

America. I want everybody to remember four things to take home that you have done to see to it that our men and women who fight for us and keep us safe get treated the way they should every day.

No. 1 is the VA MISSION Act.

After a number of years, when we started moving towards a way to get better appointments, better timing, and better results for our veterans, we finally came together with the VA MISSION Act. We saw to it that if a veteran needed health needs met, he got them when he needed them, not when it was convenient for him to get them. If the VA couldn't provide them, the private sector could. He could go to the private sector. We have done everything we can to expand accessibility to quality healthcare. Our vets are the most important assets we have.

The second is the accountability bill. For a lot of years, we saw on the front pages of the newspapers that the VA had done stupid things and that a lot of VA employees had done stupid things. The way they got corrected—the way they got punished—was to be transferred to another VA office. We finally passed a bill whereby if you don't do your job, if you hurt the people you are there to protect—meaning our vets—then you get fired. You have a 10-day appeal, and then you are through. You don't get paid forever. You don't get moved. You don't get switched around. We make sure you have pure accountability. Because of that, the VA is more responsive today than it has ever been.

With that, we had to put in whistleblower protection to allow our vets who find out something is going wrong but who are afraid to say something to have the protection that everybody has with whistleblower laws we have passed.

The third biggest problem we had and the No. 1 headache we have is seeing to it that veterans' benefits are timely and that they get a good appeal. The timeliness in approving veterans' applications for that had gone to as much as a year and a half to 2 years before they had gotten decisions. Now we have better accountability with the improved results we are seeing in giving our veterans their benefits and their approvals in a more timely way. I hope, before I leave the Senate, whenever that will be, we will get it down to almost zero. They don't get the luxury of waiting when they are on the battlefield. They have to pull and fight when they are confronted. So we need to make sure they get that benefit today.

Lastly and most importantly, as we have said, our veterans are our most important people. We now have the Agency focused in the right direction. We have a good Secretary in Secretary Wilkie. We have a good focus in what we are doing, and we have passed the types of acts that are necessary to get a bureaucracy to become a responsible organization. We have seen to it that the benefits we are supposed to protect

are not only protected but are delivered as well.

Thank you for the time I have been given to address the Senate. I hope all of us go home and remember that our most important people are our veterans. Also remember what each of you has done in passing these improvements—seeing to it that the GI bill is now permanent for everybody in that there are no more caps on their time; seeing to it that veterans in the Reserves and veterans on Active Duty are treated the same; and seeing to it that we have accountability and benefits for our veterans so no one is left behind and so the United States of America will continue to be the greatest country on the face of this Earth.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Connecticut.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST— H.R. 299

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, I thank my colleague and friend Senator ISAKSON, as well as the ranking member, Senator TESTER, for their leadership on the Veterans' Affairs Committee in this past session. I have been proud and honored to work with them, and I look forward to doing so in the next Congress on issues so important and challenging. We have a responsibility to meet the needs of our veterans.

In that spirit, I ask unanimous consent that the Veterans' Affairs Committee be discharged from further consideration of H.R. 299, the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2017, and that the Senate proceed to its immediate consideration; that the bill be considered read a third time and passed; and that the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table with no intervening action or debate.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

The Senator from Georgia.

Mr. ISAKSON. Mr. President, reserving the right to object, my apologies to those on the floor who wish to speak. We have spoken a couple of times about this on the floor. I want to do it one more time.

I appreciate the motion by the gentleman who had been my ranking member on the committee for 2 years before this current session of the Senate. The blue water Navy has been an issue that has been controversial. It has almost been passed a few times, and it has been defeated a number of times.

Our veterans, today, who served in Vietnam and who have ended up contracting cancer—non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and things like that—do not have the luxury of presumption of cause on their service in Vietnam unless they served on the land. If they served on the land in the battlefield, they get the benefit, but if they served at sea, where most of this napalm and all of the other agents were delivered—

on those ships—they don't have that benefit.

The VA bifurcated a benefit of healthcare to our veterans—many of whom contracted cancer and many of whom have died—and said: If you are on the land, you get it. If you are on the sea, we will not let you have it.

It is the wrong thing to do. No veteran who served on the land is more important or less important than the one who served at sea. We have a chance to do this, and we ought to do it. I am going to vote in favor of adopting the motion by the gentleman from Connecticut.

Let me just say one other thing. There is a letter floating around about the cost of this and about the cost estimates we had. We got a new cost estimate yesterday after our having spent years in the committee trying to get a better cost estimate. We got one yesterday that was higher than the day before. I don't know what its credibility is. I am not going to cast aspersions on the credibility of the CBS. Obviously, nothing should surpass a promise we have made for healthcare coverage to our veterans that they are not getting. That is what we owe to them, and I hope everybody will vote to support the blue water Navy benefit with regard to the motion by the Senator from Connecticut.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Utah.

