**Name:** Mark Steven Kirk

**Political/civic background**: I worked for 10th District Congressman John Porter and later at the World Bank, at the State Department, at a private law firm, and as counsel for the House International Relations Committee. In 1989, I was commissioned as an intelligence officer in the U.S. Navy Reserve and served for 23 years until retiring in 2013 with the rank of commander. When Congressman Porter retired in 2000, I was elected to replace him and served five terms representing the people of Illinois’ 10th District in the House of Representatives. In 2010, I was elected to represent Illinois in the U.S. Senate.

**Occupation**: United States Senator (IL)

**Education**:  I attended Blackburn College in Carlinville and earned a degree in history from Cornell University, a master’s degree from the London School of Economics and a law degree from Georgetown University.

**Campaign website**: [www.kirkforsenate.com](http://www.kirkforsenate.com/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)

**Chicago Sun-Times Editorial Board questionnaire responses**

**Legislative priorities:**

**Q) What are your three top legislative priorities for the country?**

1 – Protect the American people from the threat of terrorism at home and abroad.

2 – Change the culture of corruption in the VA health care system.

3 – Tax less, spend less and encourage economic growth.

**Q: What are the three most important issues in Illinois on which you believe the federal government needs to act?**

1 – Stop Gang Violence.

I am the only candidate for Senate who is both tough on crime and supports local investments to keep kids off the street. Chicago is losing a generation of kids to the gang and gun violence plaguing our city. I said in 2010 that I would partner with anyone who wanted to take on gangs, and I have. Over the past three years, through my role on the Senate Appropriations Committee, I have secured $37.5 million to fight “gangs of national significance.” Of those funds, $17.5 million established and maintains seven U.S. Marshals Counter Gang Units in the U.S. – including one in Chicago – to investigate and arrest fugitive gang members. In 2015, the Marshals arrested 693 fugitive gang members in Illinois.

Additionally, $20 million directly funds the Project Safe Neighborhoods Violent Gang and Gun Crime Reduction Program. According to a study by the University of Chicago Crime Lab, the Project Safe Neighborhoods program is “remarkably effective in reducing neighborhood crime rates.” PSN in Chicago has stressed the consequences of gun violence and steered offenders into social service programs through a combination of community outreach efforts to school-aged youth, increased federal prosecution, offender notification forums, and follow-up re-entry programs. Because of the successful results of PSN in select neighborhoods in Chicago, I have revived the program with federal funds to expand into new areas.

Illegal weapons on Chicago streets are killing our citizens every day. According to a report by the City of Chicago and the Chicago Police Department, 60 percent of those guns come from states with weaker gun laws, such as Indiana, Wisconsin and Missouri. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) and I wrote a bill making gun trafficking a federal crime. I am also a co-author of legislation to expand background checks and improve the criminal and mental health database, the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS).

2 – Clean and Protect the Great Lakes.

In light of the toxic drinking water in Flint, Mich., never has it been more important to secure the drinking water for 30 million Americans. As co-chair of the Great Lakes Task Force, I coordinate support among Senators of both parties to support the Great Lakes. Through the Senate Appropriations Committee, I recently secured $300 million for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative to remove invasive species, pollution and toxic contamination. My legislation S. 1024, the *Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Act*, will continue this program for another five years and authorize $300 million in federal funding for the program each year. This bill has passed committee and is currently moving through the United States Senate.

3 – Reform the Department of Veterans Affairs and Protect Our Veterans

As a veteran of the Navy Reserves for 23 years, I have stood up to the VA on behalf of the 700,000 veterans in Illinois. The VA health care system is failing veterans every day- here in Illinois and across the nation. The culture of corruption run deep, highlighted by whistleblowers in Phoenix for the scheduling manipulation scandal and at Hines VA for hundreds of unready echocardiograms. And even though these cases have received national media attention, the corruption and mismanagement pervades every level of the VA. As Chairman of the committee overseeing funding of the VA, I am confronting VA and naming names.

I have also advanced a program working successfully at Lovell VA Hospital called Frontlines to Lifelines. The best person to care for a veteran is another veteran, because they would never leave a battle buddy behind. My Frontlines To Lifelines bill would put more wounded warriors under the care of fellow veterans. The VA continues to fail veterans in processing disability claims- another area where I am holding them accountable in their funding. There is no excuse for failing our veterans.

