

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.

So I announced in the hearing today that, similar to what I had to do to get the Homeland Security Secretary to even come before the committee—I had to put a hold on any sorts of nominations that went through Homeland Security. Maybe it had an influence. Maybe other pressures got her there. But now she is not answering my questions.

So, effective today, I will refuse to allow any en bloc nominations to go through this Senate floor until I get my questions answered—effective today. Effective on March 19, I will block any nomination, any markup of legislation that goes before Finance, Banking, Judiciary, or Veterans' Affairs. I will block my own nominations until I get the answer to the question—and every other one that goes through that—because my vote is necessary in any partisan votes to get it out of the committees.

I want answers to questions. That is what you give to a U.S. Senator. You don't treat us like some sort of person that you just placate in a committee and go on and do other things. I have the election certificate. I have people in North Carolina that want answers, and I want answers. If I don't get them, we are simply going to shut down the noms process until we can get somebody to answer my question.

Now, the questions I am not going to cover that have to do with the encounters—that is delineated in the letter. But these are five other questions that I want answered, and they go like this—because I want them in the Federal Register, and I will submit a document so the transcription is accurate. These are my five questions:

The Homeland Security Act of 2002 expressly prohibits the Secretary of Homeland Security from restricting or diverting FEMA resources from the Agency's mission. Based on your disaster response, I have reason to believe that she is violating the law, either knowingly or unknowingly, so I want to know what the total amount of FEMA reimbursements are that are currently being held by DHS for final approval to be spent by FEMA. I want the exact dollar figures, and I want a full list of the recipients.

Based on recent reports, I have reason to believe that DHS has delegated responsibilities of the FEMA Administrator to an outside contractor, who is Kara Voorhies. What is her official role in DHS? That is my second question.

My third question: Special government employees, SGEs, are prohibited by law from working more than 130 days during any 365-day period. How many days has Corey Lewandowski worked over the last year, and how many days does he currently have left under the SGE status?

No 4: Why does Corey Lewandowski have final signoff authority on internal DHS routing documents—these are internal routing documents—above the Deputy Secretary—a part-time, unpaid person—above a Deputy Secretary be-

fore documents are submitted to the Homeland Security Secretary for approval?

No. 5: Based on an unclassified letter submitted to Congress yesterday by the DHS Office of Inspector General—these are the people that keep us honest; they are a very important part of the role—I have reason to believe that the Secretary and the Department are obstructing at least one criminal investigation.

Not my words; these are the words of the Office of Inspector General, who published a letter yesterday. That is almost unheard of. Do you have any idea how bad it has to be for someone embedded in a Department to publish a letter about the obstruction of the Secretary of that Department? That is bad, folks.

So I want the Secretary to answer the question: Do you believe that restricting or delaying the inspector general's access to documents, systems, and witnesses reflects a direct violation of Federal law?

The OIG thinks she does, so I want to know.

Mr. President, I know we are 2 minutes away from going into recess, and I am not going to extend time.

The bottom line: This Secretary has done our President an injustice by some of the most incompetent execution I have had the displeasure to witness over the last 11 years and 2 months that I have been a U.S. Senator. It bears no resemblance to Trump 1 in terms of Homeland Security and in terms of FEMA response.

I am a Republican. I support this President. I believe deporting people illegally present here is critically important to our future. But I also believe you have to be able to execute, you have to be able to do your job, you have to be able to be responsible, and when you make a mistake, you admit it and move on. This Secretary has done none of that, and so I will be doing none of nominating and confirming and markups until such time as I get an answer to these critical questions—or her resignation or the answer to the question, whichever comes first.

RECESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senate stands in recess until 5 p.m.

Thereupon, the Senate, at 3:30 p.m., recessed until 5 p.m. and reassembled when called to order by the Presiding Officer (Mr. CURTIS).

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Oregon.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST—S. 2746

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, late last week, when I first scheduled this consent request that is relating to Jeffrey Epstein's bank records, I was not ex-

pecting it to be set against the backdrop of Donald Trump dragging America into yet another war in the Middle East.

I will address the horrific crimes and worldwide financial network of Mr. Epstein in a minute. Right at the outset, I need to address the actions of the Trump administration this past weekend.

This is a war the American people do not want, a war that has already cost American lives, a war the President and his scheming advisers have not even tried to justify, a war Donald Trump kicked off at his private club minutes before stepping out to celebrate at a glitzy fundraiser where attendees spent \$1 million per plate.

Now, I remember the debate about the Iraq war 20 years ago, including the bad faith attacks against those of us who opposed it from the start.

No doubt there will be a replay of that debate. There will be some who say: War is on. It is time for everybody to line up behind the President and every other issue has got to go by the wayside. That is wrong.

It has been clear from the beginning that the core principle for this administration is that Donald Trump gets to do what he wants, no matter the cost, when he wants to. It doesn't matter to him how many American soldiers die as a result of the war. It doesn't matter how many people lose their health insurance or their livelihoods as a result of his policies.

And in the case of Mr. Epstein, it doesn't matter how many pedophiles and sex traffickers continue to walk the streets and prey on the vulnerable while the Trump administration hides essential Epstein files from the public.

The position of this administration is that Donald Trump can't do anything wrong. He gets to do what he wants, and everybody else has to obey. Ultimately, the American people aren't going to have it. I won't either, and that was the message in my town meetings this past weekend.

The last thing that I am going to do is to slow down or walk away from our 4-year investigation into Epstein's trafficking network because Donald Trump decided to kick off another open-ended war in the Middle East. So I am going to take just a few minutes to lay out why the Senate needs to pass my legislation demanding the release of the Epstein bank records that are at the Treasury Department.

Here is what Americans needs to know. Four years ago, my investigators on the Finance Committee began digging into the so-called tax planning that Jeffrey Epstein performed for one of the titans of Wall Street. That man was Leon Black. That relationship spawned sprawling financial ties, and Black had a curious story about their relationship. Here was a guy worth billions and billions of dollars, really a money-making machine.

He already employed the best tax and estate planning experts in the Nation.