

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

things Democrats aren't thrilled about. The same is true of our Republican friends. That is true of all compromises. If each of us stood on our hind legs and said "If I don't get everything I want, I am voting no," we would be totally paralyzed, and that happens far too often in this body, but on this appropriations bill, this omnibus, somehow that didn't happen. There was a remarkable spirit of give-and-take in the room.

Overall, we Democrats are very happy with what we have been able to accomplish on a number of very important priorities to the middle class in America: infrastructure, education, opioid treatment, mental health, childcare. For nearly a decade, the middle class in this country has suffered from a needless and self-imposed austerity, limiting investment of all of the things that create good-paying jobs and improve the working conditions of Americans, improve the lives of Americans. This spending bill, this spending agreement, brings that era of austerity to an unceremonious end and represents one of the most significant investments in the middle class in decades.

So many of the middle class are frustrated, and they don't know why. Well, one of the reasons is quietly, but unfortunately and quite decisively, this Congress cut back on the very ladder that helps the middle class climb in education, in infrastructure, in healthcare. It was cut and cut and cut. The help that the Federal Government has given to the middle class since the progressive era of the early 1900s was taken away quietly but decisively. It is back. It is going to help middle-class people stay in the middle class. It is going to help those aspiring to the middle class climb that ladder and get there. It is really a good thing, and I am excited about it.

As the Republican leader mentioned, it robustly funds our military, giving our men and women in uniform the resources they need; it also improves our ability to respond to wildfires; it makes a critical downpayment on election security; it provides a reliable pathway for the essential infrastructure projects in our country; and it makes an incremental but important progress on the issue of gun violence—a debate this Congress must resume soon.

Again, that era of austerity, which so hurt middle-class Americans, is coming to an unceremonious end because this bill respects one of the most significant investments in the middle class in decades. For these reasons, I am confident this agreement will pass both Houses of Congress; hopefully, with comfortable margins; hopefully, in a bipartisan way.

Again, I thank the Republican leader for his part in reaching this agreement, and I look forward to passing this legislation as soon as possible.

CHINA AND PROTECTING AMERICAN INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

Mr. President, now on a final issue, while we are talking about agreement and bipartisanship, I don't agree with President Trump on a whole lot, but today I want to give him a big pat on the back. He is doing the right thing when it comes to China.

For many of us, since Senator GRAHAM and I went and visited China over a decade ago, we have watched China rapaciously take advantage of America, American jobs, American workers, and America's intellectual property. China is ruthless in how they go after us. They do it quietly. They do it with a smile. Unfortunately, previous Presidents—Democratic and Republican—just stood by as China did what it did to us.

President Trump is exactly right when, this afternoon, he will propose a plan designed to punish China for its most flagrant trade abuses.

I have called for such action for years and have been disappointed by the inactions by both President Bush and President Obama. I am very pleased this administration is taking strong action to get a better deal on China because China has stolen and extorted the intellectual property of American companies for years without repercussion.

Our intellectual property is our family jewel. The American way of openness, of thinking, of debate has created the kind of place where great thinkers come, think of great ideas, and those ideas are often translated into millions of middle-class, good-paying jobs. China knows this, but China is not a free and open society. To achieve the kind of gains and advancements in technology, in biomedical science, and so many other things, they have to steal what we do sometimes by buying our companies, sometimes by cyber theft, sometimes by just these joint ventures, and they tell American firms: You can only come to China if you give away your intellectual property. China is taking huge advantage of us.

Intellectual property is the lifeblood of emerging industries and the good-paying jobs they provide. The American advantage of intellectual property is one of the main things that will keep us No. 1 economically in this century but not if we allow it to be stolen and taken advantage of, and the country that does that more than any other is China.

As I said, intellectual property is the lifeblood of emerging industries and the good-paying jobs they provide, so it is impossible to overstate the cost of IP theft to our economy and our workers. This sentence pains me, and I think about it often: GEN Keith Alexander, a four-star general, nonpolitical, was in charge of cyber security in America, and here is what he said: China's theft of our intellectual property is "the greatest transfer of wealth in history." We are letting them do it. The crown jewel of America, our free

and open society that allows great thinkers to create great ideas and products, they steal it, and we do nothing. It is one of the things that aggravates me more than most others. Finally, President Trump is doing something, unlike his predecessors, so I commend him.

The WTO—they have been grossly inadequate for this problem. We cannot continue to ignore flagrant cheating by China, whether WTO likes it or not. So the administration's announcement today is a leap forward. If this new push is going to be successful, we need our allies to work with us—Germany, Italy, France, Britain, open and free societies, unlike China. They know their stuff is being stolen too. Join with us. If we are a united, strong front against Chinese activities on intellectual property, we can force them to change their ways, but they will not do it by persuasion; they will not do it by smiling; and, frankly, they will not do it by diplomacy when some of our diplomats come in and say: We need China for this thing; ignore the economic theft; ignore the economic disadvantage. So I support what the President is doing.