**Q) What is your biggest fundamental difference with your opponent(s)?**

1. I am a defense hawk, social moderate, and fiscal conservative. I am repeatedly rated as one of the most independent Senators – that means I vote for Illinois and for solutions, not for Republicans or against Democrats. Every one of my opponents are extreme partisans, offering more of what is wrong with Washington. Washington doesn’t need more partisans, we need more people willing to find common ground. There is nothing more important than keeping our families safe. Yet we have severe deficiencies in our ability to screen people trying to enter America – we aren’t even screening the social media profiles like Facebook and Twitter accounts.  As a social moderate, I don’t believe government has a place in your marriage and I trust women to control their own bodies. And as a fiscal conservative I oppose spending more money than we have, taxing families in order to pay for a bloated government and borrowing billions from other countries- threatening our own economic solvency.  I have remained true my campaign promise to be the Independent Senator for Illinois.

**Transparency:**

**Q) Will you pledge to make public: a) your campaign schedule; b) your fundraiser schedule and the names of all fundraiser hosts ; c) if elected, your daily schedule of meetings? If not, why not?**

1. Yes

**Q) Please list all relatives on public or campaign payrolls and their jobs on those payrolls.**

1. My mother, Judy Kirk, currently works on Kirk for Senate doing administrative work with the finance team and with volunteers. She makes $1,000 per month. There is no one I can trust more and who has been my biggest supporter in politics and life.

**National security:**

**Q) What are the most important actions the Senate can take to reduce the threat of ISIS abroad and at home?**

1. 9/11 and ISIS’s deadly terror attacks in Paris soberly remind us to do all we can to prevent terrorists from entering the United States and once again attacking Americans. *ABC News* has reported how the Administration [has](http://abcnews.go.com/US/feds-make-national-security-related-arrest-sacramento/story?id=36153595" \t "_blank) [repeatedly](http://abcnews.go.com/International/terrorists-refugee-program-settle-us/story?id=35252500" \t "_blank) [failed](http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/al-qaeda-kentucky-us-dozens-terrorists-country-refugees/story?id=20931131" \t "_blank) to stop terrorists from entering our country as refugees, and also how ISIS [built up](http://abcnews.go.com/International/isis-fake-passport-industry-official/story?id=36505984" \t "_blank) a false credentials industry by acquiring passport-printing machines and “boxes of blank passports.”  While both parties in Washington turn away from the facts, I wrote a bill to pause the refugee program until federal law enforcement and intelligence leaders certify their ability to stop terrorists from infiltrating Syrian and Iraqi refugee flows into the United States, including through the screening of applicants for pro-terrorist social media.

ISIS has stoked chaos throughout Middle East and has shown it is capable of directing or inspiring terrorist attacks around the world, including in Paris and even on U.S. soil in San Bernardino. The American people deserve a clear assessment of the threat of ISIS, our government’s failure to contain it, and what is being done now to destroy ISIS and to prevent terrorist attacks.

At the same time, we should take Iran’s terror threat just as seriously as we take ISIS’s threat.  Iran is the biggest state sponsor of terrorism, and Iranian-backed terrorists have killed even more Americans than ISIS has.  In the October 1983 bombing of the Beirut Barracks, Iran-backed terrorists killed 241 American troops, including 11 from Illinois.  General Joseph Dunford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, [said Iran is responsible for the deaths of over 500 Americans](http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/capitol-hill/2015/07/14/iran-linked-to-deaths-of-500-us-troops-in-iraq-afghanistan/30131097/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) in Iran and Afghanistan in the last decade.  In 2011, Iran-backed terrorists [were foiled](http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/two-men-charged-alleged-plot-assassinate-saudi-arabian-ambassador-united-states%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) as they planned a bombing attack in Washington, D.C., in an attempt to kill the Saudi ambassador and innocent Americans.

Under the flawed Iran nuclear deal, the Administration is now opening the spigots for over $100 billion in sanctions relief, resumed oil sales and new international trade to flow to the world’s biggest state sponsor of terrorism. The nonpartisan Congressional Research Service has traced $6-15 billion a year from Iran to fund Assad’s war on his own people in Syria. Iran’s missile testing in violation of international law has been ignored. I support renewal of the *Iran Sanctions Act of 1996*, a law critical to punishing Iran if it cheats on the nuclear agreement.

**Q) What bans, if any, do you support on Muslim admissions to the United States? Please explain your position.**

1. No.

**Q) Specifically, how would you have, or how did you, vote on the American Security Against Foreign Enemies (SAFE) Act of 2015 and its efforts to make it harder for Syrian and Iraqi refugees to enter the U.S.? Please explain your position.**

1. The *American SAFE Act* is designed to make it harder for terrorists to infiltrate Syrian and Iraqi refugee flows into the United States. We know for a fact that terrorists have repeatedly infiltrated the refugee programs. U.S. law enforcement has arrested terrorists masquerading as refugees in Kentucky, California, and Texas. Some of them were even arrested after getting caught on camera trying to buy Stinger missiles and bombs right here on American soil, according to an ABC News investigation.

