

It is a balance between those two, and the veterans win.

The VSOs are on board. They were part of the discussion on this bill. We talked to the VA extensively to make sure this bill would work for the VA, and they agreed.

As I said earlier, I would love to have the VA come out forcefully for this bill. I think it would help get it passed in this body.

One thing in closing. We are going to pass a temporary stopgap measure for our budget, and VA Choice funding will probably be a part of it. I will tell my colleagues that this is the last banda-aid that I am willing to put on the Choice Program. We need a long-term solution, and if we don't get that long-term solution, we are not doing right by our veterans in this country.

With that, I would again like to thank Chairman ISAKSON for his leadership and for his good work on the VA Committee. When we come back here in 2018, hopefully we can get this bill passed early in the session because it is the right thing to do for our veterans.

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 President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

Mr. FRANKEN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to speak for as much time as I may consume.

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

#### FAREWELL TO THE SENATE

Mr. FRANKEN. Mr. President, this is my final speech on the floor of the U.S. Senate. I have come to the floor many times, as we all have. We come to the floor to cast our votes on bills and amendments. We come here to discuss and debate the issues that are important to our States and to the country. We introduce and explain legislation. We talk about our States and what we learned on our latest visit to a community health center, a farm, or a small business. What we don't talk about all that often is the work of all the men and women on our staffs who make all of this possible.

I have been fortunate to have had a dedicated, hard-working staff both in Washington and in Minnesota, and I have no doubt that they will go on to do great things and to serve our Nation well.

I am also very lucky to have a wonderful family who has stood by me throughout the good times and the tough times of being a Senator. As Senators, we have packed schedules. There are late nights. There are difficult votes on divisive issues and a lot of time invested in better understanding the challenges our constitu-

ents face every day. All too often, that important work doesn't leave enough time for our families. I am grateful for my wife, my children, and their spouses, who stood by me and who have helped me to do my work effectively.

Finally, as I leave the Senate, I take great comfort in knowing that my successor, Senator-designate Tina Smith, has a well-earned reputation for being a smart, diligent, hard-working public servant, and I have no doubt that Senator Smith will serve Minnesotans and all Americans exceptionally well.

When most people think about politics, they think about arguments—the arguments they have around the dinner table, the arguments they have online, and most of all, the arguments we have here in Washington. That is a big part of the reason why a lot of people just don't like politics.

Often, the debate here in Washington can sometimes seem arcane and tough to understand. Other times—especially in recent years—it can be so bitter that it doesn't even feel like we are trying to resolve anything, just venting our spleens at each other. I get that. I get why people want us to stop arguing and start doing stuff.

But since I am leaving the Senate, I thought I would take a big risk and say a few words in favor of arguments. After all, there is no single magic solution that can bring all 100 of us together because there is no one set of values that brought all of us here in the first place. I think many of my colleagues have heard me talk about what brought me to politics and what makes me a Democrat, and it is my wife Fran.

When she was 17 months old, her father, a decorated World War II veteran, died in a car accident, leaving her mom widowed at age 29 with five kids. There was one sibling younger than Franni, Bootsie, who was 3 months old. Franni's family made it—barely, but they made it—thanks to Social Security survivor benefits. Sometimes they had to turn the heat off in the winter. This was in Portland, ME. Sometimes—often—they were hungry because there wasn't enough food. But they made it.

Franni and her three sisters all went to college on combinations of scholarships and Pell grants. At the time, a full Pell grant paid for about 80 percent of a public college education, but today it only pays about 35 percent.

When Bootsie went to high school, my mother-in-law got a GI loan for \$300 and went to college. She got three more loans, graduated from college, and became an elementary school teacher. And because she taught title I kids—poor kids—all her loans were forgiven.

My brother-in-law went into the Coast Guard and became an electrical engineer.

Every member of Franni's family became a productive member of society and a member of the middle class.

They tell you in this country to pull yourself up by your bootstraps, but

first you have to have the boots. The Federal Government, through Social Security survivor benefits and Pell grants and the GI bill and title I, gave my wife's family the boots. That is why I am a Democrat. That is why I am a Democrat.

