

There is only one thing he is more proud of than his home State, and that may be the Crimson Tide football team and the number of their national championships.

I just wanted to start my comments this afternoon by saying congratulations to our friend Senator RICHARD SHELBY for 32 years of serving the people of Alabama.

NOMINATIONS

Madam President, we will continue to push through a long list of executive and judicial nominations pending before the Senate.

People may wonder, well, why are we making such an emphasis on nominations? That is mainly because of all of the foot-dragging and obstruction we have seen from our friends on the other side of the aisle. They have basically burned the clock and have caused many nominees to simply withdraw. There are not many people who can put their lives on hold and wait a year and a half for the Senate to act on their nominations, especially when it is not a controversial nomination in and of itself.

This is simply a continuing reaction to President Trump's election in 2016. Many of our colleagues simply haven't gotten over the fact that he won. They are just not willing to engage in the normal sorts of advice and consent that the Constitution calls for, nor will they let the President and his administration get the people they want on his team, even if there is not an extraordinary problem.

Under previous administrations, we know the process to confirm nominees is relatively quick and unremarkable and that cloture votes were rarely required. As soon as you start talking about cloture votes, people start falling asleep, but it is actually a pretty significant problem.

Cloture votes basically mean we have to burn the clock and go through the procedures—all of the different hoops that you have to jump through absent some consent or an agreement.

As you can see, under President Trump, the Senate has had to file for cloture 128 times, so it has caused an extended debate, even on uncontroversial nominees. What is worse, even after you vote to close, which is what cloture is, then you still have to burn 30 hours postcloture, which makes it very difficult for us to do anything else in the Senate other than to confirm uncontroversial nominees.

As you can see, when President Clinton was in office, in his first 2 years of office there were only eight cloture votes on nominees. Under President George W. Bush, No. 43, there were only 4, and, of course, under President Obama, there were 12. That is a far cry from the 128 nominees who were essentially obstructed by our colleagues across the aisle.

They aren't forcing these votes because these nominees are controversial or because they are unqualified. Just

look at one of the nominees we just confirmed as an example. Nearly 400 days after he was nominated, John Ryder was finally confirmed for a board position with the Tennessee Valley Authority.

Mr. Ryder was initially nominated on February 1 of last year—more than a year ago. Not long after he testified before the Committee on the Environment and Public Works, we saw unanimous support from the members of the committee—bipartisan support.

During simpler times, the process would have been pretty straightforward. He would have been confirmed by the full Senate without any valuable floor time. He probably would have been confirmed by consent or by a voice vote, which would not have burned all of this valuable floor time, which is necessitated when you have to file for cloture. It is now clear that these simpler, more civil, and more bipartisan times have gone out the window.

Our Democratic colleagues have forced cloture on this nominee. Again, it is not because he is not qualified and not because he is controversial but because they are literally using every trick in the book to bring the work of the Senate to a crawl.

It is not Republicans who are being hurt; it is the American people. We are here to serve the American people and not to engage in these sorts of political games that result in nothing.

Sometimes we have important battles, debates, and disagreements, but usually they are over important principles. But here, it is just about burning time and making nominees wait, sometimes for a year or more before their nomination is even voted on.

I am personally aware of a number of nominees who have said: Do you know what? No more. I have a life to live. I can't put my life on hold waiting for the Senate to vote on my nomination, even if it is not going to be controversial.

I am afraid we will see the Democrats' political theater continue. One of the nominees we will soon be voting on is John Fleming of Louisiana, who has been nominated as Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Economic Development.

Mr. Fleming's nomination was first received by the Senate in June of last year. Again, the committee held a hearing and favorably reported out his nomination within 6 weeks. Here we are, 7 months later, and he still hasn't been confirmed because the only way our Democratic colleagues will allow that is by going through this long and laborious procedure of filing for cloture and burning hours on the clock.

Again, under previous administrations, a nominee for this sort of a position would be confirmed with little or no fanfare and certainly without sitting on the calendar for 7 months.