When it came to the tariffs on steel and aluminum, I supported the thrust, I supported the President's instinct, but it wasn't focused enough on China and hurt too many of our other allies, like Canada, where we have a trade surplus. I hope the President corrects his thinking on that, but, here, this is aimed at China and one of the ways China hurts us the very most. It is smart. It is good. I salute our Trade Rep Lighthizer for pushing this issue; I salute our Commerce Secretary Ross for pushing this issue.

By the way, to help support the administration's efforts to crack down on China, we will fully fund the USTR's trade enforcement fund at \$15 million in the omnibus. So let's make sure China starts playing by the rules, and intellectual property is certainly at the top of the list. Today's announcement by the President will be a great start in that direction. Democrats, Republicans, Americans of every ideology and every region of the country should support these actions.

I yield the floor.

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

OMNIBUS APPROPRIATIONS BILL

Mr. CORKER. Madam President, I rise today to speak about the omnibus bill that we are going to be voting on either later today or tomorrow.

I came to the Senate almost 12 years ago. I have 9 months left in my term. I told folks back home that I couldn't imagine serving more than two terms. Yet it has been an incredible privilege to be here. When I ran, I ran concerned about our Nation's fiscal issues, and I ran on the combination of pro-growth tax reform and entitlement reform and dealing with the tremendous deficits that our country has. I really thought we would do something about it.

We had the financial crisis that took place back in 2007, 2008, 2009—building in 2007 and occurred in 2008. We dealt with much of it over 2009. I remember talking to people around our country not just about the financial crisis but about the tremendous deficits that our Nation was creating. I was still hopeful in my first term that we would rise to the occasion and actually deal with the fiscal issues that are going to haunt these young people who are our pages sitting before me. We have \$21 trillion in debt today and over \$100 trillion in unfunded liabilities with our long-term programs, our mandatory spending programs. So during that period of time, near the end of my first term, I kept saying to people around the country: There is no question that the Senate and the House, with leadership from the executive branch, will deal with this fiscal issue.

I am convinced today that that is not going to happen until there is a crisis in our Nation. Let me say it one more time. Without extreme leadership at the very top, I do not think we will deal with this issue until there is a crisis, because I just don't see the will here to do the things that need to be done.

During December we had a debate on the pro-growth tax reform side of this, and I think it is well documented that I had concerns about it. As a matter of fact, when the bill came through the Senate, I voted against it. I continued to work with some of my counterparts on the Democratic side—CHRIS COONS and others—and the White House, to see if there was some way to potentially alter the bill so that if growth projections didn't achieve what we thought they might be, we had some way of ensuring that we would not have deficits. At the end of the day, when it came to the floor, I supported it—pro-growth tax reform, again, being one of those things that I ran on back in 2006.

What concerns me is that today, or maybe tomorrow, we have a 2,232-page omnibus bill before us that sets a base in spending that will be about \$2 trillion in deficit spending over the next 10 years. By the way, that doesn't include some of the supplemental items. I am talking about just the baseline in spending.

I think everyone knows that, like the Presiding Officer, I am a very strong supporter of our men and women in uniform. No doubt we all understand that the defense numbers in this bill are way beyond even what the executive branch asked for. Somehow, in these negotiations, we have ended up, over a 2-year period, with an average increase in base spending of about \$150 billion. When you multiply that times 10, that is \$1.5 trillion. We know there are going to be increases over that 10-year period. Then, if you look at the interest on the debt that it is going to create, we are voting on a bill tonight or tomorrow that is going to add—there is no question—a minimum of \$2

trillion in deficits over the next 10 years.

What was fascinating during the month of December, when we were dealing—let me stop for a second.

Let me just say this. There are a lot of discussions about the fact that maybe the Republican Party has lost its soul. There is a lot of discussion about that around the country—that maybe the Republican Party has lost its soul.

I will say that for the Republican Party to have the Presidency, for the Republican Party to have the Senate, and for the Republican Party to have the House of Representatives, and for us to be passing a bill today—obviously, it couldn't happen without us; we control the agenda here—for us to be in this situation where we are getting ready to pass a bill that adds \$2 trillion in deficits over the next 10 years, or sets the stage for that by passing the first 2 years with a huge increase in base spending with no offsets to speak of, does have to be a wake-up call for people as for whether that is the case.

