

getting hundreds of messages a day personally and thousands through the office, and I just physically could not.

Believe it or not, of these hundreds of people calling me and contacting me however they did, many of them disagree with each other diametrically. Three dimensionally, they disagreed. But the unifying factor is that they all desire the best for our country, even though they differ from each other so much. And maybe that kind of frames my feelings about this nomination.

For context, before entering politics, before ever thinking about running for political office, I practiced medicine for 30 years in a public hospital for the uninsured, caring for those who otherwise would not have been able to afford the access to the care that I provided them.

After seeing patients die from vaccine-preventable diseases, I dedicated much of my time to vaccine research and immunization programs, personally witnessing the safety monitoring and the effectiveness of immunization. Put simply, vaccines save lives.

This is the context that informed me when considering RFK as the nominee to be Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services.

It was a decision I studied exhaustively and I took very seriously. And as I said I would, I spoke with Mr. Kennedy not once but multiple times over the weekend, including this morning. We had in-depth conversations about the medical literature and about the science behind the safety of vaccines. He referred me to studies and to people. I reviewed them and spoke to those whom he mentioned I should speak to.

The most notable opponents of Mr. Kennedy were pediatricians on the frontlines of our children's health who regularly have to combat misinformation, combating vaccine skepticism with correct information—correct information that comes from their education, their training, and experience as physicians. They are aware of the falling vaccine rates and the inevitability of increasing hospitalizations and deaths of children from vaccine-preventable diseases. They are aware that children are now contracting diseases that they would not have contracted if the child was vaccinated.

I heard from others impassioned about the need to address chemicals in our food and a belief that we are victims of large impersonal forces maximizing profits while sacrificing their health. And there is evidence for that. Although, food safety is principally a USDA concern, I strongly agree that this is an issue society must address.

Other RFK supporters are concerned regarding environmental risks. They fear these risks are being ignored by authorities. Mr. Kennedy's history of environmental activism motivates their support. I pointed out that the Environmental Protection Agency monitors this, not the Department of Health and Human Services. But they still feel that he can make a difference.

So as I looked how to resolve this, I returned to where I began. Would it be possible to have Mr. Kennedy collaborate in helping public health agencies re-earn the trust of the American people?

Regarding vaccines, Mr. Kennedy has been insistent that he just wants good science and to ensure safety. But on this topic, the science is good. The science is credible. Vaccines save lives. They are safe. They do not cause autism. There are multiple studies that show this. They are a crucial part of our Nation's public health response.

But as someone who has discussed immunization with thousands of people, I do recognize that many mothers need reassurance that the vaccine their child is receiving is necessary, effective, and most of all, safe.

While I am aligned with Mr. Kennedy as regards ultraprocessed food, reforming NIH, and taking on chronic disease, once more, it leaves vaccines.

Mr. Kennedy and the administration reached out seeking to reassure me regarding their commitment to protecting the public health benefit of vaccination. To this end, Mr. Kennedy and the administration committed that he and I would have an unprecedentedly close collaborative working relationship if he is confirmed. We will meet or speak multiple times a month. This collaboration will allow us to work well together and, therefore, to be more effective.

Mr. Kennedy has asked for my input into hiring decisions at HHS beyond Senate-confirmed positions. This aspect of the collaboration will allow us to represent all sides of those folks who were contacting me over this past weekend.

He has also committed that he would work within current vaccine approval and safety monitoring systems and not establish parallel systems.

If confirmed, he will maintain the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommendations without changes. CDC will not remove statements on their website pointing out that vaccines do not cause autism.

Mr. Kennedy and the administration also committed that this administration will not use the subversive techniques used under the Biden administration, like sue and settle, to change policies enacted by Congress without first going through Congress.

Mr. Kennedy and the administration committed to a strong role of Congress. Aside from he and I meeting regularly, he will come before the HELP Committee on a quarterly basis, if requested. He committed that the HELP Committee chair, whether it is me or someone else, may choose a representative on any board or commission formed to review vaccine safety.

If he is confirmed, HHS will provide a 30-day notice to the HELP Committee if the Agency seeks to make changes to any of our Federal vaccine safety mon-

itoring programs, and the HELP Committee will have the option to call a hearing to further review.

