

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

some safeguards to prevent fraud. It is common sense. If you are going to take this Federal money for your State, for goodness' sake, put some safeguards in place so you know whoever is receiving the money is going to use the money as intended, that they will meet the deliverable, that they will show their outcomes.

I think it is so interesting in Minnesota, with the spotlight on that State, that Governor Tim Walz has announced he is not going to seek reelection for that job, that he is dropping out of the race. Minnesotans deserve an immediate resignation from him, and we are hearing that he will not do that.

We know that this issue goes far beyond Minnesota. Just last month, California's nonpartisan auditor found that eight State agencies have a high risk of waste, fraud, and abuse. Yet they have taken zero corrective action—no corrective action. Across the board, the State is at risk of losing billions to fraud in food assistance, unemployment benefits, and in the State's Medicaid Program.

In New York, Republican lawmakers are calling for an independent audit of the State's spending following several fraud scandals. In one case, scammers in Brooklyn used two adult daycare facilities to steal—get this—\$68 million in taxpayer money from the State's Medicaid home care program. A State comptroller's office also revealed that the State provided more than \$500 million in Medicaid benefits to out-of-State residents.

If you live in New York and you are getting benefits through the Medicaid program and you find out that a half a billion dollars has been used to provide benefits for people who are not even residents of the State, you ought to be asking questions.

In Illinois, the State's auditor general found that the government paid out more than \$5 billion in fraudulent unemployment insurance. Well, do you know what? They didn't do a thing about it.

Last month, the Trump administration indicted two men outside Chicago who submitted nearly \$300 million in fraudulent claims to Medicare and Medicaid as well as to private insurers.

Then, this week, in Mississippi, a trial started for a man who faces charges from the Justice Department for allegedly participating in a scheme to steal \$77 million in Federal aid intended for needy families. Instead, the scammers spent the money on luxury vehicles, investments, private schools, and more.

While President Trump works to end this abuse of taxpayer dollars, Congress should do everything possible to support his efforts.

This week, I am introducing the Fraud Accountability Act, which would amend the Immigration and Nationality Act to explicitly make clear that fraud is a deportable offense. If you come to our country to steal from the American people, you ought to be de-

ported; and if you have somehow gained American citizenship, you should be stripped of it. Every single Member of this Chamber should support this legislation.

The era of rampant fraud is over. Under President Trump, we are going to continue to put the American people first.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Rhode Island.

**PROVIDING FOR CONGRESSIONAL DISAPPROVAL UNDER CHAPTER 8 OF TITLE 5, UNITED STATES CODE, OF THE RULE SUBMITTED BY THE ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY RELATING TO “AIR PLAN APPROVAL; SOUTH DAKOTA; REGIONAL HAZE PLAN FOR THE SECOND IMPLEMENTATION PERIOD”—Motion to Proceed**

Mr. WHITEHOUSE. Mr. President, I move to proceed to Calendar No. 290, S.J. Res. 86.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the motion.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

Motion to proceed to Calendar No. 290, S.J. Res. 86, providing for congressional disapproval under chapter 8 of title 5, United States Code, of the rule submitted by the Environmental Protection Agency relating to “Air Plan Approval; South Dakota; Regional Haze Plan for the Second Implementation Period”.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Rhode Island.

Mr. WHITEHOUSE. Mr. President, coal is America's dirtiest energy source. Coal pollution from powerplants befools our air, pollutes our water, and leaches into our food. Coal pollution causes acid rain. Coal pollution causes severe health issues, even death.

Between 1990 and 2020, pollution from coal-fired powerplants killed 460,000 Americans—23,000 deaths per year on average. Despite how massive that death toll is, the trend has been in a good direction. Coal plant-caused death rates have decreased in the last 15 years as more and more coal plants have either shut down in favor of cleaner and cheaper energy sources or—often in answer to Clean Air Act programs—adopted broadly available pollution reduction technologies which significantly reduce but do not eliminate the health-harming emissions and pollution.

One such Clean Air Act program, the Regional Haze Program, addresses haze and visibility impairment in national parks and wilderness areas. Unsurprisingly, coal plants are the Nation's most significant source of haze. The same coal pollutants that drive severe health issues and deaths nationwide, including particulate matter, nitrogen oxides, sulfur dioxide, and volatile organic compounds, also drive haze formation. Haze is a pollution marker. The Clean Air Act's regional haze provision requires States to reduce emissions from haze-causing sources

through controls or retirements where necessary to make reasonable progress toward natural visibility conditions.

The EPA provides guidance regulations that help States develop appropriate regional haze plans which are due every 10 to 15 years. The Clean Air Act presumes that additional controls or retirements will be necessary for reasonable progress. They are thus required each time new haze plans are due unless the State can demonstrate that no action would be the reasonable course.

South Dakota took no action in its latest regional haze plan to address haze pollution over the long term. It made no updates to significantly out-of-date controls at its three major emitters—a coal plant, a cement plant, and a lime plant—and it failed to demonstrate that that inaction was reasonable. The Trump EPA approved the plan anyway.

The resulting pollution will blow downwind toward Midwestern and Eastern States. The EPA's approval puts forward a reading of the Clean Air Act that is blatantly at odds with the text, the context, and the purpose of the act, and that encourages the spread of harm to the downwind States from these polluting plants. Well, there is something we can do about it here.

In 1996, Congress enacted the Congressional Review Act to give Congress the opportunity to vote on administrative regulations. During the Biden administration, Republicans in the Senate forced 35 rollcall votes to try to kill rules that sought to protect consumers' public health and public lands—35 to 0. It was an astonishing record. Now that the Trump administration is in power, it has engaged at breakneck speed to tear down the protections of Americans' health and safety and our environment.

I know it is an uphill struggle in our polluter-funded Congress and particularly with this polluter-controlled Trump administration, but I nevertheless urge support for this commonsense Congressional Review Act resolution and hope that we can make it a brighter day as well as a clearer day for the downwind States.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from North Carolina.

**VENEZUELA**

Mr. TILLIS. Mr. President, I appreciate the opportunity to come to the floor and talk about a couple of things.

Earlier today, we had a classified briefing on the situation in Venezuela. I have to say that I am very impressed and thankful for the expertise, the resources, and the work that was done by the men and women on the ground. It was truly an extraordinary operation that couldn't have been done by any other nation other than the United States.

As for those who were injured, I understand they are recovering and that some have been released from the hospital. I hope they heal up safely and