

in a cruel irony, it appears President Trump is inching toward a deal with Iran that is very similar to the Obama Iran nuclear agreement which Trump recklessly withdrew from during his first term in office.

Ultimately, wars cannot be won through threat or bluster. We need a real plan that brings a real end to these hostilities and to Iran's threats in the region. I am pleased my Republican colleagues are finally starting to realize that reality.

Last week, the House passed a resolution requiring that the President receive congressional approval before taking any further military action against Iran, and last month, the Senate advanced a similar measure.

Where in the world did Members of Congress and the House and Senate come up with the idea that the Congress has any authority to say anything about the declaration of war? Well, it might be the Constitution, which says in article I, section 8, that it is the authority and responsibility of Congress to declare war—a fact which this President has totally ignored when it comes to Iran.

We cannot allow the President to wage a war without checks, oversight, and accountability. Congress must step up and exercise its responsibility.

#### FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE SURVEILLANCE ACT

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, on a separate note, section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act is set to expire on Friday. This powerful, necessary tool allows for warrantless surveillance of private phone calls, text messages, and emails of hundreds of thousands of foreign nationals outside the United States. There is no authority in this law for direct surveillance on American citizens, but Americans are being swept up in the efforts under 702 and have been for years.

Section 702 can yield valuable foreign intelligence and even prevent terrorist attacks. It is valuable, and I don't question that it should continue. But it can and has been abused in the effort to spy on foreigners. Americans have become the victims.

Those who oppose reforming FISA argue there is no time to address these abuses because our national security will be harmed if section 702 is allowed to expire even for a day. That is not true. Existing law allows section 702 collection to continue under an order from the FISA Court for another year even without congressional reauthorization.

Congress can and must take the time to get this right. We must finally fix the fundamental and indefensible flaw at the heart of FISA: warrantless surveillance of American citizens.

We should ask ourselves two questions:

Who is being entrusted with this immense power? President Trump would like this authority to be overseen by

unqualified MAGA loyalists. President Trump has named Bill Pulte Acting Director of National Intelligence. Bill Pulte is in charge of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, the housing programs of the Federal Government. He has no—underline “no”—background in intelligence.

The Republican Senate leader came to the floor here and said: Don't worry about it; he is just temporary.

Temporarily in charge of the intelligence operations of 17 or 18 Agencies? Temporary approval of their actions by a man who has no background in intelligence? What are we saying to the men and women who have devoted their lives in defense of America to intelligence gathering? Some have risked their lives. Some have given their lives in the process.

To take Mr. Pulte, who runs the housing programs, and put him in charge makes no sense whatsoever—temporary or permanent.

Let me add as well that Mr. Pulte isn't just a housing expert; he tends to be an expert as well on revenge politics under MAGA. He has followed the President's admonition to go after the President's enemies and done it over and over again. Now we are going to put him in charge of all the intelligence Agencies of the United States? It makes no sense.

Since being confirmed to lead the Federal Housing Finance Agency, Mr. Pulte has abused his position to push for criminal referrals against President Trump's perceived enemies, from New York attorney general Letitia James to Fed Governor Lisa Cook.

If Mr. Pulte becomes the Acting Director of National Intelligence, he will have access to thousands of Americans' private texts, phone calls, and emails. This housing expert is going to be playing with ammunition provided by the intelligence Agencies to keep Americans safe. Now it is going to be used for political purposes if we are not careful.

Then there is the Federal Bureau of Investigation Director Kash Patel—a special case for sure. His Agency is one of the biggest users of information acquired through section 702.

The New York Times this morning had a lengthy article on the lengths Patel has gone to—with the FBI—to get even with the President's critics. In addition to overseeing the purge of nonpartisan career agents at the Bureau itself, Mr. Patel has also gutted internal FBI oversight of FISA by eliminating the Office in charge of auditing complaints with section 702 regulations.

Another official with an instrumental role in section 702 surveillance is Acting Attorney General Todd Blanche. Mr. Blanche was President Trump's personal defense attorney, and he has warped the Department of Justice into a personal sword and shield for President Trump.

