

who are Iranian proxies, launched the deadliest attack in history against the nation of Israel.

And all the while, China prepares for war. They have actually threatened to forcibly take Taiwan. President Xi has ordered the People's Liberation Army to be ready to do so by 2027, of course, escalating tensions in the Indo-Pacific and engaging in provocative joint military exercises with Russia.

Notwithstanding the chaos around the world, America was suffering direct consequences from the drug war, as I alluded to a moment ago. Cartels in Mexico and Latin America took advantage of President Biden's open border policies and refusal to act where action was required. Of course, they made untold millions of dollars selling these drugs and transporting them beyond their borders into the United States, taking countless lives and inflicting untold misery.

Now the Department of Justice has charged Maduro and his coconspirators with transporting tons of cocaine into the United States by moving the drug under the protection of Venezuelan officialdom, including the law enforcement and their military, by providing diplomatic passports to drug traffickers and facilitating diplomatic cover from planes to move drug proceeds from Mexico to Venezuela.

Iran, through its proxy Hezbollah—which operates primarily in Lebanon, north of Israel—they were embedded in Venezuela working with the Maduro administration and helped collaborate to provide those elaborate trafficking networks. And, of course, Hezbollah used the drug trafficking proceeds to finance their own nefarious activities around the world.

Back in 2022, Venezuela signed a 20-year economic cooperation agreement with Iran, the No. 1 state sponsor of international terrorism, an agreement between two of the most heavily sanctioned regimes in the world, all designed to defy the United States and expand their criminal enterprise.

In a hearing before the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control that I chaired late last year, one of our witnesses described Venezuela as playing a very important role in what they called the "axis of evasion," a global sanctions-defying network that also includes Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea.

And, of course, Maduro was an important part of that within this "axis of evasion" because he is the one that gave them a foothold in our backyard in the Western Hemisphere.

And, of course, all of this went on during the Biden administration and right under their nose, but they did nothing—virtually nothing—about it. President Biden and Secretary Mayorkas turned a blind eye, allowing these illicit happenings to continue while drugs poured into the United States and totalitarian dictators and terrorists enriched themselves and spread their misery.

But President Trump has now begun to turn the tide. He began on day one of his administration with an aggressive immigration enforcement, rounding up and deporting members of MS-13, one of the most dangerous gangs in the world; Tren de Aragua, another dangerous Venezuelan gang; and other criminal networks who had set up shop here in the United States in our neighborhoods and in our communities.

Given the vast networks of these international gangs, it became clear to President Trump that it was not enough to simply send them back from where they came so they could regroup and reorganize. President Trump and Secretary Rubio and President Trump's administration, rightly, determined that further action was necessary. And, of course, that began, most notably, with a series of strikes on drug boats in the Caribbean designed to deter the cartels and disrupt their evil trade.

Now, by capturing Maduro, by enforcing an indictment made by a U.S. grand jury in a Federal court in Manhattan, President Trump has shown, without a doubt, that he means business.

Of course, the radical left is losing their mind, as they usually do every time President Trump acts decisively and with boldness. Protestors outside the courthouse held signs reading "Free President Nicolas Maduro" and "Hands Off Venezuela."

I guess any jurisdiction that would elect a new mayor like a democratic socialist, Mamdani, that is probably what you would expect. So I don't think anyone was surprised.

But the message of Operation Absolute Resolve to our allies and adversaries around the world could not be more clear: America is back. The Trump administration will act with boldness and decisiveness. And if you threaten the American people with drugs or terrorism or any other sort of criminal or military attack, you better watch your back because you could be next.

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

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

VENEZUELA

Mr. COTTON. Mr. President, today is a great day in America. Nicolas Maduro—an indicted drug trafficker, an illegitimate communist dictator who has the blood of hundreds of Arkansans and thousands of Americans on his hands—is behind bars in a prison in New York. Again, he was an illegitimate communist dictator, in league with all of America's enemies around the world.

With the Venezuelan people crushed underneath his iron fist for years, Maduro turned the country into a crossroads and a playground for the likes of communist China, Cuba, Iran, Russia, and even Islamic terrorists like Hezbollah.

