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Senate

The Senate met at 10 a.m. and was called to order by the Honorable BERNIE MORENO, a Senator from the State of Ohio.

PRAYER

The Chaplain, Dr. Barry C. Black, offered the following prayer:

Let us pray.

Eternal Spirit, we praise You because of Your righteousness and lift our hearts in adoration to You, the King Most High. Pour eternity into these brief lives of ours and use us for Your glory. Lift our lawmakers to the heights of noble living, renewing them with Your hope and strengthening them with Your power. Lord, show them how to make wise use of their days to become the people they ought to be and to do the things that make for peace in our Nation and world. May their highest motive be not to win over one another but to win with one another by doing Your will.

We pray in Your great Name. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The Presiding Officer led the Pledge of Allegiance, as follows:

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

APPOINTMENT OF ACTING PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will please read a communication to the Senate from the President pro tempore (Mr. GRASSLEY).

The senior assistant bill clerk read the following letter:

U.S. SENATE,
PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE,
Washington, DC, March 3, 2026.

To the Senate:

Under the provisions of rule I, paragraph 3, of the Standing Rules of the Senate, I hereby appoint the Honorable BERNIE MORENO, a

Senator from the State of Ohio, to perform the duties of the Chair.

CHUCK GRASSLEY,
President pro tempore.

Mr. MORENO thereupon assumed the Chair as Acting President pro tempore.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Morning business is closed.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

HOUSING FOR THE 21ST CENTURY ACT—Motion to Proceed

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the Senate will resume consideration of the motion to proceed H.R. 6644, which the clerk will report.

The senior assistant bill clerk read as follows:

Motion to proceed to Calendar No. 343, H.R. 6644, a bill to increase the supply of housing in America, and for other purposes.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The majority leader is recognized.

DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, my Democrat colleagues are at it again. They are on their second shutdown in 6 months, and in a few short days, a lot of government workers will be missing part of their paychecks again thanks to Senate Democrats.

Well, let's just briefly review the 2026 fiscal year.

At the start of the fiscal year, which is October 1 for the Federal Government, Democrats shut down the entire

government for a staggering 43 days—the longest government shutdown in history—and by the time a handful of Democrat Senators agreed to end the shutdown, air travel was in chaos, essential programs had been affected, and many government employees had turned to loans, credit cards, and food banks to make ends meet, but even the worst government shutdown in history wasn't enough for Senate Democrats.

Fast-forward now to January of this year. Democrats and Republicans in both Houses of Congress had agreed on a final Department of Homeland Security spending bill that included deescalation training for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, as well as \$20 million for body cameras for ICE officers. But Democrats decided that wasn't enough, so Republicans and the White House agreed to reopen negotiations. Knowing that negotiation takes time, we suggested a temporary funding extension for several weeks, but Democrats insisted on no more than 2 weeks. When 2 weeks, predictably, wasn't enough, especially since Democrats were in no hurry to put together a legislative proposal, Democrats shut down the entire Department, and now, a whole lot of Department of Homeland Security employees are starting to miss pay thanks to Senate Democrats. That includes TSA agents—the people tasked with the safety of air travel in this country—as well as Coast Guard civilian employees, members of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, who do so much—I might add—essential disaster response work here at home, and many others.

Let's be very clear. This isn't a principled stand by Democrats against Republicans who refuse to negotiate. That is not the case. The White House has not only made a lot of reforms to ICE procedures on its own, it has shown a clear willingness to legislate reforms and has made more than one substantial offer to Democrats. Democrats could have recognized this and

• This "bullet" symbol identifies statements or insertions which are not spoken by a Member of the Senate on the floor.



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chosen to extend DHS funding while negotiations finished up or we could be considering an agreement right now. Instead, it is becoming abundantly clear that what Democrats really want is to keep this alive as a political issue. If Democrats really wanted to put reforms in place, they would be doing everything they could to get a bill.

Of course, the White House isn't going to sign off on every Democrat demand—no side gets everything it wants in negotiations—but Democrats could be on the verge of having substantial reforms signed into law if they were at all serious about actually implementing solutions, but they are not. They are interested in politics, not policy, and a whole lot of essential government employees are suffering as a result, to say nothing of the essential government work—the work of government—that is suffering. The deployment of cyber security measures to Federal Agencies has been delayed. States are having to wait for disaster reimbursements. FEMA training centers are closed, affecting 45,000 students per week, and the list goes on.

I mentioned the air travel chaos that ensued as a result of Democrats' first fiscal year 2026 shutdown. Well, the longer this DHS shutdown drags on, the more likely it is that we will start to have staffing problems at airport checkpoints, which will lead to compounding flight delays and other problems.

Now, it shouldn't need saying that it is always a terrible idea to use the Department of Homeland Security as a political pawn. There are always threats to the homeland that have to be addressed, and that is exactly the work that is done by the Department of Homeland Security. But above all, right now, with an enhanced terror threat from Iran and Iran-funded terrorist groups, it is vital that we ensure the Department of Homeland Security is fully funded and fully functioning.

