

We must expand Social Security services for seniors. Since 2010, Congress has cut Social Security's operating budget by 16 percent, and Republicans want to cut it another 4 percent this year. These budget cuts have resulted in the loss of more than 10,000 employees, the closing of 64 field offices, and reduced hours in many others. In Vermont, one field office has seen its staffing cut by 30 percent. According to a recent Washington Post article, 10,000 people died in the past year while they waited for decisions on Social Security disability benefits. We need to increase the funding for these vital services by at least \$1.4 billion just to bring staffing back up to where it was in 2010.

We need to keep our promises to our veterans, the men and women who put their lives on the line to defend our country. Right now, we have tens of thousands of vacancies in the VA. Those vacancies must be filled. Veterans must be able to get high-quality, timely healthcare.

We must fight the opioid and heroin epidemic that is sweeping this country. All over America, we are seeing tens of thousands of people, often young people, overdosing on opioids and heroin. States and communities all over this country need the resources for prevention and treatment. That is an issue that cannot be delayed. It has to be dealt with now.

Everybody knows that in the last several months, we have seen disastrous hurricanes impact Texas and Florida and Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. In Puerto Rico today, there continue to be many people who still do not have electricity. We must pass disaster relief right now that is adequate and that treats Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands just as we will treat Texas and Florida. We cannot continue to delay given the enormous suffering that is existing in Puerto Rico and in the Virgin Islands.

Very briefly, let me touch on another issue of enormous consequence which simply cannot be ignored. On September 5, 2017, President Trump announced that he would be rescinding President Obama's Executive order on DACA. That decision means that some 800,000 young people who have known the United States of America as their only home—this is where they grew up; this is where they went to school—are on the verge of losing their legal status in terms of education, in terms of employment, and in terms of serving in the military if that program is not re-established. Without the legal protections afforded by the DACA Program, these young people live in a constant fear of being deported. Since the President's announcement in September, more than 11,000 people have lost the protections under DACA, with there being approximately 22,000 set to lose their legal protections by the March 5, 2018, deadline.

Any spending agreement must address the fear and uncertainty that has

been unnecessarily caused by the administration's reckless actions, and a clean Dream Act must be signed into law as part of the budget negotiations. Protecting the Dreamers and moving these young people toward citizenship is not some kind of wild and radical idea; it is precisely what the American people want. A recent Quinnipiac poll showed that 77 percent of the American people support providing legal protections to the Dreamers. This is an issue that must be dealt with, and it must be dealt with now.

When history looks back on this period, I do not want it to see a U.S. Congress that worked overtime to protect billionaires and large corporations and a Congress that turned its back on working families and the children and the sick and the poor. I do not want history to look back on this period and say that Members of Congress thought it appropriate to spend \$100 billion more on the military but were not concerned about veterans who did not get the healthcare they needed or some 800,000 young people who are now frightened that they will lose their legal status.

As the U.S. Senate, we must get our priorities right, and we need a budget that deals not only with military spending but with the needs of the middle class and working families of this country.

I yield the floor.

#### RECESS

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

Thereupon, the Senate, at 12:52 p.m., recessed until 2:15 p.m. and reassembled when called to order by the Presiding Officer (Mr. LEE).

#### EXECUTIVE CALENDAR—Continued

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from New Jersey.

#### IRAN

Mr. MENENDEZ. Mr. President, I rise today as brave citizens in Iran are taking to the streets to exercise their fundamental right to freely express their opinions and protest against their government.

As a democracy founded on core values, including the freedom of speech, equal rights under the law, and basic human dignity, the United States must always stand up for those peacefully advocating for these principles. For decades America has championed these principles, not only because they are right but because they promote our interests. We know that nations whose governments respect human rights and freedom of expression, that uphold the rule of law, and that protect the civil rights and liberties of their people serve as America's most reliable allies, most strategic security relationships, and most prosperous economic partners. Our enduring belief in democratic

values compels all of us to stand up, not as Democrats or Republicans but as Americans, and to support citizens around the world courageously protesting the regimes that oppress them.

We stand with those who speak out, and even risk their own lives, to make their voices heard in the struggle against oppression, inequality, and injustice. The fact that today's protests in Iran are against a regime that engages in activity that directly threatens our Nation, our allies, and our security interests is a separate matter.

Iran's leaders may try to blame the protests on outside forces, but in reality this unrest is homegrown. The Iranians marching in Tehran know exactly who is to blame for the hardship, inequality, and oppression they face in their daily lives. It is the regime itself. For those who have closely followed the developments in Iran for years, it is no surprise to learn that the regime continues to disregard the basic rights of its citizens. The regime has proven that it has no moral qualms with forcing the innocent to suffer. Already security forces are responsible for the deaths of more than 20 Iranian protesters. They have detained and imprisoned hundreds of people who are simply speaking their minds.

Of course, these abuses are just one example of the consistently odious behavior we have witnessed from Iran in recent years. This is a regime that has proven that it is more interested in building ballistic missiles than building bridges, that believes money is better spent on terrorist networks in Lebanon and Syria than on schools and hospitals for the Iranian people, that any revenue generated by Iran's international energy deals go directly into the pockets of those fomenting discord in the region and not into the hands of Iranian citizens trying to feed their families, and that will continue to engage in malign activity that isolates it from the community of nations, directly at the expense of the Iranian people. For these reasons and many more, I sincerely hope that the international community lives up to its responsibility to support all those who are protesting this repressive regime.

However, words go only so far. The United States must continue to lead international efforts to counter the Iranian regime's destabilizing behavior overseas. Unfortunately, this administration has yet to take the lead. We hear plenty of bluster from this President, but threatening tweets do not constitute policy nor can they hold Iran culpable. Putting a nation "on notice" means nothing if there are no policies put in place. We need a real strategy that addresses Iran's destabilizing activities in the Middle East, whether it is the regime's continued support for terrorist networks, illegal ballistic missile development, or human rights abuses and political interference in other countries.

These threats are what compelled me to work with my colleagues across the

aisle last year to pass the Countering Iran's Destabilizing Activities Act, a bill to hold Iran accountable for its ongoing support for terrorism, ballistic missile proliferation, and human rights abuses. This legislation passed the Senate with an overwhelming bipartisan majority of 98 to 2. Ultimately, it served as the base text of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, which addressed a wide range of hostile behavior from not just Iran but from Russia and North Korea as well. This bill calls for the administration to develop a comprehensive regional strategy to deter conventional and asymmetric threats. We are fast approaching the deadline for that strategy.

More importantly, however, we have heard the President say for more than a year that he was going to develop a plan to hold Iran accountable. Thus far, we have seen nothing more than tough talk. The reality is that this administration has yet to fully implement critical provisions of this law that could substantively counter Iran's nefarious behavior. The bill gives the President the authority to target human rights abusers, including those complicit in the ongoing repression of protesters, but he has yet to use that authority. The bill also authorizes the President to go after those individuals and entities that are violating international arms embargoes, exporting hateful ideologies and weapons across the region and fomenting violence and chaos against innocent civilians in Syria and Yemen, but he has yet to go after these actors.

While the administration designated Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps under terrorism authority—something I applaud—it has not effectively targeted actors associated with the IRGC.

All of my colleagues know that I was deeply skeptical and strongly opposed to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. I voted against the JCPOA precisely because I thought it was a mistake to roll back sanctions on Iran without the total dismantlement of its nuclear infrastructure. However, refusing to certify Iran's compliance with a deeply flawed deal, as the President did in October, does little to address its shortcomings. The President's move in October was a hollow attempt to fulfill a campaign promise while continuing to let Iran enjoy the benefits of the JCPOA and continue its non-nuclear malign activities throughout the region. Furthermore, this decision was carried without a clear path forward and without specific proposals that could have garnered critical international support.