Again, this isn't about Republicans versus Democrats. Honestly, this is about punishing the American people

and these nominees who want to serve by keeping them hanging and forcing them to wait more than a year before they are confirmed. This, again, is part of the "Never Trump" syndrome, part of the Trump derangement syndrome that seems to be an epidemic here inside the beltway.

I personally see no reason these games should continue to play out, and that is why I am an advocate for the proposed rule changes to expedite the process.

These expedited changes we will make is something that, if the shoe were on the other foot and we had a Democratic President, Republicans could gladly live with. This isn't about gaining some advantage by a rules change; this is simply about returning the Senate to some sense of normalcy.

GEAR UP PROGRAM

Madam President, on another topic, this is a remarkable time for our Nation's economy. Sometimes with all of the noise, chatter, and just the chaos that is part of Washington these days, we forget the fact that our economy is doing so well that we are seeing a record number of people employed, and we are seeing the highest employment rate for African Americans and Hispanics at any time in recorded history.

I attribute some of this—not all of it—to the tax reform bill that we passed over a year ago. Since that time, 3 million jobs have been added here in America—3 million jobs.

Wages are on the rise. Labor is tight. It is hard to find people to work, particularly in places like West Texas in the Permian Basin around Odessa and Midland, which has the lowest unemployment rate in the country because of the energy boom there that has been long associated with that part of our State and that part of our country.

Workers are seeing more of their hard-earned money in their paycheck because tax rates are lower. As I said, unemployment hit its lowest rate in nearly 50 years. That is something to celebrate.

Today we find ourselves in the unique position of having more job openings than jobseekers. It is an indication of how great our economy is doing and a reminder that we need to continue to invest in our workforce.

One of the biggest reasons these jobs are unfilled isn't because there aren't willing candidates. Let me say that again. The reason these jobs are unfilled isn't because there aren't willing candidates. It is because the candidates who are available lack the right skills.

For many students, postsecondary education seems like a pipe dream. Many of my constituents in Texas come from families who have never attended college and, thus, are the first generation of young students who hope to achieve a higher education.

There is a great program that I am supporting. I introduced bipartisan legislation with our colleagues here called the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program,

also known as GEAR UP. That program is working to change the landscape and the educational opportunity for many young people still in middle school and high school.

This grant program is designed to increase college and career readiness through a range of academic, social, and planning support.

Starting in seventh grade, you have to start making decisions about what your middle school and high school education will be. If you guess wrong and don't take the appropriate math class, for example, then you can't finish the curriculum you need in order to go to the college you want to go to.

One reason GEAR UP has been so successful is that it recognizes that college and career readiness begins early, not when you are graduating from high school but when you are in seventh grade, literally.

GEAR UP is also unique because it doesn't use a blanket approach to support students. What works well in one State or in one school district may not be the best in another, so local leaders and parents have the flexibility to cater to their students' needs.

The best part of GEAR UP is that it actually works. It is a government program that works. GEAR UP students graduate from high school at a higher rate than their peers, regardless of ethnicity or income, and they attend college at a higher rate.

Texans have benefited from \$885 million in GEAR UP grants over the last 20 years. We have seen incredible results, but I believe there are additional steps we can take to ensure that local leaders and parents have the increased flexibility they need to tailor the programs to the needs of these students.

Over the last few weeks, I have had a chance to travel my State and talk to students, teachers, administrators, and community leaders in Texas about the legislation I have mentioned, the GEAR UP for Success Act.

In Harlingen, for example, in the Rio Grande Valley, I held a roundtable with superintendents and community leaders from across that area to learn about the impact of GEAR UP there. They say that they have seen great results in terms of improved graduation and participation in postsecondary education, and they are full of ideas about how to build on the progress they have already seen.

I also got a chance to spend some time with the students themselves. As I mentioned, this program begins with seventh graders, and I had a chance to meet several members of the class of 2024—you heard that right, 2024—who have just begun their journey because they are in seventh grade. You can see the excitement in their eyes and that hunger for success.

Particularly in the Rio Grande Valley, with a large Hispanic population, as I have said, many students whose parents did not go to college realize that college and education generally is the key to the American dream. Be-

cause of GEAR UP, these students don't view college now as a farfetched fantasy. They view it as part of their life plan, and they are excited about it. That is no doubt, at least in part, due to the older students I was able to meet. We talked about where they were hoping to go to college and what they want to major in.