Mr. LEE. Mr. President, reserving the right to object, I have great respect for my distinguished friends and colleagues, including my colleagues from Connecticut and from Georgia. I will also add that there is no doubt that all of us owe a great debt of gratitude to the brave men and women who fought and served in the Vietnam war. There is no question that they endured unspeakable hardships there and, of course, for many decades following their service.

For some, one of these hardships involved exposure to Agent Orange. This very potent chemical was widely used by the U.S. military during the Vietnam war as part of its herbicidal warfare program, and it has proven to have been something that has caused major health problems for the service men and women who were exposed to it. So Congress passed the Agent Orange Act of 1991 to provide health benefits for those servicemembers who were affected by it.

The act presumes the service connection for diseases caused by herbicides for Active military, naval, or air servicemembers when, and only when, there is scientific and medical evidence to support it.

In 2002, the VA removed the blue water Navy veterans from the presumption of exposure, as they had looked at the data repeatedly under multiple administrations and had not found evidence to grant the presumption.

The bill now under consideration would restore this presumption to the

blue water Navy veterans, but prudence demands that we wait until we have more complete information and evidence to make this presumption. In fact, previous studies have lumped all the branches of the services together into their analyses or they focused solely on the Army. In other words, they failed to differentiate between those who were Active on the ground and those who were serving on ships miles offshore.

Now we have a chance to get that precise data. The VA is currently undertaking a study, slotted to be released in the early months of 2019, that examines the myriad of health factors in Vietnam veterans and specifically includes a subsample of blue water Navy veterans.

It is only right and only reasonable that Congress should examine this study before making any presumption of a service connection for all blue water Navy veterans from this war. The brave men and women who have sacrificed so much for our country should undoubtedly get the medical care they need in connection with their service.

As Members of this body, it is also our duty to ensure it is done in a prudent and proper way, with all the relevant information available to us. Our veterans deserve no less, and it is for this reason that I have concerns with it.

I have received calls from Secretary Wilkie and from four previous VA Secretaries, all of whom have said consistently that the VA has been strapped with difficulties in recent years. We have to make sure the VA has the tools it needs to offer the services it needs to offer to our veterans. Doing something that would offset that, as these VA Secretaries have concluded, would be unwise. On that basis, I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The objection is heard.

The Senator from Connecticut.

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, I greatly respect my colleague from Utah, and I thank our friend from Georgia for his positive remarks on this topic, but more than words are necessary; we need action. We need dollars and cents to brave Americans who undertook to serve this country, who risked their lives, and who have suffered for years and years from the severe health effects of their contact with Agent Orange and other toxins on the battlefield. They deserve the same benefits as their comrades who served on land. They served in the territorial waters. Year after year they have been denied simple justice—action that fulfills our obligation to them. I greatly respect the words, the rhetoric, the pledges, but asking them to wait denies them justice.

There is an adage we quote frequently: Justice delayed is justice denied. That maxim has particular force here because these veterans, very simply, are passing away. They will be denied the benefits they are owed by this

Nation. They will be deprived of the just compensation for injuries they received, like their fellow veterans who served boots on the ground on land, if they are not compensated for the injuries they received when they served in those territorial waters off Vietnam.

This measure has been brought to the floor before. Last week, I joined my colleagues Senators TESTER, GILLIBRAND, DAINES, and BROWN to demand that simple justice for blue water Navy veterans. Today I am joined by Senator BALDWIN of Wisconsin, my very distinguished colleague and friend, to whom I will yield shortly.

Our calls to unanimously pass H.R. 299 were blocked, and that is why we are back here again. In these closing hours of this session, we have the opportunity and obligation to do right by those veterans and to follow our words by our actions. Today the Senate has another chance, even in these last hours, to right a wrong.

Currently, the VA gives the benefit of the doubt to some veterans who have been exposed to toxic substances but not to others. Despite the fact that defoliants were indiscriminately used, only some of those veterans who were affected by them—those veterans suffering from cancer and skin disease and other aftereffects—are eligible for healthcare and benefits to address the health effects of their exposure.

Others, like Gerry Wright of Connecticut, are forced to shoulder the burden of proving they are suffering from this toxic exposure.

I ask my colleagues to reconsider their opposition. I ask them to think about the veterans of their own States who suffer from these kinds of diseases. I ask them to consider men and women like Eugene Clarke of Redding, CT. Because of his experience in Vietnam, he has spent most of his years fighting on behalf of veterans who served there and veterans who served in Korea in the 1960s. He has been a champion. His advocacy, backed by strong support from the Veterans of Foreign Wars, shine a light on these problems.

