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Senate

The Senate met at 10:31 a.m. and was called to order by the Honorable ROY BLUNT, a Senator from the State of Missouri.

PRAYER

The Chaplain, Dr. Barry C. Black, offered the following prayer:

Let us pray.

O God, our Father, may life's seasons teach us that You stand within the shadows keeping watch above Your own. We praise You that You are our refuge and strength, a very present help in turbulent times.

Lord, cultivate within our lawmakers the grace of gratitude as they seek to stand for right for the glory of Your Name. May they refrain from hasty speech, as they labor to treat others as they would have others treat them. Empower them to grow in Your grace and in a greater knowledge of Your will and wisdom.

We pray in Your Holy Name. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The Presiding Officer led the Pledge of Allegiance, as follows:

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

APPOINTMENT OF ACTING PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will please read a communication to the Senate from the President pro tempore (Mr. HATCH).

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the following letter:

U.S. SENATE,
PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE,
Washington, DC, March 22, 2018.

To the Senate:

Under the provisions of rule I, paragraph 3, of the Standing Rules of the Senate, I hereby appoint the Honorable ROY BLUNT, a Senator

from the State of Missouri, to perform the duties of the Chair.

ORRIN G. HATCH,
President pro tempore.

Mr. BLUNT thereupon assumed the Chair as Acting President pro tempore.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The majority leader is recognized.

OMNIBUS APPROPRIATIONS BILL

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, yesterday evening, the House filed a landmark appropriations bill for the remainder of fiscal year 2018. Months of in-depth, bicameral, bipartisan negotiations and committee work have led us to this point. The result is legislation that neither side sees as perfect but which contains a host of significant victories and important achievements on behalf of the American people.

First and foremost, in my view, this bill will mark the end of disproportionate and harmful cuts to the Department of Defense. It delivers the largest year-on-year increase in defense spending in 15 years. These new funding levels will ensure that the training and tools available to our servicemembers remain on the cutting edge, and at long last, veterans will receive more transparent and more accessible care. This has been a top priority, on our side of the aisle especially, to deliver for our men and women in uniform, to deliver for the future of national security. This bill will get it done.

Of course, our Armed Forces aren't the only vital priority this measure will address. It is a victory for families caught in the grip of the opioid epidemic. This bill scales up research, treatment, and prevention funding and provides for grants to first responders.

It will confront the scourge of addiction head-on and help save lives. For rural communities, like many in my home State of Kentucky, this is a big deal.

The measure is also a victory for safe, reliable, 21st century infrastructure. It will fund long overdue improvements to roads, rails, airports, and inland waterways to ensure that our growing economy has the support system that it needs.

Importantly, the bill will also contain a number of provisions to provide more safety for American families. It expands funding for Federal law enforcement. It allocates new resources to border security and immigration enforcement, including an important step forward for President Trump's proposed wall. The total miles of new and upgraded walls and barriers funded by this bill exceeds even the administration's initial request for this fiscal year, and it also provides the necessary funds to keep Guantanamo Bay open and operating.

The legislation also delivers for students and teachers across our Nation, who deserve to learn and work without fear of violence.

At the insistence of the Speaker and me, this bill will include two important bipartisan, commonsense measures to address real issues facing the Nation: the Fix NICS bill and the STOP School Violence Act. Thanks to the leadership of Senator HATCH, this bill represents a major step forward for school safety. It provides millions of dollars in new funding for early intervention and prevention programs to stop school violence before it happens. These grants will include funding for training of students and school personnel for identifying and responding to safety threats, as well as for implementing enhanced technology and equipment to improve school safety. Thanks to the dogged efforts of Senator CORNYN, the Fix NICS

• This "bullet" symbol identifies statements or insertions which are not spoken by a Member of the Senate on the floor.



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provision to repair and improve fire-arm background checks is also included. Both of these bipartisan accomplishments are the direct result of tireless work by those who have been most tragically affected by violence in America's schools.

Here is how Mark Barden, a co-founder of Sandy Hook Promise, described the school safety provision: "This legislation will save lives."

Likewise, the Parkland, FL, families recently wrote all four congressional leaders to ask that we include these two particular measures in this piece of legislation. I am proud that we could deliver for them and for the safety of schools around our country.

Let's take one more look at just a few of the good things this bill will accomplish: No. 1, the largest year-on-year funding increase for our warfighters in 15 years; new resources for the fight against opioids and for border security and the President's wall; major enhancements for law enforcement and school safety. These provisions and the entirety of this omnibus represent months of bipartisan work. I look forward to considering it very soon.

TAX REFORM

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, on another matter, the good news about tax reform continues to sweep across the Nation. But recently, as special bonuses, wage increases, and expanded employee benefits continue to make headlines, they have had to share the front page with a series of late winter storms. This prolonged cold weather can mean high heating costs for working families. Fortunately, tax reform has an answer for that as well.

