

whether your State voted for him or not.

This is an opportunity to say we are a separate and coequal branch of government and if you are a Republican, say: Listen, I support this President, but I don't support this nominee because I don't want measles or mumps or rubella or polio to make a comeback.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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 President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

NOMINATION OF PETER HEGSETH

Mr. KAINE. Mr. President, I rise to talk about the pending matter of the Pete Hegseth nomination to be Secretary of Defense.

Before I get into the bulk of my comments, I want to just state my own record in terms of votes for the Secretary of Defense as a member of the Armed Services Committee. This administration is the fourth Presidential administration I have been part of. I was elected with the second Obama administration, then served in the first Trump administration, then the Biden administration, and now a second Trump administration. As to my track record as an Armed Services Committee member and as a Member of this body, I voted for every Secretary of Defense nomination before the body.

In focusing on the Trump nominees, President Trump nominated General Mattis to be Secretary of Defense. I voted for him in committee. I voted for him on the floor, and he received a 98-to-1 vote with 1 abstention when he was before us in 2017. Secretary Mattis served during a portion of President Trump's term and then stepped down, and President Trump nominated Mark Esper, who had been the Secretary of the Army, to succeed General Mattis.

A Trump administration nominee paid me the honor of asking if I would introduce him before the Armed Services Committee, and I did. He is a Virginian. I had worked with Secretary Esper when he was the Army Secretary on military housing issues. He had been responsive and professional. So I said: Sure. You are President Trump's nominee, but I am going to introduce you before the committee.

Secretary Esper was approved in the committee—I think unanimously—and the vote on the floor for Secretary Esper was 90-8-2.

I bring that up just to say it is not my desire or norm to stand on the floor and speak in opposition to a nominee for Secretary of Defense or to speak in opposition to a nominee by President Trump for Secretary of Defense.

I spoke the other day—probably 2 days ago—here about why I am opposing Pete Hegseth to be Secretary of De-

fense. What I want to focus on today is his claim. I know my colleagues have been on the floor all day long explaining their own reasons for their opposition to Pete Hegseth, but I want to just really drill down on what Pete Hegseth is saying about the allegations that folks are making against him.

This was pretty apparent in the committee hearing a week ago Tuesday, and it has been consistent since. It was most clear in a recitation that he had back and forth with Senator KELLY of Arizona.

Senator KELLY asked him: I am just going to ask you really simple questions. Here is an event that someone says you participated in; true or false?

Again and again and again, what Pete Hegseth said was "anonymous smears." He didn't say "false" because if you say "false" to something that you have done, it could verge on perjury. He didn't say "true" because if you say "true" to these kinds of allegations, it could be disqualifying.

So it was a very interesting litany where, again and again and again, Senator KELLY said: Here is an event; true or false?

"Anonymous smears."

"Anonymous smears" was a very, very sophisticated way of not answering the question. Yet, even as I examined Pete Hegseth about marital infidelity and about a sexual assault allegation against him that led him to make a payout to the complainant, about allegations of spousal abuse, again and again, what he said was "anonymous smears."

So what I want to do during my time today, since I have already laid out sort of my bill of particulars about why I am not supporting his nomination, I want to focus on this: The claims that have been made against Pete Hegseth are not anonymous, and they are not smears. They are not anonymous, and they are not smears.

Let me start with "not anonymous."

To begin with, many of the claims are claims that have been admitted by Pete Hegseth. So let's start with the man himself. He has admitted serial infidelity in both of his first two marriages. He told me at the committee hearing that he took an oath of fidelity to his wife, but he admitted to serial infidelity. That is not an irrelevant factor when we are analyzing whether someone who takes an oath to become Secretary of Defense is able to carry out that oath.

Pete Hegseth admitted as recently as yesterday that he made a payout to somebody who charged him with a sexual assault. There was an incident in Monterey in September of 2017 that led to a criminal sexual assault complaint and a criminal investigation. It did not lead to criminal charges, but it did lead to a civil charge and a settlement and a payout and a nondisclosure agreement. He has admitted to all of that. He claims it was a consensual event, and the victim claims it was a sexual assault, but as to the fact of the inter-

action and the fact that it was both cheating on an existing wife and also on the mother of a newborn child, he has admitted to all of that. It is not an anonymous claim when Pete Hegseth has admitted to this.

Second, it is not anonymous what Pete Hegseth's mother wrote to him. Pete Hegseth was in the middle of a very contentious divorce from his second wife, Samantha, in 2018, and he received a most extraordinary email from his mother. This is not anonymous, and I want to read the email. It is an extraordinary bit of tough love from a mom to a son.

