

Program was started—so that thousands of veterans and their families can get the care they deserve when and where they need it. Instead of traveling long distances or waiting months on a list, veterans can use the Choice Program to get the healthcare they need in their own communities.

As the ranking member of the Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Subcommittee, I want to give a little perspective on what would happen to our veterans if we don't pass the bipartisan Veterans Choice Program Improvement Act.

Now, I know that the Choice Program is not funded through my subcommittee, but what we do today has an impact on the VA as a whole. If the Veterans Choice Program Improvement Act does not pass, the funding we appropriated to the VA will expire before it has all been used. It is not a small amount of funding. It is \$1 billion, and the VA does not have \$1 billion elsewhere in the budget to make up for this loss.

In other words, if we don't pass this bill, it is going to be a disaster for veterans because all of the veterans who use this program for their healthcare are going to have to go back to the VA. That means the wait times that everybody was complaining about over the last couple of years will grow longer and longer and longer, and especially in rural America, where access to care is such a challenge, it will get worse and worse.

To manage the increase in patient load, the VA will have to scramble to find funding that can take away from other VA programs, including hospital maintenance and medical equipment. That is what is going to happen if we don't pass this bill. This is an urgent matter for veterans across the country. Whether you are a participant in the VA Choice Program or you go to a traditional VA clinic or hospital, one way or another, this is going to impact you.

Now, I know the Choice Program isn't perfect, but this temporary extension, coupled with the improvements in the system contained in the bill, gives Congress the time we need to develop a long-term, comprehensive solution. And while we are working on a solution, let's not punish veterans by cutting off \$1 billion toward a program that is designed to improve services for people who have served our country.

So I hope we can come together to find a way to pass this bill. Our veterans are counting on us.

I yield the floor.

Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

RUSSIA AND TRUMP CAMPAIGN INVESTIGATION

Mr. UDALL. Mr. President, I know several Members are ready to come here and talk on a veterans issue, and they will let me know when they are ready to start. I thought there might be a good chance to get this in.

Our democracy is under attack. U.S. intelligence agencies have concluded that the Russian Government interfered in the U.S. Presidential election and intervened to help Candidate Trump. Around the same time, Candidate Trump began making flattering statements about Russian President Putin and proposing pro-Russia policy changes while criticizing longstanding U.S. allies, including in Europe.

President Trump continues to defend Putin and offend Western allies. Now we have come to learn that there are unexplained ties between the President, his campaign staff, his associates, and Russia; that many close to the President had meetings and telephone calls with Russian officials during the campaign and the transition; most critically, that the FBI and the Department of Justice are investigating whether the President and his associates coordinated or conspired with the Russian Government to interfere with the Presidential election—an investigation that began last July and is likely to continue for months.

The President and his associates keep giving the American people reason for worry—inaccurate denials, evasive answers, explosive attacks they can't back up, scheming with the chair of the House Intelligence Committee on the committee's investigation of the White House. New, very disturbing information comes to light every day.

A recent CNN/Opinion Research Corporation poll showed that two thirds of Americans believe a special prosecutor should be appointed. The American people want answers. What was the scope of the interference? Who knew what, and when? How can we protect ourselves and our allies, who are facing similar cyber attacks? What is the appropriate government response to such an attack?

I appreciate the work the Senate Intelligence Committee is doing. I believe that is the first step, but I believe we must go further. That is why I am again calling for an independent, bipartisan national commission modeled on the 9/11 Commission to fully investigate Russia's interference with our election and our election processes and to investigate the ties between the President, his family businesses, and his close associates and Russia that may threaten our national security. I am also again calling on the Department of Justice to appoint a special counsel to investigate potential criminal conduct that may jeopardize our security.

Questions about the President's ties to Russia will divide the country, undermine his Presidency, and distract Congress, unless we take these steps.

The American people are right to be concerned. The President's stance on Russia is perplexing, starting when he first denounced the role of NATO last spring, calling it "obsolete," suggesting that it would be OK if NATO broke up. Then, he publicly asked Russia to hack Hillary Clinton's emails.

