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Senate

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

PRAYER

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

Let us pray.

O mighty God, our gracious King, we thank You that Your power is still active in our Nation and world. Forgive us when we forget that You continue to rule Your universe. Lord, we are grateful for the confidence You have given us that You hear and answer our prayers. Use the Members of this body as ambassadors of reconciliation. Help them to create laws that will bring wholeness to a fragmented nation and world. Lord, infuse them with a spirit of contemplative stillness so that they will find joy in righteousness, justice, and integrity.

We pray in Your great 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.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mrs. HYDE-SMITH). 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 pro-

ceed to executive session to resume consideration of the Truncate nomination, which the clerk will report.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the nomination of Michael J. Truncate, of Texas, to be United States District Judge for the Eastern District of Texas.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Iowa.

Mr. GRASSLEY. Mr. President, I ask to speak for 1 minute as in morning business.

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

NATIONAL POLICE WEEK

Mr. GRASSLEY. Madam President, to commemorate this year's National Police Week, I joined a bipartisan group of Senators on a resolution to honor these people who lost their lives in order to protect our lives. The men and women of law enforcement make sacrifices every day to protect their families and fellow citizens. We are indebted to their dedication.

I want to express my appreciation for each and every police officer, firefighter, first responder, and other law enforcement officers who work diligently to protect our friends and families.

All of those visiting Washington this week to commemorate National Police Week, if you get a chance to see them on the streets of Washington, DC, thank them for their service.

I yield the floor.

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 PRESIDING OFFICER. The Democratic leader is recognized.

THE MIDDLE EAST

Mr. SCHUMER. Madam President, this morning's New York Times contained a stunning report that President Trump's top national security aid had been presented with a plan that would "send as many as 120,000 troops to the Middle East should Iran attack American forces or accelerate work on nuclear weapons"—120,000 American troops in the Middle East. This report is completely baffling and incredibly alarming.

What is the strategy here? The administration just began a maximum pressure campaign of sanctions against Iran to squeeze its economy. Doesn't it make sense to see if your policy is working before preparing for potential troop deployments, particularly in such large numbers? Six months ago the President was trying to pull U.S. forces out of the Middle East entirely, against the advice of many in our defense and diplomatic communities. Now his national security team is reviewing plans for war?

Meanwhile, President Trump has not laid out what his plans are, what his long-term strategy in the Middle East is, or even given a speech about Iran. So why on Earth are his advisers discussing plans to entrench U.S. ground troops in the Middle East for who knows how long? It seems that hardliners in the administration are pushing the conversation in a very dangerous direction, and I am very concerned.

U.S. foreign policy depends upon the stable execution of a consistent policy, but all too often the Trump administration has seemed capable of neither stability nor consistency. The erratic behavior of the President and the chaos he instills in his administration has led to numerous blunders at home and abroad. We should all hope that this report is just that—another blunder—and not the beginnings of a rush by the President's hawkish advisers to heighten military tensions with Iran.

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



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There are many questions for the President, but here are two. Why do we need more troops in the Iran area right now? Why? And why such a large number—120,000, which is as many as the total number of troops we have had in Iraq at significant times.

PUERTO RICO

Now, there are a lot of Americans still waiting at this point for Puerto Rico and the disaster bill. A lot of Americans are still waiting for the Senate to put politics aside and help them piece their lives back together from natural disasters last year, from wildfires to floods, from tornadoes to hurricanes. Because of climate change, our weather is different—considerably different—and Americans are paying the price. We are also paying the price for not taking leadership on climate. But now I am here to discuss this relief package. Throughout our discussions here in Congress about the relief package, Democrats have maintained that it must include relief for all Americans affected by disasters last year, not just those Americans who live in the West and Midwest or South, but also the 3 million citizens living in Puerto Rico. It is not a zero-sum game. It is not that if you help Puerto Rico you would not be helping Florida or Iowa. You can help them all, and that is what Americans have always done.

But there is some good news. I must say that I am encouraged that Republicans are starting to realize that we cannot leave Puerto Rico out. It may not have happened had Democrats not insisted all along that Puerto Rico be included, but our Republican friends are beginning to realize that if Puerto Rico is not in the package, no package will pass. As for their intransigence and obeisance to President Trump, when he came in out of the clear blue one day and bollixed up the package that had been carefully worked out between the Democrats and Republicans by insisting that no aid to Puerto Rico be in the package, it is clear to our Republican friends that is not working, and I am encouraged that Republicans have moved into our direction when it comes to disaster in Puerto Rico. I hope that we can find agreement soon and put this totally unnecessary political fight behind us and finally deliver relief to disaster-stricken Americans, wherever they may be.