Son, I have tried to keep quiet about your character and behavior, but after listening to the way you made Samantha feel today, I cannot stay silent. And as a woman and your mother I feel I must speak out.

You are an abuser of women—that is the ugly truth and I have no respect for any man that belittles, lies, cheats, sleeps around, and uses women for his own power and ego. You are that man (and have been for years) and as your mother, it pains me and embarrasses me to say that, but it is the sad, sad truth.

I am not a saint, far from it, so don't throw that in my face, but your abuse over the years to women (dishonesty, sleeping around, betrayal, debasing, belittling) needs to be called out.

Sam is a good mother and a good person (under the circumstances that you created) and I know deep down you know that. For you to try to label her as "unstable" for your own advantage is despicable and abusive. Is there any sense of decency left in you? She did not ask for or deserve any of what has come to her by your hand. Neither did Meredith.

Meredith was the first wife.

I know you think this is one big competition and that we have taken her side . . . bunk. . . . We are on the side of good and that is not you. (Go ahead and call me self-righteous, I don't care.) Don't you dare run to her and cry foul that we shared with us. . . . That's what babies do. It's time for someone—

Someone—

(I wish it was a strong man) to stand up to your abusive behavior and call it out, especially against women.

We still love you, but we are broken by your behavior and lack of character. I don't want to write emails like this and never thought I would. If it damages our relationship further, then so be it, but at least I have said my piece.

And yes, we are praying for you (and you don't deserve to know how we are praying, so skip the snarky reply).

I don't want an answer to this . . . I don't want to debate with you. You twist and abuse everything I say anyway. But . . . on behalf of all the women (and I know it's many) you have abused in some way, I say . . . get some help and take an honest look at yourself . . . Mom.

This is not an anonymous smear. I know a little bit about a mother's love. I know a little bit about a mother's tough love. This is not an anonymous smear, but it is an extraordinary, painful, candid rebuke.

Why do I have this letter? This is not a letter that anyone in this body had. This is a letter that appeared in a newspaper about a month ago. The only people who would have had this email are family, the people closest in

the world to Pete Hegseth. No one else would have seen this. No one else would have had it. No one else could have read it on the floor of the Senate unless someone very close to Pete Hegseth—a member of his immediate family—decided years after it was written that a man nominated to be Secretary of Defense whose character had led his own mother to write this letter—that this is a fact that should be put before the public in analyzing the character and qualifications of this individual—not anonymous.

Pete Hegseth's former sister-in-law Danielle Hegseth, who had been married to his brother Nathaniel, submitted an affidavit that is in the Senate records, which is available to all of my colleagues, and all have read this affidavit or made a decision that they didn't want to read it, but it is available to all of us.

The affidavit that Danielle has written about the treatment that was referred to by his mother in this letter is completely consistent with what the mother says. The mother wrote this. It is now public. Danielle has signed an affidavit about it. It is now public, and it is completely consistent with what the mother said. Danielle Hegseth is not anonymous.

There is a whistleblower report that is available to all Senate Members. I read it 10 days ago. It is for Members only, but it is available to all hundred of us, and I hope all of my colleagues have read it. It would be a huge mistake to vote on this nomination not having read that whistleblower report.

What does the whistleblower report involve? It is anything but anonymous. It is a report that was generated years ago when Pete Hegseth was the leader of an organization called Concerned Veterans for America. It wasn't created for this hearing. It wasn't created because of a Secretary of Defense nomination. It was created by disgruntled employees in an organization that Pete Hegseth was leading. It is a seven-page, single-spaced whistleblower report.

Again, I have to say it is anything but anonymous. In fact, it mentions, by my count, 36 names of individuals connected with Concerned Veterans for America and multiple events of improper behavior by Pete Hegseth as the leader: being at work events impaired by alcohol, creating a toxic work culture that led to the sexual harassment of women employees, repeated instances of unprofessional behavior, and fiscal mismanagement of the organization.

I know that Pete Hegseth calls that "anonymous smears." But when you read this 6-page document—and, again, I just want to say to any public watching this: The Senators in this body have all had access to it. So if you see somebody like Pete Hegseth saying it is an "anonymous smear"—no, the Members of this body have all had access to Danielle Hegseth's affidavit, to Pete Hegseth's admissions, to the mother's letters, and to a whistle-

blower report with 36 names in it attesting to a variety of unprofessional behaviors. That document was provided to Mr. Hegseth and his attorney, and they submitted a response.

But by my read of the document, they could not get a single individual whose name is mentioned to challenge or retract any of the statements that are made in the document. This is anything but anonymous.

Again, all Members have seen this. All Members have had access to it. These are not anonymous claims. They are on-the-record claims by people very close to this man, including in a most unusual way, his own mother.