I can't imagine, for instance, had the 2016 election gone a different way and we had a Democratic President and we controlled the House and Senate, our being in a situation where we would vote tonight or tomorrow for a bill that is going to add \$2 trillion in debt without offsets. As a matter of fact, I can just tell my colleagues, absolutely, that would not be the case.

So here we are. There are going to be all kinds of things in this bill that people don't even know about. It is just human nature. When you have the pen in your hand and you are working in a back room some place—and I don't criticize back rooms; that is how these bills get written—people do things that benefit themselves. They just do. That is the way it works. I don't even want to speak to that. That will be something I hope the media will speak to over the next two or three weeks, when we find, in these 2,232 pages that no one has read, the things in this bill that are going to be egregious to the American people—highly egregious.

I hope people will find them. I hope the media will report them. I know they are in there. I just don't know what they are yet because the bill has just been produced. That is of concern.

What is of grave concern to me is that we have made no attempt whatsoever to create any kind of offsets and no attempt whatsoever to try to solve our fiscal issues. Together, Republicans and Democrats are running off a cliff and passing a bill.

Now, let me speak to Democrats. I am criticizing Republicans, as I should, with this piece of legislation, when we control the executive branch, we control both Houses of Congress, and we are getting ready to pass a bill that will add \$2 trillion for these young people to pay for down the road, which will compound, compound, compound. We have \$21 trillion in debt today, not

to speak of the \$100 trillion of unfunded liabilities.

My Democrat friends, raised unmitigated H-E-L-L over the tax bill that was potentially going to create some deficits if growth projections didn't occur. I have not heard a word from them—not a word, not a word—about the fact that there is no question that we are adding \$2 trillion in debt here—no question. This is money gone, down the tube, out the door, and no way to pay for it. I haven't heard a word from them—not a word. My friends in the media were beside themselves—beside themselves—in December. I mean, the world was going to come to an end if the growth projections that were laid out didn't occur, and the deficits that might be created by this tax bill if we didn't have the growth projections. They were just beside themselves. I have not heard a word from them. It is amazing. Somehow or another, spending more money than we have is different than hoping to create pro-growth tax reform.

So let me just say this. I am optimistic about our future. I see young people around our country who are just so impressive. I go to schools. I go to colleges. I see people in townhall meetings, in restaurants, at the grocery store and in other places, and I could not be more upbeat about the generation of people coming after us—who care about others, who care about the future, and who are engaged in issues. We will have a big crowd up here this weekend, caring about a particular issue that they should care about.

But I could not be more discouraged about where we are today with our adult leadership here in Congress and at the White House.

This is one of the most grotesque pieces of legislation I can remember.

One of the best votes I ever made was the Budget Control Act. It was criticized, but it kept domestic and discretionary spending on a level. We should have done the rest of it. The rest of it was people getting together to solve our long-term problems. That didn't happen. We created sequester, and I know that has built some of the pressure that leads us to where this bill is today.

This is a grotesque piece of legislation—grotesque—that we would pass a piece of legislation that would set the standard for \$2 trillion in deficit spending not offset.

I am discouraged. I am discouraged about where we are today. I am discouraged about the fact that we continue to be engaged in generational theft—my generation.

We will not deal with mandatory spending—mandatory spending that benefits my generation. To these young people sitting in front of me, we are engaged right now in generational theft because we are transferring from you to us your future resources, because we don't have the courage or the will to deal with issues.

By the way, unfortunately, the American people are not there. The

American people do not care about this issue because we are living fat and happy today and because the crisis has not yet occurred and because we can slough it off on you and keep ourselves from making these tough decisions.

By the way, these tough decisions play themselves out in the polls because people get angry about the fact that we need to be responsible and that we need to make sure that you guys are not going to pay these huge tabs. By the way, your standard of living, when we pass this bill, will be diminished. When you go on to college and graduate and start working in your job, just know that what we are getting ready to do tonight or tomorrow is going to diminish your standard of living, because we are going to pass a huge bill, unpaid for, that you are going to pay for and your children are going to pay for. That is what we are doing.

That is what we are doing because we don't have the will as a body to say: OK, if we are going to spend this additional money, what is it that we are going to cut over here? What are we going to do relative to the fact that right now Medicare recipients take about three times out of the program what they put in. What are we going to do about that?

Well, see, we are going to do nothing about it because that is unpopular, and people don't want to hear the truth about these things. Instead, what they would rather do is say: Well, let's worry about that down the road.

But let me tell you who is going to be worrying about it. You are going to be worrying about it.

I know you have seen some outstanding people. I serve with outstanding people in this body. I really do. They are intelligent, hard-working people. I really do. It has been a great privilege. But what you are going to see tonight and tomorrow is a bunch of hard-working people pass a piece of legislation that is going to make your lives and your kids' lives worse.