Today only veterans who were served on the Korean DMZ, from April 1968 through August 1971, are eligible for presumption, despite the fact that from 1966 through 1969, about 55,000 servicemembers were sent to Korea each year.

Mr. Clarke was instrumental in providing evidence that defoliants were sprayed during testing prior to 1968. His efforts have inspired me and my colleagues to introduce the Fairness for Korean DMZ Veterans Act. He is a veteran of that experience. He has fought for the Korean veterans, but he has also added his weight in support of the Vietnam veterans who served after he did.

Two years ago, I pledged to Mr. Clarke that I would fight as long and as hard as possible to make sure veterans who served in the Korean DMZ receive compensation and healthcare if they suffer from agent orange-linked illnesses. I am here today because of

him, because of Korean War veterans, and because of Korean veterans who served in the DMZ.

I ask my colleagues to reconsider their opposition. In the limited number of days left in the 115th Congress, we have this important opportunity. We have this tremendous opportunity for anybody who cares about not only the veterans of Vietnam but also their descendants by extending healthcare, vocational training and rehabilitation, as well as providing a monetary allowance to children suffering from the aftereffects through their parents.

I ask my colleagues to do the right thing.

I yield to my colleague from Wisconsin.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Wisconsin.

Ms. BALDWIN. Mr. President, I rise today to ask the Senate to come together and do the right thing for our veterans by passing the blue water Navy legislation. I thank my colleague from Connecticut for his leadership, and I join him in appreciating the remarks of the Senator from Georgia in support of advancing this legislation in the final days of this session.

As a result of the VA changing its policy, Vietnam blue water Navy veterans have to meet higher burdens of proof to receive healthcare and disability benefits that they earned due to their exposure to Agent Orange.

I have heard from many veterans and their families from across Wisconsin asking that the Senate pass this bill because they don't have any more time to wait.

A veteran's family from Reedsburg, WI, wrote to me. They wrote:

Senator Baldwin, my brother-in-law did three tours off the coast of Vietnam on an ammunition ship. He has contracted brain cancer, lung cancer, diabetes and hearing loss. We have submitted a request for compensation for these ailments. All requests have been denied and we are still appealing. This House bill passed unanimously and now languishes in the Senate. My brother-in-law is in hospice with limited time remaining. Please pass this legislation.

I heard from a veteran from Stetsonville, WI. He said:

I served in the U.S. Navy and spent 1966 aboard the USS Intrepid as a gun fire controlman. I have been diagnosed with stage 4 non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and large hairy cell leukemia. The lymphoma is currently in remission, but the leukemia is untreatable.

On August 10, 2018, I had open-heart quintuple-bypass surgery as well. My children and grandchildren are suffering from my exposure to the dioxins found in Agent Orange which polluted the waters of the Tonkin Gulf. Please get the VA to do its job of caring for, treating, and recognizing the service-connected disability of the many Navy vets now suffering.

The money for this care was originally provided for, prior to 1991, when the VA arbitrarily disallowed the gulf sailors. It is time to correct this breach of promise to care for our veterans, and I am asking for your help in getting the Blue Water Navy bill passed in the Senate, as it was unanimously passed in the House.

I am disappointed that Senator BLUMENTHAL's request to pass this bill was just objected to by my colleague from Utah. Some of my colleagues on the other side of the aisle have argued that we can't afford the cost of this legislation, but I heard no such objections when those same colleagues voted for a very partisan tax bill that gave huge tax breaks to the largest corporations and added \$1.9 trillion to our Nation's debt. Now, when it comes to doing right by our Vietnam veterans who served this country and are now dying from their illnesses, we don't have the money to spend to help get them better or to help give their families a little more time with them. That is simply wrong.

How much is it costing blue water Navy veterans who are trying to beat cancer? How much is it costing their caregivers who quit their jobs in order to take care of them? We have a moral obligation to fix this, and we have the opportunity to get this done right now.

These veterans fought for us and are dying from their service-connected illnesses. It is past time to do the right thing and pass this bill. We need to do it now, and we should not leave town until it is done.

Thank you.

I yield back to Senator BLUMENTHAL.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Connecticut.

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, in closing, I am grateful to my colleague from Wisconsin and my colleagues across the aisle. This measure was bipartisan. It was passed unanimously in the House of Representatives. It should be unanimous here. The money is not a problem. The money is there. The predictions about outlandish possible financial exposure are simply products of fantasy. I know my Republican colleagues almost unanimously on the other side of the aisle understand that simple fact. But even if the costs were higher than they are projected to be, we have an obligation to do the right thing. We have a moral duty to make sure we fulfill our promise.