Then, Mr. Trump's campaign manager, Paul Manafort, was forced to resign because of his close political and financial ties to Ukraine's former pro-Russian President. He became the subject of a multi-agency investigation. We don't have the full story, but we do know that he failed to register as a foreign agent while he lobbied for pro-Russian Ukrainian interests in the United States. It appears that Manafort has a \$10 million contract with a Russian oligarch who is very close to Putin that would "greatly benefit the Putin Government" and that he had at least 15 offshore bank accounts in Cyprus that even Cypriot bank officials thought were suspicious. Once those bank officials began asking about money laundering activities, Manafort closed the accounts rather than answer questions.

During his campaign, Mr. Trump stated that he would "be looking at" whether to recognize Crimea as Russian and to lift sanctions. President Trump and his team apparently took little or no interest in the debate over the party platform in the Republican National Convention, except for one thing—Ukraine. They intervened with delegates to get more Russia-friendly language in the Republican Party platform. Candidate Trump's national security policy staffer J.D. Gordon told CNN: "This was the language Donald Trump himself wanted . . . and advocated for . . . back in March." Now Gordon is reportedly under investigation for his ties to Russia.

We have all heard the President compliment President Putin, calling him a strong leader. Why is the President so enamored, when Putin's actions are authoritarian, violent, and anti-democratic? Putin seeks to weaken NATO and the European Council. He annexed Crimea in violation of international law and treaties. He interfered with our national election. Putin has crushed free press in the Russian Federation, placing restriction upon restriction on the press, quashing independent news organizations, and harassing and jailing journalists. The President's outspoken admiration is inexplicable.

So we are still left with a President who has expressed policy views toward Russia that run counter to U.S. ideals and treaty obligations, as well as global norms of international affairs. While we don't know the full extent of the President's financial, personal, and political ties to Russia and Putin, we have plenty of reason to seek an impartial investigation. The President still has not released his tax returns, unlike any previous modern President. His son Donald Junior volunteered, as far as

back as 2008, that “Russians make up a pretty disproportionate cross-section of a lot of our assets. . . . We see a lot of money pouring in from Russia.”

In 2013, Mr. Trump said on a talk show: “Well, I’ve done a lot of business with the Russians.”

Due to his history of bankruptcies, no major U.S. bank would loan to Donald Trump in recent years. So he has needed new sources of capital for his real estate projects. There is growing reason to believe that Russia—or at least wealthy Russians—have financial interests in the Trump organization. Recent reports link the President and his companies to ten wealthy former Soviet businessmen with alleged ties to criminal organizations or money laundering. The extent of corruption and criminal ties among the oligarchs of Russia are well known, and to stay wealthy oligarchs, they must stay friendly with the Putin regime.

Is the Trump organization reliant on Russian capital or loans from Russian banks? What relationships are there between Russian oligarchs that are tied to the Russian Government and the Trump organization and between those former Soviet businessmen and Trump’s properties? We need to get to the bottom of this, with a credible, deliberate, nonpartisan investigation.

Mr. Trump has surrounded himself with associates with close Russian ties—not just Mr. Manafort. Michael Flynn headed to Russia within 18 months after his retirement as the head of the Defense Intelligence Agency to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Russian Government’s media outlet RT. Secretary John Kerry called RT a “propaganda bullhorn” for Putin. Mr. Flynn was paid for that trip by RT, a potential violation of the emoluments clause of the Constitution, and appeared regularly on RT. Flynn, of course, had to resign as National Security Advisor after 24 days in office. But the President knew of Flynn’s misrepresentations weeks before he was fired and did nothing until it became public. We now know that Russia’s payments to Flynn were generous. In 2015, Russian entities paid him \$65,000. We know he worked for pay as a foreign agent for Turkey during the campaign and during the transition, but he failed to register as an agent at the time, as required by law.

Other Trump associates and campaign staff—Roger Stone, Carter Page, and Mr. Gordon—all are reportedly under investigation for intercepted communications and financial transactions with Russia. Stone admitted at least 16 contacts with Gufficer 2.0, the Twitter handle covering for Russian intelligence that released the Democratic National Committee hacked emails.