I will not support this piece of legislation. I know it is going to pass overwhelmingly because there is too much in it to make people happy for the moment. But let me just say that down the road the American people are going to be very unhappy with our lack of responsibility.

Not only do I question the soul of my own party, I question the soul of the other party, and I wonder where the media is and why they are not out crying over what we are getting ready to do.

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

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

Mr. DURBIN. Madam President, I use the term loosely, but last Saturday, the 17th of March, was one of the high holy days in Chicago—St. Patrick's Day. They color the Chicago River green. Everybody wears green. There are great parades, great celebrations. I look forward to it each year—going back to my parish, Old St. Pat's, for mass and celebration and having a wonderful day of a lot of good feelings.

During the course of the St. Patrick's Day Parade, I walked along with various groups who were going to march and came upon the Chicago Police Department's bagpipe and drum band. I noticed that the banner they were carrying for the day was in honor of a wonderful man by the name of Commander Paul Bauer.

Paul Bauer, a commander of the Chicago police force, was downtown in the Loop of Chicago on February 13. He was attending an important meeting, and he heard over his radio that a fugitive was trying to escape. He dropped what he was doing, joined in, and participated in trying to catch this fugitive. He was cornered in the stairwell by this man and shot dead. The man who shot him got off six rounds and killed this wonderful man who had served not only the city of Chicago but our Nation in his role with law enforcement. He left behind a young wife and beautiful teenage daughter. He was from the Bridgeport community of Chicago, and when his funeral was held, massive crowds showed up, people paying tribute to Paul Bauer.

The reason I raise that is because they traced the gun that was used to kill this brave policeman. It was a gun that was originally sold legally through a federally licensed dealer in Madison, WI, and then the person who purchased it sold it, without a background check, to a member of his gun club. We don't know whether that person was disqualified, under the law, from owning a handgun, but we do know that the next purchase was the purchase that made a difference. That person decided to sell the gun on the internet, with no background check, and ended up selling it to a convicted felon—a person disqualified, under the laws of this country, from owning a gun. That is when that handgun got into the world of crime. It was used in the commission of a crime months before the shooting of Commander Bauer, and it was used to kill him on that day, February 13.

The reason I raise that is we know what we need to do. We need universal background checks—no ifs, ands, or buts about it. Whether selling to a person at a gun show or over the internet, there ought to be a background check. There is no excuse for selling a gun legally in the United States to someone who is prohibited by our laws from owning it—none. That is what happened. That is why that wonderful man, that brave policeman, lost his life.

The reason I raise that is we have a bill before us now. It is an Omnibus ap-

propriations bill, and it includes some provisions about gun safety. They are good. I don't argue with them. One is called Fix NICS—try to make sure more information is put into the background check system. There is another one related to school violence, which provides grants to schools to make them safer and such. I have no objection whatsoever. But we are not getting to the heart of the issue.

This is the heart of the issue: We have a Second Amendment that gives rights to Americans to legally own guns and use them responsibly, and the Supreme Court has made clear that we can draw clear lines as to what is permissible in that gun ownership and gun usage. We can draw lines that say: Yes, if you have been convicted of a felony, you cannot own a gun. You cannot assert a Second Amendment right. You have disqualified yourself. We can say: If you are mentally unstable, you can't legally own a gun in America. You can't assert Second Amendment rights in that circumstance. We can put provisions in the law relating to the type of gun that you own, how old you have to be to buy that gun, what kind of background check takes place. But none of that—none of that—is included in this omnibus bill.

My fear is that many Members of Congress will say: Well, we got a lot of contacts after the Parkland, FL, situation, and met with a lot of people. Now we have taken care of our constitutional obligation with the provisions in this omnibus bill.

It will be a sad day if that is the case because what we have done in this omnibus bill would not have stopped that killer from taking the life of Commander Paul Bauer—not at all. So as far as I am concerned, we have fallen far short from where we need to be when it comes to gun safety.

Something is about to happen this Saturday, a week after our St. Patrick's Day Parade. There are going to be marches and parades across the United States on March 24. Tens of thousands of students and their supporters are going to march right here in Washington, in Chicago, where I will join them, and in cities and towns all across America, including Springfield, IL. They will march to urge lawmakers—like me—to finally pass meaningful gun reforms that help keep our children safe and our communities safe.

There are things that happen in our personal lives that we bring to our professional lives, and I will share one of them with you.

After the terrible shooting that occurred in Florida, my daughter, who lives in Brooklyn, NY, was talking to her daughter, my little granddaughter, a first grader. Her daughter, that first grader, said: Mom, the teacher told us that if there is a shooter in our school, stay away from the windows and get down on the floor.