Now, I will acknowledge this: There are some who have come forward who are anonymous. I have to acknowledge that. They are anonymous because they are afraid.

I have had extensive conversations with a close personal friend of the second wife who has told me things that are directly supportive of the public materials contained in the mother's letter and in the Danielle Hegseth affidavit.

I don't know that he knows Danielle, but what he told me is completely consistent with Danielle Hegseth's allegations that Pete Hegseth was abusive to his second wife. But this individual is afraid to come forward and have his name mentioned because he believes that, if his name was mentioned, he would be subject to abuse and potentially violence.

I have spoken to a close friend of Jane Doe, the complainant in the sexual assault allegation and the sexual assault civil complaint and settlement, with direct knowledge of this. She has told me a number of things that confirm the public reporting about the sexual assault allegation, but she is afraid, for her own physical safety, to come forward.

And I have spoken to one of the individuals whose name is mentioned, among the 36 whose names are mentioned, in the whistleblower report, who participated in putting it together years ago, who was able to give some texture and context to this report that all Members have had access to. She expressed a willingness to speak to the FBI about it. She doesn't want to come forward publicly because she is afraid, but she expressed a willingness. Mr. President, get this: She expressed a willingness weeks ago to talk to the FBI about the whistleblower report, which they had.

And as of 2 hours ago, the FBI has not been in contact with a single individual whose name is mentioned in this whistleblower report.

Now, we already know that the FBI, in their initial investigation, did not reach out to either of the wives—wife one and wife two. They didn't reach out.

I haven't seen the FBI report. I am not allowed to see it. It is only accessible by our committee chair and ranking. But I asked Senator REED: Was

there any reference to it? Was there any evidence that either of the first wives were interviewed?

I mean, you had the letter from the mother. Why wouldn't you go talk to the wives about the behavior? The FBI didn't talk to the first or second wife. They had to go back and do an interview, after we brought that up that they hadn't even done it. They did a cursory interview about Mr. Hegseth's drinking but didn't ask him about the abuse allegations.

But as of 2 hours ago, the FBI still has not reached out to a single person whose name is contained as someone with knowledge about the whistleblower report and the activities of Mr. Hegseth when he was the CEO or the lead executive of Concerned Veterans for America.

I am saddened that a friend of wife two, that a friend of Jane Doe, that somebody who is a whistleblower is so physically afraid to come forward and say what they know because of fears of violence against them. That makes me sad. But I will stake my reputation on this: What they have told me is a direct match and an affirmation of the material contained in the public accounts from the mother, from Pete Hegseth's own admissions, from the sexual assault facts that we know, and from the Danielle Hegseth affidavit.

I have taken some time to go over this to show that the material that this body is considering is not anonymous, and now I want to turn to the second. It is not a smear.

The Pete Hegseth allegation seems to be that this is all created at the last minute to try to derail him from being Secretary of Defense, and, in that way, it is a smear. It wouldn't be further from the truth.

The sexual assault claim happened years ago. It was not created to try to stop Pete.

The whistleblower report was written more than a decade ago. It was not written to stop Pete Hegseth from being Secretary of Defense.

Pete Hegseth has admitted to serial infidelity years ago. Those allegations were not brought up to stop Pete Hegseth from being Secretary of Defense.

And, finally, this letter from Pete Hegseth's mother, it was sent years ago, and it wasn't sent to stop Pete Hegseth from being Secretary of Defense. It was sent, as his own mother has recently stated in media interviews, as a message of love. This painful, painful email was sent to her son as a message of love.

None of this material was a smear. None of this material was created once Pete Hegseth was nominated to be Secretary of Defense to try to stop him. This material has been around for many, many years and was created contemporaneously with abuse that he was visiting upon others because people were trying to stop him. They were trying to stop him as a message of love. They were praying for him. They

were encouraging him to look in the mirror and improve. Yet he says this is all a smear.

That is not the case. They are not smears. They are clear and consistent and contemporaneous reports of the behavior, judgment, impulse control, and character of this nominee for the most important Cabinet position that any President will forward to the U.S. Senate.

I am going to conclude and just say this: We can do better. As a nation, we can do better. As a U.S. Senate, we can do better. Supporters of President Trump can do better. Members of the military can do better. Veterans can do better. Blue Star families—I am one. My kid is a Marine reservist. We can do better.

We need to do better. We need to do better by our Active Duty. We need to do better by our Guard and Reserve. We need to do better by DOD civilians. We need to do better by military families. We need to do better by defense contractors. We need to do better by all who care about the important mission of the American military. And we can do better.

Mr. President, you and I both know this: There are so many good public officials who have aligned on the Republican side, who have supported President Trump, who have their own credentials.