Over the years, I have heard Democrats and Republicans talk about their own values, the things they believe brought them to politics, the things that make them care about what happens here. I have learned so much from listening to the arguments we have in this country and the arguments we have here in this Chamber. I have learned from Republicans. I have learned to respect but not always agree with their opinions, and I have learned how their backgrounds can lead them to reach, in good faith, a conclusion that I never could have imagined. And, of course, I have learned so much from my fellow Democrats.

But the person I learned the most from is someone who isn't here. For 12 years, the seat I currently occupy was held by Paul Wellstone. As I have said before, Paul was a tireless, passionate champion for working families—for working families in Minnesota and across the Nation. He fought for veterans, for farmers, and for those who simply needed a voice.

Paul was my friend. Paul had a saying that I think perfectly represents the values and the principles for which he fought. He used to say: "We all do better when we all do better." That was Paul's creed. What Paul meant by that is that the whole country—the working poor, the middle class, and the well off—the whole country does better when each and every one of us is able to contribute to and participate fairly in our economy and in our democracy.

I think Paul was right, but not everybody does. Some people's values are different. Some people believe that those at the top are there for a reason and that they shouldn't have to concern themselves with what is going on in the lives of people who haven't been so lucky or even so accomplished. Some people believe honestly—honestly, legitimately, believe—that not everyone deserves to have the same standing in this country. They believe that your standing as a citizen should depend, in part, on where you were born or what you believe or whom you love or what you do for a living. Some people believe that at some fundamental level, we are all in this on our own. I don't agree with any of those values, but I respect that some people hold them, and that is why arguments matter.

When we argue, whether it is across the fence with your neighbor or on a cable news show or here on the floor of the Senate, it can help us sharpen our ability to articulate what we want and challenge us to examine our own views with a more critical eye and help highlight the choice for the American people, because, after all, in a democracy, the people get to choose.

As I prepare to leave the Senate, I have been thinking a lot about my values and Paul's values—the values we share with many of my colleagues here in the Senate and many of the progressive activists I have met and worked alongside of in Minnesota and around the country. That is because, regrettably, the policies pursued by the Trump administration and congressional Republicans today could not stand in a starker contrast to the principles Paul championed and the values I have fought for during my time here in the Senate.

The values being advanced by the President and his allies in Congress simply don't represent my belief that our economy, our democracy, and our country work best when they work for everyone. Indeed, the values propelling the Republican agenda today are about consolidating political and economic power in the hands of corporations and the very wealthy.

Just take the tax bill Congress passed this week. At virtually each and every step of the process, Republicans drafting this bill chose to embrace the failed trickle-down policies of the past, crafting an enormous—giveaway that benefits their corporate campaign backers and wealthy donors. For instance, according to the non-partisan Tax Policy Center, by 2027, 83 percent of the benefits in the Republican tax bill will accrue to the top 1 percent of income earners; that is, people who make more than \$912,000 a year. Eighty-three percent of the benefits go to the top 1 percent. Do we really need any other data point? Well, here is one: At the same time, the Republican tax bill would increase taxes on 35 million low- and middle-income families.

During his inaugural address, President Trump vowed that “the forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer.” But the Republican tax bill represents a slap in the face to those forgotten men and women. I guess the President forgot about them.

Make no mistake, the Senate-passed version of the Republican tax bill was deeply flawed, but when Republicans later attempted to reconcile differences between the House and Senate bills—a process that took place behind closed doors—even more favors were doled out to Republican donors and to special interests. New rules were created to give real estate developers like President Trump and his son-in-law the ability to pay less tax on passthrough income. The top individual rate, which applies to millionaires and billionaires, was cut to 37 percent—a rate lower than either the House or Senate versions of the bill. And provisions in the original bills that were designed to stop foreign corporations from avoiding taxes by shifting their profits overseas—a practice known as earnings stripping—were dropped altogether.

The problem in this country is not that the wealthy aren't doing well

enough. After all, the top 1 percent of the country's population controls nearly 40 percent of its wealth. The problem is that too many working families have been left out of the economic growth that the top 1 percent has enjoyed in recent years. But rather than use the tax reform bill as an opportunity to help those working families, Republicans have instead decided to shower corporations and wealthy donors with tax breaks and special favors.