In first grade, they are being warned about shooters coming into their classroom. Who would have dreamed that

America would reach this point? It has. Who would possibly argue that the Second Amendment envisioned that possibility, that we would arm teachers so we could have some sort of a shootout in a first grade classroom anywhere in this country?

The marches that will take place on Saturday are a sign that perhaps America has reached a tipping point on gun safety. The fact that a majority of gun owners have stepped up and said that we should have universal background checks is an indication that we are reaching that point. The younger generation is standing up, speaking out, and, frankly, confronting us—those of us who are in positions of power, elected office—confronting us to do something and stop talking about it.

These young people are tired of living in fear, as are many students across this country. They are fed up with the status quo, in which hundreds of Americans are getting shot every day while politicians sit on their hands in fear of the gun lobby and the National Rifle Association.

I don't care what my scorecard is with the National Rifle Association. I know, incidentally, it is a failing grade, which I wear with pride. I don't care about my scorecard there. I care about my scorecard with the people I represent in Illinois, and I particularly care about the students and the parents who are worried about whether the school for their kids will be the next site of gun violence.

These young people who are going to march on Saturday are fed up with lawmakers who ignore the overwhelming majority of Americans who want to close loopholes in the background check system. Through their powerful advocacy and eloquence, these juniors and seniors in high school are already bringing about change.

Listen to what businesses across the country are doing. They are distancing themselves from the National Rifle Association. It is no longer considered just another political organization. They are voluntarily changing their business practices so they don't give a break to a gun lobby that will not give a break to honest Americans who want to be safe in their homes and schools. The students from Parkland, FL, have helped these businesses recognize that they need to be part of this effort.

We are seeing new gun safety reforms passed in State legislatures—not so much here in Washington but in States like Florida that have a long tradition of voting the other way on gun issues.

Unfortunately, the Republicans, who control the House, the Senate, and the White House, still haven't gotten the message. What we have included in this omnibus bill is weak soup; 17 lives in Parkland, FL, are worth more than what we are putting in this bill. Even after Parkland, after all of the lives that have been lost to violence, even as the school shootings continue, including a shooting in a Maryland high

school this week, President Trump and the Republican majority of Congress are still unwilling to push for universal background checks and an end to high-capacity magazines and assault weapons.

There were modest measures included in this bill. Is that all we get? Is that it? Is that the end of the national debate on gun safety for another 5, 6, or 8 years?

There is important language that I included in the defense portion of the bill, directing the Department of Defense to not only submit all its relevant records for NICS background checks but also to flag and prevalidate the records that would prohibit a person from buying a gun. It is a step in the right direction. It is necessary, but it is not sufficient to really make a difference when it comes to gun safety.

The prevalidation and flagging are important for the FBI to help us and will help them quickly confirm whether a person should be blocked from a gun sale. But let's be honest; this omnibus bill that we are considering today and tomorrow doesn't address the fundamental challenges our Nation faces when it comes to gun violence. It takes a pass.

It is time for Congress to start considering legislation on gun violence that the gun lobby might not like. We can't let the National Rifle Association have veto power over gun policy in this Nation. Politicians need to recognize the obvious. The gun lobby is increasingly angry, sometimes paranoid, often isolated in its political positions. It no longer speaks for the majority of people who own guns responsibly in America.

Remember, the gun lobby cares about one thing more than anything: selling firearms. It is all about the business side of the ledger—the bottom-line profit margin.

Violence prevention is not the focus of the gun lobby's agenda. In fact, the gun lobby usually opposes violence prevention legislation just in case it might hurt gun sales. It has reached the point where the NRA endorsement of gun reform proposal is typically a sign that the proposal is not meaningful.

We can't settle for the status quo anymore. We are facing a public health crisis of gun violence, and half-hearted measures are not enough. We need to fight for meaningful gun safety reforms. We need to call up measures like universal background checks and ending high-capacity magazines.

Tell me why a person who owns a firearm, whether it is handgun or a semiautomatic weapon, needs to have a high-capacity magazine so that they can fire 30 or 60 rounds at a time. Tell me why. You might need that if you are in the military. You might need it when it comes to police work and keeping our communities safe. There could be circumstances where they are needed, but why would an individual citizen need the capacity to fire 30 or 60 rounds

at one time? Those are the clips that are being used, incidentally, by these shooters. Those are the clips that are being used for mass killing in America. Those clips do one thing: They take human lives. It is not a question of sport or hunting or target practice.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator has used 10 minutes.

Mr. DURBIN. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent to speak for 3 additional minutes, if the Senator from Utah will give me that opportunity.

