The weather has been problematic throughout. We had warm weather conditions at the outset of the race, and then to have the weather really be the No. 1 opposition at the end made it something we are going to be talking about for years.

The Presiding Officer has had the opportunity to attend the ceremonial start of the Iditarod and is familiar with the excitement when there are 60 to 70 dog teams, mushers, and all their supporters around handling the dogs. There were literally 1,000 dogs in the downtown area of Anchorage. It is really quite exciting. It is a fabulous way to come to understand the history of the Iditarod but, more importantly, to understand the mindset of some of these mushers and the dedication they have to this sport and the passion they have for their dogs.

This year I was in the chute, and I like to visit with each of the mushers as they are coming down. Dallas Seavey was in the chute, and I was talking to him. He was really excited about the course because he said: This is going to be fast. This is going to be the quickest course we have seen. It is just perfect for someone like me who is young and fit and can stand up on his sled and literally be running next to his sled the whole way.

Three mushers later is Jeff King, and Jeff is telling me: This race is the perfect race for us older guys.

Jeff is my age.

He said: It is perfect because it takes the maturity and the wisdom and having been through a series of Iditarods to know exactly how to handle a course like this.

I think both of them were right. We saw the energy and determination of young Dallas Seavey 2 years ago. When he won for the first time, he was the youngest musher to win. He demonstrated a level of energy and determination that truly knocks your socks off. But what Jeff King was able to do with his methodical planning and strategy that goes into that race is certainly something to be embraced. And then, of course, Aliy Zirkle, a 44-year-old woman demonstrating once again that tough, independent female spirit—my gosh, she was in there all the way. This is the second year now that she has come in—actually, it is not the second year she has come in second. She has come in second more times than any other musher out there.

Dallas Seavey broke the Iditarod record this morning at 4 a.m. He came in at 8 days, 13 hours, 4 minutes, 19 seconds. He shaved off almost 5 hours from John Baker's previous win back in 2011.

There were a lot of firsts and a lot to be celebrated. There are still more mushers out on the trail.

When I talked to Dallas about an hour ago to congratulate him, I said: You must be pooped and ready to go to sleep after the last 8 days.

He said: Well, I am going to wait up for my dad.

His dad, Mitch Seavey, is in third place at this point in time. We expect him to come across the finish line.

I said: Isn't it nice to know that after all the years your dad waited up for you, you get to wait up for your dad before you take a break?

Alaskans are pleased with the outcome. We are happy to celebrate amazing athletes—both human and canine—doing amazing things in an amazing State. I am pleased to be able to announce today's results.

I thank the indulgence of the Chair.

RECESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate stands in recess until 2:15 p.m.

Thereupon, the Senate, at 1 p.m., recessed until 2:15 p.m. and reassembled when called to order by the Presiding Officer (Ms. BALDWIN).

MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will be in a period of morning business until 6 p.m. with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

AFFORDABLE CARE ACT

Mrs. MURRAY. Madam President, I want to take a moment to recognize our Republican colleagues in the House of Representatives who last week cast the 50th vote in their effort to dismantle the Affordable Care Act—their 50th. I know it is a tradition to give gold in celebration of a 50th milestone. I instead would like to gift my colleagues on the other side of the aisle with a reality check.

More specifically, today I would like to talk about a certain group of people who arguably stand to lose if their antics continue. So I have come to the floor this afternoon to set the record straight on the Affordable Care Act and how it is working for women in America. It is not much of a stretch for me to say the Affordable Care Act is probably one of the most significant pieces of legislation for women in my lifetime. Not because of the battles we fought to get it to the President's desk, not necessarily because of the size or scope of the law, but because of the tangible and positive impact it has had and will continue to have on the health and well being of women in America.

Four years ago health insurance companies could deny women care due to so-called preexisting conditions such as pregnancy or being a victim of domestic violence. Four years ago women were permitted to be legally discriminated against when it came to insurance premiums and were often paying more for coverage than men. Four years ago women did not have access to the full range of recommended preventive care, such as mammograms and prenatal screenings and more. Four years ago the insurance companies had all the leverage. Four years ago too often women were the ones who were paying the price. That is why I am proud today to highlight just how far we have come for women in the past 4 years.

Since the Affordable Care Act became law, women have been treated fairly with increased access to affordable health insurance, benefits, and services. Deductibles and other expenses have been capped so a health care crisis does not cause a family to lose their home or their life savings.

Women can use the health care marketplaces to pick quality plans that work for them and their families. If they change jobs or have to move, they are able to keep their coverage. Starting in 2012, we saw these benefits for women expand even further. Additional types of maternity are now covered. Women are now armed with proper tools and resources in order to take the right steps to have a healthy pregnancy.

