.

Let's take a look at the record on management as well as the personal conduct of the person President Trump has nominated to be head of the Defense Department, Mr. Hegseth.

He led two veterans organizations and, based on the testimony, in both cases engaged in financial mismanagement and wasteful spending. When managing a budget of under \$10 million, he repeatedly overspent until the organization was on the edge of bankruptcy.

In his next leadership role, he continued to overspend, including on social events and excessive drinking. His successor in that position was told:

Among the staff, the disgust for Pete was pretty high. Most veterans do not think he represents them nor their highest standard of excellence.

He was told that funds had been used to fund Mr. Hegseth's partying and drinking, as well as his use of work events to "hook up with women on the road."

Mr. Hegseth has a disturbing history of sexual harassment. In 2017, he was credibly accused of raping a woman in a California hotel room. We learned yesterday that Mr. Hegseth paid the woman \$50,000 to prevent her from talking about the assault. We also know that he failed to disclose that information to the transition team, attempting to keep it secret.

We can understand why he didn't want the American people and the Senate to know that.

So I really wonder how the Senate could possibly confirm Mr. Hegseth for an entry-level security clearance, let alone the enormous responsibility of leading the Department of Defense and the men and women who serve there.

Let's take a look at another aspect of Mr. Hegseth's record, because whoever is Secretary of Defense has to understand that they represent the great American military—every single person in it, regardless of background, regardless of religion, regardless of race, regardless of sexual orientation. That is their job. They all bleed red. They are all out there fighting for the United States of America. They have all sworn to defend our country.

And, yet, if you look at his statements, it is very clear that he believes military service is for some, but not all, Americans who want to serve. His remarks are centered on disparaging women, people in the LGBT community, and Muslim Americans.

Let's look at the women serving in the military. He has said:

I'm straight up just saying we should not have women in combat roles.

Now, I watched some of the hearing. I saw him try to wheedle out of statements that he had made very clearly, like this one I just read. And, frankly, nobody should be fooled by this eleventh hour conversion as he seeks to be confirmed by the U.S. Senate. He said what he said, and it was actually part of a pattern when it came to women serving in the military.

In his 2024 book called "The War on Warriors," Mr. Hegseth criticized both the don't ask, don't tell, as well as its repeal, writing that these policies are just part of a social justice agenda.

I would say to those men and women who are serving in our military who have been condemned and criticized by Mr. Hegseth, we all thank you for your service. Most of us thank you for your service.

In his 2020 book, "American Crusade," Mr. Hegseth portrays contemporary cultural and political conflicts in the United States. He portrays them as part of the Crusades—the Crusades—and frames "Islamism" and Muslim immigration as existential threats to American society.

Again, we have a military comprised of people of all different faiths. They have all sworn an oath to defend this country, and we should not have a Secretary of Defense that maligns a big group based on their faith and engages in that kind of bigotry.

And yet, in 2015, a former employee reported that Hegseth chanted: "Kill all Muslims." In a "drunk and violent manner" he said that.

So these are just some examples of the words and conduct of the person that we are considering to be Secretary of Defense for all the men and women who serve in our Armed Forces and in the Pentagon. And we should not want any member of our military to be fearful of the person who is leading them. And, yet, if you are falling into one of these groups—or even if you are not—you should be very scared about what he has said, maligning certain Americans and trying to pit people against each other based on faith, based on gender, based on sexual orientation.