It is 2 more days until the Department of Homeland Security employees start missing part of their paychecks. I hope that my Democrat colleagues will finally decide to come to the table and bring their second shutdown in under 6 months to a close.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

The Democratic leader is recognized.

IRAN

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, it has been 4 days since Donald Trump launched America into a war that most Americans oppose, most Americans don't understand, and his own administration can't consistently explain.

I walked out of yesterday's intelligence briefing even more concerned than when I walked in because if the case for war were strong, the story would be consistent and steady. Instead, it changes by the hour.

First, Donald Trump suggested the goal was regime change. He said the people of Iran should rise up and take back their country.

Then it was about nuclear weapons—the same program he said was “obliterated” last summer.

Then, yesterday morning, Pete Hegseth said:

Iran had a conventional gun to our head.

He said:

This is not a so-called regime change war.

Then Secretary Rubio claimed it was about crippling Iran's missiles. Then it was about crippling Iran's navy. Then Rubio said it was about what Israel would do and the Iranian response. We heard that this attack was “defensive” in nature; then Rubio says it was “pre-emptive.”

Which one is it, Donald Trump? Regime change? Nuclear weapons? Missiles? An imminent threat to the homeland? Or a preemptive strike to stop future attacks on the region?

When the rationale for war keeps shifting, the strategy is missing, and that is because there is no strategy. And when the strategy is missing, the risk grows. Six American servicemembers are dead. The conflict is widening. The State Department is telling Americans to leave the region. Oil prices have already jumped 7 percent in just a few days.

History teaches us a simple lesson: Wars without a clear objective do not stay small. They get bigger. They get bloodier. They get longer. They get more expensive.

This is not a defensive war. This is not a necessary war. This is a war of choice. The American people do not want another endless war of choice in the Middle East. They do not want to see our troops fight and die in a pointless war. Parents don't want to worry about whether or not their kids will be sent abroad to fight in a conflict Americans didn't ask for.

The American people want leadership that is focused on lowering costs here at home because, while this administration debates which justification to use for the war, American families are debating which bill to pay. Gas prices are rising again. Electric bills are through the roof. Groceries are still too high. Housing costs are crushing middle-class families. Health insurance premiums are rising. The President should be focused on lowering costs.

Instead of mission creep abroad, we need cost relief here at home. Instead of shifting rationales for war, we need a clear strategy for affordability. That is what Americans are asking for, and that is what Senate Democrats are fighting for.

AFFORDABILITY

Mr. President, that is why, this week, the Senate is moving long-overdue

housing legislation, the 21st Century ROAD to Housing Act, and I want to thank Senator WARREN for her incredible work bringing this package to fruition.

The ROAD to Housing Act is a good step, but Democrats know it is only the first step. We have much more work to do to fix the housing crisis—to restore the promise of homeownership and bring rents down. Democrats will continue to develop and push additional housing policies that build on the good work of this bill, including the ideas we laid out in our housing rollout and in our report on the housing crisis in January.

But Democrats are not stopping at housing. Later this week, I will join my colleagues to roll out our food prices legislation. Our bill will go straight to one of the core problems of the food industry: too much consolidation in America's food system, especially in meat and agriculture, where a handful of dominant players squeeze farmers on one end and squeeze consumers on the other.

Donald Trump acts like affordability is some kind of hoax, but Democrats understand it is the No. 1 thing people think about when they are paying the rent, filling up their tank, and especially when pushing a cart down the grocery aisle. We will keep fighting on this issue because Americans want us to bring their costs down.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

ORDER OF BUSINESS

Mr. BARRASSO. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate recess from 3:30 p.m. to 5 p.m. today and that all time during recess count postclosure on the motion to proceed to H.R. 6644.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

IRAN

Mr. BARRASSO. Mr. President, the President of the United States took decisive action this weekend to keep America and Americans safe. He did it to stop the No. 1 state sponsor of terrorism in the world. He did it to forge a path to peace in the Middle East.

Operation Epic Fury is one of the boldest military operations in modern history. I support it fully and without reservation. President Trump had the courage to do what is right and what needed to be done, something previous administrations refused to do—absolutely refused.

Operation Epic Fury has one purpose: to protect the American people from a regime that has spent 47 years at war

against America—at war trying to destroy us. This is an absolutely blood-thirsty dictatorship, and blood is on their hands.

I heard the minority leader here on the floor, this morning, make reference to parents whose sons and daughters serve in the military. Well, I got an email yesterday from one of those parents, a Gold Star parent because she lost her son in Iraq in 2008. He was from Wyoming: SSG Tyler Pickett. She emailed me because I had spoken at his funeral in 2008. He was a 28-year-old from Saratoga, WY, killed by an IED. And we know that it was Iran who was supplying those IEDs that killed so many Americans in Iraq and in Afghanistan.

And what did she say? She said:

I have a request. When you speak to our President, Donald J. Trump, will you thank him from me and my family.

She said:

I was working when the attack on Iran took place. My brother texted me and called me. We were cheering, praying, and continuing to pray for everyone. Once again, thank you, and God be with you always.

That is a mother who lost her son, who is cheering the action this past weekend—and it continues today—to protect the American homeland for which her son lost his life 18 years ago.

