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House of Representatives

The House met at 10 a.m. and was called to order by the Speaker pro tempore (Mr. MASSIE).

DESIGNATION OF SPEAKER PRO TEMPORE

The SPEAKER pro tempore laid before the House the following communication from the Speaker:

WASHINGTON, DC,
March 25, 2014.

I hereby appoint the Honorable THOMAS MASSIE to act as Speaker pro tempore on this day.

JOHN A. BOEHNER,
Speaker of the House of Representatives.

MORNING-HOUR DEBATE

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the order of the House of January 7, 2014, the Chair will now recognize Members from lists submitted by the majority and minority leaders for morning-hour debate.

The Chair will alternate recognition between the parties, with each party limited to 1 hour and each Member other than the majority and minority leaders and the minority whip limited to 5 minutes, but in no event shall debate continue beyond 11:50 a.m.

AFGHANISTAN

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The Chair recognizes the gentleman from North Carolina (Mr. JONES) for 5 minutes.

Mr. JONES. Mr. Speaker, I am on the House floor today to bring attention to an article from the World Affairs Journal, titled, "Money Pit: The Monstrous Failure of U.S. Aid to Afghanistan." This is an eight-page article documenting case after case of American tax dollars being wasted in Afghanistan.

I would like to bring one specific example to your attention, keeping in

mind that many more months have now passed since this article was published and these figures are now even larger.

In a recent quarterly report, the U.S. Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction said that when security for aid workers is figured, the total amount of nonmilitary funds Washington has appropriated since 2002 is "approximately \$100 billion"—more than the United States has ever spent to rebuild a country.

Since then, Congress has appropriated another \$16.5 billion for "reconstruction." And all that has not brought the United States or the Afghans a single sustainable institution or program.

As I traveled through the Third District of North Carolina last week, I spoke on this subject many times and was met with frustration from the audience at the waste of taxpayer money in Afghanistan.

When I went on to explain that the Afghan Parliament was able to vote on the bilateral strategic agreement that we are in the process of finalizing with Afghanistan, but we have not even debated the issue in the House, the individuals with whom I spoke were incredibly disappointed in Congress.

Mr. Speaker, we cannot blame the American people for wanting a vote on this agreement, which will spend billions of American dollars in Afghanistan with little to no accountability over at least the next 10 years.

This is not a partisan issue. Congressman JIM MCGOVERN and I have signed a letter asking the leadership of both parties for a debate on the expenditure of tax dollars to prop up the corrupt nation of Afghanistan.

To further explain why this debate is necessary, I will briefly read two more examples from the "Money Pit" article.

The Special Inspector General's office, widely known as SIGAR, noted that for the 2012 and 2013 fiscal years the United States has been providing Afghanistan, practically the most corrupt nation on Earth, with \$1.1 billion in fuel for the Afghan military—even

though the United States has made no effort to determine how much fuel the military actually requires.

The article goes on to cite a GAO report, stating that for \$130,000, Afghan contractors built a large shower/bathroom facility, "without holes in the walls or floors for plumbing and drains." What's more, the walls were constructed of "crumbling cinder blocks." The report named insufficient oversight.

Mr. Speaker, it is time that we bring to a close the era of waste, fraud, and abuse of the United States' resources overseas and in Afghanistan.

Mr. Speaker, I hope the leadership of both parties will allow this Congress to debate whether we should stay in Afghanistan for 10 more years. If the Parliament in Afghanistan can have that debate, why can't the United States House of Representatives?

In closing, I would like to ask God to please bless our men and women in uniform and their families.

I will close by saying we have spent enough blood and treasure on this failed policy in Afghanistan. Let's debate the issue and stop spending the taxpayers' money in Afghanistan.

SPECIAL IMMIGRANT VISAS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Oregon (Mr. BLUMENAUER) for 5 minutes.

Mr. BLUMENAUER. Mr. Speaker, this morning's New York Times had a jarring reminder of the fate for those Afghans who put their trust in the United States when they decided to help us as interpreters, as guides, providing a variety of services that made the American mission possible. Indeed, our soldiers, our diplomats, countless Americans have put their lives in the hands of these brave partners. There was a promise, that we would be there for them, just as they were there for us.

This symbol represents the time of day during the House proceedings, e.g., 1407 is 2:07 p.m.

Matter set in this typeface indicates words inserted or appended, rather than spoken, by a Member of the House on the floor.



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Sadly, this is a promise that has been broken time and time again. For the last 10 years, I have been working on an initiative to have the special immigrant visas to allow these trusted partners, whose lives are now at risk, to escape to safety and freedom in the United States.

Too often we have had a program mostly in name only. Visas were authorized, but through lack of attention, resources, commitment, focus, the paperwork languished. People have been in a bureaucratic hell, impossible conditions created, and to be met by despair and too often threats, injury, and, sadly, death of the people who trusted us. During the height of the government shutdown, we were nonetheless able to come together to bring the program back to life, or at least put it on life support.

I deeply appreciate the staff of Majority Leader CANTOR and Minority Whip HOYER. Their key staff members worked with a bipartisan coalition. Special thanks to ADAM KINZINGER and TULSI GABBARD, two new Members of Congress who served in theater in the Middle East, who know what the problems are and our commitment to those who helped us.