At the end of the day, the Trump administration's actions may have actually left the United States with less leverage to address Iran's far-reaching, nefarious behavior in the Middle East, whether it be its support for terrorism, its human rights abuses, or its illegal ballistic missile development. None of

these critical security challenges are addressed simply by not certifying the JCPOA, nor does it move us toward a comprehensive international strategy for the nuclear program Iran plans to resume immediately following this agreement's expiration. In short, the President's own lack of policy has squandered whatever leverage he may have hoped to gain.

Furthermore, the President has severely disadvantaged himself by gutting the very instruments in his national security apparatus that should be taking the lead on Iran and all foreign policy matters. As an architect of the sanctions networks that crippled Iran's economy and forced its leaders to negotiate with the international community, I know how essential our diplomatic arsenal is to confronting Iran.

The President, however, seems committed to hollowing out those agencies and offices that are in the best position to advance our diplomatic interests. The Trump administration, for example, has shuttered the office of sanctions policy at the State Department. The Office of Foreign Assets Control at the Treasury Department is now woefully understaffed. As the President publicly talks about supporting democracy, his administration has scrapped funding for human rights and democracy programs and even removed the word "democracy" from USAID's mission statement.

Meanwhile, Iran continues to increase its presence in Iraq, to maintain support for the terrorist organization Hezbollah, and to take credit for Bashar al-Assad's murderous grip on power in Syria.

The United States must be willing to work with its allies if we are serious about holding Iran accountable. We should be corralling our allies in Europe to begin treating all of Hezbollah's entities as terrorist organizations. We should be moving our allies toward the development of a comprehensive international strategy for addressing Iran's nuclear ambitions once the JCPOA expires.

Finally, this administration must prioritize the release of American citizens unjustly arrested and detained in Iran. Today, Princeton University student Xiyue Wang, a scholar from one of the most renowned academic institutions in the world, in my home State of New Jersey, remains in prison under ridiculous charges of espionage. Similarly, Siamak Namazi, a former student of Rutgers University in New Jersey, remains in prison, along with his father, a former UNICEF employee. And Robert Levinson remains missing after more than 10 years.

In short, this President's approach toward Iran thus far has been a disjointed mix of campaign promises, bluster, and confusing signals to our allies—not a serious consideration of how to effectively confront an existing and growing threat.

So, as we approach a legally mandated deadline for the President to

present Congress and the American people with a sound policy to confront a real threat, I call on the President to make use of our incredible national security establishment, to consult experts who can help formulate a strong, sound policy capable of confronting Iran's destabilizing behavior in the Middle East, and to implement a strategy that will effectively confront Iran's continued support for international terrorism, its belligerent ballistic missile tests, and its ongoing public and brutal abuses of human rights within its own borders and around the world.

I yield the floor.

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

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

#### TAX REFORM BILL

Mr. CASSIDY. Mr. President, Republicans just passed the largest tax reform package in 30-something years, and middle America will go home in February with bigger paychecks than they did—I say in February because it will not take that long for the IRS to update their software. They will go home with more money in their pockets.

If there has been a theme in the Trump administration, it is that they want those working Americans, those middle-class Americans, to do better under this President than they did in the previous 8 years. That tax reform package is part of that, and I am amazed that my Democratic colleagues objected to it. They objected to middle-class Americans having more money in their pockets, in their take-home pay, for no other reason, I think, than to resist President Trump.

#### OFFSHORE OIL AND GAS LEASING PROPOSAL

Mr. President, what I am about to speak about speaks to better jobs and better wages for working Americans, for those middle-class families.

This afternoon, the U.S. Department of the Interior released the Trump administration's draft proposed program for offshore oil and gas leasing. This proposal would mean more affordable energy made right here in the United States of America. That is good news for American workers and families. I commend President Trump and Interior Secretary Zinke for their commitment to supporting American workers and making America energy dominant.

For decades, past administrations have handcuffed American energy manufacturers by restricting offshore leases to the western and central Gulf of Mexico. You could only drill there, not elsewhere. Past plans left 90 percent of U.S. offshore resources off limits to energy producers and in the process said no to thousands of good-paying American jobs and billions of dollars in offshore investments—when I say "offshore," I mean off the American shore

but creating jobs here in the United States of America.

The Trump administration's proposal rejects the status quo and puts American workers and families first. It would open areas with significant oil and gas potential—areas off the coast of Alaska and the Atlantic and Pacific and portions of the eastern Gulf of Mexico.

What are the ramifications of this? According to one study, opening the eastern Gulf of Mexico would create nearly 230,000 new American jobs by 2035. It would bring roughly \$115 billion of investment to the United States. Federal, State, and local governments would collect an additional \$70 billion in tax revenue by 2035, not because rates are going up—rates have now gone down—but, rather, people are making more money, and because they are making more money at lower rates, Federal, State, and local tax receipts continue to increase. American energy production would be boosted by about 1 million barrels of oil, making our country more secure.

Let's take a look at the State-by-State job increases from these lease sales. Florida gets the biggest gain of all—87,000 new jobs by 2035. Texas would add 62,000. My home State of Louisiana would add 31,000 new jobs. Alabama would add 21,000; Mississippi, 12,000; and the rest of United States, 15,000 new jobs.

I know some of my colleagues across the aisle, including my Democratic colleague from Florida, have expressed concerns about this energy production plan's impact on fishing and military training in the Gulf of Mexico. Let's remember that oil and gas manufacturers have coexisted with other activities for decades. I share my colleagues' interest in protecting our communities, businesses, and the environment. The reality is that these goals are not mutually exclusive, especially on the gulf coast.

Let me use Louisiana as an example. According to NOAA, Louisiana has 4 of the 10 top ports in the country by volume and value of seafood landed. In 2016, two Louisiana ports alone received 670 million pounds of seafood landed in the gulf. This is in addition to the oil and gas production off of our coast. Together with Texas, our two States accounted for half of U.S. shrimp landings.

NOAA also reports that roughly half of the jobs in commercial and recreational fishing in the gulf exist in States where there is also oil and gas production. Recreationally, gulf anglers accounted for 33 percent of fishing trips, which equals 39 percent of the total U.S. catch.

Of course, more than 85 percent of recreational landings were in inland estuaries or State territorial waters. Most of the oil and gas activity we are discussing today is in deeper, Federal waters many miles away.

Again, the gulf coast is a working coast, and it has been proven over the

decades that multiple industries can successfully coexist.

When my colleague from Florida brought up his concerns about potential conflicts with the Department of Defense operations in the Gulf of Mexico, I took that very seriously. Ensuring that our military is equipped to train and test is vitally important. However, it is simply not true that the eastern Gulf of Mexico must be completely free of energy production in order for the military to conduct operations. Our military's own testing data from the last 5 years makes that very clear. This map shows all the Department of Defense testing done in the last 5 years in the eastern Gulf of Mexico. The Department of Defense used only 19 percent of the eastern Gulf of Mexico during the last 5 years. To put it differently, 81 percent of the gulf went untouched.

When you look even more closely at the space regularly used by our military, it becomes clear that this objection to energy production in the eastern gulf does not pass the smell test.

This is the Panhandle of Florida. Right here is the State of Alabama. For those who are interested in it, the Florida-Alabama bar is right there, and this is where folks from Louisiana love to go and enjoy themselves.