These commitments, and my expectation that we could have a great working relationship to make America healthy again, is the basis of my support. He will be the Secretary, but I believe he will also be a partner in working for this end.

If Mr. Kennedy is confirmed, I will use my authority as chairman of the Senate committee with oversight of HHS to rebuff any attempts to remove the public's access to lifesaving vaccines without ironclad, causational, scientific evidence that can be accepted and defended before the mainstream scientific community and before Congress.

I will watch carefully for any effort to wrongfully sow public fear about vaccines through confusing references of coincidence and anecdote. But my support is built on assurances that this will not have to be a concern and that he and I could work together to build an agenda to make America healthy again.

We need a leader at HHS who will guide President Trump's agenda to make America healthy again.

Based on Mr. Kennedy's assurances on vaccines and his platform to positively influence Americans' health, it is my consideration that he will get this done.

As I said, it has been a long and tense process. But I have assessed it, as I would assess a patient as a physician. Ultimately restoring trust in our public health institution is too important, and I think Mr. Kennedy can help get that done.

As chairman of the Senate committee with oversight authority of his position, I will do my best to make sure that that is what we accomplish.

I want Mr. Kennedy to succeed in making America healthy again. His success will be tied to the health of our Nation. He has the opportunity to address the most pertinent issues affecting Americans' health.

We also need to reform institutions like the FDA and NIH, and those, as already has been indicated, are my priorities as chairman of the HELP Committee. I look forward to his support in accomplishing this. If confirmed, I look forward to working together with Mr. Kennedy to achieve President Trump's mission of improving the health of all Americans.

I yield the floor.

THE PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Kansas.

NOMINATION OF DOUGLAS COLLINS

Mr. MORAN. Mr. President, I am here this morning—now, this afternoon—because, in just a few moments, we will be asked to make a decision as to whether or not Congressman Doug Collins should be confirmed as the next Secretary of Veterans Affairs. I am speaking today to encourage my colleagues to make that happen.

I believe caring for the men and women who have served our Nation in

uniform, for the loved ones they leave behind, and for their families is one of our Nation's most sacred obligations. We owe those who served all that they are entitled to and perhaps more.

I remember making a commitment when I was in high school to express my gratitude and respect for those in uniform. I never envisioned being a U.S. Senator and, now, the chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, where our responsibilities are greater than just respect and gratitude. That is certainly important, but now we are here to make certain that all the promises we made to those who serve are kept.

I want a VA Secretary who understands the VA's mission. I want a Secretary who will put veterans first. I want a Secretary who recognizes the VA's importance in serving veterans and contributing to a safe and successful future for our Nation. The success they had in uniform, I want them to have that success as a veteran, as a civilian, as a citizen.

Congressman Collins is that person. Through his own service, which continues in the Air Force Reserve, Congressman Collins knows firsthand service in the uniform, and he knows the benefits and challenges that veterans face and the challenges their families face.

In his testimony before the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, he demonstrated significant understanding of the policies he will be expected to administer at the Department of Veterans Affairs and proved to me and to others that he is prepared to lead the VA into the future.

He is committed to working closely with Members of Congress and certainly the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs and to make sure that our input is understood, taken into account, and, hopefully, implemented. His nomination was reported out of the committee in an overwhelmingly bipartisan manner. On a rollcall vote, the vote was 18 to 1.

I am thankful for Congressman Collins' interest in serving in this capacity. I ask my colleagues to support his nomination, and I look forward to working with him to improve the lives of veterans, caregivers, survivors, and military families.

I yield the floor, but before I do, I ask that the vote scheduled at 12:15 occur immediately.

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

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the clerk will report the nomination.

The bill clerk read the nomination of Douglas Collins, of Georgia, to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

VOTE ON COLLINS NOMINATION

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is, Will the Senate advise and consent to the Collins nomination?

Mr. MORAN. 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 assistant bill clerk called the roll.

The result was announced—yeas 77, nays 23, as follows:

[Rollcall Vote No. 32 Ex.]