I am the only candidate for Senate to support the *American SAFE Act*. This bill requires federal law enforcement and intelligence leaders to certify their ability to certify their ability to stop terrorists from infiltrating Syrian and Iraqi refugee flows into the United States, including the screening of all applicants for pro-terrorist social media. Today the screening process for refugees and visa applicants does not include basic screening of social media like Facebook or Twitter posts. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper has warned ISIS would try “to infiltrate operatives among these refugees,” and FBI Director James Comey has cautioned about gaps in our ability to screen refugees for terrorist connections. The House passed this bill with a veto-proof majority – including 47 Democrats – yet Rep. Tammy Duckworth voted no. Senate Democrats blocked the bill from getting an up-or-down vote. Willful ignorance of the vulnerability of our country’s refugee programs to terrorist infiltration makes the American people less safe.

**Q) Do you support a Syrian no-fly zone or the U.S. enforcement of Syrian humanitarian safe zones? Why or why not?**

1. If we have an Administration willing to enforce red lines and protect a humanitarian safe zone, then yes. The current Administration, however, has failed to lead with responsible members of the international community in stopping the humanitarian disaster in Syria, where [over 300,000 Syrian civilians have died](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2015/06/09/Rights-group-More-than-300000-people-killed-in-Syria-since-2011/4421433884126/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) and [over 4.5 million Syrians have been displaced](http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank). For nearly five years, Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, Iran's closest ally in the Arab world, has escalated the murder of civilians while repeatedly refusing demands from the Syrian people and the international community to step down.  The Assad regime [has repeatedly used](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/07/world/middleeast/syria-chemical-weapons.html?_r=0" \t "_blank) chemical weapons against Syrian civilians yet faced no real consequences.  Assad’s butchery--and the international community's unwillingness to stop it--has created a magnet for terrorist groups like ISIS to flourish and plan horrendous attacks against the Western world, as we saw in ISIS’s November 13th terror attacks in Paris that claimed the lives of 130 innocents.  Until Assad steps down, Syria will continue to be a breeding ground for deadly ISIS terrorists.

**Q) Regarding the House Benghazi Select Committee, should its investigation remain open-ended, or should the panel be given a deadline to complete its work? Please explain.**

1. The American people are not convinced they have been told the whole truth about the gaps in security in Benghazi and what role the Administration had in failing to provide adequate security of our Ambassador. The public deserves answers as to why the facility in Benghazi did not meet security specifications and why requests for security personnel and equipment were denied. As long as these questions remain unanswered, the process should continue.

**Q) What measures, if any, do you support to give U.S. authorities access to encrypted or “dark web” communications about potential terrorist plots? Please explain.**

1. The threat of terrorists using encryption to attack us at home is real – a terrorist planning a May 2015 terror attack in Garland, Texas, exchanged 109 messages with overseas terrorists the morning of the planned attack, yet our law enforcement could not access them. While that plot was thankfully foiled, every tool should be available to our law enforcement in order to stop foreign and domestic plots against American citizens. Companies must be proactive in working with law enforcement and intelligence services to cut off untraceable and easy means of communication between terrorists, including encrypted messaging services and apps.

I support legislation to give law enforcement better access to encrypted terrorist communication at home and abroad. However, there must be a balance between encryption and security so that backdoors do not become gateways for malicious hackers to gain access to our personal and private information.

**Q) Do you support transferring the detention of terrorism suspects from Guantanamo Bay to the United States? Why or why not?**

1. No. In his final State of the Union, the president reiterated his plan to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay. This year, the administration has transferred 16 terrorists from Gitmo to other countries, including Oman, Ghana and Kuwait, under arrangements the administration has not disclosed. Another 34 detainees have been cleared for eventual transfer. In all, 151 detainees have been released since 2009, including 20 released in 2015 and the infamous “Taliban Five” released in 2014 in exchange for Bowe Bergdahl, a U.S. soldier now facing a military court martial for desertion.

Of the 91 prisoners now at Guantanamo, 48 of them are deemed “too dangerous” to leave U.S. custody, according to the final report released by the Guantanamo Review Task Force in 2010. If Gitmo is closed, the intent is to move these dangerous terrorists to facilities in Colorado, South Carolina and Kansas.