This is, if you will, zoomed in on the last map and shows the spaces the military used for more than 14 days during that 5-year period. So over 5 years, these are the spaces it used for more than 14 days—not per year but over the 5 years. Only 0.5 percent of the eastern Gulf of Mexico was used by the Department of Defense for more than 14 days over the last 5 years—0.5 percent. That means that the Department of Defense regularly uses only 1 out of every 200 acres in the gulf.

I have met with both the Interior Department and the Defense Department and urged them to work together to ensure the best use of Federal waters. This data shows that it can be done.

I am confident that, under the Trump administration's proposal, we can provide thousands of Americans with good-paying jobs, boost our energy manufacturing and security, strengthen our economy, and do it in a way that is environmentally responsible and protects our communities.

I applaud today's announcements because it will make a true difference for our country and for the American people, the American worker who has not done well over the last 8 years but under this administration has begun to do well, and this is the next step in making sure that his and her future is as bright as it ever could be.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. CORNYN). The Senator from Utah.

Mr. LEE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senator from Texas, Mr. CORNYN, be recognized at the conclusion of my remarks.

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

REMEMBERING THOMAS S. MONSON

Mr. LEE. Mr. President, I rise today to honor the life of a truly remarkable man: Thomas S. Monson, the president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

On Tuesday night, at the age of 90, President Monson was called home by his Heavenly Father. I expect that his reunion with his wife Frances was a joyous occasion, and I am confident that this reunion will provide comfort to his three children and eight grandchildren.

But President Monson's legacy is far greater than his family, even though that was of paramount importance to President Monson and his wife Frances. President Monson's legacy also includes the countless men and women whose lives were touched by him, as well as the confident, global church he helped to shepherd, to expand, and to strengthen.

Consider this: In the 54 years Thomas Monson served as an apostle, church membership swelled from 2 million to 16 million. That accomplishment is a blessing from God, but it was realized by saints like President Monson, who devoted their lives to serving Him—in his case, starting at an exceptionally young age.

Thomas Monson was born and raised in Salt Lake City in a large and devoutly faithful family. He attended Utah State University. He served with honor in the U.S. Navy Reserve, and he worked for a time in printing, including for the Deseret News.

By the age of 22, he was the bishop of a ward, a local congregation in Salt Lake City, charged with guiding over 1,000 people in their walks with Christ.

By 36 he was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, one of the youngest people ever to receive that special calling.

But Brother Monson did not give in to hubris as a result of those unexpected and, in many cases, early promotions. Quite the opposite, he was humbled by the very heavy mantle that had been placed on his shoulders with each of these callings.

Members of President Monson's ward remember the young bishop as a steady companion to people who were enduring struggles and hardship. There were 80 widows in his ward, and Bishop Monson took the time to visit every single one of them on a regular basis. Also in his ward were 18 servicemen fighting in the Korean war. Every month, he sent letters to those 18 men to remind them that they had not been forgotten, and even decades later, he would speak of these servicemen and widows during the church's General Conference meeting. His love for them could still be felt by those in attendance.

Those stories illustrate the kind of man President Monson truly was. I can testify to this fact through personal anecdotes of my own, including the fact that in 2010, shortly after I had been elected to the U.S. Senate, President Monson invited me, along with

my wife Sharon and our three children, to visit with him in his office in Salt Lake City. He prayed with us, encouraged us, and offered us counsel. As much as anything, we just felt honored that he would take the time to meet with us and show interest in our lives.

This is perhaps the single most consistent thread in President Monson's life. He was someone who at every step of his life, at every stage of his service, was always willing to reach out to others, to visit them even without anyone else expecting it. He was known—famous, in fact—for routinely interrupting his daily routine just to visit someone who happened to be sick, who happened to be in the hospital, who happened to be going through something difficult. President Monson didn't always know the reason why he needed to visit the person in advance; he just knew it needed to be done, and he always did.

There are lessons that we can learn here in the U.S. Senate about this type of service—this type of service that is selfless, that is eternal in its scope and in its reach, this type of service that blesses the lives of other human beings without any expectation of remuneration. He was a leader who understood how even small, seemingly insignificant acts of kindness could affect people's lives in profound, lasting ways.

He always urged his brothers and sisters within the church and elsewhere to be on the lookout for signs that God was calling them to help. "Never fail to follow a prompting of the Holy Spirit," he would say, and on a regular basis, he did just that. This could mean visiting a relative in the hospital or delivering a meal to a coworker who was mourning a loss or just checking in on a friend he hadn't seen in a while.

For President Monson, it was always about taking time for that personal connection. President Monson knew that little encounters build strong relationships—and strong saints.

In 2008, President Thomas S. Monson was called to lead the church. He proved to be a good steward of the church in a fast-moving world and in an expanding, growing faith community. Many obituaries have already noted how in 2012 he lowered the age requirement for missionaries, a decision that increased the missionary force in short order from 52,000 to almost 70,000. That is almost 20,000 more young people to spread the Gospel and daily serve in those communities around the world.

But President Monson did far more than that to strengthen the church's commitment to caring for the least in our community. Under his leadership, the church expanded its poverty and disaster relief programs. He even added "caring for the poor and needy" to the church's official mission statement.

President Monson lived in Utah almost his entire life, but his heart was with the church spreading throughout the world. During the depths of the Cold War, he helped lead the Latter-

day Saints trapped behind the Iron Curtain. Mormons in the Soviet Union were poor just like everyone else. They didn't have a temple, and their governments forbade them from traveling abroad. As a result, they didn't have access to temple ceremonies that are central to our faith. That didn't sit well with President Monson.

As he told his brothers and sisters from the pulpit during a trip to East Germany, he wanted them to share in "every blessing" of the faith. So he gave everything he had to help those people, even the shirt off his own back—quite literally. He returned from one trip to the Soviet Union in his house slippers because he had given his spare clothes to the less fortunate, a funny story that brings to mind the words of the Savior: "[For] I was a stranger, and ye took me in: [I was] naked, and ye clothed me."

Around that time, President Monson began two decades of quiet diplomacy with the Soviet authorities, including with Erich Honecker himself. His labor reaped a tremendous harvest. In a regime that was hostile to religion and to outsiders, he won approval for Mormon missionaries to come and spread the Gospel.

In 1985, he won an even bigger triumph when a temple opened behind the Iron Curtain in Freiberg, Germany. Ninety thousand East Germans attended the dedication of that temple.

He had followed a prompting of the Lord. The result was nothing less than that dramatic, impactful tear in the Iron Curtain, one that had stifled religious belief, but religious belief was facilitated by this noble servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.

These are just a few stories from President Monson's life that I have shared, and I would like to conclude with just one more. Not long ago, President Monson was asked what he wanted for his birthday, which was coming up. Here was his simple response:

Do something for someone else on that day to make his or her life better. Find someone who is having a hard time, or is ill, or lonely, and do something for them. That's all I would ask.

President Monson was always looking for little ways to help other people. That wish is as true in death as it was in life. In lieu of flowers for his funeral, the church has requested contributions be made to the church's Humanitarian Aid Fund.

President Monson's legacy will outlast his death because he chose to follow the One who conquered death, taking upon Himself the sins, the transgressions, the pains, the miseries of all mankind so that we, too, might return to live with Him.

President Monson will be missed. President Monson, God be with you until we meet again.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. CASIDY). The majority whip.

#### ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE CONGRESS

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, I know we are back, fresh from the holidays, at the start of a new year, and all of us are already thinking a lot and working hard on the tasks we have at hand. We have a lot to do, especially before the next continuing resolution expires on January 19.

