

If you have ever been in a situation with a serious illness in your family and you had no health insurance, you will never forget it. It happened to me and my wife. We will never forget it as long as we live. I do not want to see another family in that situation. Repealing ObamaCare could create it. I hope we have the good sense to vote down the Vitter amendment and stand for good, affordable health insurance for working families whether they work in the private sector, the public sector, or Congress, and to make sure they have an employer contribution so that health insurance is affordable.

The Vitter amendment is a step back in time. It is a step back in time that will eliminate the protection of health insurance for literally thousands if not millions of Americans. That is not the way to go. I would say to the Senator from Louisiana it makes no sense to the working families of America.

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Michigan.

NAVY YARD TRAGEDY

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. President, I wish to say a brief word about yesterday's tragic and senseless violence at the Washington Navy Yard.

The men and women who protect our Nation and the men and women in uniform and the thousands who serve the Department of Defense make enormous sacrifices for us. Facing a workplace gunman should not have been one of them. Those who have died, their wounded, their families, and loved ones are in our thoughts and in our hearts today.

SYRIA

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. President, I come to the floor this morning to discuss another senseless act of violence and our Nation's response.

In the early morning hours of August 21, the Syrian military began firing artillery rockets into the suburbs east of Damascus, hitting neighborhoods held by opposition forces that had been fighting to end the brutal dictatorship of Bashar al Assad.

We know from the accounts of independent observers such as Human Rights Watch, the work of our intelligence services, and those of our allies, that many of these rockets were armed with warheads carrying sarin, a deadly nerve gas. We know these rockets were launched from areas under the control of Assad's regime, using munitions known to be part of Assad's arsenal, and into areas held by opposition forces. We know from the report of the U.N. weapons inspectors released yesterday that the weapons used, both the rockets and the chemicals themselves, were of professional manufacture, including weapons known to be in the Syrian Government's arsenal. There is no other source of this deadly gas except the Syrian Government. Nothing else makes any sense whatsoever.

President Obama declared that the United States would act in response to this threat to global security. He determined it was necessary to use American military force to degrade Assad's chemical capability and deter future use of such weapons by Assad or others. He did so because a failure to act would weaken the international prohibition on chemical weapons use. He did so because the failure to act could lead to greater proliferation of these weapons of mass destruction, including the potential that they could fall into the hands of terrorists and used against our people. He did so because if the use of chemical weapons becomes routine, our troops could pay a huge price in future conflicts.

On September 4, a bipartisan majority of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved the President's request for an authorization of the limited use of military force.

Faced with this credible threat of the use of force and in response to a diplomatic probe by Secretary Kerry, Russia—which had for more than 2 years blocked every diplomatic initiative to hold Assad accountable for the violent repression of his people—announced that Assad's chemical arsenal should be eliminated.

The agreement that followed requires Syria to give up its chemical arsenal on a historically rapid timetable.

Within a week Syria must fully account for its chemical weapons stockpiles and infrastructure. By the end of November, U.N. inspectors must be allowed to complete their assessments and key equipment used to produce chemical agents must be destroyed. All of Syria's chemical stocks, materials and equipment must be destroyed by the end of next year.

Any failure to abide by the terms of the agreement would lead to consideration of penalties under Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter, under which the U.N. Security Council may authorize among other steps "action by air, sea, or land forces as may be necessary to maintain or restore international peace and security." Regardless of U.N. action or inaction, the President retains the option of using force if Assad fails to fully comply.

This agreement is a significant step toward a goal we could not have achieved with the use of force. The authorization approved by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee had the stated purpose of degrading Assad's chemical capability and deterring the use of chemical weapons by Assad or by others. What can now be achieved is more than degrading and deterring. We may be able to eliminate one of the world's largest stockpiles of chemical weapons.

