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Senate

The Senate met at 10 a.m. and was called to order by the President pro tempore (Mr. HATCH).

PRAYER

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

Let us pray.

God of hope and love, through all the length of changing years, Your goodness never fails. Help us to know that to embrace Your counsel is the way to find the road to abundant life. Sustain our Senators. Empower them to walk blamelessly and honor You by doing what is right.

Lord, prosper the works of their hands, and use them to help our Nation and world reflect the greatness of Your Kingdom. May their mouths speak wisdom and their hearts possess a knowledge of Your holiness, as You sanctify them through Your truth.

We pray in Your Holy Name. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The President pro tempore 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.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mrs. HYDE-SMITH). The majority leader is recognized.

RELEASE OF AMERICAN PRISONERS IN NORTH KOREA AND NOMINATION OF GINA HASPEL

Mr. McCONNELL. Madam President, let me begin this morning with gratitude to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Overnight, he completed a sensitive diplomatic mission and returned home from North Korea with

three freed American prisoners. The families of these three men, and the entire country, are so grateful.

This episode offers just one more example of the complex, relentless foreign policy challenges that confront our country. Clearly, America was fortunate that our new Secretary of State was prepared to execute his responsibilities from day one. Leadership and expertise matter.

Yesterday, our colleagues on the Intelligence Committee heard from another well-prepared leader, Gina Haspel—President Trump's selection to head the Central Intelligence Agency. Ms. Haspel's testimony showcased the judgment and poise that have defined her 33-year career of selfless service with the Agency. Her testimony confirmed what her gold standard resume and her bipartisan support from seasoned national security leaders had actually already told us: Gina Haspel has the experience, the talent, and the unique skill set to excel in this important job at this important moment.

Since 1985, she served the Nation in clandestine operations around the globe and rose to the highest levels of Agency leadership. True to the best traditions of intelligence professionals, numerous former Directors have lauded her qualifications, notwithstanding whether their service was for Democratic or Republican administrations. Her nomination carries the full-throated endorsement of 53 of our Nation's most respected national security leaders.

Today, more than ever, the value of Ms. Haspel's insights and experiences cannot be understated. Her career has encompassed both the Cold War and the ongoing Global War on Terror. In a moment when our national security demands excellence in each of these areas—great power competition and counterterrorism alike—Ms. Haspel stands uniquely ready to assume the responsibilities of CIA Director as perhaps its most qualified candidate in the

Agency's history. As the Intelligence Committee continues its consideration, I strongly urge my colleagues to support this fine nominee. We will all sleep better at night knowing Gina Haspel is on the job.

JUDICIAL NOMINATIONS

Mr. McCONNELL. Madam President, on another matter, today the Senate continues our work to confirm President Trump's well-qualified judicial nominees. Yesterday, we confirmed Kurt Engelhardt to the Fifth Circuit by a significant bipartisan margin.

The nominee now before us, Michael Brennan, is similarly qualified. His nomination carries bipartisan support from the people who know him best, including the endorsement of more than 30 current and former peers in Wisconsin. In the words of one such colleague, Mr. Brennan possesses "the mind, heart, and soul of a great jurist." It is not too surprising, then, that the American Bar Association has awarded Mr. Brennan its highest rating, unanimously—unanimously—"well-qualified."

I look forward to voting to confirm Mr. Brennan later today. Later, we will be voting to advance two more circuit court nominees: Joel Carson and John Nalbandian. Each possesses their own set of sterling qualifications, each comes recommended widely by those who have worked closely with them, and each deserves to be confirmed by this body and take their place on the Federal bench.

Our friends across the aisle aren't making it easy, but despite the historic obstruction, this Senate will continue to do what it takes to process and confirm the President's fine nominees for these important posts.

TAX REFORM

Mr. McCONNELL. Madam President, on one final matter, later today, President Trump is visiting the great State

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



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of Indiana. He is joining Hoosiers to celebrate the new jobs and prosperity our Republican agenda is delivering to communities in Indiana and all over the country. After years of Democratic policies that made life harder for job creators, the United States of America is officially open for business once again.

Surveys show that since President Trump and this Republican Congress were elected, the percentage of small and independent employers feeling confident about expanding their businesses has nearly tripled. The amount that employers spend on wages, salaries, and benefits for American workers grew more in 2017 than in any calendar year of the Obama administration. The number of Americans receiving unemployment benefits is the lowest—the lowest—since 1973. Let me say that again. The number of Americans receiving unemployment benefits is the lowest it has been since 1973. Richard Nixon was in the White House back then. Republicans have focused like a laser on getting Washington out of the way. More job opportunities, higher pay, and greater prosperity are already reaching middle-class Americans.

My colleague Senator YOUNG has been sharing some of the great news that awaits the President when he gets to Indiana. He has heard from constituents like Donald from Noblesville. Donald said:

I don't consider myself rich, but applying next year's tax changes to this year's income, I'll pay over \$1,000 less in taxes next year. Everyone benefits with the new tax cuts.