One of the neatest things about the GEAR UP program is that the older students will actually mentor some of the younger students in the GEAR UP program and talk about what a difference it made in their lives and in their education.

All of these students have bright careers ahead of them. One of them told me he wants to be a U.S. Senator. I said: You realize that you have to wait until you are 30 years old to do that. He is willing to wait. It was a pleasure to spend time with all of them.

Last month I was in my hometown of San Antonio at Gus Garcia Middle School, and I held another roundtable with students and school administrators to learn about how GEAR UP has impacted their communities. There was one student, in particular, whose life story illustrates just how much this program can help.

Francisco Hernandez told me that he and his family were once homeless, but with the support he received from GEAR UP and Sam Houston High School, he was able to turn his life around and make his dream of going to college a reality.

Not only is Francisco now a student at San Antonio College with a promising career ahead of him, he is also, as I suggested a moment ago, a mentor for younger students. Students like Francisco are a reminder of how important it is to support programs like GEAR UP.

These pieces of legislation, these programs, and these grants we vote on here in the Senate have an impact on the lives of real people, but they are also reminders of how we must find ways to do more and to better serve these students.

This bill, as I said, the GEAR UP for Success Act, will provide greater flexibility to school districts on how they use GEAR UP funds. In some instances, they told me that the local match was a prohibitive problem. So what we intend to do is to cut that local match requirement in half.

There is, as I said, no one-size-fits-all program to prepare all students for life after high school. Each school district knows its students' needs better than Washington ever could. So they should have the flexibility to design and implement programs that will work best.

This legislation will also improve GEAR UP research and evaluation at both local and national levels so we can figure out what the best practices are and what is working and what isn't, and it will reduce the administrative burdens for those who receive the grant so they can focus less on paperwork and more on successful student outcomes.

The young Texans I have heard from over the last few weeks are inspiring, and they are excited about their future. That is the way we want them to be. I hope Chairman ALEXANDER and Ranking Member MURRAY will include the GEAR UP for Success Act in their efforts to reauthorize the Higher Education Act this Congress so we can continue to support students like this across the country.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Hawaii.

NOMINATION OF CHAD A. READLER

Mr. SCHATZ. Madam President, it is very important that the American people know that Republicans are still trying to take away their healthcare. Last year, Republicans filed a lawsuit arguing that the entire Affordable Care Act should be invalidated, and now they want to give a promotion to the person who led that effort at the Department of Justice. That person's name is Chad Readler, currently a Deputy Assistant Attorney General at the Justice Department.

Last year, he filed an argument on behalf of the Department of Justice to take away protections for people with preexisting conditions. The American Medical Association said that Mr. Readler's argument would "have a devastating impact on doctors, patients, and the American health system as a whole," that it "would cause 32 million people to become uninsured," and that it would double insurance premiums.

The American Medical Association was not alone here. Lawyers at the Justice Department refused to sign their names to Mr. Readler's brief. One senior career official actually resigned in protest, and Senator LAMAR ALEXANDER said that his arguments were "as farfetched as any I've ever heard."

On the same day that Mr. Readler filed his argument to take away people's healthcare, the White House nominated him to a lifetime appointment to the bench on the Sixth Circuit. They wanted to promote him because of his good work suing in Federal court trying to invalidate the entire healthcare system—the entire healthcare law.

We should not sign off on this nominee—not if we care about protecting the health of our constituents, especially those who have cancer, asthma, diabetes, or any other preexisting medical condition.

We should also be wary of putting someone on the Sixth Circuit who makes the kind of poor, farfetched argument that Mr. Readler made, because this isn't purely a question of public policy. If it were public policy, you would definitely say: Don't take 32 million people and take away their healthcare—right? If it were public policy, you would say: Don't do the thing that is going to double premiums.

This is about what kind of a lawyer he is. This is about what kind of a judge he would be. The White House may want to reward his efforts, but we don't have to.