The tax bill didn't just come out of the blue—quite the contrary. This tax bill comes on the heels of countless Republican attempts to shred policies that offer protection to working families and the environment. But corporations and wealthy donors who support my Republican colleagues believe that these policies stand in the way of their profits.

Take healthcare, for example. Despite President Trump's campaign promise that “We're going to have insurance for everybody,” when his administration attempted to deliver on that promise, House Republicans devised and passed a bill that would have resulted in 23 million fewer people having health insurance, including 14 million people who rely on Medicaid. Facing unprecedented public outcry, Republican Senators eventually proposed a narrower bill—one that didn't repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act outright but instead undermined some of its foundational provisions. But this narrower Senate bill still would have left 16 million more Americans uninsured, all while spiking premiums by 20 percent, according to CBO.

The American people continued to fight, demanding that the Senate kill the bill. Thanks to the incredibly hard work of organizers and activists, including the American Medical Association and everyday Americans, that is exactly what happened. Republican attempts to repeal the ACA failed, but it seems my Republican colleagues have not learned their lesson.

Finding themselves unable to sustain an open assault on the Affordable Care Act, they instead included a measure in the tax bill that will repeal an essential component of that law—the individual mandate. As a result, 13 million fewer Americans will have health insurance in the years to come. But that doesn't matter to President Trump and his allies, who claim they need to repeal this central pillar of ObamaCare in order to pay for the massive tax cuts that their wealthy donors demand.

Those same wealthy donors also demand that Republicans turn a blind eye to climate change—an existential threat to humanity. Climate change is not just an environmental problem. Climate change stands to affect virtually every aspect of our lives, posing a great threat to public health, national security, our country's infrastructure, and our economy. Circumstances require that we take immediate action in order to protect the welfare of future generations.

Almost every Republican in Congress refuses to take the issue of climate change seriously. They continue to deny the underlying evidence and science behind it, even as Americans suffer the devastating consequences of their denial. This year alone, hurricanes ravaged Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, and wildfires raged across the West, most recently in Los Angeles.

We know that climate change makes these extreme weather events worse, and this is just the beginning. What we are witnessing is the beginning of a new normal—a new normal that this country simply cannot endure.

It doesn't have to be this way. It is possible to address climate change while at the same time growing our economy and creating jobs. During the Obama administration, the Federal Government increased research and development investments in clean energy technology, both through tax credits designed to incentivize investment and through the energy title that I was proud to help write in the farm bill, which allowed people in rural America to participate in the clean energy revolution. Those investments paid off. Since 2009, the cost of wind power has decreased by 66 percent, and the cost of solar power has dropped by 85 percent. But we need to do more.

I championed an energy efficiency standard that would require utilities to become more efficient. I led legislation to encourage energy storage, a game changer that allows wind and solar to be used when the wind isn't blowing and the sun isn't shining. I pushed to deploy distributed energy that makes our grid more resilient and reliable.

Rather than join me and my Democratic colleagues in confronting the challenge of climate change by driving innovation, Republicans ordered a retreat. At the behest of the fossil fuel industry and other corporate interests, Republicans have put forward nominees for key environmental posts who cut their teeth defending corporate polluters, not enforcing the laws that keep our air and water clean, and they have pushed an agenda that guts funding for science and innovation. The Republican strategy of denial and obfuscation isn't just an affront to the government; it is an affront to common sense.

The Trump administration and its allies in Congress have never let science or common sense stand in the way of ideology. Time and again, they have acted to roll back evidence-based, commonsense protections put in place to improve the lives of minority or marginalized communities, including women and LGBT people.

For example, in October, the Trump administration announced a new rule that guts a provision in the Affordable Care Act that requires health insurance plans to cover birth control free of charge—a policy that has benefited more than 62 million American women.

The ability to access affordable reproductive healthcare has a powerful effect on the choices that women and families make every day—choices about whether to finish college, buy a home, or start a business. Ensuring that women have access to contraception is vital to the economic security of our families, and that is why I filed a brief in support of the ACA's contraceptive coverage requirement when it was challenged before the Supreme Court.