We should have no illusions that achieving this outcome will be easy. First are the technical and logistical challenges. Many have expressed concern about the likelihood that Assad's stockpiles can be secured and disposed of as quickly as this agreement pro-

vides—by the end of 2014—especially given the dangerous security environment in Syria. I share these concerns. But accepting and addressing these challenges is a better course than not acting against the certain danger of leaving these weapons in the hands of a brutal dictator allied with Hezbollah, a dictator who has demonstrated a willingness to use them against civilians.

Some have expressed doubts that Assad and Russia will follow through on the agreement which was reached in Geneva. To address these doubts, we must inspect, verify, and continue to hold open the option of a strike against Assad's chemical capability if he fails to fully abide by the Geneva agreement.

What I do not understand is why some of the same voices who called for the United States to get Russia to end its obstructionism now criticize the President for getting the Russians involved. I was disappointed to hear my Michigan colleague, Congressman MIKE ROGERS, make the irresponsible claim that this agreement amounts to "being led by the nose" by Russia. This contradicts his previous statements that we need to put pressure on Russia to get involved in a solution to the Syrian threat.

Chairman ROGERS has also said: "What keeps me up at night: We know of at least a dozen or so sites that have serious chemical weapons caches" in Syria, and stressed the urgency that "all the right steps are taken so that we don't lose these weapons caches and something more horrific happens."

Thanks to U.S. pressure and a threat to take military action in response to Assad's use of chemicals, the Russians are finally getting involved in getting Syria to respond. We have taken a major step toward securing these chemical weapons as Chairman ROGERS himself so strongly urged.

We need not rely on good intentions from those who have not shown good intentions in the past. It was the credible threat of the use of military force that brought Russia and Syria to the bargaining table. It is a continued credible threat of military force that will keep them on track to uphold the provisions of that agreement.

The President has made it clear, and rightfully so, that "if diplomacy fails, the United States remains prepared to act."

Secretary Kerry, standing right beside his Russian counterpart in Geneva, emphasized this agreement in no way limits President Obama's option to use force if it becomes necessary.

Many of our colleagues have stressed repeatedly in recent weeks that the credible force, the credible threat of military force, is essential to reining in Assad. I strongly agree. For the life of me, I cannot understand why those who have taken that position would now argue, as some of those same colleagues are arguing, that the Geneva agreement is somehow of little or no

use because they say it somehow removes the option to use force. The Geneva agreement says nothing of that sort.

Their argument isn't just inaccurate, it is damaging to our efforts. Why would those who believe the threat of force is essential to keeping pressure on Syria and Russia want to argue it is no longer available? Why would those who have accurately said the United States does not need international approval to use its military forces now argue the Geneva agreement leaves us in the position of needing to get international approval to use force in this case when the Geneva agreement does nothing of the sort?

Some have criticized the Geneva agreement for not doing more to aid the Syrian opposition. Russia and Syria tried to get an agreement from us to not support the opposition, but they failed to get that agreement from us in the Geneva agreement or anywhere else. Indeed, the administration is seeking ways to facilitate the additional support for the opposition that so many of us believe is essential.

I believe we should facilitate the provision of additional military aid to the opposition, particularly the vetted elements of Syria's opposition forces, including antitank weapons. Such aid will help the Syrian people defend themselves from the brutal Assad regime, furthering our goal of bringing a negotiated end to his rule.

I find it troubling that so much of the commentary on this topic has not dealt with substance and policy. Washington has been and always will be a political town, but we now reach the point where politics seems to be the only lens through which so many people around here view the most important and serious matters of the day, including national security.

Speculation as to motives, or about potential winners or losers, or who is up and who is down, misses the point. This is not an ice-skating contest with points awarded for style. What is important is our national security and whether this agreement advances it. Removing weapons of mass destruction from the hands of a brutal dictator—a preliminary outcome, yes, but real and tangible—is the direct result of American leadership.

A month, a year, or 5 years ago, an agreement to eliminate Assad's chemical weapons would have been seen as a significant gain for our security and for the world's security, not just for the President who achieved it but far more importantly, again, for the safety of our people, of our troops, and the entire world.

