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Senate

The Senate met at 9:30 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.

Almighty God, who has given our lawmakers diversities of talents by the same spirit, use us for Your glory.

Lord, protect our Nation from evil. Prevent the weapons formed against America from prospering, for You remain our refuge and fortress. Continue to be the strength of our lives, as we remember the many times You have preserved us in the past.

Lord, open our eyes to the unfolding of Your providence. Open our minds to Your truth. Open our lips to speak Your wisdom.

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.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. TILLIS). The Senator from Iowa.

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

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

SWEET CORN DAYS

Mr. GRASSLEY. Mr. President, in honor of the Iowa Department of Agriculture's Sweet Corn Days yesterday, I would like to highlight the strong agricultural sector of my State of Iowa.

Many people don't know how you get from the seed to the corn on the cob you are used to seeing on your dinner table. That is one reason, particularly

for city people, that I started the hashtag "Corn Watch" series on my Instagram.

Each week I post an update with the progress of how the crop is growing on my farm in New Hartford, IA. It is a small way to show nonfarmers how Iowa feeds and fuels the world.

I yield the floor.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

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

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority leader is recognized.

ELECTION SECURITY

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, yesterday the entire Senate had the opportunity to meet in classified session for a briefing on election security. We heard from the Director of National Intelligence, the FBI Director, Acting Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, and other key administration officials about our recent progress and ongoing work to protect our democratic process from interference.

The takeaway was perfectly clear. After 2016, this new administration kicked into high gear. Alongside our efforts in Congress, all levels of government worked proactively to make sure that 2018 was not a repeat of 2016.

Far from letting up, the executive branch is continuing to work hard in advance of next year's Presidential election. We know our adversaries will not be letting up, so we aren't letting up either.

I want to underscore my appreciation for the tremendous work that so many officials across our government have been doing to protect our democracy

and impose costs on adversaries who dare to interfere. Threats remain, but yesterday's briefing was an instructive counterpoint to the doom and gloom hyperbole we often see in the media.

Good news doesn't sell newspapers. Although I doubt it would get much coverage, I am proud of the work of our government and what they have done to shore up our defenses of American democracy and deter foreign influence and interference.

I believe our colleagues feel the same way. At one point during yesterday's briefing, applause broke out in the room for the work of one of our agencies—bipartisan applause in the briefing yesterday about what was done in 2018, after which it was largely incident free.

Many of the details of yesterday's briefing were classified and should remain so, but much of what was discussed were the specific details and the full impact of steps that are already public knowledge.

Here in Congress, we have taken legislative action to enhance interagency coordination on cybersecurity, expedite security clearances for election officials, and allocate hundreds of millions of dollars in direct aid to State election officials—direct aid to State election officials.

With the new resources that we provided, the Department of Homeland Security dramatically strengthened its information sharing and security partnerships with the State and local authorities that operate elections in the United States. Participation came from all 50 States and 1,400 localities, and the direct aid to States helped the authorities who were on the frontlines conducting elections update their systems, strengthen their defenses, and maintain vigilance.

These and other actions have been part of a coordinated, government-wide, Federal, State, and local campaign to shore up our defenses. I would anticipate that every Member who attended the classified briefing likely

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



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came away feeling confident that big steps forward have taken place in the last 2½ years.

Thanks in large part to these measures, the 2018 elections went more smoothly than 2016, and as we look to 2020, it is encouraging to learn how seriously the administration is taking the threat and proactively working to counter it because we know the threat is not going anywhere. Foreign adversaries are going to keep at it, so I am glad the administration is so focused on staying strong and remaining vigilant.

Of course, as I said yesterday, the roots of the issue run deeper than our elections themselves. A foreign adversary like Russia didn't just wake up one day in 2016 and decide to interfere in the American democracy. The meddling was an outgrowth of a long pattern of weakness and naivete that permeated all 8 years of the Obama administration.

Punching back against this misbehavior, and deterring future episodes like it, has also meant taking broad steps to strengthen America's posture abroad and to get more realistic about our relationship with the Russians. Obviously, nearly 30 Russians and Russian corporations have been indicted by the Special Counsel for election meddling.

More broadly, we have a new national security strategy—an improved roadmap for our global presence that takes seriously the need to check great power competitors like Russia and China.

We are recommitting to the alliances that preserve American values around the world, reforming NATO to meet 21st century threats, and equipping our allies and partners who are on the frontlines of Russia's geopolitical prospecting. Congress and the administration have worked together to restore our Armed Forces and unwind harmful funding restrictions that cut readiness and limited our commanders. So not just our efforts on election security but, really, our entire foreign policy have made strides under the leadership of this administration.