Despite the millions of women who have benefited from the policy, and despite the science demonstrating that restricting access to contraception has negative health consequences, the Trump administration has eviscerated the policy.

In February, the Trump administration rescinded Obama-era guidelines that instructed schools on how to protect transgender students under a Federal law called title IX. LGBT students deserve to learn in an environment free from discrimination, and they deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. But far too often, LGBT kids, particularly transgender kids, experience bullying and harassment. When that happens, those students are deprived of an equal education. That is why I led the Senate in calling on the Obama administration to issue those guidelines back in 2015. Nonetheless, the Trump administration decided to scrap that guidance—a callous and mean-spirited decision that sent a terrible message to LGBT children and their parents and took away a tool designed to protect our children. It is our responsibility, not just as Senators but as adults—as adults—to protect our children, not turn a blind eye when they face prejudice and cruelty.

Nothing that Republicans have done is more galling, nothing poses a greater threat to the fabric of our democracy than their deliberate and sustained attack on the right to vote. Let's start with the Supreme Court's disastrous 2013 decision in *Shelby County v. Holder*, a 5-to-4 decision in which the Court's conservative Justices effectively gutted the Voting Rights Act and eliminated a check on States with a history of discrimination at the polls.

After the *Shelby County* decision, States swiftly began to enact harsh restrictions on the right to vote, in many cases citing the myth of so-called voter fraud as justification.

Take North Carolina, for example. Just a few months after *Shelby County*, the State enacted one of the Nation's strictest voter ID laws. Without any evidence, the State described the new restrictions as necessary to prevent fraud. Without the protections of the Voting Rights Act, those changes went into effect, keeping poor and minority voters from casting a ballot.

When North Carolina's restrictions were eventually challenged in court, the Fourth Circuit found that the primary purpose of the restrictions wasn't to fight fraud but to make it harder for

Black people to vote. The court found that "the new provisions target African Americans with almost surgical precision."

The fact that North Carolina's restrictions stand as a blatant example of race discrimination is undeniable, but the strategy behind adopting such harsh restrictions is even more insidious. The strategy here is designed to ensure that voters who don't agree with their candidates or their policies aren't able to vote against them.

Paul Wellstone's words are more important today than ever before: "We all do better when we all do better." I believe that to my core. But the policies pursued by President Trump and his allies are not about lifting people out of poverty or about giving the politically powerless a louder voice in our democracy. These policies are intended to line the pockets of wealthy donors and to protect the power of those who already wield outsized influence in our democracy. That is a far cry from Paul's creed.

When I think about what has gone wrong here, when I reflect on how this country has strayed so far from the values that I believe a majority of Americans share, I have to say that I think there is something wrong with the way we are arguing, and it started long before 2016. Lurking behind each of those issues isn't just a difference of opinion or a difference of values. There is something far worse: a lie.

Take, for example, the Trump administration's efforts to suppress votes. Shortly after winning the Presidential election, then President-Elect Trump was confronted with the unpleasant fact that he lost the popular vote. He tweeted: "In addition to winning the Electoral College in a landslide, I won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally."

Let's be clear. President Trump lost the popular vote by more than 2.8 million votes. What he claimed in that tweet was that nearly 3 million fraudulent votes were cast. In fact, he later claimed that between 3 and 5 million illegal votes caused him to lose the popular vote, citing no evidence.

There were 138 million votes cast in the 2016 Presidential election. State election and law enforcement officials found virtually no credible evidence of fraud, and no States—not one—recorded any indication of widespread fraud—none. But that didn't stop the Trump administration from quickly turning the President's tweets into policy. The White House created a new commission to investigate the President's wild and unsubstantiated claim—a commission led by Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, a rightwing extremist who has made a career out of trafficking in the voter fraud myth and who was fined for repeatedly lying to a Federal court in voter ID litigation. When Kobach was asked whether he believed the President's claim that millions of people voted illegally, he said: We may never

know the answer to that question. Really?