I hope as we continue with the hard work of implementing this agreement and as we seek an end to Bashar al Assad's rule, we can keep our eyes on those goals and skip the superficial political scorekeeping and inaccurate potshots that distract us from achieving those goals.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. SCHATZ). The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. THUNE. I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

NAVY YARD TRAGEDY

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, as I rise today, I wish to talk about the economy and the need to create an economic climate that strengthens the middle class.

Before I do, I wish to acknowledge, as have many of my colleagues, and to comment on the tragedy that occurred here at the Washington Navy Yard yesterday.

We are going to debate a lot of issues. The business of the country goes on and the business of the Senate goes on, but for the families of the victims of that tragedy yesterday, things stand still. It is important for all of us to take a moment to mourn with them the loss they have experienced and to extend our thoughts and prayers to their families and their loved ones. It is a horrible tragedy. As we continue the back-and-forth we have on the issues of the day, we will remember and keep those families in our thoughts and prayers.

THE ECONOMY

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, I wish to speak on the economy. The President has yet again this week—in fact, he gave a speech yesterday where he was pivoting back to the economy, a topic that millions of unemployed Americans haven't had the luxury of pivoting away from.

For most Americans, they are living this economy every single day in their personal lives. When the President talks about pivoting back to the economy, this has been a repivot, and a repivot many times. He talks about something else for a while and then talks about coming back to the economy. For the American people, the American economy is, was, has been, and will continue to be the issue for them and their families.

As the President steps up his rhetoric to try and convince a skeptical public that his policies have somehow helped our economy, I think it is important to point out that the President's policies, according to facts, simply aren't working.

The reality is participation in the labor force continues to decline. The August job numbers report a labor participation rate of 63.2 percent. This is the lowest participation rate since August of 1978, 35 years ago when President Carter was President.

What this means is if thousands of Americans haven't given up looking for work, the unemployment rate would be over 10 percent. We talk about the reported unemployment rate, which is 7.3 or 7.4—it has hovered around that

range for a long time—but the real unemployment rate should include those who have quit looking for work. When you add that number in, the unemployment goes up to 10.6 percent.

In August the number of long-term unemployed—those people who have been jobless for 27 weeks or more—remained roughly at 4.3 million people. Those individuals accounted for 37.9 percent of the unemployed. We are not seeing any improvement in the area of people who have been without jobs for a long period of time.

Worse yet, 60 percent of the jobs created this year were part-time jobs. We continue to see evidence that the President's policies, President Obama's policies, are leading to not the creation of full-time jobs but the creation of part-time jobs. In other words, Americans are having to work more than one job to make ends meet, therefore reducing the take-home pay for them and their families. This is another thing we have seen. Take-home pay has gone down in this President's time in office.

The American people understand the President's economic policies have fallen short. That is why, as you look at these various polls, most Americans—the majority of Americans—disapprove of the President's handling of the economy. The reality remains that this administration's policies are hurting jobs in our economy. The President's signature health care law is probably as much to blame for that as anything else.

As I talk to employers in my State of South Dakota and across the country, the recurring theme is the mandates, the requirements, all the new redtape associated—and the higher taxes with the President's health care law—are meaning higher taxes and fewer hours for American workers. According to Americans for Tax Reform, there are 20 new or higher taxes in ObamaCare that will hit American families and small businesses. As a result of these taxes and other policies in ObamaCare, the President's signature health care law significantly impacts what matters most to people, and that is their jobs and their ability to provide for their families. It is no secret that a good job is a critical part of the American dream, but this President's policies are putting that dream farther and farther out of reach for many Americans.

In fact, in selling the law, former House Speaker NANCY PELOSI declared at the time:

This bill is not only about the health security of America, it's about jobs. In its life, it will create 4 million jobs—400,000 jobs almost immediately.

The former Speaker's claims run completely contrary and counter to what we are seeing. People are working fewer hours. As the numbers I have presented before demonstrate, fewer people are actually even participating in the labor force. Americans are discouraged by the lack of economic growth and by ObamaCare's impact on