

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 narcoterrorist. 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.

We have had lofty goals on the Senate Armed Services Committee. We are charging ahead on America's military rebuild and on transformational acquisition reform and working toward the success of the AUKUS partnership, and we are helping Ukraine and Taiwan stand up to tyrants. We are making great strides on each of these efforts. John Keast has been integral to every one.

We had another lofty goal in the Armed Services Committee: to build a member-driven National Defense Authorization Act and work it through the Senate in regular order and in the light of day. It takes a master of Senate process to accomplish that goal, and John has done so. He can cite Senate rules by chapter and verse. He can anticipate and maneuver through this body's complicated idiosyncratic process. That knowledge bore fruit in countless backstage victories. But for one prominent example, take this year's success in the Senate NDAA. We saw a remarkably efficient markup followed by primetime—daylight—floor votes. Unusual in this body.

John pairs his procedural dexterity with 20/20 political vision. He understands that political realities shape what any individual Member can accomplish in Congress. John knows when to push in a negotiation and when to make difficult compromises. And that must take place in this bipartisan body. He has earned trust on both sides of the aisle. Both my colleagues and his fellow staffers know John to be a man of his word.

John understands these first three dynamics—policy, process, politics—because at the end of the day, he understands the final “p”—people. John has formed strong relationships with the mayors, alderman, and city councilmen of north Mississippi, with industry leaders and entrepreneurs across the Nation, with lawmakers, Hill staff, administration officials, and most personally with all those fortunate enough to have worked with him on Team Wicker.

His team members have been devoted and for good reason. John knows how to nurture talent. He takes time to show staff their skills and inspire them to greater heights. He sets a high bar and expects his team to meet it. When he hires someone, he gets out of the way and lets them excel. Those people skills have paid off. The policy results speak for themselves—the 30 years of policy results. But so does the outpouring of support John has received since announcing his departure. Many are here now and will be at future celebrations to honor him.

As I speak about John today, I do not speak only for myself. My wife Gayle and I both will always be grateful for John Keast. My children will be grateful for the influence of John Keast. At so many pivotal moments, he has been a trusted and faithful friend, as well as a public servant. I know he will remain so. We look forward to seeing him often

in Mississippi—I mentioned in Oxford, where he will reunite with his wife Virginia and their children Patrick, Grace, and Anna Kate.

Until then, we remain and always will be grateful for this hero of public service, this great American patriot, John Keast.

I yield the floor.

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

#### FRAUD ACCOUNTABILITY ACT

Mrs. BLACKBURN. Mr. President, I think we are all pleased to be back with a new year and hard at work.

One of the things that has really captured the attention of the American people in this new year is the amount of fraud that has been uncovered in Minnesota. What we have learned is that now the total has climbed to \$9 billion—still rising. It is important to note that is all stolen taxpayer money. It is so interesting that this big theft was uncovered by a young independent journalist who really blew the story open when he started visiting childcare centers following a lead, visiting these childcare centers in Minneapolis.

Despite these centers having pulled in tens of millions of taxpayer dollars, the childcare centers were actually empty. There were no children; there were no cars in the parking lot. Usually—not even any staff to come answer the door. These were visits that were made during the day when one would assume that children and their caretakers would be present in the facility.

We know and what we are learning is that this childcare fraud scheme is just one part of a widespread fraud operation taking place in Minnesota. Under State Democrats, billions of taxpayer dollars were stolen by front groups that pretended they were providing social services. But they padded their pockets. They basically took this money from vulnerable individuals—programs that were intended for children, for the elderly, for individuals with autism. So basically, they were robbing the taxpayer, padding their pockets, pocketing all of this money that was intended for vulnerable citizens.

The Trump administration has targeted this fraud network, and they have been working on this for several months. They are bringing dozen of criminal indictments, and the list of these alleged crimes is staggering. I think the list grows every day, and that is one thing that is shocking to people.

But what you have is tens of millions of dollars that were stolen through Minnesota's Medicaid Housing Stabilization Services Program. The money was appropriated. The money was sent from the Federal Government to the State of Minnesota, and poof, it has gone into pockets, not into programs. The Housing Stabilization Services Program was meant to help people

with disabilities, yet what you had was these scammers come in and take most of that money.

Millions more were stolen through the State's Feeding Our Future Program. Here, the fraudsters claimed that they were providing thousands of meals every day to needy children. Instead, what we are learning is they weren't providing those thousands of meals; they were spending your hard-earned tax dollars on luxury vehicles and on pricey real estate.

And yet millions more were stolen by a single woman who paid parents to enroll their children in her fraudulent autism therapy program even though most of those children had never been diagnosed with autism.

I know that Tennesseans and, indeed, I am sure, many Americans across the country are wondering, How in the world could this possibly happen?

One of the things I have heard from Tennesseans most on is this fraud issue because they can't believe nobody ever noticed. We are talking \$9 billion in fraud—and climbing—in one State. Well, we know the answer to this, from what we are learning, is that most of this fraud was committed by members of Minnesota's Somali community and that that community is closely tied to the State's Democratic machine. It appears that there were some Democrats who chose to look the other way, and they allowed this to happen. Meanwhile, the Biden administration poured gas on the fire by eliminating safeguards that were meant to stop the waste, fraud, and abuse of your hard-earned taxpayer dollars.

In 2024, the Joe Biden administration scrapped a rule that required childcare centers to verify that kids actually attended their facilities in order to receive Federal funding. Think about this: They removed the provision that says you have got to tell us you are actually enrolling children in your childcare center. So what does that do? That invites fraud. In total, his administration paid out more than \$19 billion to daycare centers without having any verification that that childcare center had children—\$19 billion to daycare centers.

Thankfully, President Trump and his administration are working to ensure that these fraudsters face justice and that something like this can never happen again.

Right now, you have Federal authorities on the ground in Minnesota who are working to identify and arrest these criminals who have defrauded the Federal Government and the U.S. taxpayer. President Trump has also frozen more than \$10 billion in Federal funding for social services programs to Minnesota and to other States—California, Colorado, Illinois, and New York—where there are fraud investigations.

The President's message is quite clear: If these States want to see a dime of Federal taxpayer dollars, they must prove that they have put in place