This episode could almost be considered funny if the ramifications weren't so deadly serious. Kobach's voter fraud commission requested sensitive information about voters—including names, dates of birth, party registration, and voting history—from all 50 States. This is information that could lay the groundwork for disenfranchising scores of eligible voters, which is why more than 40 States refused to comply with that request. At the same time, the Trump-Sessions Justice Department quickly dropped legal challenges to discriminatory voting practices in States, further signaling that protecting the right to vote will no longer be a priority of the Justice Department. It is all based on a lie—and not a lie President Trump came up with. Rightwing conservatives have been raising a false alarm about so-called voter fraud for years despite the fact that no credible evidence has ever been produced to demonstrate that it is a real problem.

Or take the Trump administration's attacks on LGBT rights. Again and again, lurking behind these policies are lies—the lie that advocates of LGBT rights want to trample on people's religious freedom, the lie that families led by a gay or a lesbian couple don't provide safe environments for children, the lie that allowing transgender people to use the appropriate bathroom opens the door to sexual assault. President Trump didn't invent these lies, but he and his administration proudly repeat them.

Or take the attacks on science, especially climate science. We now have enough evidence to conclude that climate change is real, and it is man-made. It is a threat to our Nation's security and is an existential threat to the planet. Defense Secretary Mattis knows this; yet, for years, so-called scientists who have been funded by industry have been hard at work in casting doubt on the well-established scientific consensus. Heck, a recent Washington Post report revealed that Trump administration officials have prohibited the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—our Nation's premier public health and research institute—from using the terms "evidence-based" and "science-based" in budget planning documents. President Trump didn't launch the war on science, but now he is leading the charge.

Or take healthcare. President Trump promised that everyone would have insurance, but an analysis by the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office revealed that under the House Republican healthcare bill, 23 million fewer people would have had health insurance than are currently covered today—23 million people. To add insult to injury, the House bill would have hit the most vulnerable among us, and it would have hit them the hardest.

According to the Congressional Budget Office, 14 million of the 23 million people who would have lost coverage

under the House Republicans' plan would have been Medicaid beneficiaries.

That is right. Despite candidate Trump's assurances that "everybody's going to be taken care of much better than they're taken care of now," the Republican bill would have cut funding to Medicaid—a vital safety net program that ensures that our seniors, people with disabilities, pregnant women, and families with children have access to the healthcare they need. On top of that, the Republican plan would have driven up the costs of premiums, with older and sicker people having experienced the deepest increases.

Indeed, the healthcare debate has long been predicated on lies—lies that "well over 90 percent of what Planned Parenthood does" is provide abortion services, the lie that women rely on birth control only because they are sexually promiscuous, the lie that the Affordable Care Act is collapsing under its own weight when, in fact, the Trump administration and the Republicans here in Congress have been doing everything they can do to sabotage it.

Then there is the tax debate. Over the last year, Republicans have repeatedly claimed that they would advance policies that are designed to benefit middle-class families, not the wealthy. President Trump pledged not to forget the "forgotten men and women of our country." Steve Mnuchin, the Secretary of the Treasury, promised that the Republican tax plan would help the middle class. He vowed that any tax cuts for upper income earners would be offset by getting rid of deductions that benefit the wealthy. That is what he said, that "there will be no absolute tax cut for the upper class." Again, 83 percent of the benefits in the Republican tax bill go to the richest 1 percent. What he said is not true.

Just the other day, the White House Press Secretary claimed that President Trump, himself, will pay more because of this bill. We don't know exactly what the effect will be on his personal finances because the White House has refused to release his tax returns. They have claimed in another lie that he cannot release them because they are under audit. You can release tax returns while you are under audit. What we do know is that tax breaks in the Republican bill for real estate developers like President Trump and his family will save him millions upon millions of dollars.

I could go on and on.

Before I came to the Senate, I was known as something of an obsessive on the subject of honesty in public discourse, but as I leave the Senate, I have to admit that it feels as though we are losing the war on truth. Maybe it is already lost. If that is the case, if that is what happens, then we have lost the ability to have the kinds of arguments that have helped to build consensus—I see LAMAR ALEXANDER here; we have done that on the HELP Com-

mittee; I thank the chairman for when we have done that—or at least to have helped the American people make informed choices about the issues that affect their lives.

