left judicial vacancies close to or exceeding 90 through the first 6 years of this President's tenure.

In comparison to the current treatment of judicial nominees, by the end of March 2007, the new Senate Democratic majority had scheduled votes on and confirmed 15 of President Bush's district and circuit court nominees. The refusal to schedule a vote on a single judicial nominee this year comes despite the fact that four of these nominees have languished on the Senate floor for a month and were recommended to President Obama by their two Republican home State Senators. Three of these pending nominees will fill district court vacancies in Texas, two of which have been designated by the non-partisan Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts as ''judicial emergency'' vacancies. I would urge the current Assistant Republican Leader, who represents Texas, to work to schedule votes to fill those vacancies. I would also urge the junior Senator from Texas, who has now announced his intent to run for President, to urge his Leadership to schedule a vote to fill those vacancies.

We started this Congress with 44 judicial vacancies, including 12 vacancies deemed judicial emergencies. Today, there are 55 vacancies, including 23 judicial emergency vacancies. Let us not go back to the first 6 years of this presidency when vacancies consistently hovered around 90. The Democratic majority worked hard to reduce those vacancies so that our justice system could function effectively. The Republican majority needs to put partisanship aside and schedule votes on these consensus judicial nominees.

Filling the current vacancies is necessary but not sufficient. Last week the Judicial Conference of the United States, led by Chief Justice John Roberts, identified the need for adding 5 permanent judgeships to the courts of appeals, and 68 permanent judgeships to the district courts, as well as converting 9 temporary district court judgeships to permanent status. This Senate should be working to provide the Federal Judiciary with the resources it needs, including the addition of more judgeships.

I urge the Republican leadership of this body to schedule votes on the current pending nominations before we break for the 2-week recess. Let us show respect to the independent Federal judiciary of this country and let's get these nominees to work for the American people.

DIPLOMACY, DEVELOPMENT, AND NATIONAL SECURITY

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, the Appropriations Subcommittee on the Department of State and Foreign Operations has a long history of bipartisanship. Over the years, I have served as either chairman or ranking member, and I am pleased that cooperation between Republicans and Democrats is as strong today as it has ever been.

I want to commend Senator GRAHAM, the chairman of the subcommittee, who has been a passionate defender of the budget for international affairs as a key component of our national security strategy. He understands that the use of military power is often an insufficient—indeed inappropriate—way to solve problems or protect our security. There are times when the use of military force is necessary, but diplomacy and development can be a cost-effective investment to avoid the far more costly and dangerous deployment of U.S. troops.

Earlier today, the subcommittee heard testimony from five outstanding private sector witnesses on this very subject—Bill Gates, co-founder of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation; Ben Affleck, co-founder of the Eastern Congo Initiative; ADM James Stavridis, former Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, former Commander of U.S. Southern Command, and current dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University; Scott Ford, founder of Westrock Coffee Company and the Rwanda Trading Company; and John Megrue, chairman of Apax Partners U.S., chairman of Born Free, chairman of the Business Leadership Council for a Generation Born HIV Free, and a director of Millennium Promise and of Grameen America.

Each of these witnesses made a compelling case for increased funding for the international affairs budget. They gave inspiring examples of how partnerships between the U.S. Agency for International Development and civil society organizations in poor countries have brought dramatic improvements to the lives of local people, and more open and stable societies.

In a world that is perhaps more dangerous and unpredictable as any time since World War II, we have a chance to help promote economic growth and political stability, and in doing so build sustainable foreign partners. It is therefore ironic that today we were presented with an amendment, offered by the junior Senator from Kentucky, to slash the international affairs budget by nearly 50 percent for the purpose of bolstering defense spending, even though the Pentagon is among the strongest supporters of diplomacy and development. Fortunately that amendment was resoundingly defeated by a vote of 96 to 4.

At just 1 percent of total Federal spending, this account cannot and should not serve as a bill payer for other priorities. Nor will reducing foreign assistance benefit our military. In fact, the opposite is true, and I commend Senator GRAHAM for calling today's hearing in order to explain why.

I ask unanimous consent that an October 21, 2014 op-ed by retired Gen. Anthony Zinni and retired ADM James Stavridis, entitled Fighting Extremism Requires Foreign Aid, Too be printed in the RECORD.