Because of this team we were able not only to keep it alive, we secured some real advances in the Defense Authorization Act. We are hearing noises from the administration and the many bureaucracies involved: the State Department, Homeland Security, FBI. There are lots of places for the system to break down, yet there appears to be some greater commitment but still not enough action.

Again, this morning, there is a reminder of the reality of our government having failed to deliver. For too many of us, it is a story in *The New York Times*. But for the Iraqis and the Afghans left behind, they don't need a story in a foreign newspaper, except the people who are featured in these stories miraculously often get their cases expedited. For the rest of these poor souls, they have a daily reminder of the threats, the assaults, of what it means to be left in the tender mercies of al Qaeda and the Taliban.

Next month, I will be introducing legislation for the next steps. I would strongly urge my colleagues to remember that brief moment when we came together during the shutdown to keep the program alive.

Please join me in cosponsoring the legislation because it is not enough just to keep the program alive. Let's come together to make the program work so those partners of America in Afghanistan and Iraq themselves can be kept alive.

THE MEDICAL EVALUATION PARITY FOR SERVICE MEMBERS ACT

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Pennsylvania (Mr. THOMPSON) for 5 minutes.

Mr. THOMPSON of Pennsylvania. Mr. Speaker, despite the recent military drawdown, our Nation continues to rely upon qualified and well-trained volunteers joining the military in order to regenerate our Armed Forces. Now, some of these young men and women have prepared their entire lives for service, while others found the call to duty some years later. All have chosen to serve their country in uniform and do so with honor and bravery.

When joining the service, new recruits must undergo comprehensive medical and physical examinations in order to certify they are both fully fit and capable of performing the range of rigorous and demanding jobs our military must carry out. However, Mr. Speaker, despite comprehensive physical and medical evaluations, there is no similar examination for mental health competency; meaning, we thoroughly examine knees, backs, eyes, and even the heart, yet leave the most important part of the body—one's mind—off-limits.

Now, this is certainly cause for concern and what some view as a serious gap in recruitment evaluation, especially as the military continues to address issues of behavioral health, posttraumatic stress disease, traumatic brain injury, and suicide. According to a recent Army study, nearly one in five Army soldiers enter the service with a psychiatric disorder, and nearly half of all soldiers who tried suicide first attempted it before enlisting. Additionally, the Journal of the American Medical Association found that a large percentage of suicides in the military were individuals who had never been deployed in a combat role.

Mr. Speaker, as policymakers, we have a responsibility to address this challenge. And this week, Ohio Congressman TIM RYAN and I plan to call on our colleagues to do just that and to join as cosponsors of the Medical Evaluation Parity for Service Members, or MEPS, Act. This bipartisan bill will institute a preliminary mental health assessment at the time recruits are first joining the military.

Keeping individual privacy in mind, the MEPS Act will follow all HIPAA guidelines and cannot be used in consideration for promotion or assignments. Additionally, the Congressional Budget Office has found the MEPS Act to have no budgetary effect.

In addition, this legislation requires the National Institute of Mental Health, in conjunction with the Department of Veterans Affairs and other experts, to report their recommendations on the assessment to ensure best practices are done. Now, this common-sense proposal seeks to bring mental health to parity with physical health and recruitment evaluations and will ensure that our incoming troops are both physically and mentally fit to serve.

Additionally, the bill has the support of the American Psychological Association, the Veterans of Foreign Wars,

the National Guard Association of the United States, the Reserve Officers Association, the Reserve Enlisted Association, and the Association of the U.S. Navy.

Mr. Speaker, the MEPS Act is not, alone, the magic silver bullet to solve all of the behavioral health issues the military faces, but it is an important step in better understanding the scope of the challenge that we face. Now, I encourage my fellow colleagues to join us in this effort to protect the safety and security of those in uniform by becoming a cosponsor of the Medical Evaluation Parity for Service Members Act. These brave men and women deserve as much.

THE AMERICAN WAY

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The Chair recognizes the gentlewoman from Texas (Ms. JACKSON LEE) for 5 minutes.

Ms. JACKSON LEE. Mr. Speaker, this morning I want to take a few moments to share thoughts with my colleagues on a number of items that I believe we should be focused on.

Before I do that, I want to join my friends and colleagues from the great State of Washington to express my concern and my sympathy for the people of Darrington and Oso on Highway 530 that have experienced this terrible devastation of a mudslide. To the families of those who lost their loved ones, we mourn and pray for you; and to those who are still missing, we thank the first responders and pray for their accuracy in discerning and finding those that are alive.

As a member of the Homeland Security Committee, and as we have a hearing this morning on emergency preparedness, I am asking that all of the resources that the delegation from Washington request, and, as well, the Governor of that State, that all of us will embrace them, stand as Americans, unite behind them and provide the resources as we do for our fellow brothers and sisters in this country because it is the American way that we never leave a lonely person along the highway of despair. We always provide for them. And I want those people in Darrington and the city of Oso to know that we will not leave you along the highway of despair.

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I want to now challenge this Congress, the other body, as they proceed to move on what actions should be taken in Ukraine. We know that Americans are war-weary, but if we have principles of democracy, if we believe there is an international world order, we cannot sit idly by and not act. So I am grateful that the President has strongly denounced Russia's actions and has begun to move on strong sanctions. I would argue that there should be more.

We should ensure that the new Ukrainian Government that wants to cling to aspects of democracy and