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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.

Almighty God, our faithful Father and Friend, take and use our lawmakers for Your glory. Fill them with Your wisdom, enabling them to make the tough decisions with complete confidence in Your guidance. Keep their lives unstained by any word or action that is unworthy of their best. Lord, give them clarity and understanding so that their labor will be acceptable to You. May they maintain the fidelity of those to whom much has been given and from whom much will be required.

We pray in Your sacred 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.

VA MISSION BILL

Mr. McCONNELL. Madam President, today the Senate will begin considering the VA MISSION Act. It marks a major step forward for the VA system and the millions of heroes who rely on it for services.

The bipartisan reform legislation before us builds on the earlier progress of the Veterans Choice Act of 2014 and reaffirms a clear message: Delays at the

VA cannot stand between veterans and the medical care they need. The shortcomings of a Federal bureaucracy do not free our Nation from its promises to our All-Volunteer Armed Forces. Veterans deserve prompt, thorough care, period.

In the few short years since the creation of VA Choice, the program has seen important success. More than 2 million veterans have taken the opportunity to see private providers when the VA system couldn't meet their needs. In Kentucky, it helped more than 23,000 veterans in 2017 alone.

Thanks to the leadership of Chairman ISAKSON, this new legislation builds on this significant progress, continues it, and improves it in ways that will help veterans even more.

The VA MISSION Act will clear the path for veterans to receive greater healthcare choices. It will eliminate the wait time and distance requirements that keep veterans out of the driver's seat and empower them, in consultation with their respective physicians, to take charge of their own care. It will help prioritize and speed improvements to existing VA facilities. It will direct \$5.2 billion to fund the Veterans Choice Program, and it will establish more streamlined delivery of care through the veterans community care program.

The bill before us passed the House by an overwhelming bipartisan margin. It carries the support of the President and 38 veterans advocacy organizations. It is based on a simple idea: Promises made to those who sacrifice for our freedoms must be promises kept. Let's make good on these promises this week.

AMERICA'S WATER INFRASTRUCTURE ACT

Mr. McCONNELL. Madam President, on another matter, this morning, the Environment and Public Works Committee is concluding its work on America's Water Infrastructure Act of 2018.

Chairman BARRASSO has led an open, bipartisan process that has generated a strong proposal. It builds on President Trump's infrastructure approach, encouraging local control over local priorities and leveraging Federal resources to ensure that each dollar spent goes to major water infrastructure improvements. It cuts redtape and empowers the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to break through bureaucratic backlogs.

Thanks to Senator BOOZMAN, it enhances the investments in our Nation's failing drinking water and waste water infrastructure.

My State of Kentucky contains more than 1,900 miles of navigable inland waterways. Our water resources support more than 13,000 jobs in the maritime industry. Paducah, KY, serves as the heart of America's inland waterways system, and Western Kentucky is also home to major water civil works projects like the Olmsted Locks and Dam and Kentucky Lock.

This bipartisan legislation is good news for communities throughout the Commonwealth. One provision, the Freedom to Fish Act, will help safeguard an important part of Kentucky's cultural heritage. Generations of Kentuckians have fished the Cumberland River and the tailwaters of the Barkley and Wolf Creek Dams.

I remember my dad and his friend taking us to fish there at a young age. They were experienced fishermen. The last thing they needed was advice from Federal bureaucrats on where to cast their lines, but, in 2012, in a typical display of Obama administration overreach, the Army Corps threatened to restrict access to these cherished waters. I didn't know anyone in Kentucky who thought it was a good idea. The farmers didn't, the anglers didn't, the area businesses relying on fishing tourism didn't. The Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife certainly didn't. So I worked with community leaders like my friend Lyon County

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



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judge executive Wade White and my colleagues in the Kentucky and Tennessee congressional delegations to put a stop to this government interference. We introduced legislation to prevent the Army Corps from robbing our fishers and anglers of this beloved pastime and damaging this key component of the local economy. The measure passed with overwhelming support and was signed into law. It has been successful, but its provisions are set to expire soon.

That is why I worked with Chairman BARRASSO, Ranking Member CARPER, and the committee to secure a new 5-year extension of the Freedom to Fish Act in this year's water infrastructure bill. It is just another achievement among the many victories this bill will deliver for communities across the country.

I am grateful to the supporters of this legislation, such as the National League of Cities and the National Rural Water Association, and the bipartisan coalition of Senators who worked to craft it. I look forward to the committee's vote today and to supporting this bill once it reaches the Senate floor.