Women now have access to domestic partner violence screening and counseling, as well as screening for sexually transmitted infections. Now women finally have access to affordable birth control. As public servants here, it is our job to help our constituents access Federal benefits available to them, particularly when it comes to health care. Since 80 percent of women are not only making health care choices for themselves but also their families and loved ones, it is our responsibility to serve as a guide when it comes to understanding how to best access these benefits.

It might mean putting them in touch with a navigator to ensure they are getting the most affordable health insurance available or making them aware of an enrollment event where they can get information on available coverage options. But our responsibilities do not end there. It is our job to have an open, honest discussion about what the Affordable Care Act means for our constituents and to talk about ways to responsibly improve it.

Instead, as we saw in the House last week, others have spent the better part of the last 4 years trying to take away the critical benefits that I just talked about, trying to score cheap political points on an issue that can literally mean the difference between life and death. I can understand why some of our colleagues disagree with certain parts of this law or maybe how it was implemented, but what I cannot understand is why anyone elected to Congress would decide to simply ignore real life stories of their own constituents whose lives were changed the day this law took effect.

It is people like Susan Wellman. She lives in Bellingham in my home State of Washington. She is self employed. She has had to pay for individual insurance. Every year she has watched her health care costs rise higher and higher. It got to the point where she was

paying $300 monthly premiums with an $8,000 deductible, all for a plan she described as ''paying for nothing.''

So as soon as Susan could access health care through the Washington State health care exchange, she jumped at the chance. She spoke on the phone with a real live person. She was able to sign up for an affordable plan in a matter of minutes. Now Susan is on a plan that costs her $125 a month instead of $300. It is a plan that has a $2,000 deductible that actually pays for things. Guess what. She can afford to go to the doctor, not just in the case of an emergency but for a physical or a mammogram that could save her life, not to mention thousands and thousands of dollars in health care costs.

That kind of preventive care is good for women like Susan. It is good for her family, and it is good for this country because when more people have access to preventive care, it makes health care cheaper for every single one of us.

It is also good for women like Carrie Little. She is a certified organic farmer who lives in Orting, WA. A few weeks ago she was working outside when one of the rams on her farm attacked her, leaving her with bruises and a broken leg. Fortunately, because of her new health plan, her visit to the emergency room was painless. Well, as painless as it could be with a broken leg. But her hospital bills, her cast, and her visits to the orthopedic physician were paid in full.

Until last year, Carrie had been spending half of her income for a catastrophic-only health plan, forcing her to pay out of pocket for even the most basic of care. Carrie wrote an op-ed, and I want to quote from it. She said:

> What a welcome relief that my new health plan covers preventive care, like mammograms, immunizations, and yearly doctor visits. I can keep the primary care doctor I have been seeing for years. And I no longer worry about family members getting kicked around due to pre-existing conditions. Thank goodness. In agriculture, profits and losses shift like the weather, so for our community, it is crucial that health premiums stay affordable.

Or women like Ingrid Gordon. Ingrid is a small business owner from Seattle who immediately enrolled in coverage when it became available. After an hour on the Web site, she told us, with minimal technical difficulties, Ingrid was enrolled and received her insurance card in the mail a few days later. Since her coverage began on January 1, Ingrid had her first dental and physical exams in 14 years. She cured a skin disorder thanks to prescription medicine. She scheduled a colonoscopy now that she is 50, and finally had her bothersome knee x-rayed.

All of those exams, visits and prescriptions would have cost Ingrid thousands if not tens of thousands of dollars out of pocket just 1 year ago. But thanks to the Affordable Care Act, Ingrid paid a grand total of zero dollars in copays.

Thanks to the Affordable Care Act, women like Susan and Carrie and Ingrid are now fully in charge of their own health care, not their insurance company. That is why I feel so strongly that we cannot go back to the way things were. While we can never stop working to make improvements, of course, we owe it to the women of America to make progress and not allow the clock to be rolled back on their health care needs.

As we all know, unfortunately, there are efforts underway all across the country, including here in our Nation's capital, to severely undermine a woman's access to some of the most critical and life-saving services that are provided by the Affordable Care Act. No provision of this law has faced quite as much scrutiny as the idea of providing affordable, quality reproductive health services to the women of America.

We have seen attempt after attempt to eliminate access to abortion services and low-cost birth control all while restricting a woman's ability to make personal decisions about her own care. I guess we should not be surprised. The truth is that the tide of these politically driven, extreme efforts continues to rise.

