CUBA

Mr. DURBIN. On a separate topic, late last night I returned from Havana, Cuba, with Senator PATRICK LEAHY, Senator STABENOW, Senator WHITEHOUSE, Congressman VAN HOLLEN, and Congressman WELCH of Vermont. It was a whirlwind trip.

In a matter of 2 days we had a number of visits with a variety of different people in Havana. They included government officials. Bruno Rodriguez, who is the Foreign Minister of the Cuban Government; we had a lengthy meeting with him yesterday.

We had a meeting with about 10 different Ambassadors to Cuba from foreign countries. We met as well with a dozen reformers or dissidents, opponents of the current Castro regime in Cuba, and had individual meetings with ministries. This was a productive and important delegation trip, important because starting tomorrow we are going to have face-to-face negotiations in Havana between the United States and Cuba pursuant to President Obama's December 17 announcement. We are setting out to change the foreign policy of the United States as it regards Cuba. It is time for change.

For over 50 years we have been committed to a policy of exclusion, believing if we had embargoes and blockades we could force internal change in Cuba. The policy failed. The Castro brothers still reign, and life in Cuba is not what we want to see.

What the President has said is let's engage them at a different level, a constructive level where we try to find ways to open the Cuban economy and Cuban society. That, to me, is the best course. It isn't just a theory that is the best course, it has been proven.

When the Soviet Empire came to an end, what happened to the Warsaw Pact nations allied with the Soviet Union? They opened their doors to the West, they saw what they could anticipate to be part of their life in the future, and they made the conscious choice to move toward democracy, to move toward a free market economy. I think the same can happen in Cuba.

One young man came to speak to us. He had gotten in trouble because he challenged the Cuban Government. They put him back on a pig farm to work, but he was still determined to aspire to a better place in Cuba in the future. He said to us: What President Obama's announcement has done is to pull the blanket off the caged bird in Cuba. Those of us who live in Cuba are still in the cage of communism, but we can see out now about opportunities and a future. That, I believe, is part of what the President's new policy is all about.

When we were discussing our current blockade with Cuba with their leadership, we learned that powdered milk comes to Cuban citizens from New Zealand—halfway around the world—when there is an ample supply in the United States. What we are trying to do is to not only open the Cuban economy to powdered milk but to the power of ideas, the exchange of values, the belief that if the Cuban people see a better model for their future, they will gravitate toward that model.

This negotiation which opens this week is the beginning of this conversation. The President is moving in areas of trade and travel, as we hope he will do, to expand these opportunities, but we have to do our part in Congress. As contentious and spirited as the debate may be about changing our policy in Cuba, it wasn't that long ago that we stood on the floor of the Senate and considered establishing diplomatic relations with Vietnam. There were some with fresh memories of all we had lost, over 40,000 American lives in Vietnam, who said we shouldn't have a normal relationship with what is a repressive regime in a country we just concluded a war with. Others with cooler minds prevailed, and we established diplomatic relations and I think to the betterment of both nations.

Let us move forward, not forsaking our principles, not turning our back on our belief that the Cuban society should be more open, fair, and legitimized by the voters at the polls but believing we can work with this country as we have with others around the world, even when we disagree with their form of government and their practices, to try to strive to reach that democratic ideal.

DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

Mr. DURBIN. The last point I would like to make relates to a motion that was made this morning by the majority leader. It was related to the appropriations bill for the Department of Homeland Security. Why are we bringing up this appropriations bill at this moment? Because when we agreed last December to fund our government, the Republicans in the House insisted we carve out the Department of Homeland Security and not give it its regular budget, instead give it emergency spending, a continuing resolution.

This is not the way to run any department of government, certainly not the Department of Homeland Security. Why is it important to fund this department? One need only look to what has happened in the last few days in Paris to understand that the threat of terrorism to the world is still very real. One of our first lines of defense when it comes to terrorism is our Department of Homeland Security. There is no excuse for us to be dealing with this continuing resolution to fund this department. They should have the resources they need to keep America safe, but instead what has happened is this: The House of Representatives last week said they will only agree to fund this department properly if they can provide certain riders and changes in the law as part of it.

I would tell you that the change that has been proposed by the House of Representatives is unacceptable. The President has said he is going to veto it if it is sent to his desk, and I totally support his position.

Here is what they have come up with in the House of Representatives. If you are familiar with the DREAM Act, which I introduced in Congress 14 years ago, it says: If a young person is brought to the United States at an early age, parents making the decision to come to this country, and that young person grows up in the United States, finishes high school, no serious criminal problems, willing to go forward to higher education or to the military, we will give them a chance of becoming legal in America. That is the DREAM Act. It has been considered and passed on the floor of the Senate, considered and passed on the floor of the House but never in the same session, and so it is not the law of the land.

President Obama, a little over 2 years ago, came out with an Executive order program known as DACA. DACA said to these young people who would qualify under this law: If you will come forward and register with our government, if you will pay the filing fee, if you will allow us to do the background check, we will allow you to stay, go to school, and work in America and not be deported. Six hundred thousand young people have come forward. We estimate there are some 2 million eligible, and 600,000 have come forward. Thirty thousand are from my State of Illinois. Who are these young people?

Let me introduce you to one of them, Oscar Vazquez. Oscar Vazquez grew up in Phoenix, AZ. His mother and father brought him to that city from Mexico, and he was undocumented. He attended Carl Hayden High School in Phoenix. He was a member of the Junior ROTC. His goal was to serve in the U.S. Army.

When he went to the recruiter to sign up, the recruiter said: I need your birth certificate.

Oscar said: Come on. We are fighting a war. Can't you look the other way and just let me join?

He said: No, young man. You don't have the proper documents. You can't enlist in the U.S. Army.

He was despondent because that was his goal. He went home and got engaged in another project which is the subject of a new movie called ''Spare Parts,'' which George Lopez produced, directed, and starred in, which I saw last week. I will not give away the whole story, but I can tell you this: Oscar Vazquez and three other students at Carl Hayden High School entered into an underwater robotics competition. They competed with colleges such as MIT and they won. Their high school team won the underwater robotics competition.

The talented young man, Oscar, said: I am going to Arizona State University. Without any government assistance, he graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering. After he got his degree and a wife and a baby, he