For 47 years, Iran has chanted “Death to America,” and they have meant it. Iran has, for years, bankrolled and armed terrorists—terrorists who have killed thousands of Americans, terrorists who on October 7, 2023, killed over 1,000 Israelis and Americans in the attack by Hamas on Israel. Iran has plotted assassinations on American soil against dissidents, against American officials, and even against President Trump.

Iran continued to race to build nuclear weapons. Even after the successful bombing of their nuclear facilities, last year, the Iranians were not deterred. They said: We are going to go do it again.

And they stockpiled ballistic missiles, which could be used to deliver a nuclear weapon or just to attack neighbors.

Make no mistake, Iran is not some faraway threat. It is a clear and present danger to the United States, and this Congress knows it. Every Democrat knows it.

In the past 96 hours, Iran has launched a wave of missiles and drones and attacked 11 countries in the region. Think about that. Iran attacked 11 of their neighboring countries—immediate neighbors. Iran’s indiscriminate attacks prove Iran poses a universal threat. President Trump gave Iran every opportunity to choose peace. Instead, they chose delay, they chose deception, and they chose destruction. Iran refused every diplomatic off-ramp offered, and Iran believed it could once again run out the clock without consequences.

Iran was wrong. Operation Epic Fury was President Trump’s commitment to protect our Nation.

Today, Ayatollah Khamenei is dead, his senior leadership team is dead, and his reign of terror is over. Iran’s vast missile arsenal is being dismantled. Its nuclear program is being demolished. Its tentacles of terror are being severed. America is safer. The world is safer. This is American peace through strength.

Operation Epic Fury also sends a strong message to America’s other adversaries. Iran’s allies and enablers, of course, are China and Russia. For years, every dollar of Iranian oil and weapon sales sustained their terrorist regime. The oil and weapons also strengthened our adversaries. This anti-American axis of aggression is today weaker. President Trump has reshaped the strategic landscape in the Middle East and all around the world.

Inside Iran, people are pouring into the streets to celebrate. To the Iranian people: You have endured decades of repression and brutality. This is a moment of freedom. America stands with you.

As Operation Epic Fury succeeds in Iran, far-left Democrats in this Chamber are on a mission, and their mission is to undercut American peace through strength. This week, Democrats are going to force a vote on yet another War Powers Resolution. Their War Powers Resolution is intended to tie the hands of the Commander in Chief as he works to protect the country.

This administration briefed the Gang of 8 before Operation Epic Fury began. Every Senator is going to be briefed later this afternoon. The mission objectives are clear and publicly stated: Destroy Iran’s missile industry; destroy Iran’s Navy; destroy Iran’s terrorist network; stop the world’s No. 1 sponsor of terror from obtaining nuclear weapons.

President Trump protected our country. He did it by enforcing a redline with Iran. This is the opposite of President Obama and the Democrats. They tried to buy the Ayatollah’s friendship. They sent pallets of cash directly into Iran.

Under the War Powers Act, the President retains authority to conduct missions like this for up to 60 days. Now is the time for Congress to support our servicemembers in the combat zone, not undermine them from this very Chamber.

If Senate Democrats are truly concerned about protecting the American people, here is what they should do right now, right here, today: Fund the Department of Homeland Security. They have been holding it up, shutting it down. Today, the greatest threat to our safety at home right here is terrorism. We are at heightened alert.

The Department of Homeland Security is on the front line against terrorism, and the Democrats want to keep it shut.

The Department of Homeland Security protects our airports, our shores, our cyber networks, our homeland. Democrats have shut down the Depart-

ment of Homeland Security, and that shutdown endangers every single American citizen.

This weekend in Austin, TX, a killer wore a T-shirt with the Iranian flag and a sweatshirt that read “Property of Allah.” The investigation is ongoing, but the message is clear, now is the time for us to be on high alert. For the safety of the American people, the Department of Homeland Security needs to be fully funded. The workers need to be fully paid, not waiting and hoping to say: Well, will we ever get paid again, as the Democrats refuse to fund the Department of Homeland Security.

Republicans stand with the brave men and women who are carrying out Operation Epic Fury. We pray for their safety in harm’s way. We also pray for the family members who have given their lives in defense of our freedom, as the email that I have just read from the mother of SSG Tyler Pickett from Wyoming who lost his life in 2008 near Kirkuk in Iraq.

Peace through strength always keeps America secure, and as the majority whip, I am going to do everything possible to defeat Senator KAINE’s resolution that undercuts our peace through strength.

Republicans are going to continue to work for the safety and security of the American people and of this great country.

I yield the floor.

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

Ms. WARREN. Mr. President, we are facing a dark moment in our country’s history. On Saturday, Donald Trump decided to drag the American people into a reckless, illegal war with Iran, a war based on lies, a war launched with no imminent threat to our Nation.

Six U.S. servicemembers are now dead and more badly hurt. A missile from the United States and Israeli-led bombing campaign reportedly killed over 150 people at a girls’ school in Iran, many of them little girls, some as young as 7 years old. And now, violence is spreading across the Middle East, with the threat of that violence bleeding into the United States.