In 2013 our Nation saw yet another record-breaking year of State legislatures passing restrictive legislation barring women's access to reproductive services. In fact, in the past 3 years the United States has enacted more of these restrictions than in the previous 10 years combined. That means that now more than ever, it is our job to protect these kinds of decisions for women, to fight for women's health, and to ensure that women's health does not become a political football.

For this reason I was very proud to lead members of my caucus in filing a brief with the Supreme Court of the United States in the case of Sebelius v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc., where a secular corporation and its shareholders are trying to get in between a woman and her health.

Just like the many attempts before this case, there are those out there who would like the American public to believe that this conversation is anything but an attack on women's health care. To them it is a debate about freedom, except of course freedom for a woman to access her own care. It is no different than when we are told that a tax on abortion rights is not an infringement on a woman's right to choose; they are about religion or State's rights; or when we are told that restricting emergency contraception is not about limiting a woman's ability to make her own family planning decisions; it is about protecting pharmacists; or just like last week, when an Alaskan State Senator said he did not think there was a compelling reason for the government ''to finance other people's recreation.'' That was in reference, of course, to contraception coverage in health care. In fact, after doing some research, this State Senator concluded that since birth control costs about ''four or five lattes'' the government should really have no reason to cover this cost to women.

The truth is that this is about contraception. This is an attempt to limit a woman's ability to access her own health care. This is about women. Allowing a woman's boss to call the shots about her access to birth control should be inconceivable to all Americans in this day and age, and it would take us back to a place in history when women had no voice and no choice.

In fact, contraception was included as a required preventive service in the Affordable Care Act on the recommendation of an independent, nonprofit institute of medicine and other medical experts because it is essential to the health of women and families.

After many years of research, we know ensuring access to effective birth control has a direct impact on improving the lives of women and their families in America. We have been able to directly link it to declines in maternal and infant mortality, reduced risk of ovarian cancer, better overall health outcomes for women, and far fewer unintended pregnancies and abortions, which is a goal we all should share.

But what is at stake in this case now before the Supreme Court is whether a CEO's personal beliefs can trump a woman's right to access free or low-cost contraception under the Affordable Care Act.

Every American deserves to have access to high-quality health care coverage, regardless of where they work. Each of us should have the right to make our own medical and religious decisions without being dictated to or limited by our employers. Contraceptive coverage is supported by the vast majority of Americans who understand how important it is for women and their families.

In weighing this case, my hope is that the Court realizes women working for private companies should be afforded the same access to medical care regardless of who signs their paychecks. We can't allow for-profit secular corporations or their shareholders to deny female employees access to comprehensive women's health care under the guise of religious exemption. It is as if we are saying: Because you are a CEO or a shareholder in a corporation, your rights are more important than your employees', who happen to be women. That is a slippery slope that could lead to employers cutting off coverage for childhood immunizations if they object to that idea or prenatal care for children born to unmarried parents if they think it is wrong, or blocking an employee's ability to access HIV treatment.

I was proud to be joined in filing the brief by 18 other Senators who were here when Congress enacted the religious protections under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 and who were also here when Congress made access to women's health care available under the Affordable Care Act of 2010. They are Senators who

know Congress did not intend for a corporation or, furthermore, its shareholders to restrict a woman's access to preventive health care.

In the coming weeks, as the Supreme Court prepares to begin oral arguments in this case, these Senators and our colleagues who support these efforts will echo those sentiments, because we all know that improving access to birth control is good health policy and good economic policy. It means healthier women, healthier children, healthier families, and it will save monies for our businesses and consumers.

I know many of our colleagues here believe that repealing the Affordable Care Act and access to reproductive health services is a political winner for them. But the truth is this law and these provisions are a winner for women, for men, for our children, and our health care system overall.

I am very proud to stand with my colleagues who are committed to making sure the benefits of this law don't get taken away from the women of America, because politics and ideology should not matter when it comes to making sure women get the care they need at a cost they can afford.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Arkansas.

MEDICARE PROTECTION ACT

Mr. PRYOR. Madam President, I know others are waiting, so I will make some brief remarks about something that is very important to me.

I rise today to discuss S. 2087, the Medicare Protection Act.

Over the past few years one of the things we have witnessed in the Senate is, unfortunately, an irresponsible few who are trying to turn Medicare into a voucher system and raise the eligibility age for benefits. This would not only have a catastrophic effect on seniors' health but also on their financial security. It would force seniors to pay more for their doctor visits and for prescription drugs.

