

Millions of jobs and trillions of dollars have been taken out of our economy. Thousands of small businesses are holding on for dear life. Tens of millions of Americans are struggling with the rent, groceries, medicine, and utilities.

Only a week ago, the United States crossed the tragic milestone of half a million deaths from COVID-19, a stark reminder that the pandemic isn't done with us yet.

Over the past year, Congress has stepped up to the plate to pass important relief measures, but the job is not complete. The American Rescue Plan is designed to finish the job; to patch up the holes in our economy and lay a foundation for recovery; to keep struggling businesses, families, and workers afloat until brighter days appear on the horizon; to send our children back to school as quickly and safely as possible; and to defeat this evil disease once and for all.

That is what the American people sent us here to do. That is what our government is for—not to sit back and wait for problems to fix themselves, not to cross our fingers and hope the economy will recover on its own. Our job is to end, through action, the current state of the crisis and hasten the day when our country and all of our lives can return to normal.

The bottom line, if you look at the trajectory, every time we put in a relief bill—in March, the economy got better in June, and July. We put a relief bill in December, and now the numbers look a little better for January.

But the economy is not strong enough to sustain things on its own. We need strong relief to get the economy going so it can continue on an upward path on its own. That is what this bill is designed to do. I fear—most economists, Secretary Yellen, Chairman Powell—if we do too little or nothing, the economy could stay mired in recession for all too long a time, just as it did when we didn't do enough in 2009, and the economy stayed in recession for many years after the financial crisis.

VOTING RIGHTS

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, on voting rights, in our American system, we talk a lot about “perfecting our Union,” a reference to the preamble of the Constitution, a document which effectively gave only White male landowners the right to vote in our fledgling democracy. Suffice it to say, there is a lot of perfecting to do.

As I think about my Democratic caucus—incidentally, it is probably so that less than half of them could actually vote in the elections of 1789 because I believe in many States you had to be White, male, Protestant, a property owner—not so many of those around here.

Over the course of 230 years, we passed scores of laws and amended the Constitution to reflect the flaws in our

democracy and expand the franchise to all our citizens, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the 14th, 15th, 19th, 23rd, 24th, 26th amendments—just to name a few.

Despite all this progress, there is now, in the 21st century, a concerted effort to roll back voting rights in State legislatures across the country, alarmingly making it harder—harder—for Americans to vote and particularly aimed at Americans of color—African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans. And it is becoming a feature of one of America's major political parties.

Yesterday, I detailed a number of laws pushed by Republicans in State legislatures to limit the amount of time that Americans have to vote, to frustrate election administration in urban areas and around college campuses, to impose overly burdensome ID requirements, absurd witness and signature requirements for absentee ballots. Maybe the most pernicious of all, Republicans in Georgia have coalesced around a plan to end all early voting on Sundays, a day when Black churches organize voter drives, with no good reason—again, none.

The threat to voting rights in America is now very real. It must be opposed in every State house and Governor's mansion in this country.

And the threat extends all the way to the Supreme Court of the United States. Eight years ago, a conservative 5-to-4 majority on the Court gutted the Voting Rights Act by essentially rendering meaningless section 5 of the statute, a provision which prevented the implementation of undue voting restrictions in a State with a history of discrimination.

Chief Justice Roberts suggested that the era of widespread discrimination, which led to the enactment of the Voting Rights Act, was over, and there was no longer a need for the critical portions of the statute. Well, within 24 hours after the ruling had been handed down, Texas announced it would implement a strict voter ID law, and soon thereafter, Mississippi and Alabama followed with laws that had previously been barred by the Justice Department.

Republican leaders in the State of North Carolina passed a suite of voter suppression laws that a Federal judge found targeted African-American voters “with . . . surgical precision.” Think about that. This was not a ruling from the Reconstruction Era or Jim Crow. It was only a few years ago.