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

Mr. DURBIN. Let me close by saying, on March 24, students and Americans of all ages will march in the streets to honor those who have been lost to senseless gun violence and to call on their elected representatives to step up. I support the marchers. I will continue to work for meaningful action to help reduce gun violence. I am going to keep doing everything I can to put the safety of our kids and our neighborhoods ahead of the gun lobby's agenda.

I don't have any obligation to the National Rifle Association whatsoever, but I do have an obligation to a granddaughter living in Brooklyn, NY, in the first grade, who has been warned about what to do if a shooter comes into her classroom.

I hope my colleagues from across the aisle will join me. It is time to take a stand and show leadership. America is waiting.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Utah.

NOMINATION OF RYAN NELSON

Mr. LEE. Madam President, I wish to speak for a few minutes about Ryan Nelson, who has been nominated by the President to serve as the Solicitor of the Department of the Interior. Ryan is a fantastic choice for this position at Interior. As a native and current resident of Idaho Falls, he is a fellow westerner who understands the issues confronting the West, confronting the region, confronting the entire country as it relates to the U.S. Department of the Interior.

Ryan would not just work on behalf of the West. I know he is someone who is going to serve honorably on behalf of the American people as a whole. In order to do that, he first has to be confirmed.

By my count, it has been 232 days since Ryan Nelson was nominated. There should be no further delays. The American people deserve to have qualified professionals in the executive branch, and Mr. Nelson is qualified, to put it very mildly. He is someone who has worked in notable posts of responsibility in all three branches of government.

During the George W. Bush administration, Ryan worked as Deputy Assistant Attorney General in the Department of Justice's Environment and

Natural Resources division. In that position, he personally argued 13 appellate cases. He also oversaw 700 attorneys and staff, who touched on all aspects of energy and environmental issues within the Department of Justice.

Later, Ryan worked in the White House as deputy general counsel for the OMB and as special counsel to then-Senator Jeff Sessions. That is just his experience in government.

Ryan has acquired senior management experience in the private sector as well. For the past 8 years, he has worked as general counsel for Melaleuca, which is a very successful billion-dollar Idaho business.

Ryan does not just know what it is like to work in government, what it is like to work in Washington. He knows that, but he also understands the challenges that businesses and workers face in the modern world.

I have known Ryan for many years. Ryan and I got to know each other while we were both in law school at BYU. I got to know Ryan and his wife Barbara, who have 7 lovely children. After law school, I ended up recruiting him to work at the law firm where I was then employed, Sidley Austin. After pulling all-nighters alongside Ryan, I can confirm what nearly 50 of his former colleagues wrote about him in a recent letter of support: He is an excellent choice to serve as solicitor.

Ryan has outstanding analytical skills, and he pays immense attention to details. These are qualities that will serve him well as the Department of Interior's top lawyer.

As you know, this administration has made it a priority to repair the relationship between the Federal Government and the Western States, where the Federal Government owns so much land. Too many workers in the West still don't feel as though they are treated fairly by their government. We can help restore that trust by confirming impartial, well-qualified nominees. Ryan Nelson is such a nominee. We need him at the U.S. Department of the Interior.

The Interior Department needs to have a Solicitor. Ryan Nelson is an exceptionally qualified nominee for that position. Let's confirm Ryan Nelson today.

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

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

OMNIBUS APPROPRIATIONS BILL

Mr. CORNYN. Madam President, I rise to mention one piece of legislative business and then will pay tribute to the senior Senator from Mississippi, Senator THAD COCHRAN.

Last night, the Appropriations Committee, which Senator COCHRAN chairs,

released the 2018 Omnibus appropriations bill. It includes a proposal that I feel very strongly about, and I am grateful to him and all of our colleagues for their support. I particularly want to acknowledge the advocacy of the majority leader, MITCH MCCONNELL, to make sure this provision is included in the omnibus bill. The House will soon vote on the omnibus, and then I hope we can quickly follow suit here in the Senate.

The provision I am referring to is, in shorthand, called Fix NICS. NICS, of course, is the National Instant Criminal Background Check System. I think it is a reasoned and reasonable response to the shootings that have, appallingly, occurred in our schools, our churches, and in our public spaces.

Just this last week, a gunman opened fire at a high school in Maryland, not far from here, and, of course, shootings have occurred in Florida, Texas, Nevada, Charleston, SC, and elsewhere. Our constituents are frustrated, frightened, and fed up. They want us to do something. More importantly than that, they want us to do something that will be effective and save lives. I am happy to say the Fix NICS bill fits that description.

People who haven't been active on this issue now are raising their voices and demanding that they be heard. Students are worried, understandably, and parents of students are worried. They simply don't want what happened in Parkland, FL, to occur to them. We need to listen to all of these voices, including to these students, who obviously will shape our Nation's future. They don't want to go to school and wonder whether bullets will rain down their hallways or whether their friends might be the next victims.