To conclude, yesterday's briefing made it clear that our work has led to huge progress—huge progress—but the work certainly isn't over. Leaders across government are continuing to explore and repair potential vulnerabilities and increase cooperation ahead of the 2020 Presidential election. Congress will certainly continue to monitor this closely while resisting any efforts to use the failures of the past to justify sweeping federalizations of election law, as some on the other side have consistently sought to do.

Let me say that again. Congress will certainly continue to monitor this closely while resisting any efforts to use the failures of the past to justify sweeping federalizations of election law, as some on the other side have consistently sought to do.

Make no mistake, many of the proposals labeled by Democrats to be

“election security” are measures, in fact, for election reform that are part of the wish list of the left called the Democrat politician protection act.

What they do is ignore the great work this administration has done and sweep under the rug the necessary measures this Chamber has passed.

But speaking broadly, I think all Americans should remember this: What Russia really set out to do was to sow division, spark doubt, and trigger a crisis of confidence in our country that would extend far beyond the actual actions that they undertook.

So as I have said before, as we continue taking action and shoring up our defenses, it is also vital that we not fall into precisely—precisely—the trap that Putin and company have laid. It is vital that Americans not take the bait on fear and division and ultimately do Russia's work for them.

Our country is strong. American democracy is strong. Our elections are already safer and more secure, and the important work continues. Our adversaries will not let up, so we are not letting up either.

NOMINATIONS

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, on another matter, all week the Senate has continued our productivity in overcoming partisan opposition and confirming the President's well-qualified nominees for important offices.

We have confirmed the newest judge on the Ninth Circuit. Yesterday we confirmed three district judges by overwhelming bipartisan margins—78 to 15, 80 to 14, and 85 to 10. Those are the margins on three district judges. Clearly, we are not exactly talking about radioactive, controversial nominees here, not when 78 votes for confirmation is the low end.

Nevertheless, as has become typical over the past 2½ years, our Democratic colleagues insisted on cloture votes to cut off debate before we could confirm any of them. In fact, we have yet to voice-vote a single judicial nominee this entire Congress. We haven't voice-voted a single judicial nominee this entire Congress.

It is really a shame. It is not the precedent the Senate ought to be setting for these lower tier nominations. Of course, we have confirmed them nonetheless.

Before the end of this week, the Senate will have done the same for three other lower level nominees to the executive branch.

Weeks like this were impossible before my Republican colleagues and I did the right thing for the institution a few months back and moved the Senate back toward our historic norms for nominations of this sort. We argued that Senate Democrats were mindlessly obstructing even the least controversial nominees just for obstruction's sake.

Our colleagues across the aisle insisted, no, the majority would be ram-

ming through these extreme individuals and cutting off intense debate that these extreme nominees deserve. Well, who is right? Well, one more time for good measure: 78 to 15, 80 to 14, and 85 to 10. Enough said.

It is particularly ironic that some of my friends across the aisle elect to complain that the Senate is spending too much time on nominations—the Presiding Officer has heard that—spending too much time on nominations. I am not making this up. We actually hear protestations from the Democratic side that confirming these men and women is taking too long, as though it weren't totally obvious to everyone that their own unprecedented delaying tactics are the only reason these nominees have not been quickly confirmed in big batches on a voice vote.

It is quite the two-step: Democrats systematically drag their heels for 2½ years and counting and then complain we are not moving fast enough. Well, if it weren't clear by now, the tactics are not going to work. The Senate is going to press on. We are going to do our job.

Today, we will press on despite 492 days of obstruction—492 days of obstruction—and confirm Peter Wright, the President's nominee to serve as—listen to this—an Assistant Administrator at EPA. He has been waiting for 492 days.

As it happens, we will also vote on two Kentuckians—Robert King and John Pallasch. Mr. King has been nominated to serve as Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education. He comes with an impressive record of experience in higher education administration and advocacy at home in the Bluegrass State and beyond. Mr. Pallasch has been tapped for Assistant Secretary of Labor. His résumé includes service as director of the Kentucky Office of Employment and Training as well as previous service with the Department as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Mine Safety and Health.

I will be proud to support each of these well-qualified nominees as their senior Senator from Kentucky but moreover as someone who believes that the American President deserves to have his team in place and that citizens ought to be governed by the government they actually voted for.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mrs. HYDE-SMITH). Without objection, it is so ordered.

STUDENT LOAN DEBT

Mr. THUNE. Madam President, the Democratic Party's motto this year might as well be “Free Stuff”—free