At a time when an African-American man elected by the most diverse coalition in the history of American politics occupied the White House, Republicans in North Carolina passed voting laws so pernicious that even the Roberts Court—among the most conservative we have seen on this issue of voting rights—could not ignore the overwhelming stench of discrimination. That is what it was—a stench rooted in

America's sordid history of voter suppression and discrimination against Black voters.

Well, today the Supreme Court will hear another case concerning the Voting Rights Act, this time about section 2, a section which Chief Justice Roberts referred to in the Shelby County ruling as a necessary failsafe to police discriminatory voting procedures nationwide.

As one news outlet reported this morning, “there is every possibility that the high court could make it more difficult, or practically impossible, to challenge voting restrictions in the future,” warning that another ruling against the law could render the Voting Rights Act “a dead letter.”

That is what is at stake in America right now. As State legislatures move to restrict voting rights from one end of the country to the other, the law we rely on to prevent outright discrimination at the ballot box is at risk of being “a dead letter.” This is one of the most appalling things I have seen in this country after 4 years of an appalling administration. This is just incredible. It burns my blood and should burn the blood of every fair-minded American—Republican, Democrat, Independent, liberal, conservative.

After centuries of expanding the right to vote, of struggling to get that right to vote, these pernicious, self-serving proposed laws cut back on the right to vote. Will the Supreme Court let that happen? It is so against what America is all about.

We cannot stand by and do nothing as these rights are diluted or stripped away. Congress must pursue a restoration of the Voting Rights Act, and by all accounts should be working in a bipartisan way to make it easier, safer, and more convenient for all Americans to vote. The judgment of history has never been kind to those who work against the full participation of their fellow citizens in our democratic experiment.

I yield the floor.

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Republican leader is recognized.

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, there has been a lot of discussion about the Democrats' decision to load up their partisan spending bill with liberal items that are completely unrelated to the pandemic.

We are at a key turning point in this crisis. The Nation has just endured a historically painful year. This virus has stolen half a million American lives. It has thrown millions of children out of classrooms and workers out of jobs.

But on every front there seem to be signs we are actually turning the tide.

New cases, hospitalizations, and deaths have been declining. The CDC reports that one in five adult Americans has already received at least one vaccine dose. That is 50-plus million people. One in 10 has gotten both shots. And the supply of vaccines is continuing to ramp up with yet another authorized just last weekend.

Meanwhile, science keeps confirming it is quite safe to get kids and teachers back in the classroom with simple precautions that we can accomplish right now. All indications suggest our economy is poised for a roaring comeback for workers and for families.

This crossroads should give Washington a golden opportunity. We could get together on a bipartisan basis like we did five times last year—five times—and pass more targeted policies to help finish the fight and get the American people their jobs, their schools, their lives, and their country back.

A number of Senate Republicans went to the White House just days after President Biden was sworn in, proposing we continue the streak of overwhelming bipartisanship that has designed the COVID-19 response all this time. Our Democratic colleagues said no; they wanted to go it alone. And when you look at their partisan bill, you can certainly see why.

Less than 9 percent of their massive proposal would go to the core healthcare fight against COVID-19. Listen to this: Less than 1 percent goes to vaccinations.

You see, they had to leave room for all the completely unrelated, leftwing pet priorities, like sending \$350 billion to bail out long-mismanaged State and local governments, multiple times the expert estimate of COVID needs; things like massive expansion and ObamaCare subsidies that would disproportionately benefit wealthier people; things like handcrafted tweaks to Medicare so it pays more money to just three States: Rhode Island, New Jersey, and the President's home State of Delaware. You might call it a special kick-back for the Acela Corridor.

They had to make room to bankroll things like underground rail in Silicon Valley, upgrading a bridge from New York to Canada, and giving Planned Parenthood access to taxpayer money meant to rescue mom-and-pop Main Street businesses.

Sadly, the parts that actually do relate to the pandemic aren't much better. At the same time that Democrats refuse to follow the science on in-person schooling, they want to pass a massive new set of deluxe benefits for Federal Government employees, including 15 weeks of paid vacation for folks whose children have the option—just the option—of virtual or even hybrid learning.