But I don't want to make the mistake of failing to recount the good work we were able to accomplish on behalf of the American people in 2017 because, sometimes, in the hustle and bustle of life, we fail to acknowledge those things that we have actually been able to do, for which we ought to be grateful, and that our constituents need to know about. I would like to take just a few minutes to do exactly that because, unfortunately, in the hyperpolitical and hyperpolarized political environment we live in today—especially with the advent of social media—there are always some naysayers and pundits who want to offer their comments. One of the things I have noticed most about many of those naysayers and pundits when they comment on what is happening here in Washington is how little they know about the facts. The facts matter, and I want to offer those for the public's consideration now.

In January of last year, the Nation was quickly called to order following the inauguration of President Trump. One of his first actions was to nominate Neil Gorsuch to the U.S. Supreme Court. I think most of us were astonished at the quality of this selection, many of us not being familiar with the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals on which Justice Gorsuch served in Denver, CO.

Justice Gorsuch was quickly confirmed in April, and then we moved on to fill other judicial vacancies, which, of course, are the prerogative of the President to make that nomination and to then be confirmed with the advice and consent of the Senate. We, like the President, have made filling these judicial vacancies a priority.

The fact is, though, that the Senate is in the personnel business. In other words, our friends in the House of Representatives don't have to vote on confirmation of judges and other Presidential nominees, but we in the Senate have that responsibility. All told, we have confirmed 19 men and women to the Federal bench in 2017, setting a record for appellate judges confirmed during a President's first year in office. Two of them, Jim Ho and Don Willett, I am pleased to say, will serve from Texas on the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals that sits in New Orleans. These are exceptionally qualified nominees—and typical in that description of the types of people that President Trump has selected to serve in the Federal judiciary.

But our work wasn't just confined to confirming the President's nominees. After 8 years of overreach, hundreds of burdensome rules passed during the

previous administration—many in the waning hours of President Obama's Presidency—were rolled back or suspended. I am glad Congress did its part, using the Congressional Review Act to roll back 15 harmful regulations last year. As much as anything, I think that has contributed to the soaring stock market, the increase in consumer confidence, and the extraordinary rebound of our economy.

As last summer began, we passed a bill funding Texas priorities. It funded things like the National Space Administration programs at Houston's Johnson Space Center, which will advance missions, hopefully back to the moon and eventually to Mars. We allowed through that funding to make sure that the Department of Homeland Security had what they needed to hire additional Border Patrol and agents at ports of entry to improve those checkpoints and to add immigration court judges too.

I remember thinking about Hurricane Harvey. A friend of mine years ago asked the rhetorical question: Do you know what makes God laugh? Then he answered: When we make plans.

Hurricane Harvey is perhaps an example of that, because we were making other plans when we got this natural disaster known as Hurricane Harvey.

Texas was pummeled with the most extreme rain event in the history of the United States, devastating more than 28,000 square miles along the coast. I, along with the entire Texas congressional delegation, helped secure roughly \$30 billion for recovery efforts, but the thing I am most proud of is the way ordinary Texans responded to their neighbors in need. They weren't waiting around for Washington to act first. They wanted to act to help their neighbors, their community, and their State.

Recognizing we have the Presiding Officer from Louisiana, I just want to make special note of the Cajun Navy that came over from Louisiana to help rescue people off of their rooftops. That is part of what makes not only Texas and Louisiana great, but it is what makes America great, too, when people will come to the aid of their fellow Americans.

As Texans tore out sheetrock and molded carpet in their living rooms, Federal resources helped piece together the lives disrupted. Now we have to make sure we complete the task by delivering additional relief not only to Texas but to Florida, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands, as well as to those States devastated by the wildfires out West. The House having passed a substantial disaster relief bill and sent it over to us, I am hopeful that is something we will take up and pass very soon, perhaps as soon as January 19.

I spoke about natural disasters, but now let me turn to a manmade disaster. After the hurricane, Texas was dealt a second blow just 2 months later, when a man opened fire at a church in Sutherland Springs, TX.

With multiple convictions for domestic violence, a felony conviction, and a history of mental illness, this individual should never have been able to legally purchase a firearm because, under existing law, those conditions disqualify you from being able to purchase a firearm, if you are a convicted felon, convicted of domestic violence, or have a history of mental illness.

That is why, following this terrible disaster where 26 people were killed, I introduced the bipartisan Fix NICS Act—that is, Fix the National Instant Criminal Background Check System Act—to ensure existing laws are enforced and convicted felons don't exploit our background check system by lying and buying. I am going to continue to urge the passage of this important piece of legislation, which is, as I say, bipartisan, as it should be.

The fall of 2017 gave way to winter and soon came the flurries of snow not only here in Washington but back home in Texas. The week before Christmas, we completed comprehensive tax reform—a historic overhaul of the Tax Code and the first in more than three decades.

We said originally that our goals were threefold: One was to make the Tax Code simpler; the second was to make sure everybody in every tax bracket saw a decrease in their tax liability; and third was to make the American Tax Code competitive in the global economy. Until that point, we had the highest tax rate in the industrialized world, which caused companies to move or invest offshore and create jobs in other countries rather than the United States because we had the most burdensome tax in the industrialized world.

As I said, this bill—now law—reduces taxes in all income brackets and boosts the standard deduction and child tax credit. This means that only 1 out of 10 taxpayers will likely choose to itemize because they will actually benefit more from the standard deduction along with the child tax credit. It will allow businesses to add jobs, raise wages, and reinvest in the United States from overseas. For example, a family of four making the median income will see their taxes drop by more than \$2,000—a reduction of nearly 58 percent.

Tax reform complements an economy that has already been truly unleashed under this administration. Just since January, the economy has added 1.7 million new jobs, and over the last two quarters, our economy has grown at more than 3 percent—as compared to an average of only 1.9 percent under the previous administration.

While not historic in the sense that the tax bill was historic, there is other legislation we passed with little fanfare but significant impact that I would like to mention.

One is a bill I championed called the PROTECT Our Children Act, which reauthorizes task forces to combat child exploitation online. The second I would like to mention is a bill that tackled

elder abuse. A third, called the SAFER Act—which was signed today by the President—reauthorizes rape kit audits and prioritizes the training of pediatric nurses handling sexual assault cases.

I was shocked and chagrined a year or so ago to learn there could be as many as 400,000 untested rape kits either sitting in evidence lockers or in laboratories untested. Now, thanks to the Debbie Smith Act—named after a heroic woman who has championed the funding of Federal efforts to identify and test this backlog of rape kits—that number is far smaller today, but reauthorization of the SAFER Act is important to keep our commitment to victims of sexual assault that we will do everything in our power to help them identify their assailant and bring them to justice, and, at the same time, exonerate people who may be falsely accused because there is no DNA match.

Finally, other legislation I filed and has now been signed into law assists police departments in hiring military veterans. We know our police departments are always in need of good, highly qualified applicants for those important first responder jobs. Once signed by the President, it will streamline the process that Active-Duty personnel and reservist members go through to apply for their commercial driver's license.

We know it is a long and arduous process to apply for a commercial driver's license, so why not take our Active-Duty military who are soon to retire or our veterans and expedite their ability to qualify for a commercial driver's license when they leave the military?

As I said, these bills don't grab big headlines, but they chip away at problems and were passed on a bipartisan basis—which I think puts the lie to the canard that nothing ever gets done in Washington.