And for what? For another forever war that the American people do not want? Our Constitution is clear; only Congress can declare war. That is because one single person should not have the power to drag our entire country into a reckless war.

But that is exactly—exactly—what Donald Trump has done. He has given prepared remarks. He has spoken to the press. Yet, even after multiple bombing runs and the death of American servicemembers, Donald Trump cannot give a single clear reason for this war.

Why are we at war? Donald Trump has dozens of reasons and, ultimately, no reason at all. Worse yet, Donald Trump is dragging Americans into this war with no plan for how to end it. He

has no stated objectives, no clear strategies, no way to explain: When we accomplish this, we will leave. Even the deaths of Americans has not given Donald Trump pause. Instead, he doubles down.

Every hour, the Trump administration feeds us shifting justifications for this war; every hour, he contradicts a justification that he used earlier. Donald Trump said that Iran has restarted its nuclear program, but Donald Trump's own officials have said that is not true.

Donald Trump claimed that Iran is developing long-range missiles that will soon be capable of hitting the United States. That directly goes against what his own government has claimed.

As recently as January, the Trump administration said they would not engage in any regime change wars. And now, they are calling on the Iranian people to rise up and change their regime. Khamenei was an authoritarian dictator who has the blood of Americans on his hands, but killing one leader does not topple a brutal regime. The next leader could be just as bad or even worse. And Donald Trump's deceptions keep right on coming. In June of last year, Trump bombed Iran and claimed that Iran's key nuclear enrichment facilities had been "completely and totally obliterated."

"Completely and totally obliterated."

And now, Trump is telling the American people that he had to attack Iran on Saturday because Iran posed an imminent threat based on their nuclear capabilities. Both of those things cannot be true.

If Donald Trump believes that Iran's nuclear ambitions are a threat, he had the chance to curb them. In fact, the United States had a deal that would have prevented Iran from getting a nuclear weapon. That was President Obama's nuclear deal with Iran, and Trump ripped up that deal and got nothing in return.

Instead of doing the hard work of diplomacy to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, Trump is lying to Americans while dragging us into yet another reckless war that is costing American lives.

Already, six U.S. servicemembers have been killed, and others have been seriously hurt in these attacks. My heart is with these servicemembers and their loved ones, but Trump just doesn't seem to care.

In fact, he said he is not ruling out sending United States' ground troops into Iran. He even said that, while every President says, Well, there will be no boots on the ground, he doesn't say it. He is proud of the fact that he is willing to put American lives at risk for this war of his own choosing. It is truly horrific.

The ripple effects of this violence are even broader. Protesters in countries across the world are storming U.S. Embassies and threatening the lives of

State Department officials. American citizens living in the region are now in the middle of a war zone, in danger, and unsure if they can make it home safely.

And the violence is spreading. Iran has attacked at least nine countries since the Trump administration and Israel started this war on Saturday, putting more American servicemembers and more American civilians abroad at risk and threatening to destabilize the entire region.

I disagree with Donald Trump, but I understand that he won the 2024 election. But when he ran in 2024, he said repeatedly that he would be a peace President. He ran on a platform of no more wars. He said he would be a President to stop wars, not start them, and Americans believed him.

But now, we face an ugly reality. In the modern era, no American President has ordered more military strikes against as many different countries as Donald Trump. None. Donald Trump's disregard for human life seems to have no bounds.

I want to make one more point here, and it is about something that is very personal to me. All three of my brothers served in the military. My oldest brother served off and on in Vietnam for 6 years, running 266 combat missions. I remember the fear our family felt with every late-night phone call or official-looking letter. Could my brother be hurt? Could he be dead?

It is still hard to find the words to describe the pain that we put American families through when we ship a generation off to war. Mamas are worried sick that their sons or daughters will not make it home. A new generation of veterans will have to live with the horrors of war, live with the trauma of witnessing innocent victims of war take their final breath, live with their own injuries and prolonged recoveries.

The people who will be asked to sacrifice their lives are the American people. It won't be Donald Trump. It won't be Pete Hegseth. It will be our sons and daughters, our nieces and nephews, our grandchildren. Trump is right to note that people die in war. That happens as surely as night follows day. And that means that the leaders who send young people to die must take the consequences of this conflict with the seriousness it deserves, with life-and-death seriousness.

Instead, Trump and his team seem to be treating war with Iran like a game, as if Commander in Chief was a costume and Secretary of War is a fun, pretend title, and the lives lost are just numbers on a board with the title Operation Epic Fury.

Forty-eight hours after he started this war, Trump finally addressed the American people and took questions. He spoke to the people who are worried sick about what this war means for them and what it means for the people they love.

Instead of offering a plan, however, he talked about renovations to his

gold-encrusted ballroom. It is sickening, and it is time for this Congress to make him stop.

Here is what we need: First, Donald Trump started this war illegally, without the consent of Congress, and he cannot be allowed to continue it. There is too much at stake. Every single Senator must support Senator Kaine's War Powers Resolution to block this reckless war. This isn't about politics. This is about life and death for young Americans who will be called on to serve and for civilians who will end up in harm's way.

Second, the United States must investigate the bombing of an elementary school in Iran. Israel claims it was not aware of any operations in the area by their own IDF, and that raises the question of whether it was a United States strike and how that happened.

