PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The Honorable AL FRANKEN 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. BYRD).

The legislative clerk read the following letter:

U.S. SENATE,
PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE,
Washington, DC, December 18, 2009.

To the Senate:

Under the provisions of rule I, paragraph 3, of the Standing Rules of the Senate, I hereby appoint the Honorable AL FRANKEN, a Senator from the State of Minnesota, to perform the duties of the Chair.

ROBERT C. BYRD,
President pro tempore.

Mr. FRANKEN thereupon assumed the chair as Acting President pro tempore.

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE APPROPRIATIONS ACT, 2010—Resumed

Pending:

Reid motion to concur in the amendment of the House to the amendment of the Senate to the bill.

Reid motion to concur in the amendment of the House to the amendment of the Senate with amendment No. 3248 (to the House amendment to the Senate amendment), to change the enactment date.

Reid motion to refer the amendment of the House to the Committee on Appropriations, with instructions, Reid amendment No. 3249, to provide for a study.

Reid amendment No. 3252 (to Reid amendment No. 3248), to change the enactment date.

Reid amendment No. 3250 (to amendment No. 3249), of a perfecting nature.

Reid amendment No. 3251 (to amendment No. 3250), of a perfecting nature.

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

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the time until 1 a.m. be equally divided and controlled between the leaders or their designees, that Senators be permitted to speak for up to 10 minutes each, that the mandatory quorum be waived, and that the majority leader be recognized for the last 10 minutes and the 10 minutes prior to that the Republican leader be recognized, if he chooses to speak.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The Senator from Illinois.

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, those who are following the business of the Senate may be surprised to find us in session a little after midnight. This is a decision made by the Senate just a few hours ago, to postpone the continuation of our session into a new day. The purpose is parliamentary, so that a motion which we have filed can be voted on. It is an important motion. It is a cloture motion. We often have them. It is a motion that closes debate on the floor and moves us forward to the consideration of a measure.

There are very few measures the Senate would consider any more important than the one on which we are about to vote. In about an hour or less, we will be voting on the Defense appropriations bill.

This is a bill which is critically important to our Nation's defense and security, as Secretary Gates reminded us today in a letter to the Senate. It is also a bill that is important to the men and women in uniform, those who are in harm's way overseas literally risking their lives while we meet in the safety of this Senate Chamber.

The bill contains a 3.4-percent pay raise for our military, richly deserved, for the men and women who serve us. It also will be a pay raise appreciated by their families, many of whom wait patiently for the return of their loved one. There is money in this, as well, for military families, to make sure that not only the servicemembers but their spouses and children have health care. It is a very basic requirement of life and one we want to provide for all of our men and women in uniform and their families.

There is certainly an allotment and allocation here for equipment, which our men and women in uniform will need to perform their missions and come home safely. Readiness and training—it covers a wide range of important expenditures for our national security.

There is no more important bill when it comes to the safety of our troops and for our endorsement and support of what they are giving for our country.

In addition to that, there are provisions added by the House which are critically important at this moment in our history. We extend for several months the unemployment benefits for the millions of Americans who have lost their jobs during this recession. Although we see things getting a little better in the economy, there are still a lot of people suffering because of unemployment. They have not only lost their jobs, many have expended their savings. They have lost their health insurance. They may lose their homes. They are struggling. This bill extends for a short period of time those unemployment benefits and some help to pay for health insurance.

It is also a bill that provides for food stamps. I wish this Nation did not need food stamps, but we need them desperately. One out of six people in the State of Michigan is on food stamps because of the state of their economy, and many States with high unemployment rates are near that. The food stamps provide literally the basics and necessities of life for these families.

You would think, as I describe this bill, that it would pass in the Senate by the same overwhelming margin it just passed in the House 2 days ago. In the House, the vote was, if I recall correctly, in the range of 393 to 35 or something close to that. It was an overwhelming bipartisan vote. Mr. President, 164 Republican Congressmen voted for it, and it is understandable why. It was a vote of confidence in our men and women in uniform. It was a vote of support for them. And it was a vote of compassion and caring for all the people suffering in this great recession.

Yet we may find—I hope it is not true—we may find that in just a few moments this will become a strictly partisan vote. I hope that does not happen. It should not. It was not a partisan issue in the House of Representatives. But many have said on the other side of the aisle that they will not vote to support our troops with this appropriation, nor provide money for the unemployed. I do not question their patriotism or their commitment to our men and women in uniform. They are doing it because of a political or procedural approach they want to use to try to stop or slow down health care reform. I think they picked the wrong bill for it. I think we have had a healthy debate, a vigorous debate, and we are likely to have that debate continue for the next several days. But why are we putting the men and women in uniform in the middle of this debate? They did not ask for that. They asked to serve our country, to be respected for that service, and to have some help so they come home safely. That is what this bill does.

I hope at 1 a.m., in just a few minutes from now, those on the other side of the aisle will reconsider their opposition to the Department of Defense appropriations bill. If there was ever a time when we should stand together in solidarity for those who defend our country, it is now. And I hope many on the Republican side of the aisle will join us in that effort, in a bipartisan effort, in a show of support for these men and women in uniform.

There is plenty of time for debate, but there is also a time for debate to end. There comes a moment, after we have tried our best and engaged in debate and amendments, when a vote should be taken and the Senate should decide.

We are dragging this series of votes out on health care reform I think to a degree which is unnecessary. At some point, and some point soon, we should take the vote and see if there are literally 60 votes in the Senate for health care reform. Having done our best on our side of the aisle to argue the case, those on the other side have argued against it, and now the people of America should have the last word through their elected Senators.

I urge my colleagues on the other side of the aisle, who tried yesterday to stop the proceedings or at least slow them down by requiring the reading of an amendment and are trying now