People in my State have figured this out. In fact, I recently got a little note from Philip of Jonesboro who said: ''Raising the Medicare eligibility age would shift thousands of dollars in costs to seniors and drive up premium costs.''

He got it exactly right. That is what it will do. That is what pretty much every study I have seen, at least, says it will do.

In Arkansas alone, we have well over 500,000 seniors who depend on Medicare. I encourage all of my colleagues to look at the numbers in their States. My guess is everyone has a large number of seniors in their State and the seniors understand how vitally important it is that we protect Medicare.

Turning Medicare into a voucher system or fundamentally changing it in any way by using some sort of voucher—they call it premium supplement, I don't know; they have a different word for it sometimes—or raising the eligibility age or cutting benefits would be very detrimental to the people in my State, and I am sure in all 50 States.

As Rebecca from Fayetteville said:

> Raising the Medicare age would simply force seniors such as my mother and me to pay more out-of-pocket. We need responsible, common-sense solutions to keep Medicare strong . . .

I agree with that. That is exactly what we need. We need these responsible commonsense solutions. Hopefully they are going to be bipartisan solutions. That is how we get things done in Washington, by working in a bipartisan way. I am hoping, over time, this Medicare Protection Act will become a great bipartisan vehicle for us to protect Medicare.

It does two things, in a nutshell. First, it amends the Congressional Budget Act to define any provision in reconciliation legislation that makes changes to Medicare to reduce or eliminate guaranteed benefits or restrict eligibility criteria as extraneous and an improper use of the reconciliation process.

I know that is technical and that is kind of getting down in the weeds, but that is a very smart way to do it, to use the Congressional Budget Act to protect Medicare.

Secondly, it expresses the sense of the Senate that the Medicare eligibility age should not increase and that the Medicare Program should not be privatized or turned into a voucher system.

Again, if we look back over the years, there have been attempts to do this, most of them originating in the House of Representatives, but we have had a few of those attempts here.

As Hubert Humphrey once said: ''The moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy and the handicapped.''

The Medicare Protection Act is the right thing to do. I hope my colleagues from both sides of the aisle will look at this legislation, give it serious consideration, and join me in supporting this critical piece of legislation. It is a great way to protect our Medicare system.

With that, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Utah.

MCHUGH NOMINATION

Mr. HATCH. I express my strong support for the nomination of Carolyn B. McHugh to the Court of Appeals for the 10th Circuit. Judge McHugh received her undergraduate and law degrees from the University of Utah. She is exactly the kind of outstanding nominee of varied legal experience that I set out to find to fill this vacancy.

She has both practiced and taught law. She has practiced in both State and Federal court. She has extensive experience both before and behind the bench. She has served the county and State bars, as well the State judiciary on committees and on commissions. She has been widely recognized and awarded for her distinguished legal career.

Somehow, along the way, Judge McHugh has found time to serve her community with groups such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, Voices for Utah Children, and Catholic Community Services of Utah.

Judge McHugh's 22 years of litigation experience were almost evenly split between State and Federal court. In nearly a decade on the Utah Court of Appeals, currently as the presiding judge, she has heard more than 1,100 appellate civil and criminal cases that ultimately reached judgment.

When she is confirmed to the 10th Circuit, I think Judge McHugh may have one of the shortest learning curves on record of any judge in any circuit court of appeals to this country.

When we have a judicial vacancy in Utah, I spend a lot of time talking to lawyers and judges throughout our State's legal community, and so does Senator LEE. We both work together on these nominations, and I appreciate the input that he has and what a great deal of legal expertise and understanding he brings to these matters.

Judge McHugh received much praise, but perhaps the most common description was simply that she works harder than anyone else. Her former law partner said it, judges said it. Over and over the same comment came up: She works incredibly hard.

I have been doing this a long time and have participated in the nomination or confirmation of more than half of the judges who have ever served on the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals. I know a first-rate nominee when I see one.

Judge McHugh's varied experience, her personal character, intelligence, and her work ethic make her one of the best. The Judiciary Committee approved her nomination without opposition, and I expect the same result in the Senate.

I do have to say that this nomination could have been confirmed months ago. Despite some controversy over a few nominees, the confirmation process was working well. In his first 5 years, President Obama appointed 24.6 percent of the Federal judiciary, compared to 25.8 percent in President George W. Bush's first 5 years.

The Congressional Research Service says the Senate confirmed a higher percentage of President Obama's appeals court nominees than it did so for President Clinton and did so faster than it did for President Bush.

In President Bush's first 5 years, Democrats conducted 20 filibusters of appeals court nominations, compared to only seven in President Obama's first 5 years. Filibusters were much