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

[Oct. 21, 2014]

FIGHTING EXTREMISM REQUIRES FOREIGN AID, TOO

(By Gen. Anthony Zinni and Adm. James Stavridis)

The American people are justifiably alarmed at the rise of ISIS and their unspeakable atrocities that are further destabilizing parts of the Middle East. The threats to our allies in the region like Israel and Jordan are real, as is the potential for terrors attacks here on American soil.

But the hard truth is that these terror threats staring us square in the eye cannot be resolved by military power alone—nor can it end the cycle of other security-related challenges occurring in Ukraine, the South China Sea and in parts of Central America, just to name a few.

The important lessons we learned in our military careers is that countering the threats to our nation require comprehensive responses that utilize all our elements of national power—military and non-military. An indispensable part of the non-military toolkit is foreign aid—one of the least appreciated and yet vital means for advancing America's interests around the world.

Today's battles require melding our military power with civilian efforts to provide humanitarian assistance and support the creation of well-functioning governance systems and civil society, build infrastructure, coalesce diverse nations around common goals, and promote economic development. In short, everything that is necessary to improve the long-term prospects of a nation and keep extremists from exploiting misery and desperation.

These lessons were made clear after World War II. Through the Marshall Plan and the creation of Bretton Woods institutions, the United States helped to rebuild the economies of our former enemies on the battlefield, Germany and Japan, who are now strong and valuable contributors to the global economy and security. The same holds true for South Korea. None of this came cheap or easy, but we've reaped the rewards through decades of peace and stability in these regions. More recently, American-led initiatives in Colombia and the Balkans have made significant progress in bringing stability and economic growth after years of conflict.

The recent status of forces agreement between the United States and Afghanistan is a good first step toward creating stability and prosperity in Afghanistan, which is in our vital national interest. Our efforts will be led by the State Department in diplomacy and USAID and other civilian agencies in helping to strengthen governance, rebuild the economy and educational systems, and move farmers away from growing poppies. These are roles our diplomatic services and development agencies, with the support of our military, are best equipped to play.

For all these reasons, our nation, at long last, needs to reject misguided narratives that question the value of foreign aid. The opinion polls consistently showing the American people favor cutting and even eliminating foreign aid are deeply troubling—and are often based on wildly inflated estimates of what we spend in the first place: one percent of the federal budget.

Make no mistake, the money spent on these programs can save countless dollars and lives by averting more costly military involvement and humanitarian crises. That's why we see these programs as the difference between preventative care and trauma care. As former Defense Secretary Robert Gates memorably said, ''Development is a lot cheaper than sending soldiers.''

The world has changed dramatically since the Cold War when we began our military

service, and so have the threats confronting our nation. That's why we must employ all the means of American influence and power, including strong and effective foreign aid. We're confident the return on that investment is an essential contribution to our national security.

General Anthony Zinni, USMC (Ret.) is the former Commander in Chief of U.S. Central Command. Admiral James Stavridis, USN (Ret.) is former NATO Supreme Allied Commander for Europe and Dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. Both are co-chairs of the National Security Advisory Council of the US Global Leadership Coalition, a broad-based coalition of more than 400 businesses and NGOs that supports a smart power foreign policy.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN COLOMBIA

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, as negotiations continue in Havana between the Colombian Government and the FARC rebels, I want to speak briefly about some recent information that is reason to be both encouraged and cautious about the future.

Over the course of the 50-year armed conflict, antipersonnel landmines and other unexploded ordnance have maimed and killed thousands of Colombians, mostly innocent civilians living in rural areas. To its great credit, the Colombian Government signed the international treaty banning antipersonnel mines years ago, but the FARC continued to use them.

Then, a little over 2 weeks ago, on March 7, the Colombian Government and the FARC reached an agreement for the removal and destruction of these indiscriminate weapons. The two sides have agreed to request the organization Norwegian People's Aid to lead and coordinate the implementation of this effort, which will prioritize areas where the population faces the greatest risk. The agreement provides for surveys, verification, and other mechanisms to ensure its effective implementation. This is long overdue, and I commend both sides for taking this step. It will not only save lives; it will help to build confidence for the implementation of a comprehensive peace agreement if one is reached.

While officials of both Colombia and the United States like to portray Plan Colombia, the 5-year initiative that has stretched on for 15 years and cost more than $9 billion in U.S. aid as an unparalleled success, the reality is mixed.

On the one hand, there have been significant achievements. Many Colombians are safer today than a decade ago, the army and police are more professional, and the economy has improved significantly. The negotiations to achieve a comprehensive peace agreement between the government and the FARC, for which President Santos deserves our strong support, are making progress, although difficult issues, particularly relating to justice and accountability, remain.