I want to take this opportunity to commend the exceptional skill and bravery of our troops, CIA officers, and FBI agents for executing such an amazing military and intelligence operation that brought Maduro's reign to an abrupt end. It is impossible to overstate the complexity of this mission. But for our troops and our intelligence officers—whose skill, professionalism, and bravery are unmatched in the world—"impossible" isn't in their vocabulary.

I also commend President Trump for having the courage to take bold, decisive, and audacious action against Nicolas Maduro. This action was well within the President's constitutional authority. The operation was in keeping with President Bush's operation to arrest the drug lord and Panamanian President Manuel Noriega, in 1989. If anything, Maduro was much worse than Noriega, and Venezuela now is even more vital strategically than Panama was then.

Additionally, this operation did not violate the War Powers Resolution. Even if you believe the War Powers Resolution is constitutional, these troops were in and out of Venezuela in a couple of hours.

Only the United States could execute such a dangerous and difficult mission without the loss of a single American life. But instead of celebrating Maduro's ouster and America's success, our Democratic colleagues are determined to condemn the operation, all because President Trump ordered it.

Consider that, in 2020, Senator SCHUMER criticized President Trump for bragging "about his Venezuela policy" but failing to bring "an end to the Maduro regime." It sounds like a call for regime change to me, just like Joe Biden's decision to increase the bounty on Maduro's head seems like a call for Maduro to be apprehended and brought to justice. Yet when President Trump did exactly that last weekend, Senator SCHUMER said this is "reckless."

Also, consider Senator MURPHY, who said, in 2019:

Getting rid of Maduro is good for the United States.

I agree. Unfortunately, he has changed his tune lately. The day after Maduro's capture, Senator MURPHY said:

The invasion of Venezuela has nothing to do with American security.

Nothing.

He further said:

Venezuela is not a security threat to the [United States].

I disagree. I think it has more than a little to do with our national security and our safety. I have heard from too many Arkansas mothers and fathers whose children have died because of a

drug overdose. This operation was about protecting those families and families like them, anyone who struggles with or who has lost a loved one to addiction.

Again, Nicolas Maduro was an indicted drug trafficker and narcoterorist. He was in league with the very drug traffickers who are in the business of killing our kids for profit. He didn't just tolerate drug traffickers in Venezuela or lose control of his territory and allow them to run wild; he was a drug trafficker.

I didn't conclude that alone. That was not President Trump's sole decision or even President Biden's decision. That was the finding of a grand jury made up of normal Americans, on more than one occasion.

As for the future of Venezuela, well, of course, it is ultimately up to the Venezuelans. The interim authorities in charge in Venezuela today know what we expect of them: Stop the drug trafficking and the weapons trafficking. Accept the return of their refugees and migrants. Release political prisoners. Expel the Iranians, the Cubans, the Islamic terrorists, like Hezbollah operatives, who have turned Venezuela into a launching pad for regional instability and threats to America's interests.

It will be a difficult road. Our best source of leverage, though, over the interim authorities is the quarantine that we have imposed on their black market oil, which the Maduro regime used to enrich itself—not just the regime but the senior leaders of the regime as well, if you know anything about their spending habits or their tastes.

Yet this resolution—this very resolution we are debating—might very well require the removal of our Navy ships from the Caribbean that are enforcing the quarantine. Is that what our Democratic friends really want—to let these Chavistas in control of the interim authorities start exporting black market oil again, to keep themselves in power, unaccountable not only to their own people but to America's vital national security interests?

I will say I don't think so. I don't think our Democratic colleagues want to let Venezuela start exporting black market oil again. I believe they were genuine years ago, when they called for Maduro's ouster. I believe they are genuine, now, when they condemn Maduro as an illegitimate dictator and a drug trafficker, someone who repressed his own people, even if they then immediately want to eat their cake and have it too by saying that President Trump still shouldn't have removed him. I think it is just that they are so blinded by their hatred of President Trump that they feel they have to condemn this action in some way.