Ratepayers in many States are looking forward to smaller utility bills, thanks to our country's new Tax Code. In my home State, the public service commission announced early this week that Kentucky Utilities and Louisville Gas & Electric will be passing along savings to customers to the tune of a 6-percent decrease in monthly bills. That means real savings for the middle-class families I represent.

We have heard a similar story from our neighbors in Indiana. The Northern Indiana Public Service Company reports that thanks to tax reform, it will be able to pass \$26 million in new savings on to its customers. That is just one of a long list of ways that tax reform is helping Hoosiers.

Pat Williams, who lives in Southern Indiana, recently shared another tax reform success story with my friend, Senator YOUNG. Pat's husband, Jim, works part-time in the U-Haul service center across the river in Louisville. He received a \$500 tax reform bonus.

Over in Converse, IN, tax reform enabled the First Farmers Bank & Trust to raise its starting wage for hourly workers, guarantee a year-end bonus for all full-time employees, and announce a big investment in employee

development and community programs.

My friend, the junior Senator from Indiana, knows the folks at First Farmers. In fact, he was so impressed by their proactive response to the new Tax Code that he invited them to the President's State of the Union back in January. There aren't enough seats in the House Gallery for all the American families that tax reform is already helping—not even close. But if there were, I would bet the working families and small businesses from Indiana would come with questions. Why did only one of their Senators vote for these tax savings? Why did their senior Senator vote in lockstep with Democrats to block their tax cuts, bonuses, raises, and benefits? Those would be tough questions to answer. Fortunately, Republicans stayed focused on empowering the American people.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

MORNING BUSINESS

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the Senate will be in a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

The majority leader.

NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT FOR FISCAL YEAR 2018—MOTION TO PROCEED

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I move to proceed to Calendar No. 165, S. 1519.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will report the motion.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

Motion to proceed to Calendar No. 165, S. 1519, a bill to authorize appropriations for fiscal year 2018 for military activities of the Department of Defense, for military construction, and for defense activities of the Department of Energy, to prescribe military personnel strengths for such fiscal year, and for other purposes.

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that Senators be permitted to speak for up to 10 minutes each.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

The Democratic leader is recognized.

TRIBUTE TO THAD COCHRAN

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, I have a few items I would like to address this morning, but first I would like to recognize our dear friend from Mississippi, the senior Senator, who will be delivering his farewell speech today.

Senator THAD COCHRAN has served in this body for decades with a sense of

dignity, decorum, and respect for his colleagues. That was always appreciated but never confused for lack of fierceness or conviction. When his issues were on the line, Senator COCHRAN fought for Mississippi as hard as any Senator. After all, he was first bitten by the political bug in his run for head cheerleader at Ole Miss, and he shares that distinction with Trent Lott. So if you want to be a Senator for Mississippi, join the cheerleading squad for Ole Miss. Of course, for New Yorkers, we like Eli Manning too. Senator COCHRAN never stopped being a cheerleader for Mississippi.

Chairman COCHRAN and I certainly had our differences. The chairman once said:

I don't call a lot of news conferences. I just don't see that as a necessary part of my responsibilities.

Well, we will agree to disagree on that one, but there are many things we have in common, and there is a particular part of his legacy I admire.

After Hurricane Katrina buffeted his State, he convinced the recalcitrant lawmakers to deliver aid to the gulf coast—far exceeding the administration's request—and he did it by working Members on his side of the aisle and across the aisle behind the scenes. That is how he earned the nickname the "quiet persuader." It is a skill I greatly respect after going through something similar when Hurricane Sandy hit my home State of New York.

At the time, Chairman COCHRAN was the ranking member on the Appropriations Committee. He and his staff were extraordinarily helpful throughout the process. Ultimately, Senator COCHRAN voted for the Sandy relief bill when many of his colleagues opposed it. I will never forget that.

Under his stewardship of the Appropriations Committee, we have just completed the text of an omnibus spending bill, which I will address in a moment. Once the bill passes, it will be a fitting legacy that Senator COCHRAN will retire with another bipartisan accomplishment under his belt.

I wish him and his family the best, and I thank him for his distinguished service to the State of Mississippi, to his beloved country, and to the U.S. Senate. He will be missed in the Senate.

OMNIBUS APPROPRIATIONS BILL

Mr. President, I am pleased to say the four congressional leaders have reached an agreement on the omnibus spending bill that is now public. It didn't happen until last night. It took a long time. There were painstaking weeks of negotiations, more than a few of which we went past the midnight hour. Before I go further, I want to thank Leader MCCONNELL, Speaker RYAN, and their staffs, Leader PELOSI and her team, Chairman COCHRAN, Vice Chairman LEAHY, the Appropriations Committee staff, and many others for all the hard work that went into this bill.

It certainly doesn't have everything Democrats want, and it contains a few