The inability of Pulte, Patel, and Blanche to serve the American people rather than the personal and political

interests of President Trump highlights why Congress must reform section 702.

The second question Congress must ask is whether the section 702 authorities safeguard the privacy of Americans under any administration, not just the current one.

Our Nation's Founders understood the government can't be trusted to police itself against the overreach into citizens' private lives. That is why the Constitution sets up a system of checks and balances.

One of the most important checks is the Fourth Amendment, which requires the government to get a warrant from a judge before searching Americans' homes or private communications. Section 702 should not be a backdoor around this congressional limitation. That is why Senator LEE, a Republican from Utah, and I have a bipartisan proposal to require the government to obtain a judicial warrant before searching Americans' communications collected under section 702.

Our legislation would also close the so-called data broker loophole, which allows the government to purchase Americans' personal information from third-party data brokers—data that would require a warrant if sought any other way.

I urge my colleagues to ask if the current administration can be entrusted with the power of section 702 and whether every future administration can be trusted without adequate safeguards. It is clear that the answer to both questions is no.

Congress must enact commonsense guardrails that uphold the Constitution and protect the American people from abuse by this administration or any future administration.

The Republican leader came to the floor earlier today to talk about the security of the United States. I agree with him. It is a paramount task. But also adherence to our Constitution, which each and every one of us swore to uphold and defend, is part of that process.

The notion that we could put a temporary person in charge of 17 or 18 intelligence Agencies across the globe, dedicated to keeping us safe 24/7, because he is loyal to the President's politics ain't enough. You ought to be qualified before you take on a job of that magnitude. Mr. Pulte is not qualified.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. SHEEHY). The Senator from Mississippi.

#### MEDICAL INSURANCE

Mrs. HYDE-SMITH. Mr. President, I rise to call attention to a serious barrier in our healthcare system, one that

hinders too many Americans from accessing the medications and the treatments that they need. Across the country, patients and providers alike are increasingly frustrated by prior authorization requirements imposed by insurance companies. Too often, these requirements override the medical judgment of doctors who know their patients best.

I have had oncologists, cardiologists, psychiatrists, and many other medical professionals visit my office to share their ongoing concerns and how prior authorizations are disrupting care. They are trained experts; yet their decisions are being second-guessed by insurers.

The result is deeply concerning. Many patients are denied or delayed access to the medications and services that their physicians have prescribed because they know those treatments are effective based on their many years of medical education and clinical experience.

And the delays are not minor. Patients are often forced to wait days, weeks, or even months for critical care which, in many cases, will still be denied in the end. There are simply too many unnecessary hurdles standing between a patient, the doctor, and the care that they need.

I am a proud cosponsor of the Safe Step Act, which would allow patients to access appropriate treatments more quickly by bypassing dangerous or ineffective "fail first" prior authorization requirements.

I have also cosponsored the Improving Seniors' Timely Access to Care Act, which would modernize and streamline prior authorization for Medicare Advantage patients. This timely access legislation would deliver realtime decisions for routinely approved treatments, increase transparency around CMS approvals and denials, and replace outdated paper-based systems with electronic prior authorization.

These are practical bipartisan solutions. In fact, 68 Senators have already joined me in support of this effort.

Despite this, the issue persists. We must act with urgency. Every day we delay is another day patients are left wanting for care, waiting for care that they need and deserve. I urge my colleagues and the administration to prioritize this issue and move swiftly to address it.

Every day we delay is another day that insurance companies will continue making decisions on behalf of medical professionals, which they have no business doing whatsoever.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Connecticut.

#### UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUESTS

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, I am here to talk about the costs of war. The United States is at war at this moment.

I am here to talk about the costs of war that should include the costs of caring for our veterans because they are the ones who fight our wars and keep our Nation strong and free.