JOB GROWTH

Mr. McCONNELL. Now, Madam President, one final matter. This week, survey data showed that more Americans say it is a good time to find a quality job than at any point in the last 17 years.

Let me say that again. More Americans say it is a good time to find a quality job than at any point in the last 17 years.

Under President Obama, this number got as low as 8 percent. It never broke 50 percent during his administration, but today 67 percent of Americans say it is a good time to find a quality job.

Optimism has taken off for all groups since this President was elected and the Republican Congress was sworn in, but the injection of new hope has been felt the most among working-class Americans. This is a major distinction between the economic policies Democrats spent years putting in place and the new approach this Republican government has taken.

For nearly a decade, Democrats followed the standard liberal playbook: tax more, regulate more, and pile up more money and power right here in Washington. They cracked down on American businesses, imposed one new regulation after another, and looked to the Federal Government to pick winners and losers.

It is a familiar, old set of ideas. Here is what it produces: an economy that works very well for a few but leaves many more behind.

The Obama era was just fine for our Nation's biggest coastal cities. Roughly, three-quarters of all the new jobs created between 2010 and 2016 poured into the country's largest metropolitan areas, but outside of these places, taxes

and regulations created an anti-business climate that hurt American manufacturing, American coal communities, and small- and medium-sized businesses throughout our country.

So Republicans charted a new course. We understand that middle-class families know how to spend their own money better than the government; that American workers thrive when American job creators are expanding, hiring, and raising wages. We passed once-in-a-generation tax relief for American families and small businesses and are working at every turn to roll back runaway regulations. The result is an economic comeback that is reaching all kinds of communities, not just a favored few.

A record-high percentage of American manufacturers have said they have a positive economic outlook for their enterprises. Rural communities outpaced everywhere else in relative job creation last year. The total amount spent on employee compensation grew faster in 2017 than in any calendar year under President Obama.

This is what happens when Republicans implement a pro-growth, pro-opportunity agenda that gets Washington out of the way. Everyone shares in the prosperity.

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 to resume consideration of the following nomination, which the clerk will report.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the nomination of Dana Baiocco, of Ohio, to be a Commissioner of the Consumer Product Safety Commission for a term of seven years from October 27, 2017.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The assistant Democratic leader.

Mr. DURBIN. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent to speak as in morning business.

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

SANTA FE HIGH SCHOOL SHOOTING

Mr. DURBIN. Madam President, last Friday, America watched in horror as the news story broke of yet another school shooting, this time at Santa Fe High School in Texas.

Eight students and two teachers were fatally shot. Thirteen victims were

wounded in another devastating tragedy. The alleged gunman was a student who came into the school with his parents' shotgun and handgun and used them to commit mass murder.

Of course, we grieve for the families and victims in Santa Fe, and, of course, we are grateful for first responders who ran toward the sound of gunfire. But let's be honest—the shooting in Santa Fe High was, by one count, the 22nd school shooting in America this year. We are in the 21st week of this year. We have had more than one school shooting a week in the United States of America. America's schoolchildren, sadly, now go to school expecting that there will be a shooter on the premises.

After the Santa Fe High School shooting, a reporter interviewed a student named Paige Curry at the school. The reporter asked: "Was there a part of you that was like, this isn't real, this could not happen at my school?"

Paige Curry replied: "There wasn't." When the reporter asked why so, she said: "It's been happening everywhere. I've always felt it would eventually happen here too."

Can you imagine we have reached this point in America if that is how many of our Nation's high schoolers think? Sadly, in Paige Curry's case, she was right. Her school was the target last week.

On Sunday, the New York Times posted an article titled "New Reality for High School Students: Calculating the Risk of Getting Shot."

The article discussed how students across America, from Iowa to Oklahoma, from Illinois to Mississippi, from Seattle to New York, are now forced to go through their day planning what they would do if the shooting starts in their school.

The article quotes one student, a sophomore in a New York high school, describing how vulnerable her desks were in each class where she sat.

She started making mental calculations about when the gunman came to the door whether she would be in the line of fire. She said her English class is the safest class for her each day because it is down a hallway, and it makes it hard for the shooter to find it, but her math class makes her particularly vulnerable because she said she sits in the second desk in the second row in a direct path from the door. The student, whose name is Emily Rubenstein, said:

It's like the front lines of a war. Being seated in front of the classroom could be what makes you live and what makes you die.

It is not just high schoolers who think this way; my 6-year-old granddaughter came home and told her mom recently that she had been warned that if there is a shooter in the school—she is a first-grader—if there is a shooter in the school, stay away from the windows and get down on the floor as quickly as possible.

Is there any sane person in America who thinks our kids should be going