The U.S. military's Central Command has said it needs to look into the incident. As we regularly do following a catastrophe of this size with the possible involvement of the U.S. military, we must find out what happened and hold those responsible to account.

And, third, we need to hold accountable every single Trump administration official who lied to the American people about this unconstitutional war. People have a right to the truth from their government, and nowhere, at no time, is that more crucial than in the life-and-death decisions surrounding the decision to go to war.

We must hold our elected officials accountable if they don't level with the people who will be sent to fight and possibly to die. Along with many of you, I am angry at what this administration is doing. I feel grief for those killed in the conflict. I feel anguish for the families at home trying to make sense of why their beloved husbands, wives, sons, daughters, moms, and dads are sent into a war that no one can explain.

And I will keep fighting for an end to this war.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. CURTIS). The Senator from Connecticut.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUESTS—S. 1032

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, I just left a hearing involving the Veterans of Foreign Wars before the Veterans' Committee. In fact, it was a joint hearing of both the House's and the Senate's Veterans' Committees, where I am the ranking member.

I informed them that I was coming to the floor of the U.S. Senate to seek unanimous consent on the Major Richard Star Act, and there was a spontaneous standing ovation. I dare say that that applause was totally bipartisan—nonpolitical—because there is no more glaring and egregious injustice affecting veterans today—our Nation's patriots—than the fact that 50,000 veterans and servicemembers are forced to medically retire or to undergo medical separation because of combat-related injuries and are unable to collect both retirement benefits and disability compensation. Right now, the men and

women who are in harm's way in the Middle East may be injured—we hope not—but there may be casualties. We know that some have already been injured.

If they retire as a result of those combat injuries with less than 20 years of service—the majority of them have less than 20 years of service—they will be reduced in their retirement pay, dollar for dollar, from their VA disability benefits. Let me just repeat: Right now, combat-injured veterans are getting a dollar-for-dollar reduction of their military retirement pay from their VA disability benefits. So if they have to retire because they have been injured in combat, they sacrifice, dollar for dollar, their retirement pay because of the disability benefits that they receive. They are entitled to both. They have earned both. The Nation promised them both. They deserve both.

The Major Richard Star Act will finally provide some justice to those veterans. It will finally provide these military retirees with their full disability and Department of Defense retirement benefits, righting this longstanding injustice.

It is sponsored by 77 of my colleagues in the Senate, including both Republicans and Democrats. It has similar support in the House of Representatives. We have never been provided with a vote—yes, a vote. If it did receive a vote, it would pass overwhelmingly. The simple request for a vote has been denied. There are a variety of excuses that have been offered like “It costs too much.”

Well, as the national commander of the VFW said today, in supporting this bill, the costs of providing for our veterans are part of the cost of war. We are in a war right now, real-time, and some of those combat-injured veterans will be sacrificing their disability or retirement pay because of this injustice. And then some have characterized the Major Richard Star Act as providing for double-dipping. Well, our veterans forced to retire because of combat injuries have earned both. We can afford to right this injustice. Whatever the estimate on the amount of funding required—and it has varied over the years—it is a pittance compared to the costs of our national defense—close to a trillion dollars now. This country can afford to do the right thing by these combat-injured veterans, and we have a moral imperative to do so.

Veterans who have served more than 20 years already received both the VA and the DOD payments in whole. Veterans who have served less than 20 years because they are combat injured—frankly, for any reason—deserve better.

This week and last, thousands of veterans have flown into our Nation's Capital from every corner of the country to advocate for their top priorities, and collectively, they are calling on Congress—all of them—all of the veterans

service organizations, all of the groups that represent our Nation's heroes have told us unequivocally and repeatedly that correcting this injustice is absolutely necessary. The benefits they have earned are the benefits they should be receiving right now, and it will make a huge difference in the lives of all these veterans.

Take, for example, SSG Clayton Smith. He was involuntarily medically retired after 11 years in the U.S. Army because of his combat-related injury. He feels that veterans impacted by this offset have upheld their commitment to serve, but the system fails to recognize its commitment to him—promises made, promises kept, but in this case, not kept. In his words:

Passing the Richard Star Act would not only restore financial fairness, but it would restore confidence among combat-injured veterans that their sacrifice is recognized equally.

It would also help veterans like Dan Nevins from Florida. His military career was ended when an improvised explosive device detonated beneath his vehicle during his deployment to Iraq in 2004. He is a bilateral amputee. He has overcome years of recurring infection and countless surgeries. He says he has no regrets about his service. He joined to serve his country. He believes it is worth fighting for.

These veterans deserve elected officials who will fight for them and deliver the benefits they have earned. In the words of Barry Jesinoski, the DAV's national adjutant and CEO:

Respect without action is meaningless.

A message to my colleagues: Respect without action is meaningless. Rhetoric without action is meaningless. Words without action are worthless. So let's put the politics aside and listen to our veterans. Let's pass the Richard Star Act today.

Mr. President, notwithstanding rule XXII, I ask unanimous consent that the Committee on Armed Services be discharged and that the Senate proceed to the immediate consideration of S. 1032, the Major Richard Star Act; that the bill 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 an objection?