A Bloomington resident named Cathy said this about her husband's tax reform bonus:

We have never had this happen. It was much appreciated.

First Farmers Bank & Trust is raising wages, writing employee bonus checks, and investing more in development for the communities it serves, with 34 branches all across Indiana.

There are stories like these being written all over the country—largely because Republicans rolled back job-killing regulations and cut taxes significantly for working families and for small businesses.

Oddly, our Democratic colleagues can't bring themselves to admit this is a good thing. Even when the facts show our growing economy is making life better for middle-class Americans, they try to shrug off the facts and fall back on the same old class warfare rhetoric. Even when people like Donald and Cathy explain how tax reform is helping them, Democrats scoff at their household finances, saying multi-thousand-dollar tax cuts are just "crumbs."

Crumbs? Maybe in New York or San Francisco, but in Kentucky, where I come from, working families don't see their tax cuts, bonuses, and pay raises as crumbs. I have a hunch it is the same in Indiana.

It is curious that only one of Indiana's Senators voted to give Hoosiers

these tax cuts and these new job opportunities. Indiana's senior Senator voted in lockstep with Democratic leaders to block tax reform from ever taking effect. Instead of working with Republicans and the President to keep the new prosperity coming, he and his colleagues have chosen to obstruct and resist on nearly every subject.

Just the other day, the Democratic leader in the House declared she plans to campaign on repealing the tax reform—that is, the Democratic leader in the U.S. House—campaign on repealing the tax reform. Tax cuts versus tax hikes, that is about as clear a contrast as you can imagine. Fortunately, for Hoosiers, Kentuckians, and all the other communities that are finally growing again after years of atrophy, Republicans will defend the American people's tax cuts and defend their new jobs.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Morning business is closed.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will proceed to executive session and resume consideration of the following nomination, which the clerk will report.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the nomination of Michael B. Brennan, of Wisconsin, to be United States Circuit Judge for the Seventh Circuit.

Mr. McCONNELL. Madam President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

The Democratic leader is recognized.

Mr. SCHUMER. Madam President, later today the Senate will vote on the confirmation of Michael Brennan to the Seventh Circuit over the objections of one of his home-State Senators, Ms. BALDWIN, who has not returned a blue slip on his nomination.

It is an abject breach of senatorial courtesy that both parties have long respected. In fact, the seat Mr. Brennan will fill on the Seventh Circuit has been held open for 6 years by the senior Senator from Wisconsin, Mr. JOHNSON,

via the same process, the blue slip. When Barack Obama was President and when PATRICK LEAHY was chairman of the Judiciary Committee, we Democrats obeyed the blue slip, and it led that seat to be vacant for 6 years. Now that the shoe is on the other foot, the Republican majority will ignore the blue-slip rights of the Democratic Senator even though it fervently believes that we ought to listen to the rights of the Republican Senator from Wisconsin. The actions of the Republican leader erode one of the few remaining customs in the Senate that forces consultation and consensus on judicial nominations.

In the grand scheme of things, the vote may seem to some of my colleagues on the other side like a small one—one judge for one circuit court. But in truth, the vote on Mr. Brennan is a death by a thousand cuts of the grand tradition of bipartisanship and comity in the U.S. Senate. I know all too well that there is plenty of blame to go around on both sides of the aisle, but if we don't take a step back now, the Senate will soon become a rubberstamp or graveyard for Presidential nominees, rendering our advice and consent nearly meaningless.

I understand the pressure on the leader from the hard right. They want judges who are not bipartisan. They wanted a judge in this case who did not go through a bipartisan judicial panel, composed of both Democrats and Republicans, who have always sent us judges from Wisconsin. Two were sent, but, instead, Brennan, who couldn't get through the panel, was sent.

This is so wrong. This goes beyond what we have seen done before. When Leader McCONNELL changed the rules on the Supreme Court—which we didn't—many on the other side, I understand, said: Well, that is tit for tat because Democrats changed the rules on the lower courts. But the blue-slip tradition has always been obeyed. We didn't change that. We could have. We could have stuffed through our nominees with no Republican support, but we didn't.

I hope for the sake of comity that one or two of my Republican colleagues will stand up and vote against Mr. Brennan's nomination, not because of his beliefs—which they may agree with, for all I know—but for the sake of the Senate, for the grand tradition of the Senate, for the right afforded to every Senator to consult on judges from their State, minority or majority, and most of all, for the traditions that have held this body together for more than two centuries and separated it from the more partisan Chamber on the other end of the Capitol.

RELEASE OF AMERICAN HOSTAGES IN NORTH KOREA

Madam President, on another matter—North Korea—early this morning, the three American hostages who were being held in North Korea were returned home. It was great to see them come home, back in America, back with their families.