In this body—I could name a bunch, but I am worried I would forget one and then get in trouble with one of the ones I don't name. But in this body, there are Senators who have served honorably in the military and are well qualified for the position of Secretary of Defense.

In the House, there are Members who are loyal to this President who have served honorably in the military and are qualified to be Secretary of Defense.

We have Governors, we have mayors, we have leaders of companies who have supported this President and are loyal to his agenda and could get a 90-8-2 vote, like Mark Esper did, or a 98-to-1 vote, like General Mattis did, and would be loyal to this President and carry out this President's agenda.

They are there. There are hundreds of them without the personal baggage of sexual assault claims that have been settled, of allegations of spousal abuse that have been testified to, of allegations of drunkenness on the job and fiscal mismanagement that are the subject of a very extensive report written by non-anonymous coworkers.

So as we near the vote for this most important position, my plea to my colleagues, as one who has supported every Secretary of Defense who has ever come before my committee—Democrat or Republican—is don't rush this and make a mistake.

No one in this room, should this break badly following the confirmation, could say: Well, I didn't know. I didn't know.

Everyone knows. Everyone has access to this material. Everyone knows

the risk we would be undertaking in confirming Pete Hegseth to be Secretary of Defense. There will be no place—no shelter, no refuge—of “Wow, I was unaware of this.”

But, more importantly than that, we all know people right in this Chamber who are qualified by background, who are qualified by credential, but, most importantly, who are qualified by character to undertake this most solemn responsibility.

Let's get this one right. Let's take the time and get this one right.

With that, I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

Mr. SCHIFF. Mr. President, the men and women serving at home and overseas under the flag of the United States of America are counting on us. To guide the Pentagon through times of war or peace, they need and deserve a Secretary of Defense who is a person of considerable experience and can run a mammoth Agency, who has exhibited good judgment, who is a person of good character, who appreciates the role of women in the military in and out of combat, and who they can look on in confidence to guide us through some of the most difficult and complex national security threats we have ever faced. While I greatly respect his time in the service, regrettably, that person is not Pete Hegseth.

This is no minor or ceremonial position. The Secretary of Defense is responsible for a nearly trillion-dollar budget, one-eighth of all Federal spending, and the 3 million people who serve under that charge.

In my time in Congress, I have worked with Secretaries of Defense from both parties who understood their sacred responsibility and upheld their oaths to support every one of our troops and lead our Nation's military to the best of their ability. Secretaries Gates and Panetta, Mattis and Carter, and many others come to mind.

But Mr. Hegseth lacks the experience to be the Secretary of Defense. Mr. Hegseth has not shown the judgment to be Secretary of Defense. Mr. Hegseth has not shown the character to be Secretary of Defense. For this job is a heavy responsibility, and he is not the right person for the job.

His record speaks for itself: financial mismanagement in the organizations he led—organizations much, much smaller than the Pentagon, with budgets that were a fraction of the size and nevertheless squandered and mismanaged. He has at times demonstrated a callous disregard for human rights and the laws of armed conflict, going so far as to recommend that the President disregard the Gene-

va Conventions and intervene in cases of servicemembers convicted of war crimes. He has a history of belittling our brave women in uniform, of denigrating the service of women in uniform and their abilities. These failures are not trivial. They are real, they are significant, and they cannot be ignored.

So let's not mince words: Pete Hegseth is the wrong choice for Secretary of Defense.

Mr. President, many of my colleagues have spoken on the floor about Mr. Hegseth's personal shortcomings and lack of experience to carry out the job to which he has been nominated. I would like to speak also about what we need from a Secretary of Defense and what a more appropriate nominee should bring to this position of such immense responsibility.

The challenges we face today are enormous. They demand real experience and leadership.

The largest land war in Europe since World War II rages on.

The Middle East is a tinderbox, with a terrorist group still running Gaza, with hostages still in captivity, with a new Syrian regime of uncertain direction, a weakened but still dangerous Iran with all of its proxies, still threatening retaliation.

China looms as a peer global competitor, with a stated object of expanding its influence and territory and outpacing the United States.

China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea are increasingly aligned with the shared goal of rolling back U.S. influence and have developed a robust operational partnership. Iran and North Korea provide Russia with drones and missiles to prosecute its relentless war of aggression against Ukraine, all while China provides money and dual-use technologies to underpin Russia's resurgent wartime economy. Trade amongst this bloc seeks to frustrate U.S.-led international sanctions.

We don't know what technology and know-how Russia has already or will provide rogue states like Iran and North Korea for their nuclear, missile, and other WMD programs.