A separate but related issue that needs to be addressed is the Ministry of Defense's proposed military justice reforms. I am among those, including the Department of State, who have expressed concern that these legislative and constitutional proposals could be interpreted to permit the transfer of certain human rights crimes, including false positives, to the military courts which lack the credibility or capacity to impartially investigate and adjudicate them. The Colombian Government needs to resolve this matter as soon as possible in a manner that eliminates any ambiguity about the authority of the civilian courts over such cases.

Despite Plan Colombia's achievements, much of the past decade and a half was plagued by massacres, kidnappings, land seizures, and other crimes by paramilitaries, the Colombian army, and the FARC and ELN rebels, for which a very small fraction of the individuals responsible have been brought to justice. Corruption was rampant during the administration of President Uribe, and life today for millions of Colombians remains one of poverty, violence, and displacement. Human rights defenders, social activists, and trade unionists continue to be threatened and assaulted or killed with alarming frequency.

According to a recent report of the International Red Cross, violations of international humanitarian law in Colombia increased by 41 percent in 2014. There were 814 alleged breaches of international humanitarian law, an increase of 258 from 2013.

During the past year, Human Rights Watch released reports documenting numerous new cases of disappearances, killings, sexual violence, and other atrocities by the FARC and successor groups to paramilitaries in the mostly Afro-Colombian areas of Tumaco and Buenaventura. In these two municipalities on the Pacific coast, more than 28,000 residents were reportedly forced to abandon their homes due to violence in 2014 alone, according to government data.

These findings illustrate that despite progress in the peace talks they have yet to bring tangible improvements in the lives of many Colombians who continue to suffer horrific abuses with impunity. The landmine agreement has the potential to help change that. And, of course, a peace agreement that results in the disarmament of the FARC and their renunciation of drug trafficking would be a historic achievement of immense benefit to the Colombian people. But while it would signify an end to the armed conflict it would only be the starting point for rebuilding the country, especially rural communities that suffered the worst of the violence and displacement. That is a process which will take years.

It is widely understood that any peace agreement between two warring parties, neither of which can win on the battlefield, requires compromise. At the same time, lasting peace will require access to justice, particularly for victims of the worst crimes. Impunity is at the root of the Colombian conflict: few criminal investigations result in convictions, and human rights or other political crimes of violence and corruption are rarely prosecuted.

If a peace agreement is reached I believe the United States should strongly support it—with an emphasis on strengthening Colombia's weak judicial institutions, including holding accountable those responsible for war crimes. No democracy can survive without transparent, competent, independent judicial institutions that protect the rule of law and deliver justice when basic rights are violated. If Colombia has the trained investigators, prosecutors, judges and most importantly, the political will to end impunity, the country will finally be able to leave the worst of its past behind.

WILDFIRES

Mr. MCCAIN. Mr. President, I would like to briefly mention the topic of wildfires. This year, Arizona and the West face an active wildfire season. Already 20 percent of Arizona's pine forests have been consumed by wildfires over the past decade. The fire situation is made worse by the ongoing drought and the unhealthy state of our overgrown forests. That is why I want to commend the chairman for reporting a budget resolution that calls on Congress to address funding shortfalls in the Forest Service's suppression budget but also promotes wildfire prevention using industry-led forest thinning and forest stewardship contracts.

Senator FLAKE, Senator BARRASSO, myself, and many others have made the case for years that the best way to control ballooning wildfire costs is to thin our forests so that fires become less severe and less costly to fight. The budget resolution's existing provision on wildfires is largely based on a bill that we recently reintroduced in Congress, the FLAME Act Amendments of 2015, which the Budget chairman supported. I am pleased that our goals are reflected in this resolution under section 319.

I also want to commend my colleague, Senator WYDEN, who offered an amendment, S.A. 434, that focuses purely on suppression funding, which I agree should be paired with the wildfire language in the budget resolution. Senator WYDEN and I have talked about merging some elements of our two proposal in order to cover both suppression and prevention. Our mutual goals were advanced today when Senator WYDEN modified his amendment to state that Congress may incorporate additional criteria in any proposal that enables limited wildfire adjustments for the Disaster Relief Fund.

SUNSHINE WEEK AND GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY

Mr. GRASSLEY. Mr. President, last week marked the 10th anniversary of