Instead, why don't we just, as I said at the beginning, celebrate the removal of a virulently anti-American, illegitimate communist dictator who was trafficking drugs into our country and

then help the Venezuelan people build a bright future that restores the glories of their past, turning a nation that was the most dangerous, anti-American country in our backyard into the most stable and prosperous pro-American country in our backyard.

So I urge a "no" vote against this resolution.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Mississippi.

TRIBUTE TO JOHN KEAST

Mr. WICKER. Mr. President, this week, we began a new year's work here in the Congress. But as we open this chapter, I have a bittersweet task of helping to close another.

Beside me sits John Patrick Keast, my longtime adviser and friend. In a few short days, John will conclude nearly two decades of service to my office, to the people of Mississippi, and to the United States of America. The U.S. Senate and the people we represent are better off because of John Keast and his work.

For years, John has been beside me, through hearings, briefings, and meetings, at campaigns and community events, and during negotiations, decisions, and celebrations. Through it all, he has been a wise and steady presence. So, for a few minutes today, I want to commend his remarkable record of service.

More than 30 years ago, a very young but wise John Keast came to work for an upstart who was running to represent Mississippi's First Congressional District. I hired John Keast to be my campaign manager. As he would do time and time again, John rose to the challenge and then some. Not only did we win the election that year, but John began absorbing in encyclopedic detail the ins and outs of Mississippi. This knowledge enabled him to serve our people well.

Name a town in the First Congressional District of Mississippi, and John can tell you where to find the precinct boxes. List a few local issues, and John could tell you what he has done to help alleviate problems there. It is fitting that John will soon be settling down in the First Congressional District of Mississippi in Oxford.

I mentioned John's outstanding recall and knowledge because John would never do that. And it is that combination of intelligence and humility that has proven so dynamic. John often told me that he likes to hire staff who are smarter than he is. I can say that for myself. It is easier for me to find staff that are smarter than I am. It is a little bit difficult and a tall order for John. He has the command of the nitty-gritty and of the big picture. He can go toe-to-toe with the best of the policy wonks, but he also knows what he doesn't know. He understands when to defer to the experts. That self-awareness is just what you want in an adviser.

When John and I got to Washington, we were determined to make a difference. It was 1994, the first Republican majority in the House in 40 years, the famous Republican Revolution. We were excited to fulfill our contract with America, as it was called. I remember it well, and so does John. We stayed in session for 93 days, managing to vote on every Contract with America item before the 100-day milestone.

Somehow, I became president of the freshman class, and John was there every step of the way—brainstorming with me at Bullfeathers restaurant during new Member orientation, building an all-star team for the office, and advancing my priorities for north Mississippi. And what teams he has assembled over the years—there may be some of them in earshot of me today. That constitutes a network of John Keast friends and alumni, and they are accomplishing great things across this body, across this city, and in this country.

I expect if we were to send each of them a pop quiz, most would be able to answer one question in particular, and that would be: What are the "Four Ps of Success in Washington"? When John gives staffers guidance in DC, he tells them to focus on four areas. They should understand policy, process, politics, and people—policy, process, politics, and people, the four dynamics at work on Capitol Hill and in this city.

John has earned every right to give his advice because he has been the embodiment of it. John is fluent in policy. John knows that we come to Washington to make good legislation and provide good oversight that benefits the American people. Name a portfolio, and John Keast has influenced it.

In our days in the House, John was especially vital in my efforts to improve our energy resources, our roadways, and our national defense assets. Together, we fought to create jobs and commerce for hard-working Americans.

The world has changed a lot in 30 years. We no longer use the IBM Selectric correcting typewriters my office inherited when John and I were setting up shop in the House. The world continues to evolve rapidly. John has shaped policy that has and will maintain American leadership through all this change. Nowhere is this truer than in his leadership of my Commerce Committee staff and my Armed Services Committee staff.

It is difficult to summarize John's success as staff director on these committees. He fought for legislation that brought well over \$1 billion in infrastructure and broadband funding to our State of Mississippi and across the country. His work on the CHIPS and Science Act, which I was proud to vote for, invested in the universities of America's heartland. Actions like these will help supercharge Mississippi's growth and development for decades, and you can say that for the entire heartland of our country.