I know the Presiding Officer has been a strong advocate for our veterans. I know my fellow members on the Veterans' Affairs Committee join me in this belief.

The costs of this program are the costs of war. They are the costs of keeping our troops on the DMZ in Korea. They are the costs of having sent them to Vietnam. They are the costs of sending our troops to Iraq and Afghanistan, and this measure would provide a study of the possible effects in terms of their health from those kinds of poisonous and toxic exposures. The modern battlefield is filled with toxins and poisons, and the injuries that result from them are the costs of war. We need to recognize that fact and refuse, absolutely reject the possibility that we will continue to delay even longer the justice these men and women deserve.

I can pledge to my colleagues that if we fail to do it this session, we will be back again next session. The costs to our conscience, if not to our budget, will rise in the meantime.

I am pleased to call on my very distinguished colleague and military veteran from Illinois, Senator DUCKWORTH.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Illinois.

Ms. DUCKWORTH. Mr. President, I thank my colleague from Connecticut.

Right now, tens of thousands of American heroes are suffering and even dying while some folks in government are looking the other way, refusing to heed their calls for help. Our blue water veterans answered the call when their Nation needed them in the thick of the Vietnam war. They left their loved ones, boarded ships, fought the Viet Cong, and risked their lives hour after hour, day after day, in service to the country they love.

We made a promise to them: Fight for us overseas, and we will fight for you when you get back home. When you step back on U.S. soil, we will bandage the wounds you earned in combat, making sure you never feel you sacrificed in vain.

I am ashamed to say that promise has been broken. For decades now, our government has refused to give them the healthcare and disability benefits needed to treat diseases linked to Agent Orange exposure despite the fact that they serviced the very aircraft that sprayed and spread the chemical. Despite that they breathed in the air and brushed their teeth with water that was likely laced with the poison, they have not been given the healthcare they need.

Those same healthcare benefits have been extended to other troops who fought in the same war during the same years, but because these blue water veterans fought the enemy on the water rather than on Vietnam soil itself, our government won't lift a finger to stop their suffering. Tell me that is fair. Tell me that makes a shred of sense. Tell me that our Nation should abandon the heroes who risked their lives for the rest of us, that we should leave them to die from cancer or heart disease or the litany of other diseases we know this chemical causes.

Look, I have also gone to war, and just as those Americans lost their health, I was wounded for this country. But from the moment I woke up in Walter Reed, I knew that the VA would give me the care I needed to recover. These nearly 90 thousand veterans deserve the same. It is long past time we pass legislation ensuring that these heroes are not left in pain.

Unfortunately, legislation that would recognize their sacrifice suffered a setback last week, but with the time remaining in this Congress, we still have the chance to make those veterans whole, to do the right thing, the obvious thing, the American thing.

To every one of my fellow Senators, please, if we actually want to honor

their service, we can't just give them an ovation on Veterans Day; we need to take action to help them lead full, healthy lives every other day of the year too. Right now, that means joining me in working to pass the Blue Water Navy Veterans Act before even one more hero dies a preventable death on our watch. It is the right thing to do.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Connecticut.

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, I wish to close by thanking my colleagues, Senator DUCKWORTH and Senator BALDWIN, and say that I would like to end this session on a positive note. I am going to be proud to yield to one of my very good friends and one of our most distinguished colleagues, Senator SHELBY from Alabama, who has done such important work on appropriations and our budget. I thank him for it.

I hope that in the next session, this great body will see it in its heart, as well as mind and conscience, to do the right thing—not sometime in the next 2 years but in the first days and weeks so that these veterans have simple justice. I will champion it. I know colleagues on the other side of the aisle will join us, and we can get it done. We must.

Thank you, Mr. President.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Alabama.

TRIBUTE TO SENATOR HATCH

Mr. SHELBY. Mr. President, I wish to start here this morning by thanking my good friend, Senator ORRIN HATCH, who happens to be in the Chamber, for his more than four decades of service in the U.S. Senate. We have served together in the Senate for 32 years; he was here before then.

I remember that Senator HATCH was first elected to the Senate in 1976 when I was still serving in the Alabama State Senate. This was his first run for public office but more to come.

Senator HATCH, as we know, is the longest serving Republican Senator in U.S. history. He is one of only two sitting U.S. Senators to have served during the Presidency of Gerald Ford. He is one of only two remaining Republican U.S. Senators who served during the Presidency of Jimmy Carter.

Senator HATCH, as we all know, serves currently as the President pro tempore of the U.S. Senate—one of the highest honors in the Senate. He has chaired three Senate class A committees during his tenure in the Senate, including the Finance Committee, of which he is currently the chairman. He has chaired with distinction the Judiciary Committee and the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions.

Some of his major accomplishments—these are just a few—include