HEALTHCARE

Madam President, 133 million Americans under 65 years of age are living with a preexisting condition of some kind. Right now, because of the laws on the books, insurance companies cannot charge those Americans more or deny them coverage simply because they have a preexisting condition. That is a great thing. That is something Americans longed for before these protections became law.

But, unfortunately, that could all change and go away if the lawsuit against our healthcare law brought by Republican attorneys general and supported by the Trump administration

succeeds. It would deprive health coverage for tens of millions of Americans and risk denial of coverage or exorbitant premiums for up to 133 million Americans with preexisting conditions. That scale of cruelty is so large that it is almost unimaginable—to tell 133 million Americans that you will not get protections if, God forbid, you have an illness and your insurance company wants to cut you off. Yet those are the practical consequences of the lawsuit that the Trump Department of Justice continues to support. While that lawsuit is a fundamental threat to our country's healthcare system, led by President Trump and supported by just about every Republican in this Chamber, the Trump administration has also spent much of the past 2 years sabotaging and undermining healthcare at every turn.

As for this ideology that the government should not help people who have healthcare problems, well, about 90 percent of all Americans do not agree with that, but somehow it is dominant in the White House and dominant in the Republican Senate. Last week the House passed legislation that would reverse the Trump administration. It is good that the new majority in the House is taking action.

Later this week the House is poised to pass another package of legislation to further protect preexisting conditions and help Americans sign up for quality health coverage. But so far none of the bills that protect Americans' healthcare have received any attention from the Republican leader, Senator MCCONNELL, and that is a shame—a real shame.

Leader MCCONNELL has slowly but surely been turning the Senate into a legislative graveyard, where even the most consequential and noncontroversial legislation gets buried indefinitely.

Just take the House-passed legislation on preexisting conditions as an example. This is extraordinarily popular with the American people. A Kaiser poll found that nearly 70 percent of Americans do not want the courts to overturn protections for preexisting conditions. I don't think any of my colleagues would argue on the merits that we should go back to a healthcare system where insurance companies could discriminate against a child with cancer. In fact, several of my Republican colleagues who recently won reelection ran ads explicitly saying they were for protections for Americans with preexisting conditions. So why will the Republican leader not commit to at least putting up legislation to do that? I hope it is not because my Republican colleagues want to be able to say one thing and do another. I hope it is not because of the influence of dark money. I hope that is not why. So I would say to the leader: Do not throw healthcare legislation into the legislative graveyard. Do not throw the healthcare of the American people into the legislative graveyard.

The American people are worried about rising costs and declining qual-

ity. They are worried that if they are sick, they could wake up any day and no longer have access to healthcare. That is a very real threat that millions of Americans face under the Trump administration. Healthcare was the No. 1 issue for most Americans in the last election. We should be doing something to protect American families from the Trump administration's effort to undermine healthcare. I understand that my Republican colleagues do not want to cross the President, but this issue is too important to too many American families to remain silent, too important for our Republican colleagues not to go to their leader—especially, those colleagues who campaigned for preexisting condition protections—and tell the leader that we must bring this legislation to the floor.

I yield the floor.

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.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority whip.

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

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

SENATE LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

Mr. THUNE. Madam President, when Republicans took office at the beginning of the 115th Congress, we had one goal in mind, and that was to make life better for American families. We knew that American families were struggling. Recovery from the great recession was long and slow. Economic growth was sluggish. Wages were stagnant. Too many families were living paycheck to paycheck. American families needed relief, and Republicans were determined to give it to them.

That is why we made getting our economy going again a priority. We knew that our economy needed to do a lot better if American families were going to start doing better. A strong economy is the key to getting Americans access to the jobs, wages, and opportunities they need to thrive.

So we took action. We eliminated burdensome regulations that were acting as a drag on economic growth, and we passed a historic reform of our Tax Code to put more money in Americans' pockets and to get our economy going again.

We cut tax rates and doubled the child tax credit, and in 2018 the average family of four saw a tax cut of more than \$2,000. We lowered tax rates for businesses, expanded business owners' ability to invest in their operations and their workers and made American businesses more competitive in the global economy.

We are seeing the results. Job creation is up. Wages are growing at the fastest pace in a decade. Personal income is up. Unemployment is at the lowest level in 50 years. Tax reform is