The Senator from Wisconsin.

Mr. JOHNSON. Reserving the right to object.

Mr. President, first of all, let's—since I have the opportunity: We all revere and respect those men and women who have served and sacrificed to defend our liberty. That is completely non-partisan. We prove it day in and day out. We prove it by how much money we spend on veterans' benefits.

So I certainly appreciate the Senator from Connecticut, his advocacy. I advocate for veterans as well. It is interesting, though, this unanimous consent request is very similar, if not identical, to the same unanimous consent request offered on October 9 of 2025 by the Senator from Connecticut.

At that point in time, responding to it, that unanimous consent, the Senator from Mississippi—the then- and now-current chair of the Armed Services Committee—stated, and I quote:

[M]y colleague is asking for an entitlement that does amount to a double benefit and that we cannot afford. We are talking between \$9 billion and \$10 billion on the Department of Defense authorization act. And we are talking about . . . a bill, a piece of legislation, that really belongs in another jurisdiction.

I am assuming he was talking about the Veterans' Affairs Committee.

We cannot possibly add another 9 billion to 10 billion of entitlement money to this Defense Authorization Act.

And that is the reason that in Democrat majorities and Republican majorities, House Democrat majorities and Senate Democrat majorities, and in Democrat administrations, this legislation has never been accepted because we simply cannot afford it.

The chairman of Armed Services went on to say:

Historically, Congress has provided permanent new benefits only after we have identified an offset, savings of a similar amount.

There is no such offset identified in this unanimous consent request. And when we do not identify offsets, that means \$10 billion has come out of readiness, out of the strength of our military to defend ourselves during the most dangerous time we have had since World War II. And with that logic, the chairman of Armed Services, the Senator from Mississippi, objected to the Senator from Connecticut's unanimous consent request.

Now, what has changed is we now have a score on this specific bill. When the Senator from Mississippi was objecting last time, he was quoting a \$9 billion to \$10 billion score. We just got the score on this one. Now, it is \$70 billion to \$75 billion.

Again, we all revere the finest among us. The men and women of the military that I know didn't serve and sacrifice oblivious to the fact that we are mortgaging our children's future. They served and sacrificed to secure our children's future. So we can't just come down here and talk about how much we love vets and how we want to support them. We also have to look at the reality of the situation in dollars and cents. We are \$39 trillion in debt. Over the next decade, it will be \$60 trillion. We have to look at the dollars and cents.

So, again, this unanimous consent request went from an assumed cost of 10 billion to now 70 billion, which reminds me an awful lot of the PACT Act, which I voted for and supported. But when that was first being discussed, it was called the burn pit legislation.

My former chief of staff served in Iraq; he was impacted by it. But I remember discussions—these were informal. I don't have anything formally written, but back in early discussions of the burn pit legislation, we were being told it was going to be \$1 billion or \$2 billion a year.

When the House passed their version of the PACT Act, the CBO score was for \$322 billion over 10 years. The Senate got its hands on that piece of legislation, and the score was \$667 billion. The current window is over \$700 billion. That is not chump change. That is approaching a trillion dollars over 10 years.

Now, again, it is not like we are spending less on veterans, even though our veteran population is declining. In 2019, we spent \$200 billion on veterans' benefits. Again, now, their retirement is through the Defense Department. This is just benefits for VA. Two hundred billion dollars, that equates to about \$11,500 per veteran. This was before the pandemic—so \$200 billion, \$11,500 per vet.

This year, we will spend about \$435 billion, so it has more than doubled, and our cost per vet is up to \$28,000 per veteran. Somebody has got to look at this.

We are \$177 billion for veterans' benefits above and beyond what we spent in 2019, fully inflated for inflation. There is no other account in the Federal Government that is that out of whack, comparing 2019 fully inflated.

So this is not the way to pass this legislation. The Senator from Connecticut has all these cosponsors. Fine. Go through the committee process. Scrutinize this. Take a look at the score, take a look at what the history of this is. It is not like we are the first Congress that reveres the members of the military.

For some reason, they differentiate between somebody who has 20 years of service or less than. Let's look at that. Let's debate it. Let's bring it through the committee process, regular order. And then if it has that great support, I might even vote for it.

But let's go through the process to see whether these policies make sense, whether there truly is double-dipping, whether there is a better way of handling—by the way, I have been told the Department of War is looking at this exact issue. They have reverence for the finest among us as well.

But this is not the way to do this, not by unanimous consent request. It was objected to in October, and I am going to object to it right now.

Mr. President, I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Objection is heard.

The Senator from Connecticut.

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, I am saddened, I am angered, and I am heartbroken for the veterans across this great country that the Senate is failing to match their courage and dedication and failing to keep faith with them. I am heartbroken for a nation that can afford to spend tens of billions of dollars, as we are doing right now—perhaps hundreds of billions—in a conflict far away, putting American lives in harm's way, causing deaths—six, at least, so far—and casualties in realtime when we are failing to match their bravery with our own.

It is unconscionable. A lot of words, a lot of numbers, a lot of fallback to Senate procedures, process—meaningless—the words and numbers are meaningless to veterans who are deprived of benefits they have earned, benefits they have been promised.