This growing alignment among authoritarians threatens our country and our allies. Yet here we are, being asked to hand over the keys to our national defense to someone so patently unqualified, so palpably unprepared.

I think it is telling that Mr. Hegseth's opening statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee failed to even mention the war in Ukraine. Just imagine, perhaps the most important national security issue that the previous Congress debated—whether to provide aid to our partners in Ukraine to turn back the Russian attack and defend their homeland—doesn't merit a sentence in his opening testimony. This is a conflict that President Trump now owns, and we must rely on him and his administration—including, if he were confirmed, Mr. Hegseth—to support our democratic partner.

When the Senator from Maine asked Mr. Hegseth about the omission of the war in Ukraine from his prepared remarks, here was his response:

Senator, that is a Presidential-level policy decision.

This from the person who is supposed to be the President's senior adviser on defense matters and a key official needed to rally NATO and other nations to Ukraine's defense.

We have a moral and a legal obligation and imperative to aid Ukraine in its existential fight against Russia and to protect our NATO allies should Russia's ambitions be left unconstrained. The last Congress made clear its support with bipartisan, overwhelming votes to reaffirm our support for Ukraine in this fight, and we will do so again as necessary.

It is not just a matter of Ukrainian security. If Russia is allowed to succeed in its objectives in Ukraine, whether on the battlefield or through a forced but favorable negotiated settlement, it will not stop there. Russia is already engaged in influence operations, cyber operations, and attacks against critical infrastructure up and down its border with NATO.

Allowing Russia to tear off parts of Ukraine will embolden Putin, allow him to better arm his war machine, and will send a message that NATO is fragmented and weak.

It will not be just Russia that receives this message; Xi Jinping is watching intently what is happening with Ukraine and whether America will continue to defend its allies and its values.

That is why Taiwan supports U.S. aid to Ukraine, even if it means sending weapons there that might otherwise be shipped to Asia—because Taiwan wants to know that if and when they face their own day of reckoning, that the United States will honor its commitments to come to its defense.

Our allies must be able to count on us, on the President, on the Secretary of Defense. They must. A nominee who ignores our obligations or our national interests in helping Ukraine roll back Russia's war machine is not a person capable of defending our interests across the globe. They just aren't.

The responsibilities go well beyond our foreign commitments. The Secretary of Defense has an enormous task to continue to rebuild the strength and readiness of our forces. For nearly two decades, wars in the Middle East and a long list of contingencies have pushed military readiness to the breaking point. The Army, Air Force, and Navy continue to face major recruitment challenges just to maintain their current size, let alone what may be necessary to—God forbid—fight a major war in the coming years against technologies we can only imagine now. We need a Secretary of Defense who can lead and inspire our troops, from the most senior officers to the youngest enlisted men and women.

Mr. Hegseth has belittled women in the military. He has attacked people

who live their lives differently than he would prefer. He has stood with those who violate the law rather than those who keep the peace. And he has no experience running a large enterprise. His experience running small enterprises was a terrible failure.

We need a Secretary of Defense with the management experience to rebuild and reshape our national security for the challenges of the present and the future. As our assistance to partners in the wars in Ukraine and in the Middle East have shown, we need to bring about urgent reforms if we are to produce the platforms, weapons, and ammunition necessary to supply our partners with the tools they need to fight and win.

So long as our enemies test the dearth of our beliefs with fire and steel, we must ensure that our military remains the best equipped, best prepared fighting force in the world. This requires investment in our manufacturing sector and the defense acquisition process. Anything less is not an "arsenal of democracy" or "Freedom's Forge"; it is a failure of our duty to defend ourselves and our allies, which is to say nothing of the need to develop new technologies and new operational concepts, tapping into the best innovative minds across the country.

Let's face it, the United States is on the brink of losing its overwhelming technological edge. Bringing it back will require reshaping the Pentagon to include new participants ready to disrupt some of our hidebound, bureaucratic, and expensive processes—new innovators and technologies, including many from my home State of California.

Partners that embrace new technology are more nimble to meet today's challenges. There is simply nothing in Mr. Hegseth's background or his performance to demonstrate that he has the necessary understanding or ability to make these changes.

GEN Matthew Ridgway was one of the greatest military minds of the 20th century. His service spanned decades and continents—and after the end of his service as Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, he was recruited to join the "Wise Men," a group of retired diplomats, politicians, and generals who assembled from time to time to give their advice to President Lyndon B. Johnson.

He knew then—as we know today—what makes effective leadership in both war and peace on the front lines and on the homefront. He said:

There is far more to professional fitness than knowledge and skill in the techniques and tools of war. These the officer must have, but the final test of his ability is not in what he knows but in what he is. There is no substitute for those innate qualities which we generally refer to as character.