The job of men and women in Congress is to serve the people who elected us. This last year we made important strides, but our work is just beginning. As I said at the outset, there is much that lies ahead. Many Americans and many Texans are still knocking at the door of greater prosperity. I hope we will make it our New Year's resolution to open that door a little wider in 2018.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

RESCINDING THE COLE MEMO

Mr. BOOKER. Mr. President, I rise today because earlier on this day, the Trump administration and Attorney General Jeff Sessions rescinded the Justice Department's policy known as the Cole memo.

The Cole memo is a policy issued under the Obama administration instructing prosecutors to shift away

from a focus on nonviolent marijuana crimes and toward more serious crimes that threaten our communities. This memo was a critical step and a move in the right direction, undoing some of the catastrophic damage that has been caused by the failed War on Drugs. It was a step forward for the Federal Government in mending our broken drug policies that have so hurt our Nation in so many ways. I believe it was a step forward that the vast majority of Americans who believe the War on Drugs failed agree with. It was a step forward that improved Americans' safety, saved money, and better aligned our laws with our most fundamental values of fairness, equality, and justice. Yet, today, Attorney General Jeff Sessions has instructed the Department of Justice to not just double down on failed policy but to turn back the clock and undermine the well-being of our country.

The policy change actually goes against what Jeff Sessions promised elected officials in this body before his confirmation. We already heard from the other CORY in the Senate—Republican Senator CORY GARDNER—that he had a commitment from the Attorney General before his confirmation that this is not what he would do.

This is an attack on our most sacred ideals and the very purpose of the Department of Justice, which is to protect Americans, to elevate ideals of justice, and to do right by people. It is a failure of this administration, which said—our President said during his campaign that he would honor what States are doing. It is a betrayal by our Attorney General, who gave a commitment to at least one Republican Member of this body. But most significantly, it will hurt America. It ignores the fact that there is a growing bipartisan consensus that the War on Drugs has failed. It sacrifices our critical, urgently needed resources in our communities, violating our values and destroying families, and has failed to make us safer.

Let me walk through those four points one by one—first, this massive waste of public resources that are urgently needed in other areas. In the last four decades in this country, we have spent so much on these policies at the same time that we are disinvesting from public education, from our public colleges, disinvesting from investments and innovation, investments in science and research. Yet we have spent trillions of dollars on this failed War on Drugs.

We have created a nation that says we are the land of the free, but we are the incarceration nation on the planet Earth. One out of every four incarcerated people on this planet is imprisoned here in the United States of America. One out of every three incarcerated women on the planet is incarcerated right here in the United States of America.

Between the time of 1990 and 2005, we have devoted so much of our resources

to building new prisons. During that time, we were building a new prison in the United States every 10 days to keep up with the massive amount of people who were being driven into our prisons. One new prison was being built every 10 days as our infrastructure and our roads and bridges crumbled.

We have sidelined the resources of our law enforcement officials. I know this, having been a former mayor. The precious time, resources, and energy of our law enforcement officials have been sidelined, redirecting them to marijuana enforcement, and for what?

At a time when we have real issues to deal with in our country, such as a drug epidemic; at a time when people cannot afford treatment and when there are waiting lists for treatment because we don't have the resources to deal with this opioid epidemic, we are instead using our resources to enforce marijuana laws.

The Centers for Disease Control, the CDC, reported last year that 91 Americans die every single day from the opioid epidemic in this country. Meanwhile, according to FBI data from 2014, one American is arrested every single minute for marijuana possession—one American every minute for marijuana possession. That is about 1,700 Americans being arrested every day for marijuana possession, using police resources, resources to put people in jail, to hold them, to feed them, court resources. All that can be used better and invested in our society to deal with the ravages of the opioid epidemic. Police resources that could be used to chase after violent offenders are instead being used for marijuana possession. It is somehow crazy that we think we can arrest our way out of a problem.

Doubling down on these failed efforts makes no sense. It is a massive waste of our precious resources as a society.

No. 2, it is also perpetuating injustice in our country. We believe that everyone in this Nation should have equal justice under the law. Those are the words written on the Supreme Court. But we know this War on Drugs has not been a War on Drugs, it has been a war on people—and not all people but certain people, the most vulnerable people. It has been a war on people, a war on mentally ill people. It has been a war on people of color.

The unequal application of marijuana laws has created a justice system where outcomes are often more dependent upon race and class than dependent upon guilt or innocence. In privileged communities and places all across this country, marijuana is being used with little fear of consequences and openly spoken about and joked about with little understanding of the painful fact that the War on Drugs in America has scarcely affected their lives but the War on Drugs, because of the unequal application of the laws, is affecting people in other communities.

I have seen this personally. I went to Stanford and to Yale, and I watched drug use being done openly—marijuana

use. There are no FBI investigations, no sting operations set up to go after the privileged in this country.

There are people in this body who openly admit to using marijuana with no consequence. But if you are poor or vulnerable in the United States of America, they are coming after you, and there will be consequences. I have had countless conversations with elected officials about their own personal drug use because it is outrageous to me, this outrageous hypocrisy that they could flaunt drug rules while poor people and people of color suffer as a result of our marijuana laws.

The facts are clear. The disproportionate enforcement of marijuana laws has helped to create a system of massive injustice in our country, and it is obvious. There is no difference in America between Blacks and Whites using marijuana, no difference between Blacks and Whites selling marijuana. Blacks are 3.7 times more likely to be arrested for marijuana possession than a White person is. This is a targeting of certain communities, a targeting of low-income people who are having their lives devastated by this unequal application of the law. Jeff Sessions' announcement today will make the problem worse.

People don't understand what it means to have a felony conviction for marijuana possession. Most people have no understanding that this is a lifetime sentence in America. It not only affects the individual's ability to get a job, you can't get a Pell grant if you have a felony conviction for marijuana usage, which many people in this body have done. You can't get a business license with a felony conviction for marijuana. You can't get food stamps. You can't get public housing.

It devastates individuals economically, but it devastates their families as well. It destroys the lives of children when suddenly the earner in their family, who is guilty of no more a serious crime than some of my colleagues—suddenly they have to pick up the pieces after one of their parents is sent away to prison. Missing 1 or 2 days of work often means losing your job, not being able to make your car payment or rental payment. We know that for children, where their father is in prison, they are more than five times more likely than their peers to be expelled or suspended from school.

This marijuana enforcement is devastating families—the fundamental building blocks of communities—and it is devastating communities. These laws weaken our overall economic health. One study found that if it weren't for the mass incarceration explosion as a result of the War on Drugs, the poverty rate in this country would be 20 percent lower.

We have a self-inflicted wound by wasting the resources—police resources and financial resources—of this country, and we have another self-inflicted wound by destroying families and communities economically.

It also has hurt our safety as a country. There are communities all across this Nation that worry about the safety of their children, the safety of their families, and the safety of their neighborhoods. By taking these critical resources away from law enforcement, this is a sacrifice of our efforts to make communities safe and strong.

In 2016, more Americans were arrested for marijuana possession than for all violent crimes combined. How many unsolved murders are there? How many unsolved assaults? How much violence and crime should our police be investigating as opposed to dealing with marijuana prohibition? We have fewer police resources, fewer officers. We have occupied our prisons with more marijuana arrests than for rape, murder, aggravated assault, or even the unsolved robberies alone in our country because we are spending our precious police resources on marijuana prohibition. Our history shows this is true.

Historians now attest to the complete and utter failure of another prohibition in this country, which is the prohibition of alcohol. It arguably made people less safe. It led to more drinking and was a blow to our economy and the ability of our officers to do their job. It was even a blow to officers' safety and security.

If we are serious about making our communities safer or stronger, families more secure, we should be focusing on how to undo the catastrophic damage of marijuana prohibition, not double down on it.