So I regret my colleague's objection to this bill. I believe he is in a small minority of this body. He has a right to object under our rules.

But I would like to offer to him a commonsense middle ground. Even if we don't have unanimous consent to pass the Major Richard Star Act right now and support our combat-injured veterans, let's agree to a vote. Give us a vote. That is our job—to vote.

I have a time agreement here that would authorize the Senate to take a single up-and-down vote on passage of this bill before August, not precipitously—sometime before August—one vote scheduled by the majority leader, Senator THUNE, at his discretion. It could start and finish in 45 minutes. It simply guarantees one vote on passage at a 60-vote, filibuster-proof threshold. That is our rule.

And I would offer, most respectfully, that surely this great body can afford a half hour or 45 minutes to give our combat-injured veterans a vote on restoration of their hard-earned benefits.

Let us vote. That is our job. Let us give our veterans an up-or-down vote on a matter of simple justice: benefits they have been promised.

Mr. President, notwithstanding rule XXII, I ask unanimous consent that, at a time to be determined by the majority leader in consultation with the Democratic leader but no later than August 7, 2026, the Committee on Armed Services be discharged and the Senate proceed to the immediate consideration of S. 1032; further, that there be up to 2 hours for debate on the bill, equally divided between the two leaders or their designees, and that upon the use or yielding back of that time, the bill be considered read a third time, and the Senate vote on passage of the bill, with 60 affirmative votes required for passage, all without further intervening action or debate and no amendments or motions in order to the bill prior to the vote on passage.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there an objection?

The Senator from Wisconsin.

Mr. JOHNSON. Mr. President, reserving the right to object, the Senator from Connecticut said we need to do our job. I agree. Our job is to recognize the fact that we are \$39 trillion in debt on the back of \$60 trillion, with the Social Security trust fund running out during that timeframe.

Our job would be, then, to go through the regular order process of taking this before the committee. If it has such broad bipartisan support, fine, but, again, similar efforts along these lines have failed in the past with Democrat majorities in both the House and the Senate. There is something about this that concerns people. So vet it out in

the committee process. We are trying to bypass that process by unanimous consent requests. This is not the way to produce good legislation, not when we are \$39 trillion in debt.

So for all the other reasons I mentioned in my previous objection, Mr. President, I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Objection is heard.

The Senator from Connecticut.

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, we have regular order in the Senate, and there is regular order in the military. I will have a hard time looking in the eye of those soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and Coast Guard members who are in conflict, in harm's way, right now in the Middle East, defending the national security of this great Nation. I will have a hard time explaining to them what "regular order" means when they are combat injured and they suffer, dollar for dollar, their retirement pay because they are receiving disability benefits when they are injured—right now—in this conflict.

I don't know how I can look them in the eye. I don't know how any Member of the U.S. Senate can look them in the eye and explain: We won't vote because of regular order. That is a mockery of democracy, and it is shameful.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Kansas.

Mr. MORAN. Mr. President, I chair the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, and my colleague, the ranking member of that committee, Senator BLUMENTHAL was just here on the Senate floor discussing the importance of the Major Richard Star Act. That bill is not in the jurisdiction, at least at this point, of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs. It is a matter for the Armed Services Committee. But it is one that is important to veterans across the country.

The issue behind the Richard Star Act is hugely important to veterans across the country. We saw that today with the joint hearings that we have annually with the House Veterans' Committee.

The VFW and other veterans service organizations highly prioritize the Richard Star Act's passage. That act—this legislation—would make certain that veterans who are medically retired due to combat or combat-related injuries would receive their earned VA disability compensation and their full retirement pay without one payment being reduced because of the other. So, today, there is an offset. The Richard Star Act would eliminate that offset.

No veteran, in my mind, should have their retirement that they earned decreased because they also were eligible for disability compensation due to an injury that they sustained during their military service. So you earn your retirement by years of service, but then that is diminished if you have a disability as a result of the service.

While the Richard Star Act, as I indicated, is not within the jurisdiction of

the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I want to make clear that I will continue to work with my colleagues in a bicameral, a bicameral, and a bipartisan way to make certain we find a path forward for the passage of this legislation.

The VFW, as I said, just completed their testimony before our joint committee, and their advocacy and that of other veterans service organizations have prioritized this piece of legislation for years.

It is widely sponsored by Members of the U.S. Senate, but we have been at this for about 5 years. And while the vast majority of Senators support the bill, as evidenced by their sponsorship of the bill, it has not been considered in a legislative manner sufficient for it to have moved forward.

I am an original cosponsor of this legislation, and I want to make certain that combat-injured veterans receive their full benefits. They upheld their oath. They fulfilled their duty, and the question before us is whether we will fulfill ours.

I am committed to continuing to work closely with my colleagues on the Armed Services Committee and with Senators from both sides of the aisle to find a responsible path forward and a solution that ultimately leads to the passage of the Major Richard Star Act in the Senate and in the House of Representatives, and eventually for it to make its way to the President's desk to become law.