YEAS—77

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| Banks | Grassley | Mullin |
| Barrasso | Hagerty | Murkowski |
| Bennet | Hassan | Ossoff |
| Blackburn | Hawley | Paul |
| Blumenthal | Heinrich | Peters |
| Boozman | Hickenlooper | Ricketts |
| Britt | Hoeven | Risch |
| Budd | Husted | Rosen |
| Capito | Hyde-Smith | Rounds |
| Cassidy | Johnson | Sanders |
| Collins | Justice | Schiff |
| Cornyn | Kaine | Schmitt |
| Cortez Masto | Kelly | Scott (FL) |
| Cotton | Kennedy | Scott (SC) |
| Cramer | King | Shaheen |
| Crapo | Klobuchar | Sheehy |
| Cruz | Lankford | Slotkin |
| Curtis | Lee | Sullivan |
| Daines | Luján | Thune |
| Durbin | Lummis | Tillis |
| Ernst | Marshall | Tuberville |
| Fetterman | McConnell | Warnock |
| Fischer | McCormick | Welch |
| Gallego | Moody | Wicker |
| Gillibrand | Moran | Young |
| Graham | Moreno | |

NAYS—23

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|-----------------|---------|------------|
| Alsobrooks | Kim | Schumer |
| Baldwin | Markey | Smith |
| Blunt Rochester | Merkley | Van Hollen |
| Booker | Murphy | Warner |
| Cantwell | Murray | Warren |
| Coons | Padilla | Whitehouse |
| Duckworth | Reed | Wyden |
| Hirono | Schatz | |

The nomination was confirmed.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. 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.

RECESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate stands in recess until 2:15 p.m.

Thereupon, the Senate, at 1:10 p.m., recessed until 2:15 p.m. and reassembled when called to order by the Presiding Officer (Mrs. BRITT).

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR—Continued

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Virginia.

TRUMP EXECUTIVE ORDERS

Mr. KAINE. Madam President, I rise to talk a little bit about what I am hearing from constituents in the Commonwealth, in the last week, and then, in particular, to direct a message to Federal employees. There are about 140,000 people who live in Virginia who work for the Federal Government.

It was a week ago yesterday—Monday morning—when I was attending a fairly standard annual celebration by the Fredericksburg Chamber of Com-

merce and the local United Way to open up seasonal tax preparation. It is called the VITA Program: Volunteers in Tax Assistance. Organizations all around the country train volunteers to help low- and moderate-income people do their taxes, and it was just the kickoff of this 21st annual event in the Fredericksburg area to help folks. And it was an opportunity to thank volunteers and to see those early-bird tax filers who were there the first day to try to get their taxes done.

Someone came up to me and told me that they were a veteran and that they had tried to log onto the VA portal that day to get a medical appointment and were shut out of the portal. Someone else heard the person telling me that story. The Fredericksburg area, about 50 miles south of DC, is very heavily populated with veterans. Others started to share their experience.

It just so happens that we have just constructed, at the cost of \$370 million, a new veterans clinic in Fredericksburg that is scheduled to open on February 28. Someone heard this discussion and said: Oh, we hear the grand opening is going to be delayed because of a Federal hiring freeze imposed by this administration.

That conversation at this otherwise good-news event started what has become a cascade of concerns that I have heard expressed by Virginians: Head Start programs not getting their monthly funding; universities that are midstream on Federal research projects being told that a funding freeze would prohibit them from drawing down dollars, thus jeopardizing the jobs of the researchers; numerous Federal employees who have been told that they are being reclassified from professional civil service to political appointee, where their future depends upon their loyalty to a person rather than their service of their fellow Americans.

I was at church on Sunday. I go to a church that has a high percentage of Congolese refugees who are here under humanitarian visas or refugee status. Many of them are worried about the possibility of deportations because they happen to live in families where there might be mixed status: some citizens, some green card holders, some refugees, others who are not documented. A Sunday school teacher at my church came up and told me that, at the Saturday religious instruction program that he holds at a nearby Catholic school, because there are a number of Latino immigrant families in that program, the attendance is down because families and kids are worried about ICE raids and deportations.

Yesterday, I had two interactions with Virginians, one with local government officials and NGO CEOs—folks running domestic violence shelters, homeless programs, free clinics, et cetera—in the Richmond area, where I live, and then a second meeting with the Virginia School Boards Association—elected school board members