I say all of this as someone who ran a police department in Newark. It was under my authority as mayor. My officers would talk about the churn of people they arrested again and again on nonviolent charges—which, by the way, many of our law enforcement officers may have engaged in and people in positions of authority, like Senators and Presidents, have done themselves, deepening the distrust between officers and the community.

I saw firsthand how the disproportionate enforcement of our drug laws made communities of mine overcriminalized and underprotected—overcriminalizing possession of marijuana and underprotecting them on serious crimes.

This is an issue which I know too personally. I have seen this from walking privileged and elite communities like universities or here in Washington, and I know it because I may be the only Senator who, when I go home, I go home to an inner-city community. I go home to a community where my census track is about \$14,000 per household. I love my neighborhood. I love my community. I love my neighbors, but it is outrageous to me that communities like mine and all over this country have seen the vicious impact of the War on Drugs, while other communities—elite communities—can brag and joke about their marijuana usage.

I am proud that I spent most of my adult life working with the people of

Newark, NJ—a city that is rich with culture, that is rich with art, that is rich with civic engagement—but I know, from Camden to Paterson, to Passaic, to Newark, there are communities like mine that, every single day, are getting the devastating blow of this prohibition—this war on marijuana.

I see the anguish people feel about the unjustness and the unfairness of it all and having lives upended for getting caught with small amounts of marijuana. I have seen countless people who couldn't find a job or a decent place to live to support their families.

I will never forget, as a city councilman in Newark, waiting in line at the DMV. A guy came over and told me the story that he was issued a uniform. He finally had a job that had a pension. He could support his family and move out of a bad neighborhood into a better one. He was so excited. They ran his record, and 18 years earlier he had a nonviolent, marijuana-related charge, and they took it all away from him. Think about that comparison to the highest office in the land, where marijuana users have occupied with no consequence—the hypocrisy of it all.

These aren't just a few people. These are hundreds of thousands of Americans who are bearing the brunt of nonviolent charges for marijuana. They have had their lives destroyed. They have that lifetime sentence of, time and time again, having to check a box about a marijuana arrest, having their uniforms taken away, opportunities closed.

I have seen how these laws make us less safe. When are we going to get back to this understanding that we—all of us as Americans—put our hand on our heart and we make a pledge; we swear an oath that we will be a nation of liberty and justice, not for the privileged, not for the elite, but we will be a nation of liberty and justice for all.

Countless people have talked about equal justice under the law. They have talked about these ideals and principles from this floor. They talked about it in the suffrage movement. They talked about it in the civil rights movement. It goes all the way back to slavery. Frederick Douglass, on the 24th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, made a statement that was as true then as it is now. He said:

Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe.

Well, this is the War on Drugs. This is the marijuana prohibition. It has been a systematic oppression of poor people in our country. It has destroyed and devastated individuals, families, communities, and cities. It has bled our national treasure. It has filled our jails to the point where we had to build more and more of them. It has taken away resources from investing in drug treatment or education, which we know not only drives down drug use but empowers people economically.

This is the War on Drugs. This is the war on marijuana. Attorney General Sessions' policy rescission today will only make these problems worse, at a time that the majority of the American public agrees with me—agrees that this prohibition must end. The majority of the American people understand that this policy makes our communities less safe, wastes taxpayers' money, makes it more difficult for police officers to do their jobs, and ultimately hurts the struggling folks at the bottom of the economic ladder most. It disproportionately affects Black and Brown Americans. They are the ones who are bearing the brunt of our failure to get rid of this prohibition.

Let's be clear about what this setback is. The American people know the War on Drugs has failed. They want change. Republicans and Democrats and Independents in States all across our country are making change at their legislature, at the ballot box—voting in a repeal of these awful, unfair, wasteful policies all across this country. In red States and blue States, Americans are marching, are standing up, and are fighting to change these laws.

We know States that have legalized marijuana have seen a massive increase in revenue and decreased rates of serious crime. Crime is going down in those communities. They have been able to put more resources to use to address urgent public needs like education and infrastructure.

In Colorado, arrest rates have decreased and State revenue has increased. Washington State has seen a 10-percent decrease in violent crime over the 3-year period following legalization.

It is time for Congress to step up to the plate. It is time for us to once again live up to our oath. It is time for us once again to fight to make our country a place of liberty and justice for all.

I know right now Attorney General Jeff Sessions and President Trump are standing squarely on the wrong side of history. I know what our ancestors have taught us about the arc of the moral universe bending toward justice. I know this is not a matter of if but a matter of when we will have sane marijuana policies in this country and end the prohibition that is destroying neighborhoods. I know these things.

How long will people suffer? How long will we waste resources? How long will we make ourselves less safe? How long? This fight is more than about a substance—a plant. It is more. It is about the soul of our Nation. It is about our ideals. It is about justice. It is about justice for veterans who rely on medical marijuana to treat their PTSD. They fought for us, they stood for us, and now, according to Jeff Sessions, with the use of medical marijuana to deal with their PTSD, they are criminals.

That is not the America I believe in. It is about justice for the man who has

a criminal record for doing something that three out of four Presidents have done—who now can't get a job, can't get a business license, and can't move his family to a better home.

This is not justice. This is not the America I know we are. This is about the mother I stood next to with her child who had Dravet syndrome—who fell into seizure after seizure multiple times a day—who was a marijuana refugee, leaving a State that didn't end prohibition to go to a State that had medical marijuana laws. According to Jeff Sessions, she is a criminal.

This is not our America. This is not the land of truth and justice to treat a parent like that—like a criminal. This is about families and communities that too long have been fractured by the inaction of this body to address the overcriminalization of our country. This is about the very values people fight for and stand for. This is about who we will be. We cannot fall into this Nation where the privileged and the elite have certain laws and the poor and the struggling have others.

What Jeff Sessions did today is unconscionable, unacceptable, and I will fight against it because when I go home, I see the communities in struggle. I can't turn my head and not understand that there are millions of Americans who are hurting from this decades-long War on Drugs.

This is a self-inflicted wound that goes deep to the bone of our country. It undermines our health and well-being, and too many suffer because of it. We have to fight. I feel this sense of hopefulness because around this country, Democrats and Republicans on the State level are making changes. They are marching forward. They are undoing past wrongs. I feel a sense of hope and promise, and even though today we were delivered a painful blow by our Federal Government to cast a shadow against every American citizen who is using medical marijuana—every American citizen who is doing things Senators have done—I still know that truth will go marching on. I still know we are a nation of justice. I know we are better than this, and I know what our future holds.

I ask my colleagues to reject this action by the Attorney General, to speak out against this devastating reality. There are Senators here who represent States where the people have spoken. It is now time we speak for the people. It is now time we speak for our country's ideals. It is now time we don't just speak the words of our pledge but we make this country, in truth, a nation of liberty and justice for all.

Thank you.

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

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

IRAN

Mr. BLUNT. Mr. President, I have two topics I want to speak about today; one is Iran.

There is no question that Iran is the principal state sponsor of terrorism in the world. Both the Obama administration and the Trump administration have without hesitation made that point. The Iranian regime provides money and it provides material support for groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah and a host of other terrorist groups. They have threatened to wipe out Israel, one of our closest allies. Their threat is to frankly wipe Israel off the map. And they have systematically trampled on the fundamental freedoms that all people everywhere would want to have. They have done that by taking those freedoms away from their own citizens and those human rights away from their own citizens.