In 2010, these terrorists very nearly came to Illinois under an administration plan to send Gitmo’s worst terrorists to Thomson Prison in Carroll County. As House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi recently stated, “the people in Illinois were looking forward to having some people transferred there,” but “the resistance of the Republicans” prevented those plans from moving forward. Minority Leader Pelosi is half right.

In December 2010, I held up Senate passage of the National Defense Authorization Act until Congress accepted the prohibition of Gitmo detainee transfers into the United States. This language has been included in every defense authorization and appropriations bill since.

After my colleagues and I insisted to President Obama and then-Attorney General Eric Holder that Thomson Prison should never be a federal facility for terrorist detainees, we finally received assurances from Holder that, even if Thomson became a federal prison, it would never be used to house Gitmo detainees.

To close any loopholes in the law, in 2011 I introduced S. 209, a bill to block the transfer of Guantanamo detainees to the U.S. The 2016 defense authorization bill and the omnibus funding bill that were recently signed into law both prohibit the transfer of Guantanamo detainees to U.S. soil through the end of this year.

Bipartisan majorities in Congress have blocked any shutdown of Gitmo because of the legal and security problems associated with transferring individuals detained under the law of armed conflict into the United States. Not only would the legal authority of the president, absent Congressional authorization, to transfer detainees to U.S. soil come into question, but litigation and Congressional action could be required to determine the legal status and applicability of Constitutional rights for detainees, not to mention the physical security, costs and political will required for long-term detention.

Guantanamo remains the best way to protect Americans at home and abroad from the threat these terrorists pose.

**Gun violence:**

**Q) What is the single most important action the Senate can take to reduce U.S. gun violence?**

1. Chicago police collect seven times as many guns used in crimes as in NYC, per capita. Sixty percent of those guns come from out of state, including 30 percent from Indiana, Wisconsin and Mississippi – where there are no background checks for private sales at gun shows or on the Internet. But there is no federal law that defines gun trafficking as a crime. This is why I introduced S. 1760 with Senator Kirsten Gillibrand from New York - the *Hadiya Pendleton and Nyasia Pryear-Yard Gun Trafficking and Crime Prevention Act*. This legislation will make it a federal crime to knowingly buy or sell guns if the buyer or seller knows the buyer is prohibited from owning a firearm. Additionally, this law will stop straw purchases who buy guns for criminals or gang members and also will enhance penalties for gang leaders who organize gun trafficking operations.

Currently, the federal Byrne Justice Assistance Grants to train and equip law enforcement are also crucial to train and arm local law enforcement.

**Q) Do you support or oppose the ‘‘Denying Firearms and Explosives to Dangerous Terrorists Act?” Please explain your position.**

1. Support. As a sponsor of this legislation, S. 551, I believe that Americans should have confidence in every aspect of our national security. Suspected terrorists should be stopped from buying weapons, just as they should be stopped from entering the U.S. Washington needs to be united in keeping Americans safe.

**Climate change:**

**Q) Do you believe there is scientific evidence of climate change, and is it caused by human activity? What is your position on the Paris climate change agreement?**

1. Yes. Climate change science is real, and human beings contribute. As I’ve said in the 2010 campaign for Senate, I will not support a carbon tax or similar efforts that will hurt our economy locally or globally. We can protect the environment for current and future generations without sacrificing the economy. The only requirement of the Paris Climate Agreement, accepted by the 196 countries attending, is for each country to report on its progress and to submit a forward-looking plan every five years. The Merkley/Kirk amendment, passed by the Senate Appropriations Committee, ensures the U.S. can continue lead global efforts to address climate change.

**Economy:**

**Q) What changes, if any, to the U.S. tax code do you support and why?**

1. Americans want lower taxes and a simpler tax code. Nearly nine in ten Americans filing tax returns pay for tax compliance help , costing more that $160 billion a year according to Taxpayer Advocate.  We need a simpler, fairer and more broadly based tax code that encourages companies businesses to compete in the free market.  The U.S. has the highest corporate tax rate in the developed world, driving many American jobs overseas. Lowering this rate will encourage economic growth and incentivize companies and investors to stay in the United States.

**Q) What are the most important actions the Senate can take to ensure the solvency of**

**Social Security?**

1. I am the only Senate candidate in support the Simpson-Bowles reforms. Only bipartisan deals can ensure future generations have Social Security. The federal government spends more on Social Security than it does on any other program. The 2015 annual report issued by the Social Security Administration's Board of Trustees stated that beneficiaries could see 23 percent across-the-board cuts as soon as 2035.