My fellow Senators, put aside the nominee's lack of knowledge and lack of experience to prepare him for a role of this magnitude. We must also consider this nominee's absence of char-

acter becoming of a Secretary of Defense. You heard it in his confirmation hearings. You have heard it described by my colleagues today. You have seen it on television, read about it in the materials that we have been provided that demonstrates Mr. Hegseth's unfitness for this office. Character matters—it does. It still does.

And no amount of tough talk on TV or bromides about a warrior spirit can make up for a distinct lack of character.

GEN Omar Bradley, the first ever chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the longest serving active duty servicemember in the history of the United States Armed Forces, wrote to the Infantry School Quarterly in April of 1953. He said:

Leadership in a democratic Army means fairness, not harshness; understanding, not weakness; justice, not license; humaneness, not intolerance; generosity, not selfishness; pride, not egotism.

Think about those qualities. Think about whether the nominee we consider today resembles even just one of them. Certainly not generosity. Certainly not humanity. Certainly not understanding. Certainly not.

I understand that politics can be complicated, but there is nothing complicated about this. Our servicemembers are watching. Their families who fear that their loved ones may be sent to battle are watching. Our adversaries are watching. There is an inscription down the hall that says it plainly, what we should consider in this moment:

Our government, conceived in freedom and purchased with blood can be preserved only by constant vigilance.

Constant vigilance. The vote before us today is about Mr. Hegseth, but it is also about all of us. What do we stand for? Are we being vigilant in the defense of our country?

This candidate is not qualified. This candidate is not experienced. This candidate lacks judgment. This candidate lacks the character we need to lead this Department at a time of great national peril.

He is simply the wrong one for the job. I urge a "no" vote.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Ms. ERNST). The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. MARSHALL). Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. GRASSLEY. Mr. President, I am going to support Pete Hegseth to be Secretary of Defense. In the process of doing that, I am going to refer generally to some of the things that I spoke about—problems at the Department of Defense—when Mr. Hegseth was in my office for these personal interviews that all nominees tend to do before their consideration on the floor of the Senate.

One of those subjects was my oversight work of the Department of Defense. I have been conducting rigorous oversight of the Defense Department, along with other Federal Departments, since I became a Member of Congress. My oversight work of the Department of Defense has led me to sound the alarm time and again about the lack of internal controls, price gouging, and the mismanagement of the taxpayer dollars.

If confirmed, Pete Hegseth, President Trump's Secretary of Defense nominee, will be the 16th Secretary of Defense to lead the Department during my tenure in this Chamber.

When I met with Mr. Hegseth, I told him what I tell all Cabinet nominees whom I meet with: When asked if you will respond to letters from Members of Congress, instead of saying "yes," you ought to say "maybe" so you won't be made a liar later when you don't answer those letters, because, as we all know here in the Senate, there is not a nominee who comes before any committee in the U.S. Senate who doesn't firmly promise to answer all of our letters or come and testify or take our phone calls. So everyone says yes when seeking confirmation, and most don't respond when they get into office.

Mr. Hegseth said yes to the answer to that question in committee. He kind of laughed when I said in my office "You ought to say 'maybe,'" but he said "I get the message."

Mr. Hegseth and I also discussed the need for the Department of Defense to pass an independent audit and upgrade outdated financial management systems to make the independent audit being certified a real possibility.

You know, the Department of Defense is the only Agency of the Federal Government that can't get a certified audit, and they have been mandated to have one for more than a decade, maybe even two decades. They have tried to produce it.

The smallest of the military groups—the U.S. Marines—they tried to work with that one first of all to see if they could get a certified audit. They went through that rigamarole, and somehow they did get certified. I asked for the Government Accountability Office to check on the legitimacy of that certification, and the Government Accountability Office said that it was not a legitimate certification. After a couple of speeches on the floor of the U.S. Senate about 8, 10 years ago, we finally got them to admit that it was a hoax that they were saying they were getting a certified audit.

So this has been a big problem for a long period of time, and I hope Mr. Hegseth can get to the bottom of it and get a clean audit because the lack of a clean audit opinion at the Department of Defense presents huge potential for waste, fraud, and abuse in defense spending. When I get to the end of my remarks, I am going to give you a couple of examples.

Mr. Hegseth acknowledged this weakness within the Department of Defense

and assured me that he will get the Department on a proper financial footing.

He also committed to ensuring the protections of whistleblowers who speak out against instances of fraud, waste, and abuse that have been unrestrained within the Department. We spoke about that issue because, for every nominee who comes to my office wanting confirmation, I say to them: You know, whether you have a Department of a few hundred or a few thousand or a few 10,000s—and there are some Departments around here that have a few hundred thousand people—big or little, you can't know what is going on in that Department as far as listening to whistleblowers.

