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Senate

The Senate met at 12:01 p.m. and was called to order by the Honorable JOHN W. HICKENLOOPER, a Senator from the State of Colorado.

PRAYER

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

Let us pray.

Precious Lord, You delight in those who have integrity. Lord, Your Word describes integrity as always trying to maintain a clear conscience before You and everyone else. Inspire our lawmakers to obey the voice of conscience, focusing on pleasing You by being true to duty. Lord, provide them with the determination to do what is right and leave the consequences to You. May they receive the smile of Heaven's approval because of their striving to be faithful. Help them to ignore the shouts from the shadows and focus on glorifying You.

We pray in Your great Name. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The Presiding Officer 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.

APPOINTMENT OF ACTING PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will please read a communication to the Senate from the President pro tempore (Mr. LEAHY).

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the following letter:

U.S. SENATE,
PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE,

Washington, DC, February 24, 2021.

To the Senate:

Under the provisions of rule I, paragraph 3, of the Standing Rules of the Senate, I hereby appoint the Honorable JOHN W.

HICKENLOOPER, a Senator from the State of Colorado, to perform the duties of the Chair.

PATRICK J. LEAHY,
President pro tempore.

Mr. HICKENLOOPER thereupon assumed the Chair as Acting President pro tempore.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Morning business is closed.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. 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 Jennifer Mulhern Granholm, of Michigan, to be Secretary of Energy.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Louisiana.

SCHOOLS

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. President, I am going to talk for just a few minutes about the need to open our schools. I think you would agree with me because I followed your career—with admiration, by the way—that our country is only as good as its dreams and we are only as valuable as our children. And, in my judgment, we are doing immeasurable damage in this country to our children.

We all know that we had to close down our public schools and our parochial schools and our private schools,

pre-K to 12, because of the coronavirus, but I think most fairminded Americans understand that we need to open them.

The future of this country is education. It is not the level of the stock market. It is not the unemployment rate. It is not who the President is. It is education, and we know that. So why aren't we opening our public schools when we know it is safe to do so?

I am very proud of our efforts in Louisiana. Seventy percent of our public school students are back learning in person—70 percent. And I want to thank every teacher, every parent, every school board member, every maintenance worker in our schools, and anyone who directly or indirectly influenced this result. They are heroes in my opinion. Seventy percent—I am so proud of that.

I especially want to thank our teachers. I have been a volunteer public school teacher in Louisiana for—I don't know—20-plus years. I do it three times a year, and I am a real substitute—none of this go for an hour and talk about how a bill becomes a law. I am a real substitute: quarter to 7 to 3, teach five classes, do your bus duty, your lunchroom duty, and get worn out. So I have some appreciation for what it takes to teach, particularly in this difficult environment, and I especially want to thank our teachers.

But that 70 percent figure that I am talking about, the number of our public school children in Louisiana who are back to in-person learning, is only 40 percent nationwide, and that is an embarrassment. That is a disgrace. We are doing immeasurable damage—immeasurable damage—to a generation of children.

Now, I don't need to tell you we have been struggling with elementary and secondary education for the last 40 or 50 years, and it is very frustrating because Americans can do extraordinary things. We can unravel the human genome. Americans can take a diseased human heart and replace it with a new

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



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S833

one and make it beat. Americans can send a person to the moon and bring him back or her back. But we struggle to teach our kids how to read and write and understand the meaning of their diplomas when we have 18 years to do it.

Now, there are a lot of reasons for that, and I am sure not blaming anybody, and I don't want to digress. But my point is, we were struggling before the coronavirus. That should tell us that now more than ever, given our circumstances before the coronavirus, we need to take meaningful steps to get these schools back open.

We know that it is safe. The CDC Director under President Trump has said it was safe. The CDC Director under President Biden has said it is safe.

Vaccination across America is—we started out a little rocky, a lot like our testing program, but it is getting much better.

I read an article the other day in the Wall Street Journal, written by a Johns Hopkins researcher, physician, who said, in his opinion, about six or seven times more Americans have had the coronavirus than we know of; therefore, they do have immunity. And he said, coupled with the number of people who have had and survived coronavirus and our vaccine program, which is getting more aggressive every day, we could have a substantial reduction in the number of coronavirus cases by March and April. Indeed, we have seen the decline in the number of our cases now, today, starting from early January. They have declined dramatically. And people smarter than me have suggested it is our vaccines, it is the approach to herd immunity, and, of course, it is the habits that we have developed in terms of social distancing and masking and good hygiene.

But my point is that the experts, the science, all tell us that it is safe. And I have to tell you, I don't mean to be unfair because I know it is complicated, or it can be, and I don't mean disrespect, but I have been very, very disappointed with President Biden. He has flipped and flopped on this issue like a banked catfish. He has said we need to follow science, but he refuses to follow the science in terms of opening our schools.

We know it can be done because we have been doing it in Louisiana. We have done it. If you look nationwide at the number of private schools that are open, back with in-person education, the number of parochial schools, the number of Catholic schools—they are doing it. Why can't we do it in our public schools?