In recent days, we have seen what happens after a decade of that kind of corruption and oppression. Protesters began a week ago to protest. It was, by all accounts, unexpected by the previous protest groups, by the military, or by the government. It spread to at least 50 cities, where brave people wanting to stand up—and in the streets began standing up by the thousands—to protest a government that denies them their rights, a government that has impoverished their country while it funnels billions of dollars to terrorists across the Middle East and across the world.

Where did those dollars come from? Unfortunately, too many of those dollars came from us.

I came to the floor, to this spot, nearly 2 years ago to ask that same question about where that money came from, after the Obama administration paid Iran what amounted to \$1.7 billion in what appeared to be a ransom for the release of five American hostages. At the time it was explained: Well, this is just money that we have had for a long time, which was part of an economic agreement, a foreign military sale that we have held on to. It turned out that the story was not true. We later learned that \$400 million of that payment was delivered in pallets of cash that came off an airplane. The pallets were stacked high with cash. And, on top of the \$100 billion in sanctions relief, we had another stack of billions of dollars in just straight cash—the sanctions relief, under the terribly thought-out Iranian nuclear deal, and the cash to apparently grease the skids so that agreement and others could happen.

We have heard of other things in recent days where the administration turned its back on bad things that were happening in order to see that the Iranian deal was going to go through. Now, if the Iranian deal had been a good deal, that would have been one thing, but to turn your back on bad things so that another bad thing can happen is even worse.

So where is this money going? Protesters have seen that the money that we delivered to them and the sanctions relief that we delivered to them didn't go to them and didn't go to their economy. It continued to finance terror around the world and war in other countries.

The State Department, once again, in their assessment said:

Iran remained the foremost state sponsor of terrorism in 2016 as groups supported by Iran maintained their capability to threaten U.S. interests and allies. The Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—Qods Force, along with Iranian partners, allies, and proxies, continued to play a destabilizing role in military conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

Those assessments always come about a year late, after you have had time to assess the previous year. I have no doubt that the same assessment for 2016 will also be the assessment for the year we just ended—2017.

Frankly, the Iranian people are tired of it. They are angry. They are putting their lives on the line to protest.

The response of the Iranian Government has been predictable. First of all, they blame others for creating these problems. They said that we were agitating those freedom fighters in their country, those freedom protesters. They censored access to the social media. They have cracked down by arresting hundreds of people. The reports are that at least 20 people have been killed.

It is clear that their behavior hasn't changed; the hope that the Iranian deal would somehow bring the long sought-after moderates in the current government to the forefront has not happened. We should support the Iranian people.

I join the administration in expressing my support for the men and women, young and old, and the courage that they have demonstrated as they stand up and try to achieve the greatness of that country, with its long heritage and its incredible assets in location and in resources, which they should be able to achieve; they just have not been allowed to do that.

The last time this happened, our country was very quiet. This time, our government is speaking up. Hopefully, others will join in. The European countries have more economic impact in Iran than we do, and there is a good reason for that. We have been very thoughtful of wanting to support this regime. They have not. It is time for them to speak up as well.

So I join the administration, I join the President, and I encourage friends of freedom around the world to not let this moment pass again—to not, one more time, act as if nothing has happened, and that, somehow, this is exactly what the Iranian Government says it is, because it is almost never what the Iranian Government says it is. We wish for those who care about freedom to stand up and defend and encourage those who are seeking a greater freedom.



## FEMA DECISION

Mr. President, the other issue I want to speak about today very briefly is that I want to commend the administration and the Federal Emergency Management Agency for a decision they just made. That decision was to make houses of worship eligible for Federal disaster aid. This is in line with legislation that I introduced in September of last year. Senator GILLIBRAND and I introduced this legislation after the impact of Hurricane Sandy on houses of worship.

FEMA's Public Assistance Program provides financial grants for the repair, reconstruction, and replacement of private nonprofit facilities—private nonprofit facilities. However, until yesterday, houses of worship were ineligible for FEMA public assistance grants.

As we saw last year, houses of worship—churches, synagogues, mosques, and other places—are critical institutions within communities. They help feed people in need and, in trying to respond to disaster, they provide comfort and shelter during those disasters. FEMA not only did the right thing by making houses of worship eligible for disaster assistance, it did what our Constitution demands.

According to FEMA officials, the change in policy was prompted by the Supreme Court's ruling in the case of *Trinity Lutheran Church of Columbia, Inc. v. Comer*. We have a provision in our constitution which I argued against and other Missouri elected officials filed amicus briefs against where we said our constitution was wrong in finding that religious, not-for-profit organizations couldn't be eligible for State programs simply because they were religious. That is not what the U.S. Constitution says. It is not what the Supreme Court determined State constitutions have a right to do.

So FEMA has taken an important step. I think it is equally important now that we make this policy permanent law. It is the right thing to do. It deserves to be permanently the right thing to do. I am hoping that we see the legislation that I have introduced and that many have cosponsored in whatever is the next supplemental disaster funding. Money is going to be spent. Let's go ahead and properly authorize it, as the Supreme Court said we had every right to do and as FEMA has decided that it is the right thing to do.

We are in a new year. We have new challenges. One of the goals we have is to be sure that we move forward in strengthening our economy, to help those responding to disasters and expanding opportunities for hard-working families. We have done that with regulatory reform, with judges who will determine what the law says, and with a tax bill where people will soon see in their paycheck that it is actually all about hard-working families.

I have an editorial from the Joplin Globe today. A tornado struck a community in 2011, and over 100 people

were killed. According to the Joplin Globe editorial—just to remind me of the numbers—some 28 churches were either destroyed or damaged by the tornado that came through Joplin. A significant number were totally destroyed. I have been to a number of those buildings that have been replaced, but they were replaced without any of the kind of assistance that other not-for-profits would have had.

The Joplin Globe editorial ends with this:

Floods, fires, tornadoes and hurricanes don't treat churches differently. Neither should FEMA.

Again, I congratulate FEMA for the decision they made on this topic.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Joplin Globe editorial be printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

[From the Joplin Globe]

## OUR VIEW: FEMA AID FOR CHURCHES

During Joplin's 2011 tornado, some 28 churches were either destroyed or damaged. But those that were still standing quickly opened doors and became centers for those left homeless after this national disaster.

That's why we applaud the Federal Emergency Management Agency's announcement that houses of worship are eligible for FEMA Public Assistance program grants, which provide funding for the repair, reconstruction or replacement of private nonprofit sites.

That's thanks to U.S. Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., who introduced the legislation in September to make houses of worship permanently eligible for disaster assistance. Sen. Claire McCaskill, the Democrat from Missouri, also added her name to the bill in a show of bipartisan support.

Both Blunt and McCaskill, in statements put out on Wednesday, recognize the value churches can play in disasters.

"I'm glad to see FEMA do the right thing by ensuring houses of worship are eligible for disaster aid on the same terms as other nonprofits," Blunt said. "As we saw again last year, houses of worship serve a vital role during disasters, providing shelter, food and other services for families who need it the most."

Previously, houses of worship were ineligible for FEMA Public Assistance program grants. FEMA's announcement on Wednesday means that churches, synagogues or mosques affected by disasters declared on or after Aug. 23, 2017, and for applications for assistance that were pending with FEMA as of Aug. 23, 2017, are eligible for assistance.

Blunt's right. Legislation is still needed to ensure houses of worship remain eligible for disaster assistance under federal law on a permanent basis. Floods, fires, tornadoes and hurricanes don't treat churches differently. Neither should FEMA.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. BLUNT). Without objection, it is so ordered.

