The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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 President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection.

Mr. LAUTENBERG. Mr. President, we are here trying to figure out where America goes in the near future, but also where it goes in the long term because the decisions we make here are going to have a long lasting effect.

What we hear and the American people are witnessing over TV is the Republicans are playing with fire, and millions of Americans are in danger of getting scorched. It reminds us some of those who played the fiddle while Rome burned. The Republicans are willing to allow our country to go into default rather than ask the wealthiest among us to pay their fair share.

The Republican side of the Capitol is clear. Do they want to protect the wealthy friends to contribute anything more to keep our ship of state afloat. Yes, the ride is going to be bumpier for everyone, but that is life. Why shouldn’t the middle class pay something, they ask. After all, there are so many of them.

In fact, a Republican Senator was on the floor this afternoon saying the wealthy are overburdened. It is not easy, I guess, to pick out a new car every year, maybe make sure your reserves are not given away and not made, and renovations for the house are in order. Life gets complicated if you are rich. These decisions do not come easy.

The Senator who spoke this afternoon complained that the poor and the middle class—and I quote him here—“need to share some of the responsibility.”

So there it is. It is the poor and the middle class who need to sacrifice once again in the name of wealth. The fat cats sitting on the front deck while middle-class workers are breaking their backs.

Middle-class workers should not have to explain to their kids why they cannot afford to help them get a college education. Democrats know the way to keep our country strong is to educate every young person capable of learning.

Now, what is the real cost of millionaire protection? This risk is an economic giant of the world, as we see in the failure of Wall Street and the damage to the credit markets that could lead to the loss of millions of jobs across the country.

The question has to be answered: Why are the Republicans willing to walk on this economic tightrope to win favor among wealthy contributors? It is because they do not sufficiently value the human infrastructure that enabled the millionaires to make their millions. They are insisting on protecting tax breaks for millionaires and billionaires.

They want to keep subsidizing big oil companies to the tune of $4 billion a year in tax breaks. I look at what our leader, the majority leader, has proposed. I am proud to be a co-sponsor of a commonsense resolution introduced by Senator REID.

The resolution says: Americans who earn $1 million or more a year should pick up the shovel and help their country dig its way out of the disaster instead of just playing politics.

The American people see through the Republican games of protecting the rich, while middle-class families lose their jobs, homes, and the belief that their children have a chance of success that their forebears dreamed. In poll after poll, survey after survey, they say we should ask the very wealthy to pay more to reduce the deficit. Yet the Republicans refuse to close outrageous tax loopholes for oil companies that are rolling in profits. We cannot ask them to sacrifice.

Look at what the CEOs of these companies are being paid. ExxonMobil, they make over $1 billion in a quarter. The CEO, in 2010, $20 million. ConocoPhillips, their CEO made $18 million in 2010. Chevron, the CEO was paid $16 million in 2010.

The facts are clear and so are the Republican priorities. They do not want the giant corporations and the wealthy to lose their lucrative tax loopholes. The Republicans want to end Medicare as we know it, forcing seniors to pick up an extra $6,000 a year for their health care. The question has to be asked: Why are the Republicans trying to slow the economic recovery? Why run the risk of financial collapse just 3 years after the last one? Do they believe destroying the economy now will help them during next year’s election? What a terrible thought that is. We heard the minority leader say his No. 1 priority is stopping this President from winning another term.

Our No. 1 priority ought not to be to destroy the middle class, resting, making sure all Americans can share in what this great country has to offer.

The question lurks: What is it that propels this unyielding refusal to ask those who make $1 million a year or more to participate some in restoring our economic viability? The bottom line is, avoiding a default crisis requires all of us to participate or we could witness the failure of a nation that has survived for more than 200 years—200 years as a beacon of freedom, liberty, and democracy—with a risk of substantial failure in the future if we do not raise the debt ceiling.

The Democrats feel the need to protect the basic values that have made this dream heard only in America, over centuries, a reality. Going forward into the future, we have to continue to protect the values we treasure in our society.

I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

AUTHORITY TO MEET

Mr. LAUTENBERG. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that if the Finance Committee meets tomorrow at 9 a.m., it be authorized to meet during tomorrow’s session of the Senate.

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

Mr. LAUTENBERG. Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

MORNING BUSINESS

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