It is not money. For our first five coronavirus bills—I am not counting President Biden's proposed bill. Through our first five coronavirus bills, we have appropriated between \$70 billion and \$80 billion to our public schools to get them back open. Our public schools have spent \$5 billion out of 70 to 80—I think it is \$70 billion. So it is not a matter of money. I think it

is just—I am not sure what it is. I don't want to be a cynic and say that it is a matter of will. But here is what I am asking President Biden to do; here is what I would do if I were King for a day. I am not; I don't aspire to be. But here is what I am hoping that President Biden will do this afternoon: Call a press conference, and look the American people in the eyes, and look our school board members in the eyes and our teachers and our parents and our maintenance workers and say that we need to open up.

If we really believe we are only as good as our dreams, we are only as valuable as our children, then we need to act like it. And I think President Biden needs to call that press conference. He doesn't need to talk about the science, though that is important, or the politics or nibble around the edges. He needs to look the American people in the eye and say: By God, open the schools. Open the schools. Our kids deserve no less.

There is not much I agree with former Congressman and Mayor Rahm Emanuel on, even though I think he is a bright guy, but politically we approach the world differently. But he said when he was mayor that kids drop out—not in the 12th grade. They drop out in pre-K and kindergarten and the first, second, third, and the fourth grades. We are going to lose a whole generation of kids here.

I see I have some additional time while we are waiting on Senator SCHUMER. I think I am going to take my additional time—and I will cut it short if Senator SCHUMER is here—to talk about another issue.

RUSSIA

Mr. President, I want to talk about the European Union's approach to Russia. We know that in February, the Russian Government sentenced Alexei Navalny, a very prominent opposition leader to Mr. Putin, to almost 3 years in prison. And shortly afterward, Mr. Putin directed that thousands of Mr. Navalny's supporters who were protesting be arrested.

What was he—what were his supporters—arrested for? Criticizing Mr. Putin. Navalny's imprisonment comes in the wake of his near-fatal poisoning, about which we have all read. And what happened to Mr. Navalny should be a wake-up call to our friends in Europe. It is certainly a wake-up call to the American people.

This isn't the first time that Mr. Putin has tried to get rid of a dissident. Unfortunately, it probably won't be the last. For years, Russia has been making trouble, both at home and abroad. Mr. Putin has made trouble here in America, about which we all know. Domestically, opponents of Mr. Putin have been arrested. They have died in prison. In some cases, they have been murdered. We all know that.

Now, if this is how Mr. Putin is going to treat his own people, imagine how he would and has treated foreign countries, particularly our friends in Eu-

rope. Russia has launched an unjustified invasion of Georgia. It still controls large parts of Georgian territory. In 2014, Mr. Putin invaded Ukraine. He illegally annexed the Crimea. He started a war in Eastern Ukraine. It cost about 14,000 lives.

But Russia's aggression—Mr. Putin's aggression—and let me say, I am not impugning the people of Russia. They are wonderful people. I admire them deeply. But their leadership, their political leadership, is lacking. And Mr. Putin's aggression begs the question: If NATO troops did not stand in the way, what else would Russia do? Who knows what would happen to Poland and the Baltic States and other countries that were once part of the Soviet sphere.

The Economist puts it this way—I am going to quote:

Russia's gangsterism has become impossible to ignore.

Russia's gangsterism has become impossible to ignore.

But our friends in Europe seem to be doing a pretty good job of it.

The Navalny case shows that criticizing the Kremlin comes with a cost, but it is a cost that we and the European Union can and must bear because the price of appeasement is too high. And our European friends can do it, taken as a group. Senator SCHUMER knows this. The EU's power surpasses Russia's by far. The EU is a bloc of 450 million people. Its GDP is nine times larger than Russia's.

Russia's economy is only slightly bigger than Spain's, and it is smaller than the economy of Italy. A lot of people don't realize this, but Russia—look, I will concede them this: They have nuclear weapons and good spies. But the economy of Russia is smaller than the economy of New York State. So why is Europe so content to be bullied?

I am going to give you a quick case in point. Josep Borrell visited Russia following Navalny's imprisonment. Mr. Borrell is the EU's top foreign affairs official. He allowed—stood there and allowed—Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov—I know Mr. Lavrov. Perhaps you have met him, Mr. President. I understand his personality. He doesn't exhaust himself trying to win friends. But Mr. Borrell, representing the EU, its top foreign official in foreign affairs, stood there and allowed Foreign Minister Lavrov to push him around shamelessly. The Russian Foreign Minister insulted the EU. He called it an unreliable partner while Borrell stood there and said nothing—nothing.

Another example, Germany. Germany is still supporting construction of the Nord Stream 2 Pipeline, a project that is going to leave Europe even more reliant on Russian oil and gas. We are going backward here. This is going to make the EU even more vulnerable to Russian influence because we know that a more independent Europe becomes—the more Europe becomes dependent on Russian energy, the more reluctant it will be to defend itself against its neighbor's bullying.