Our Nation's combat-wounded veterans—and we say this particularly at this point in time, with what is going on in the world, with men and women from the United States in harm's way. Our Nation's combat-wounded veterans should not have to continue fighting for benefits they already earned, and it is time for Congress to act.

RECESS

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

Thereupon, the Senate, at 12:30 p.m., recessed until 2:15 p.m. and reassembled when called to order by the Presiding Officer (Mrs. BRITT).

HOUSING FOR THE 21ST CENTURY ACT—Motion to Proceed—Continued

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. BANKS). The Senator from North Carolina.

KRISTI NOEM

Mr. TILLIS. Mr. President, I come to the floor today to maybe lower my own temperature but explain what I was getting at in the Judiciary Committee hearing this morning. We had the Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem before the committee, and I have not been shy about some of my criticism for the Secretary of Homeland Security really on two fronts.

I think I was primarily focused on—what I wanted to focus on was the fail-

ure, in my opinion, of the FEMA response for Hurricane Helene really across the Southeast but particularly in North Carolina, where it hit hardest.

So I went in thinking that I was going to talk a little bit about my frustration with Hurricane Helene, but then an hour before the hearing, after 30 days when I sent a letter saying I also wanted detailed information on Operation so-called Charlotte's Web, which was identifying illegally present people and deporting them—I have no problem with that, by the way. What I have a problem with is the how. But I got basically a "Dear Sir, Madam, or Small Child: Thank you for asking questions we don't intend to answer" response from the Secretary of Homeland Security. That did not make me happy. So I have to admit, when I got into the hearing, the heart rate was up a little bit.

What I wanted to do in the hearing was talk about how I apply my professional experience to working here in the Senate. I was going to give her a performance evaluation for her 14 months on the job, and I was going to use as evidence empirical information, stuff that we found—hard to get but stuff that we got.

This is a graphic of three different hurricane responses. Trump 1 had Florence and Matthew, devastating storms in North Carolina. You can see here—anytime you are in business, when you see outlays and expenditures kind of flat, that means an organization is doing a good job. In other words, we knew what the damage was, we had the money for it, they requested the reimbursement, and they got it. That is what competent disaster management looks like.

Under Secretary Noem and Helene—a \$59 billion impact in North Carolina—that is what incompetence looks like. You can see the huge difference between obligations and outlays.

Well, let's just translate this into human terms in North Carolina. That means a county that can't even balance its budget, Yancey County, one of the hardest hit—they are just looking for basic reimbursements now, and the Secretary has decided that every reimbursement in excess of \$100,000 has to go across her desk before it is approved. That is almost unheard of. It may be a violation of the law in terms of the Homeland Security Act of 2002, but it is certainly in violation of common sense.

If you want to do a quick back-of-the-napkin—do the math—divide 100,000 into 59 billion. That is a lot of numbers, right? A lot of approvals. Really? The Homeland Security Secretary wants \$100,000 increments for people who are suffering in Western North Carolina to be subject to her approval? That is what produces garbage like this. That is what gets people fired in the private sector, where I spent the majority of my career before I joined the State legislature in 2006.

So on the disaster recovery front, Secretary Noem has failed miserably,

by empirical standards. Nothing personal. It could be my mother in this position. I would have to fire my beloved mom. At the end of the day, this is horrible performance. And why it is horrible—these are not only facts and figures; these are people's lives, and she has decided paperwork and redtape are more important than flooding the zone and giving them money for removing debris, money for actual temporary housing, money for buyouts—the basic sorts of things you have to do.

But I was only going to talk briefly about that. I wanted to talk more about the main subject in Judiciary, and that was the response for these deportations. I am angry with Secretary Noem because she has taken away one of the most important issues that Republicans won elections on in 2024. The border was wide open. Millions of people were coming across the border. We didn't know who they were. There were an estimated 1.7 million so-called "got-aways." These are people who pay a premium to the cartels to go through a section of the border where they can escape detection. They even give them carpet to put under their shoes so they can't be traced. These are not angels. These are people that are paying cartels a premium to come across the border. The other people just simply come to a border crossing, present themselves, and they can seek asylum. Bad people, all right? I get that. They should be apprehended, incarcerated, or deported.

I simply asked 30 days ago: Of the 500 encounters in Charlotte, could you give me your data on it—anonimized? I don't want the specific people unless they want to come forward. I want to know: If you had an interaction with somebody, were they illegally present? were they a U.S. citizen? did you detain them? did you destroy their property in the process of detaining somebody briefly and come to find out—whoopsie—they have been a U.S. citizen for 20 years?

That is important performance information. That is called a job performance assessment. Why can't I get that for the 500 or so encounters in Charlotte, a town that is 20 minutes from where I live?

Then I get a letter an hour before the hearing saying: No, that is confidential information.

Then she has the audacity to come to a hearing and say they are a top-notch, professional law enforcement organization. There is not a law enforcement organization in the United States of America that couldn't answer that question for me.

So which one is it? Have you failed to keep track of all these encounters or are you refusing to provide it to me because you are concerned with the results—that the minority of the people you are probably detaining are the ones who are bad people that should be detained, deported, or incarcerated? I just want to know what the success rate is. And she refused to answer that question.