I consider whistleblowers to be very dedicated to their jobs and very patriotic people. They just want the government to do what the government is supposed to do under the law or to spend the money the way it is supposed to be spent. So they see something wrong; they come forward. You know, maybe sometimes they accomplish a lot by coming forward, but sometimes they are so frustrated that they come to us Members of the Senate—in my particular case, CHUCK GRASSLEY. Of the 35 investigations I have going on somewhere in the executive branch of government, 90 percent of them are instituted by information whistleblowers give me.

So I tell these nominees: You don't know what is going on. You ought to listen to whistleblowers.

It isn't just the case of a nominee listening to a whistleblower; it is a case of the nominee having a culture within their Department that will encourage middle management to listen to whistleblowers. That is particularly a problem in the Defense Department.

We find too many whistleblowers ruining themselves professionally. They are treated like a skunk at a picnic in their Departments. I could tell you a lot of stories where they have been misused just because they came forward with information that the government wasn't following the laws.

I know you can tell from what I just said that I have been a longtime advocate for whistleblowers and continue to work to ensure that they are protected when they rightfully speak out about the wrongdoings within our government.

As you can tell from my conversation with you, my colleagues, I expect Mr. Hegseth to stay true to his word that he is going to listen to whistleblowers and get the financial management system of the Department of Defense turned around.

Finally, we should thank anybody who serves in the military but particularly Mr. Hegseth for his service to our country in the military. All of the brave men and women who have served our Nation in uniform deserve our gratitude and respect.

Now, I told you that I would give you a couple of examples. One of them is financial mismanagement or not following the law.

One is Janet Mello. About 6 months ago, she pleaded guilty in a Texas court—can you believe this?—for stealing \$106 million over a period of 5 years as a Defense Department employee.

The problem there is that I am trying to get information from the Defense Department on one of my investigations. How could an employee of the Department of Defense over a period of 5 years get away with \$106 million? I read someplace it was \$112 million, but whether it was \$106 million or \$112 million, what difference does it make? It makes a difference if \$1 is stolen from the taxpayers. Anyway, if she had stolen \$5 million, she would probably still be a free person.

But what is wrong with the financial management system of the Defense Department that they can't keep track of \$106 million being stolen? So I am trying to get an answer to that, and finally, today, I got a response on my investigation. Maybe I got it because I talked to Pete Hegseth about it.

Another one is what we call in Washington the JEDI, a program that the Defense Department wanted to establish called the Joint Enterprise Defense Infrastructure. There were people in the Defense Department who had a conflict of interest because they had a relationship with Amazon. Amazon wanted that contract. They didn't recuse themselves.

This whole Joint Enterprise Defense Infrastructure and these contracts, there was so much competition among a couple wanting that besides Amazon, that it was given a brandnew start on negotiations, and I don't even know where they are on those negotiations at this point.

But those are two examples of things that have been really wrong with the way the Department of Defense has been run, not just under Biden but under a lot of Presidents, both Republican and Democrat, over a long period of time. And that is why I am going to suggest that the inspector general at the Department of Defense ought to be fired. Hopefully, Mr. Hegseth can straighten that out.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

Mr. REED. Mr. President, I rise today to urge my colleagues to carefully consider their vote on the nomination of Mr. Pete Hegseth for Secretary of Defense.

The Senate is now in the process of voting on many members of President Trump's new Cabinet, who will determine policies that will affect the lives of every American. However, I would argue that the position of the Secretary of Defense is unique. It requires

the highest quality of leadership, the ability to make on-the-spot life-or-death decisions, excellent diplomatic skills, and character beyond reproach.

There is no question that President Trump has the right to select his Cabinet, but his Defense Secretary should be someone who is capable, without question, to meet the demands of the job and the expectations of those he will lead. They should have the knowledge and experience to manage one of the most complex organizations in the world, and they should be willing to admit what they do not know and assemble a team who will help them carry on.

In his hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, last week, and in his writings and comments, Mr. Hegseth has not proven that he is qualified to be Secretary of Defense. He has been questioned about allegations of significant personal misconduct, including alcohol abuse, infidelity, sexual harassment and abuse, and toxic work environments. He refused to really address or take ownership of these allegations. As a result, he leaves himself open to having his personal history subject to exploitation by adversaries, which is the last thing we need for the leader of the most powerful military in the world.

If confirmed, Mr. Hegseth would be giving orders to men and women of every race, religion, and sexual orientation. His orders may result in these men and women risking and perhaps losing their lives. These men and women must trust that the Secretary of Defense giving those orders respects and supports them.