We are failing to pay the costs of war for more than 50,000 combat-injured veterans. These veterans were forced to medically retire or they are undergoing medical separation because of combat-related injuries, and now they are receiving a dollar-for-dollar reduction in their military retirement pay from their VA disability benefits. That practice is wrong. It must be ended. It should have ended long ago.

In fact, last year, when I introduced the Major Richard Star Act, which now is cosponsored by 80 Members of this body—obviously, both sides of the aisle.

And the Major Richard Star Act is named for Richard Star. Unfortunately, he has passed away, but his brother David is with us today, and I thank him, his family, the veterans service organizations that have been tireless in their advocacy for the Major Richard Star Act, in being the voice and face of advocating for our veterans. The Major Richard Star Act is our legislation to fix this injustice and finally deliver combat-injured veterans their full military benefits.

Our bill has, rightfully, received large swaths of bipartisan support—not only the 80 cosponsors in the Senate but 334 in the House. And there is a bipartisan discharge petition signed now by 203 Members of Congress.

Not only has this measure received bipartisan support from the U.S. Congress, but in a hearing where I questioned him, the Secretary of Defense joined in supporting us and said very simply: We support the Major Richard Star Act.

"We support the [Major] Richard Star Act," without an offset because the Major Richard Star Act has no offset.

Now, he referred to the Major Richard Star Act, not to any offset, but the 80 cosponsors are supporting a bill without any offset. There should be none. There is no reason that we should correct this injustice by taking benefits away from other veterans, which is one of the proposals that has been made; that veterans who suffer from sleep apnea or tinnitus should be forced to sacrifice their benefits.

And despite all this overwhelming support, the House leadership and the Senate leadership has blocked my attempts to advance this legislation twice. I am here for a third time. And blocked also have been my requests for a simple vote on the bill. Why?

Opponents have claimed that our Nation cannot afford this bill and demand that we offset it by cutting benefits from other disabled veterans. And they are acquiescing in spending billions of dollars a day on the President's war of choice in the Middle East.

Right now, the Armed Services Committee—literally, later today—will

begin marking up a \$1.5 trillion request from the White House—\$1.5 trillion, not even including the reconciliation amount. That probably brings the total closer to \$2 trillion?

My point is: If we can afford \$2 trillion for the Department of Defense, we can afford doing the right thing for combat-injured veterans at a total cost of probably \$8 billion to \$10 billion over 10 years. So the yearly cost would be approximately what this Nation is spending per day on the Iran war, in the conservative estimate, and probably lowballing of this administration.

There are other excuses advanced by leadership. They have said veterans are "doubledipping." Our veterans community knows better. We all know better. They are entitled to both disability benefits and retirement pay.

The fact is, we are not talking about a new benefit. We are talking about these combat-injured veterans receiving existing benefits to which they are entitled. They have earned them. It is not an act of generosity or charity that we would correct this injustice. And the simple result and easy outcome here should be for us to approve this measure today.

Let me just say, finally: Veterans deserve action. This measure is long overdue. No more excuses, no more meaningless rhetoric, or continued cowardice. Let's have a vote.

If you won't approve it today, give us a vote. Let us express the will of the vast majority of veterans, the vast majority of the American people. Pass the Richard Star Act.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Committee on Armed Services be discharged and the Senate proceed to the immediate consideration of S. 1032.

I further ask that the Blumenthal substitute amendment at the desk be considered and agreed to; that the bill, as amended, be considered read a third time and passed; and that the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

The Senator from Kentucky.

Mr. PAUL. Mr. President, reserving the right to object, there are 40 trillion reasons why new spending should be offset by cuts elsewhere.

We are approaching \$40 trillion in debt. The interest is a trillion dollars a year. Interest rates are rising. Likely the biggest threat to our country is our national debt.

No one disputes that our veterans deserve to receive the benefits they earned through years of service to our Nation, but we should offset it. There is waste in abundance throughout our budget. There is no reason why we shouldn't cut waste to pay for this.

What I proposed is a simple amendment to this legislation that would basically get rid of money that hasn't been spent over the last 10 years in welfare for refugees. They keep allocating a couple billion dollars more