In a recent interview, one teenager said something that was trite but true. She said: "Guns are not the problem. The people are the problem." I happen to agree with that.

One question about school shooters is, How did they get to the point at which they thought that shooting up public places was what they really wanted to do? How did they justify it in their own minds, as warped as that might be? Also, what is it about our culture, their home environments, or their mental states that allows them to rationalize violence that does such tremendous harm? How does slaughter—because that is what it really is—become justified in their warped perspectives? I admit that those are tough questions to answer, and they are tough to even ponder, but we still can and have to do what is possible to protect our schools, our churches, parents, teachers, and our children.

Recently, 13 families from Parkland, FL, wrote in support of this particular legislation—legislation that would improve school safety, that has been sponsored by our colleague, the senior Senator from Utah. Senator HATCH's bill would fund the creation of and provide training for threat assessment

teams—in other words, to evaluate beforehand where people are vulnerable. It includes security measures and anonymous reporting systems. This bill is widely supported and shows that even on a divisive issue, there is plenty of room for common ground.

In that same letter, the 13 Parkland families said they supported Senator HATCH's school safety measures. They also expressed support for the Fix NICS bill, which they said is desperately needed to improve compliance with firearms purchasing background check systems.

A recent Gallup Poll showed that the public broadly supports proposals like Fix NICS. More than 9 in 10 see the importance of background checks.

Over the last few weeks, there has been a true groundswell of support for this bill that I and the junior Senator from Connecticut, Mr. MURPHY, co-sponsored. The supporters now include not only victims' rights advocates, gun violence prevention groups, and prosecutors, but also the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the National League of Cities, the Major County Sheriffs of America, as well as other law enforcement groups. All of these organizations have endorsed Fix NICS and signed a letter that asks that the majority and minority leaders put this measure to a vote. Now, in its having been included in the Omnibus appropriations bill, we will finally have a chance to do that—first in the House and then in the Senate.

These organizations and the general public agree that fixing our background check system should be a national priority and that we should better ensure that convicted criminals with past histories of violence and mental illness do not purchase or possess firearms, as the law currently in effect provides. They see merit in trying to fix our system that currently has allowed these same people to slip through the cracks and purchase firearms in order to kill innocent people, like the 26 who were gunned down inside the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, TX, just outside of San Antonio.

Some have said that Fix NICS doesn't go far enough, that it is a modest measure. I have to question that sort of description. Is it really a modest measure if it will, in fact, save lives? I think not. It is a necessary measure and one that brings people together across the political spectrum, Republicans and Democrats alike. Even if Fix NICS were to save just one life, that would be reason enough to enact it, but I think that is unlikely. I think it will save many lives once it is enacted into law and signed by the President.

We have 78 cosponsors of this legislation. I can't think of another piece of legislation that has enjoyed such broad bipartisan support, including by the majority leader and the Democratic leader, Senator SCHUMER. In today's hyperpolarized environment, that kind of support speaks for itself.

I look forward to its passing in the House as part of the funding bill, and I hope the Senate will do the same before the end of the week.

TRIBUTE TO THAD COCHRAN

Madam President, I close by saying a few words about our friend and trusted colleague, the senior Senator from Mississippi, THAD COCHRAN, who has announced his retirement from the Senate. I know the real tributes are about to kick off in a minute when the majority leader comes out, but since I am up here, I thought I would take the opportunity to say a few words.

Senator COCHRAN has represented the State of Mississippi in the U.S. Senate since 1978. He is one of the longest serving Members of Congress in the history of the United States. His career and his life speak for themselves.

He is the son of a school principal and math teacher. Not surprisingly, he was a gifted high school athlete. He is a piano player and a former college yell leader. Yes, even like me, he is a recovering lawyer, but we will not hold that against him.

Before he joined Congress, he served in the U.S. Navy because he loves this country and the opportunities it has afforded him and his family. He is a man with a strong sense of duty and gratitude for the opportunities he has been given in life. After ROTC at the University of Mississippi, he received orders to join the USS *Macon*, and after that he joined the staff of the Navy commandant in New Orleans. Later, he ran for public office. He first served in the House of Representatives. He then, of course, came here to the Senate, where he quickly established himself as a cordial but formidable presence.

Before I came to the Senate, Senator COCHRAN was chairman of the Senate Republican Conference. He has chaired the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee too. Most recently, he has alternated between serving as ranking member and chairman of the all-powerful Appropriations Committee.