**Q) Do you support a “risk fee” on big banks? Why or why not?**

1. I do not support any new "risk fees" on American banks that provide valuable daily liquidity to our small businesses and consumers. This is a partisan idea that imposes an additional tax on our lenders, which will only make banking more expensive for Illinois residents, at a time when our economy has been growing at only 2 percent since emerging from the Great Recession. There are already global banking standards, called BASEL III, that impose risk weights on certain assets. In short, the more risky the asset, the more capital a bank must hold. Furthermore, banks are subject to 'stress tests' by regulators to see how a bank will perform during an economic crisis. And finally, large banks must provide "living wills" - detailed blueprints for how they could be dismantled in the event of a failure without damaging the broader financial system. The Dodd-Frank Act, which was signed into law over five years ago, included over 400 new rules and thousands of new pages of compliance. We don't need to add to this stack of paper. We need smarter regulation, not more regulation. Sadly, the Act did not solve the issue of "Too Big To Fail." Since the passage of Dodd-Frank big banks are bigger and smaller banks are fewer. That's because the small banks and credit unions cannot comply with all the layers of additional regulation. These Main Street lenders are already spending a good chunk of their budget and time dealing with compliance as opposed to lending to families or small businesses. Consumer credit has become harder to obtain and more expensive. Small businesses are not forming and creating jobs at the rates they should, and rural lenders are still very concerned about the future. As a senior member of the Senate Banking Committee, my time has been focused on finding bipartisan solutions to fix Dodd-Frank and make the law work better for Illinois consumers. I have a history of working with centrist Democrats on the Committee, such as Senators Manchin, Heitkamp, Donnelly and Warner, to protect our financial system and ensure liquidity.

**Health care:**

**Q) Should Obamacare be overturned, left intact, or changed — and if so how?**

1. I join the majority of Americans in opposing Obamacare, and I have voted against it more than 40 times. This law has made healthcare more expensive and less accessible for Illinois families. Since enactment, Congress has already amended Obamacare 18 times, starting with the onerous 1099 form and three percent withholding tax. In December 2015, the omnibus appropriations bill included a strong first step of repealing  Obamacare by delaying the “Cadillac tax,” which increases the cost of working families’ health insurance by as much as 40 percent. Congress also delayed the tax on medical device manufacturers, a tax that could cost more than 11,000 jobs in Illinois if implemented, and eliminated funding for the Independent Payment Advisory Board (IPAB), a group of unelected bureaucrats. I support permanently repealing the medical device tax and Cadillac tax, and oppose bailing out insurance companies that cannot afford to cover new enrollees, a provision known as the “risk corridors” program. That’s why I supported language in the final FY 2016 appropriations bill that prohibits additional funding for Obamacare.

**Q) Do you favor stripping federal funds from Planned Parenthood? Why or why not?**

1. No. I do not support cutting access to basic health care and contraception for women, the majority of whom have no other resources.

**Immigration:**

**Q) President Obama used his executive powers to prevent the deportation of "DREAMers—youths who came to the U.S. illegally as children with their parents. Would you support legislation to prevent DREAMer deportations? Do you support putting DREAMers on a path to citizenship?**

1. I fully support legislation to prevent DREAMer deportations and put them on a path toward citizenship. Comprehensive immigration reform is imperative to bring 525,000 people in Illinois out of the shadows, put down permanent roots and invest in Illinois. But their rights and privileges should be locked down in an actual statute that respects them as future Americans and allows them to keep families together permanently.

**Education:**

**Q) What reforms do you favor to address America’s student loan crisis?**

1. Making college more affordable is critical for the next generation of innovators and entrepreneurs to be competitive in the global economy. I have supported efforts to expand Federal Pell Grants twice for low-income students, most recently in the omnibus appropriations bill that gives students $200 additional dollars above the previous years award. ​I also voted in support of the Budget Control Act of 2011, which increased appropriations for federal Pell Grants in 2012 and 2013. I supported the president’s proposal in 2013 to reform student loan rates by creating a cap and setting it to the Treasury rate, saving students over $2000 for the life of their loan and ensuring the loan rate will never increase. Finally, I joined several colleagues in an effort to reauthorize the Perkins Loan program last fall to give students manageable loan repayment options, such as public service in lieu of repayment. I have also authored legislation to create “401(kids)” accounts to help parents save for and invest in their kids’ future. These tax-free college savings accounts will encourage investing in the future, teach kids about saving and help students avoid the burden of student loan debt. ​