Page, who has strong financial ties with Russia, admitted to meeting with the Russian Ambassador during the Republican Convention and traveling to Russia during the campaign.

The President’s Attorney General was forced to recuse himself from any

Department of Justice investigation into Trump and Russia because he did not disclose to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that he met with the Russian Ambassador during the campaign.

Now the President’s son-in-law and senior adviser is set to testify before the Senate’s Intelligence Committee. He will talk about his contacts with the Russian ambassador, a close Putin ally who is head of a Russian-owned bank.

Where does it stop, folks? Where does it stop?

These contacts give us enough reason for pause. Combined with Mr. Trump’s positions on NATO, sanctions relief, and Russia’s human rights violations, they raise serious security questions for the United States and NATO. As I said, we need an independent prosecutor at the helm to ensure that the whole of the investigation is not compromised—one who is not subject to White House pressure and not in a position of investigating his or her boss—and a bipartisan commission along the lines of the 9/11 Commission that is independent of politics.

The chair of the House Intelligence Committee is compromised and damaged beyond repair. He has coordinated with the subjects of his committee’s investigation, and he has completely lost credibility. I compliment my Senate colleagues who are working together on an investigation. But the Senate committee does not have the resources to fully investigate this, and the ranking Democrat on the committee agrees we need an independent investigation that could go further, that could be public, and could be transparent.

A former Acting Director of the CIA called the Russian interference in our election one of the most successful covert operations in history. Former Vice President Cheney has said that what they did could be “considered an act of war.” By covert interference in a U.S. election, Russia pursued a policy to install its favorite candidate as President of the United States. Yet the President has dismissed the National Security Agency findings, accused our national security agencies of acting like Nazi Germany, and leveled fake charges at the former President.

The American people are not fooled, and they want Congress to get to the bottom of this. We in Congress have a solemn duty to the American people to do just that.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

VETERANS CHOICE PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT ACT

Mr. TESTER. Mr. President, I rise today in support of the bipartisan Vet-

erans Choice Program Improvement Act. I will start my remarks by saying that Chairman ISAKSON was here earlier, and he had a meeting he had to get to. Johnny has been through a tough surgery, and it is good to have Johnny back. But the fact of the matter is he supports this bill. He is an original cosponsor of this bill. The same could be said of Senator BLUMENTHAL, who also had a meeting and wanted to be here, once again. We heard from Senator SCHATZ earlier. This bill truly has bipartisan support, not only in the VA Committee but also in this body.

The reason people support this piece of legislation is because it brings much needed reforms to the Choice Program while ensuring that veterans can access care in their communities. It is a good bill.

A few years back, the Choice Program was established with the very best of intentions. In my home State of Montana, it is a fact that veterans were waiting far too long for an appointment at the VA and oftentimes had to drive over 100 miles for the appointment. The Choice Program was supposed to allow these veterans to access care closer to home. Unfortunately, it has not been working out the way it should, and veterans have been inundated with redtape and a government contractor that struggles to schedule appointments and pay providers on time. That is why we all worked together—Democrats and Republicans and even Independents—on this bill to put forth these much needed reforms.

The Veterans Choice Program Improvement Act cuts redtape so veterans can access care more quickly. In fact, I made it clear from the get-go that I would not vote to extend the Choice Program until Congress and the VA have addressed some of the biggest concerns I have been hearing from Montana veterans and community providers.

Once we get the bill passed, this program reimburses community providers more quickly for the care they provide to our veterans. It reduces out-of-pocket costs for veterans receiving care through the Choice Program. It improves the sharing of medical records between the VA and the community providers to better ensure seamless care for veterans, whether they are seeing a VA doctor or a doctor in their community. It allows the VA to access all the funding initially appropriated for this program to ensure that veterans’ access to care is not disrupted.

This bill is not going to fix everything, but it is certainly a step in the right direction. With this legislation, combined with assurances that I have received from VA Montana, VA folks within the State will be allowed to schedule appointments for Montana’s veterans directly instead of going through an inept government contract.

It is my hope that we can make the Choice Program work the way it was