would take up the component parts of the space shuttle and assemble them in orbit. We continued that over the better part of a decade and a half, until the space station was complete.

In the interim, we lost 14 souls and 2 space shuttles, the last one of which was Columbia in the winter of 2003. The investigation board, led by Navy Admiral Gehman, said: As soon as you get the space station assembled—it was necessary to fly the space shuttle to take up the component parts—you shut it down and you replace the space shuttle with a safer rocket.

I won't take the time right now to explain the engineering and design of the space shuttle versus the future rocket, but for this discussion, suffice it to say that when you put the crew in a capsule at the top of the rocket, they have the capability to escape, saving the crew, even if there is an explosion of the rocket on the pad because the capsule can separate with the escape rockets and land some distance away via parachutes.

By the way, one of those rockets under development right now just had its pad-abort test—SpaceX—and it was very successful.

I am giving all this background to get to what was almost a dagger in the heart coming out of the Appropriations Committee in both the House and the Senate, and that is, they have funded NASA fairly well given the fact that they are trying to cut in order to satisfy this tea party-inspired sequester, which is this cut across the board, but in doing so, what they have done is cut the development funds for the humans riding on American rockets to get to and from our International Space Station, the essence of which is that if those funding cuts the committee has done are sustained, it will delay us from putting Americans on American rockets going to and from the space station until, instead of 2017, very likely 2019.

Ask almost any American whether they want a successful American space program, and they will clearly tell you yes, and that means Americans on American rockets. We have those rockets. They are sending cargo to and from. But we have to go in and do the designs of the redundancies and the escape systems on these commercial rockets, the two companies of which in competition are Boeing and SpaceX.

Now let me get back to Vladimir Putin. Do we think it is a matter of wise public policy that we would continue our dependence on Vladimir Putin on our ability to get to our own International Space Station by having to ride and pay what he now charges—$75 million a ride per U.S. astronaut? Do we think that is wise public policy given this President of the Russian Federation who is so predictable? I don't think so.

So what the House did—the President's request for this next round of competition—and they have come a long way. They are ready to go. I just said that one of the competitors, SpaceX, just did a pad-abort test by showing that the capsule could separate from the rocket and safely land 3,600 feet away in a splashdown with the parachutes.

It is not wise public policy to cut funding so this development of safe human space travel on these commercial rockets of Boeing and SpaceX—it is not good public policy, it is not in the interests of U.S. public policy that we would stay tied to Vladimir Putin in order to get to and from our own space station with astronauts.

It is just a small amount of money. The President requested for this next year of competition $1.24 billion to put in the redundancies and the escape systems and have them tested. It is a critical year. It is 2015. It is the middle of 2015. We are going to start flying U.S. astronauts 2 years from now, in 2017. But when you start cutting that funding from the President's request to $900 million, as the Senate Appropriations Committee just did last week, or to $1 billion, which the House has just done in the passage of their appropriations bill—when you do that, that is going to stretch out the development that it is very likely we can't send our own astronauts to our own space station on our own rockets. We will have to keep paying Vladimir Putin $75 million every time we go to ride on the Soyuz to go to our own space station. Now, you figure it out. How many rides is that over an additional 2 years? That is probably $300 million right there. That is only four rides, assuming he is going to be charging us in 2018 and 2019 the same price he is charging now. He could jack that up.

I think it was a sad day in the Senate Appropriations Committee when the committee turned down, by a very narrow vote of 14 to 12, Senator MIKULSKI's amendment to restore the cut from $900 million to $1.24 billion. Sooner or later, that appropriations bill is going to come out here. It has a lot of other problems, as every appropriations bill does, as the Senate is finding out on this Defense authorization bill right now—all the funny money that is baked into it because of this so-called sequester. But when it comes out here, I am going to ask the Senators: Do you think it is wise policy that we continue our reliance on Vladimir Putin?

As we have been doing the Defense bill, JOHN MCCAIN, our chairman, has been on a rampage against giving money to Vladimir Putin by virtue of us buying the Russian engine, which is a very good engine and which became an engine for American rockets, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as a way of keeping their Russian—formerly Soviet—scientists engaged in an aerospace industry so they did not get secreted off to become scientists for rogue nations such as North Korea or Iran. But Senator MCCAIN has pointed out—rightly this Senator believes—that you want to reduce your reliance on those Russian engines called the RD–180 that are the main engines for the Atlas V, one of the absolute prime horses in the stable for our assured access to space. If we are going to lessen our dependence on the Russian engine, why wouldn't we lessen our dependence on Russian spacecraft being the only means by which we would get to orbit to our own International Space Station? The logic is too compelling. Yet it is this ideological furor that has lapsed over into partisanship that has so gripped these Halls of Congress into making irrational decisions.

We can correct this decision when that appropriations bill comes to the floor of the Senate. I hope we will. I hope folks such as Senator MCCAIN—one of this country's two heroes who is taking this on in the defense committee—are going to help us out here on the floor by taking this on in the Appropriations Committee.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. MCCONNELL. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

EXTENSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. MCCONNELL. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

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

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority leader is recognized.

NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT

Mr. MCCONNELL. Madam President, the National Defense Authorization Act is one of the most important pieces of legislation Congress considers each and every year. That is why the new majority has made it one of our top priorities. It is why we have reversed the worrying trend of recent years, when we had seen such an important bill crammed in at the very last minute with little time for debate or for amendment.

This year's Defense bill has undergone weeks of thorough and serious consideration under the regular order, both in committee and here on the floor. This year's Defense bill has been open to a vigorous and bipartisan amendment process, with amendments from both sides having been adopted already.