They want to keep schools closed and then pay a special bonus only to parents who are Federal employees because—because their schools are closed.

Now, this isn't a recipe to safely reopen America. To the degree that it even addresses the pandemic, it is more like a plan to keep it shut down.

Mostly, it is just what Democrats promised almost a year ago: taking advantage of the crisis to check off unrelated liberal policies.

IRAN

Mr. McCONNELL. Now, Mr. President, on another matter, we recently learned that Iran has balked at the prospect of direct nuclear negotiations with the United States and Europe. This sort of resistance and gamesmanship is nothing new. We have seen this before.

Iran has long flouted international restrictions on its nuclear program, played hide-and-seek with U.N. inspectors, and failed to disclose the full scope of its nuclear research. This happened before, during, and after the Obama administration's Iran deal.

Now, thanks to the firm approach taken by the Republican administration which restored much of the leverage President Obama had thrown away, President Biden inherited a much, much stronger negotiating position.

Let me make it clear. Republicans do not oppose nuclear diplomacy. We hope the administration will secure a better, stronger, and more lasting deal than President Obama's, but to do so, President Biden's team must avoid the mistakes of the JCPOA.

Here is how you do that: coordinate closely with the partners and allies who are most immediately threatened by Tehran; treat Congress as a partner to be consulted, not a problem to be managed; and, most importantly, don't give up any leverage for free.

Of course the mullahs are playing coy. They want concessions before they even come to the table. In December, after President Biden was elected, Iran's Parliament reaffirmed their intent to continue acting out if sanctions were not eased.

Well, I hope it is only the Iranians and not the administration's negotiators who need this reminder: Look, the United States holds all the cards. President Biden is the Commander in Chief of a superpower. There are no circumstances—none—in which Iran should get money for nothing. And there is no need to rush into the talks.

The administration should take care not to squander our upper hand just to spite the last administration, nor should President Biden's team discount the value of the growing regional unity against Iran that is embodied in the new Abraham Accords.

Every day, headlines remind the world of the threat Iran and its proxies pose to peace and security. For example, the Iranian journalist, Ruhollah Zam, was lured back to the region from Europe, kidnapped, and hanged after a sham trial just in December.

The Lebanese activist, Lokman Slim, was an outspoken critic of Hezbollah until he was shot dead in his car.

The regime has kept escalating its support of the Houthis rebels in Yemen, sending in deadlier, longer range weapons, and inciting terrorist threats.

The Houthis have escalated attacks on Yemen's neighbors, including in civilian areas, and launched a military offensive that jeopardizes the peace negotiations being undertaken by U.N. Special Envoy Martin Griffiths.

Just last week, an Israeli civilian shipping vessel pulled into port with gaping damage from a missile attack, and Tehran's pet militias in Iraq have fired rocket barrages against our own American diplomatic and military facilities. They are communicating to the Biden administration in the mullahs' preferred language: violence.

Like I said over the weekend, President Biden is right to respond to this threat by authorizing strikes against targets belonging to Iranian proxy groups—the right decision—and he is right to recognize the need for new binding and enforceable constraints on Iran's nuclear capabilities, but, ultimately, we need a comprehensive approach to confronting Iran. It must be built on bipartisan foundations to endure for administrations and Congresses yet to come.

To get there—to get there, the administration must continue to meet Iranian aggression from a position of strength and consult closely with Congress for the sake of our own security and that of our friends and partners in the Ayatollah's backyard.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. PADILLA). 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 legislative clerk read the nomination of Gina Marie Raimondo, of Rhode Island, to be Secretary of Commerce.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Wyoming.

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. BARRASSO. Mr. President, I have come to the floor, on several occasions now, to talk about this \$1.9 trillion spending bill that will be soon before this body.

I have talked about different parts of the bill on different occasions. I have talked about the mandates, the bailouts, and the billions and billions of dollars of spending completely unrelated to coronavirus. Now, these are all reasons enough to oppose this piece of legislation.

Today, I would like to talk about another problem that I see with the bill,