Throughout his 45 years in Congress, he has participated in crafting and enacting historic legislation, but his main focus has always been on the people of Mississippi. His highest priority has always been on the men and women he was elected to represent in places like Jackson, Gulfport, Greenville, Starkville, and Hattiesburg. One example is when he fought so hard for recovery funding after Hurricane Katrina had destroyed large swaths of the southern part of Mississippi. Many people forget that that awful storm was much bigger than New Orleans'. Mississippi was hit almost equally as hard, and Senator COCHRAN made sure his State got the help it needed to get back on its feet.

His storied career is one of service and collegiality even amidst the fractious debates. He treats friends and political adversaries with respect. He listens to what people have to say. We need more people like that in public life.

The majority leader has called him the "quiet persuader," one who knows "there's a big difference between making a fuss and making a difference."

Judge E. Grady Jolly, of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, who has known Senator COCHRAN as long as anyone, said that back home, he is known for his "modesty and his retiring nature"—not attributes you would normally associate with somebody in politics, but he is a class act. He is also known for the consistent attention he has paid to the Mississippi Delta—one of the poorest regions in the Nation's poorest State. The judge calls Senator COCHRAN the "ultimate model of sincerity," one who "never engages in ad hominem or personal attacks" and always "keeps a sense of humor about himself."

My office spoke to one Mississippi resident this week because we wanted to learn a little bit more about what Senator COCHRAN has meant to her. That woman, who had met Senator COCHRAN only a handful of times, said she had always respected and admired Senator COCHRAN's statesmanship and the dignity with which he represented Mississippi. Her comments are a good note to end on—statesmanship and dignity. Those traits never go out of style.

I know I speak for my other colleagues—and they will speak for themselves—when we all say thank you to THAD COCHRAN for setting a higher standard for the Members of this body. The U.S. Senate will not be the same without him.

KENNEDY-KING NATIONAL
COMMEMORATIVE SITE ACT

Mr. CORNYN. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the immediate consideration of H.R. 4851, which was received from the House.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the bill by title.

The bill clerk read as follows:

A bill (H.R. 4851) to establish the Kennedy-King National Commemorative Site in the State of Indiana, and for other purposes.

There being no objection, the Senate proceeded to consider the bill.

Mr. CORNYN. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the Young amendment at the desk be agreed to; the bill, as amended, be considered read a third time and passed; and that the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table.

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

The amendment (No. 2215) was agreed to, as follows:

(Purpose: To strike a provision relating to a special resource study)

In section 3, strike subsection (d).

The amendment was ordered to be engrossed and the bill to be read a third time.

The bill was read the third time.

The bill (H.R. 4851), as amended, was passed.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Tennessee.

TRIBUTES TO THAD COCHRAN

Mr. ALEXANDER. Madam President, I rise to say a word about my friend THAD COCHRAN, who is retiring from the U.S. Senate.

In 1968, I had the job of recruiting State chairman for Citizens for Nixon-Agnew. I was a very young, wet-behind-the-ears former legislative assistant to Senator Howard Baker. We were working in the Willard Hotel in the fall of 1968. The idea was to try to find outstanding citizens who weren't necessarily Republicans because in the southern part of our country, there weren't a lot of Republicans, especially in the State of Mississippi.

So I called around the State of Mississippi to find out who might be willing to head up this Nixon-Agnew campaign. Everybody I called said: Well, there are two young men here who are just the most outstanding young men, both are cheerleaders at Ole Miss, or had been, and both are going to grow up to be the Governor of Mississippi, which was, at that time, I guess, the nicest thing one could say about some aspiring young man because nobody thought the two U.S. Senators, Eastland and Stennis, would ever retire. So growing up to be the Governor of Mississippi was really a great compliment to a young man in Mississippi at the time. One of those young men was named Trent Lott, and one of those young men was named THAD COCHRAN.

I telephoned THAD COCHRAN, and I invited him to become chairman of the Citizens for Nixon-Agnew. He was a Democrat, but he agreed to do that. We met in October of that year in Indianapolis. The mayor of Indianapolis then was Richard Lugar, a young mayor at that time and later a Member of this body. That was the beginning of THAD COCHRAN's Republican Party activity.

He and that other young man—who were so promising—both ran for U.S. Congress in 1972, and to the surprise of a great many people, they were elected, the first Republicans since Reconstruction, I suppose, from Mississippi—THAD COCHRAN and Trent Lott.

In 1978, THAD COCHRAN did something nobody had done from his State since the Reconstruction; he became a Republican who was elected to the U.S. Senate, and he has been here ever since.

The reason he was able to be successful is not surprising. THAD was and is an engaging, pleasant person. His parents were educators. He learned to play the piano. He was a terrific baseball player—good enough to play professional baseball. He joined the Navy. He was, in every respect, an outstanding young man, just as he has been a distinguished public servant throughout his life.