## TRIBUTE TO JAMES CHARLES

Mr. SULLIVAN. Mr. President, for the past year or so, I have been coming to the floor nearly every week, and I know the Presiding Officer looks at this as possibly his favorite time of the week because he gets to hear a lot of these "Alaskan of the Week" speeches. I know the pages love them. I come to the floor to talk about my State, really brag about my State, and recognize an Alaskan who has made a difference—made a difference in their community, whether it is a small community or a big community in the State, in the country.

I have repeatedly stated—I am sure not all my colleagues agree, but maybe some of them do—that Alaskans live in the greatest State in the greatest country in the world. We certainly have the most beautiful landscapes and all the seasons. I was in Fairbanks and Anchorage over the holidays. It was wonderful. Winter is such a great time in the great State of Alaska. For those who love snow, Alaska is the place to be, so we want everyone to come visit. But it is truly the people and strong communities throughout Alaska that make our State so great—such a welcoming place.

For those of us who live in Alaska, sustainable community is everything. Living in one of the most magnificent places on Earth, also, certainly has its challenges. We depend on each other. Our traditional knowledge, our ingenuity, our warm-hearted nature, and our determination to overcome these challenges is what makes our State great and is often the theme of our "Alaskan of the Week" speeches.

Today I wish to transport you to the village of Tuntutuliak—a village of about 400 people, southwest of Bethel, AK, on the 700-mile long, mighty Kuskokwim River—and introduce you to a truly amazing elder who, for 77 years, has worked tirelessly for his community and for our State. This is James Charles, who is our Alaskan of the Week.

Over the past decades, when there has been a meeting on the Kuskokwim concerning fish or wildlife or subsistence, James has been there helping to create and shape a fishing and hunting community and regulations, not only for the region but for the entire State of Alaska.

James was born in 1940 in a fish camp below Helmick Point on the Kuskokwim River. During that time, Alaska was being devastated by a tuberculosis epidemic. In fact, in the mid-20th century, Alaska Native people experienced the highest incidence of tuberculosis of any population ever. This is one of the many challenges we talk about.

Sadly, the epidemic took James's father, his uncle, and both grandparents, leaving his mother and the community

to care for her three children. The community—like many still, unfortunately, in Alaska—didn't have hospitals or clinics. They didn't have medicine. The Federal Government basically turned a blind eye to the havoc that this disease was wreaking over all of Alaska, particularly in our small villages.

What the community did have was each other. They had food, and they had the bounty of the land. They had elders to help teach the young people in the village the true meaning of subsistence living.

James's mother, Emma, hunted and fished to feed the family, and she and James's uncle taught James how to be a conservationist, only taking enough fish and wild game to survive and ensuring enough was left for other villagers—lessons he has passed on to the younger generations of Alaskans, year after year.

James met his wife Nancy 50 years ago. She lived in another village. He met her when he was out trapping for food. He said:

I walked 52 miles and found my wife at the end of my trapline. It was my best catch [ever].

James's accomplishments are legion. He spent 22 years in the Alaska National Guard, like so many Alaskan Natives who serve at higher rates in the U.S. military than any other ethnic group in the country. He has served on the Federal Subsistence Regional Advisory Council, the Fish and Game Advisory Council, and the Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group.

James travels all around our great State, attending different meetings and testifying at the Board of Fish and Game. He has dedicated his life to fish and wildlife conservation so he can set an example for Alaskans today and future generations, including his own family.

He has 5 children, 15 grandchildren, and 12 great-grandchildren. He is so committed to keeping the culture and tradition alive that none of his kids or great grandkids are allowed into his house unless they are able to speak Yupik, the traditional language of his people.

For all his work to help continue a vital tradition of subsistence and conservation in Alaska, James was awarded the conservationist of the year award by the Fish and Wildlife Service this past summer, which he accepted at this year's Alaska Federation of Natives Convention.

For his work, James is our Alaskan of the Week.

Thank you, James, for all you have done for the great State of Alaska.

#### TRIBUTE TO ALEX SCHENCK

Mr. President, I wish to say a few words about one of the members of my staff, who happens to be on the floor with me right now. Alex Schenck, unfortunately for me, is leaving my office on January 5 to pursue another opportunity in Washington, DC.

Alex has been in my office since 2015. He has been a legislative correspondent and rose to be a legislative aide where he oversaw issues related to my work on both the Environment and Public Works Committee and the Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee. Most notably and importantly for this body and, I believe, for the entire country, Alex was the key member of my staff who drafted S. 756, the Save Our Seas Act, the SOS Act, an important bipartisan piece of legislation we worked on with Senator WHITEHOUSE and others. It passed the Senate last year.

This legislation, which is awaiting movement in the House, will address a very important issue not only for Alaska but for the entire country, which is the epidemic of marine debris affecting our oceans, our shorelines, inland waterways, coasts across the globe, fish and wildlife habitat, and the health and sustainability of our fisheries.

What Alex was able to do in terms of this bill is very impressive. He brought together an impressive coalition of industry and conservation groups to support the bill. In addition to working on that important legislation—which we are hopeful will move in the House and get signed by the President—Alex ran point on hearings that I chaired at the Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries, and Coast Guard.

He has a bachelor of science degree from High Point University in North Carolina and a master's degree in applied political science from American University. He is an avid outdoorsman, as you can probably tell. He is a good-natured and extremely hard-working member of my team.

He will be sorely missed. We wish him the very best.

Thank you, Alex.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

#### LEGISLATIVE SESSION

#### MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to legislative session for a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

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

#### ADDITIONAL STATEMENTS

#### TRIBUTE TO KELLY FLYNN

• Mr. DAINES. Mr. President, this week I have the distinct honor of recognizing Montana Representative Kelly Flynn of Broadwater County for his service to the State of Montana. Kelly is currently serving his fourth term in the Montana State Legislature. He continues to serve with an unyielding commitment to his constituents and the well-being of the State, while also fighting cancer. This past November, Kelly made the motion to adjourn the legislative special session, concluding, "Cancer may take my body but it will never take my heart and soul."

Kelly's heart and soul are Montana through and through. Kelly is a rancher and outfitter who serves as chairman of the Montana House of Representatives Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Committee. He has also served on the Governor's Council for Private Lands and Public Wildlife and the Montana Board of Outfitters and is currently serving as a member of the Broadwater County Farm Bureau. Montana has benefited greatly from his decades of service.

Kelly has been a friend of mine for years. His work ethic is exceptional, and he is the best master of ceremonies in Broadwater County. His commitment to others represents the heart and soul of Montana.●

#### TRIBUTE TO JUNE RYCHALSKI

• Mr. DAINES. Mr. President, this week, I have the distinct honor of recognizing June Rychalski for her service with the Montana Department of Military Affairs. She has served Montana with grace, diligence, a positive attitude, and genuine care for the people of the Treasure State.

During her 35 years of service, June has been secretary to the senior Army adviser, administrative assistant to the adjutant general, and next month will complete her career with the Montana Veterans Affairs Division. June demonstrated compassion and professionalism on a daily basis. Her ability to help a grieving family member navigate the challenges of veteran burial honors or steer a distressed veteran in the right direction to attain benefits is highly commendable. Her presence in the Montana Department of Military Affairs will be missed, but the mentorship she provided agency personnel over the years will ensure that her legacy endures. To her coworkers, June was regarded as their greatest advocate.

When June retires, she plans to do what she has always done: continue to take good care of others. At age 83, June's example is inspiring. Her work ethic, compassion, and commitment to excellence represent the best of Montana values.

Thank you, June, for your service. I wish you the best in retirement and appreciate all you have done for our State.●

#### TRIBUTE TO BARBARA JOHNSON

• Ms. KLOBUCHAR. Mr. President, I wish to recognize the career of Barbara