So what is to be done? Who will stand up and fight for a more honest debate—to insist that even though we have a different set of opinions, we cannot honorably advance our competing agendas unless we use the same set of facts? I hope that my colleagues on both sides of the aisle will stand up for truth. The thing is, I have spent enough time with my Republican friends over the last 8½ years to know that they are motivated by values just like Democrats. I just hope that they will fight for those values forthrightly.

At the end of the day, it is going to be up to the American people just as it has always been. We will always have the democracy we deserve, if not the government we want. It is going to take ordinary Americans deciding to become more informed consumers of political news and opinion and deciding that they are willing to be a part of the argument themselves instead of, simply, tuning out all of the noise. If they do, I know that we will get this country back on track.

In October, 15 years after we lost Paul, I took to the Senate floor to remember him and to celebrate his life. Paul understood better than anyone I know the meaning and the power of politics, and I think he would have a lot to say about where we find ourselves today.

Paul said:

Politics is not about power. Politics is not about money. Politics is not about winning for the sake of winning. Politics is about the improvement of people's lives.

Even in the face of everything that is happening today, I still believe in Paul's words: "Politics is about the improvement of people's lives." I know those words to be true because I know that the American people still believe in justice and equality and opportunity, and I see evidence of that every day.

I saw it in January when more than 4 million people across the United States joined in the Women's March. They stood in solidarity with their mothers and sisters and daughters and wives.

I saw it later that same month after President Trump issued an Executive order that sought to ban travelers from Muslim-majority countries from entering our country. Hundreds of lawyers responded to the call to help. They rushed to airports and offered their services in support of affected families.

I saw it in May when a transgender boy in Wisconsin who was discriminated against by his school had the courage to take them to court, and he won.

I saw it in September when tens of thousands of Americans mobilized in opposition to attempts to repeal the Affordable Care Act and succeeded in killing the bill.

I also saw it at the ballot box when voters in Virginia and Alabama resisted the temptation to give in to anger and cynicism and, instead, exercised their right to vote.

"Politics is about the improvement of people's lives." The American people know that to be true, and they fill me with hope for our country.

Thank you.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mrs. FISCHER). The Senator from Minnesota.

Ms. KLOBUCHAR. Madam President, I ask for 3 minutes to talk about my colleague.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator is recognized.

#### TRIBUTES TO AL FRANKEN

Ms. KLOBUCHAR. Madam President, you heard in Senator FRANKEN's closing words the passion he has for all of the work that he has done in this Chamber and for the people of our State. You saw the love that he has for his family—for Franni—and the love that he has for his staff. They are not good staff; they are wonderful staff.

I think about all of the legacies that AL will leave. One of them is his staff, to whom he has been so devoted. Another is all of the work he has done for veterans, the work he has done for healthcare with the medical loss ratio—one of the major achievements in the Affordable Care Act. One is the work he has done, way ahead of his time, for the LGBTQ community, and another is the work he has done for our Tribal communities. That was his No. 1 ask when he arrived in the Senate—to be on the Indian Affairs Committee. That is not what other people ask for. He did that. Another is the work he did on bullying in schools. For the kids who had no voice, he gave them a voice. Another is the work he did in carrying on Paul Wellstone's work for those with mental illness.

When I think about what I will miss about AL, I will miss, first of all, how he defied expectations when he got elected. I think about all of those headlines that he mentions in his book. No matter what he did in the first few years he was in office, they would read with things like: AL FRANKEN passes a bill. That's no joke. AL FRANKEN gets reelected. That's no joke. Yet he still carried on and defied expectations every single day that he was here.

Another thing I will miss is all of the Senators approaching him in his first few weeks in office with their bad jokes, which he would smile at, and then he would later tell me they were not good jokes.

Another thing I will always miss about AL is the passion he had for his work. I think many people were captivated by the pointed questioning of witnesses and nominees in the last year, but it was that kind of focus that he took to all of his work when he would examine policies he thought were good or bad. He never gave up on that.