

will come and talk about that this morning.

I just read a quote from Senator COLLINS, but she is not alone in urging the Republican leader to follow regular order. Other sitting Senators are saying the same thing. I will not read what all of them say, but there is a small nucleus of Republican Senators who believe strongly that what Senator MCCONNELL is doing is wrong.

The Republican Senator from Indiana, Senator COATS, was quoted in one interview as saying:

If the President nominates someone, which is his choice, I think that person would deserve a hearing if that person is not someone that is just obviously nominated for political purposes.

Even the Republican leader's former colleagues agree that the President's nominee deserves a fair shake. The former Senator from Indiana, Dick Lugar, is urging Senate Republicans to do the right thing and honor their constitutional duty. He served here for more than three decades. Here is what he said yesterday:

I can't understand their reluctance given the controversy that surrounds all of the debate that has already occurred. But that is not sufficient reason to forgo your duty.

But perhaps the former Republican Senator from Maine, Olympia Snowe, said it best:

I believe that the process should go forward and be given a good-faith effort.

"A good-faith effort"—it is a phrase we hear often, but it is absolutely crucial to American democracy. Our Constitution is constructed with the expectation that elected leaders would act in good faith. That is how our government operates. It should. Under the Republican obstruction, that has not been the case.

I ask my Republican colleagues, whose side do you want to be on? Whose voice are you listening to? These voices of moderation and reason coming from within your own party or the shrill voices—the shrill, shrill voices—of Trump and CRUZ? There isn't time to vacillate. Right now, before our eyes, the Republican leader is leading this conference straight to the side of Donald Trump and TED CRUZ.

It is not too late to change course. Reject the extremist approach being propagated by the likes of Donald Trump and TED CRUZ. It will only hurt our country. Put aside this unprecedented obstruction and work with President Obama to fill this crucial vacancy on the Supreme Court. Do your job. All we are saying is: Do your job. Do your job. Do your job.

Will the Chair announce the schedule for the rest of the day.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will resume executive session to consider the following nomination, which the clerk will report.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the nomination of Robert McKinnon Califf, of South Carolina, to be Commissioner of Food and Drugs, Department of Health and Human Services.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Oklahoma.

NOMINATION OF MICHAEL MISSAL

Mr. INHOFE. Mr. President, it is quite a discussion when we talk about confirmations, one of the responsibilities this body has that the other body does not have. In the case of a U.S. Supreme Court vacancy, however, during an election year, I think it has actually been some 80 years since they have actually filled a vacancy as opposed to waiting until after the next election.

I am concerned today, though, about another confirmation. VA IG nominee Michael Missal has been nominated, and I have a hold. To explain what that means, when you have a hold, that doesn't necessarily mean you don't approve of the nominee, but it does mean there is one reason or another you don't want to go ahead and confirm that person. That happened in the case of the nominee to be a VA inspector general, Michael Missal. Actually, I am not placing a hold on him because of deficiencies in him but deficiencies in the Office of the Inspector General. Today what I am announcing is that I am lifting that hold. That means they are free to go ahead and have this nominee go forward, and I think that is the right thing to do.

At the Muskogee VA facility alone, the IG office has conducted nine investigations since 2009, and there has been little or no change in the quality of care. Right now, my office is working hundreds of cases of Oklahoma veterans facing inadequate care or blocked access to benefits. I wrote the VA IG in January of 2016 simply requesting that the VA IG—inspector general—visit Oklahoma facilities and to do so with an outside entity such as a joint commission. There is an attitude sometimes with individuals not wanting outside help, a kind of assumption that "I don't need their help." Their response letter denied my request to conduct an investigation with a third party. It is time for our VA facilities in Oklahoma to be held to those same standards as private hospitals, and I believe it would take the aid of an outside group to make this happen because right now they are not meeting that quality.

Since placing a hold on Mr. Missal, the IG office has committed to investigating Oklahoma's VA facilities with the oversight of an outside entity, and I have also had commitment from Mi-

chael Missal that he will do that. I appreciate their commitment, but our work to improve the care for Oklahoma veterans doesn't end there.

Since the VA reform bill passed Congress this last summer—and it was a good bill—it is clear our facilities in Oklahoma have continued business as usual. I haven't seen any noticeable difference in the performance and treatment of our veterans since the passage and activation of that bill. I believe the impending investigations will show it is going to require a change in the management level to bring about lasting improvements for veterans care.

That is why I, along with my junior Senator from Oklahoma, JAMES LANKFORD, introduced S. 2554, the Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability Act, on February 12. This legislation is critical to providing the best treatment for our country's veterans. Building upon the comprehensive plan of the 2014 VA reform bill, our legislation grants VA leadership at the regional level the authority to fire and demote staff working in these facilities. I think a lot of them thought the reform bill did that, but it didn't. We haven't been able to do it. It also allows directors of veterans regional chapters to contract with an outside entity to conduct investigations of their VA medical facilities. As I have worked to address the many concerns I have with Oklahoma's VA facilities, I have come to trust the leadership at the regional level. One individual who has come in is Ralph Gigliotti. He has done a great job. He doesn't have the authority to do what this bill would allow him to do. Not only were intermediate surgeries suspended due to what they have now uncovered, but also the chief of staff has been temporarily removed from his position.

However, this process revealed that regional directors are not presently empowered to address staffing concerns in the facilities they oversee. We have seen this in the State of Oklahoma numerous times. Our legislation peels away the layers of bureaucracy and allows the directors and each of the regional areas to play a larger role with improving the VA system as a whole.

As we all know, freedom isn't free. Many of our veterans have paid the price with scars, some visible and some may go unseen such as post-traumatic stress disorder—PTSD—depression, and traumatic brain injuries. In my great State of Oklahoma, there are more than 37,000 military families and roughly 340,000 veterans that call our State home, attend our churches, and contribute to our communities. On behalf of Oklahoma, I say we are humbled by the immeasurable dedication of each and every one of them. I think it is the government's duty to honor the promises made to our veterans in return for their sacrifice. I urge our colleagues to remember that.

I can remember when I was in the Army, commitments were made to me

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.