Instead, Mr. Hegseth has disparaged military personnel with racist and sexist comments, he has derided diversity in the ranks, and he has openly opposed women in combat roles. How can we expect our military to overcome recruiting challenges, maintain retention, and remain the most ready and lethal fighting force in the world if they do not have respect for their leader? Who would want to follow the orders of someone who belittles them?

For better or worse, the industry and workforce that supports the Pentagon is enormous, complicated, and is a huge factor in our Nation's economy, as well as national security. Mismanaging it can cost fortunes in our taxpayers' investments, the American economy, and workers' lives.

It has been widely documented that the extent of Mr. Hegseth's management experience was running two small veterans organizations, both of which he drove to the verge of bankruptcy and had to be relieved from his leadership roles. He has refused to acknowledge this, and it does not seem that he has learned from the experience. Do we want to risk an organization with a \$900 billion annual budget to such a nominee?

Another keystone of the U.S. military is that it is entirely professional, unlike many other nations' armies.

The U.S. military is held in such high esteem around the world because we follow the rule of law and the Geneva Conventions. Our military is not like those of Russia, Iran, or North Korea, whose soldiers terrorize and kill civilians, pillage cities, and torture captives. When the U.S. military arrives, our enemies should be afraid, but civilians should be relieved because we hold our servicemembers to the highest standards.

But in his writings, Mr. Hegseth has shown nothing but disdain for the rule of law and the men and women who attempt to keep our military personnel disciplined. He wants the United States to "fight by our own rules." But do we want the U.S. military to fight like the Russian military that is destroying Ukraine—or the Chinese or Houthis, who show no regard for international law? Do we want to vote for a nominee who will tear down 250 years of honorable service by the men and women of our U.S. forces? I hope not.

As I hope my colleagues know, my top priority has always been national security, and I have tried to avoid partisanship. I don't think it has a place in that mission. I will always pick up the phone and call whoever holds the position of Secretary of Defense and seek out opportunities to work with them to strengthen and support our military.

Whoever they may be, I hope they comport themselves with the wisdom, composure, and character that this awesome responsibility demands. Our military men and women—indeed, the American people—deserve nothing less from their Secretary of Defense.

The question I have is this: Is Pete Hegseth truly the best we have to offer?

I do not believe so, and I urge my colleagues to vote against this nominee.

With that, Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

Mr. WICKER. Mr. President, I agree with my friend from Rhode Island, the distinguished ranking member on the committee, that this is something Senators need to think very carefully about. And I would remind my friend and my fellow Senators and my fellow Americans that the voters of the United States spoke very strongly and very firmly and overwhelmingly on the first Tuesday of November for change, and over 75 million Americans voted for change not only domestically, which we are seeing being fulfilled even in the first week of this term, but also on the international scene.

The United States needs to return to a position of strength, and through that strength and through that mili-

tary might, we can assure peace for a generation. So I think one of the things that over 75 million Americans spoke for on election day was peace through strength.

The President has made his choice, and he is putting his team together to strengthen our military and to get us ready, and the person he has chosen to lead the Defense Department is Pete Hegseth.

The more I have seen of this young man over the time that we have had a chance to visit and over the time that he has been questioned and actually put through a number of trials, the more impressed I am with his character and with his ability to withstand the slings and arrows that we see in politics and in government today.

Pete Hegseth is ready to put forward the program of President Donald Trump, and he has satisfied me that he will be a change agent in the Department of Defense and that he is the person we need. He is the President's choice, and we owe it to this Commander in Chief to put him in this position unless he is not qualified for the office.

Mr. Hegseth is a retired major from the Army National Guard. He has had multiple combat tours of duty. And then he has come back and he has had some struggles. He has had some PTSD. And there are thousands and thousands of his comrades who have experienced the same thing, experienced problems after they came back. But he has overcome those.

And those thousands of young officers and people who have been in combat for the United States are watching the U.S. Senate tonight, even so, and they are watching to see whether we have listened to the dreams and to the plans and to the hopes of this young man as the next Secretary of Defense.

I agree with my friend: We should look carefully. But once we look carefully, I think we will decide that this President, who has had this mandate, is entitled to this remarkable young man as his Secretary of Defense. I am going to vote for him early and enthusiastically, and I urge my colleagues to do the same.

I yield the floor.

VOTE ON HEGSETH NOMINATION

The PRESIDING OFFICER. All postcloture time has expired.

The question is, Will the Senate advise and consent to the Hegseth nomination?

Mr. WICKER. I ask for the yeas and nays.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there a sufficient second?

There appears to be a sufficient second.

The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk called the roll.

The result was announced—yeas 50, nays 50, as follows: