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Senate

The Senate met at 3 p.m. and was called to order by the Honorable BERNARD SANDERS, a Senator from the State of Vermont.

PRAYER

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

Let us pray.

Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or even before the Earth was framed, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.

On this historic day we ask Your richest blessings upon President Barack Obama, Vice President JOSEPH BIDEN, and the members of the Cabinet. O God, in these challenging times, help them to trust You with all their hearts and to depend upon Your providence to lead and guide them to Your desired destination.

In a special way today, we ask for Your healing hands to be placed upon Senator TEDDY KENNEDY. O, God, You are a healer and we claim Your promise that, if we will ask in faith, You will respond.

We thank You for what our eyes have seen and what our ears have heard on this great day.

We pray in Your holy Name. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The Honorable BERNARD SANDERS 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 letter 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, January 20, 2009.

To the Senate:

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

ROBERT C. BYRD,
President pro tempore.

Mr. SANDERS 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.

MORNING BUSINESS

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the Senate shall proceed to a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak for up to 10 minutes each.

The Senator from New Mexico is recognized.

Mr. UDALL of New Mexico. Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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 President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

INAUGURAL AND VILSACK NOMINATION

Mr. HARKIN. Mr. President, I take to the floor right now to talk about my good friend, the former Governor of Iowa and our soon to be Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack.

Before I do, I would be remiss if I did not at this time talk about what it was like to be at the inauguration of the 44th President of the United States. This is my ninth inauguration. My first was Jimmy Carter when I was a freshman Congressman in 1977 and then two Reagans, Bush, two Clintons, two more Bushes. And so this is my ninth.

I can tell you, I have never seen anything such as this. To be out there today, I mean this is once in history that something such as this happens. I was watching a television program yesterday, a news program, and JIM CLYBURN, our colleague on the House side, was talking about the importance of today and what it meant to him.

He went on to talk about not only himself but so many people from where he is from in South Carolina and other places, elsewhere. He said, I remember my grandparents telling me about their parents being slaves and how close the connection was. And to think that today America saw inaugurated as our 44th President an African-American.

Not only does this say a great deal about Barack Obama, but it says a great deal about America and how far we have come. Someone asked me what I thought earlier about his speech. I thought three things: uplifting, sobering, and challenging. I think that is what we want from a President. We want a President who will lift us up, a President who will be honest and square with us but a President who also challenges us.

That is what I thought President Obama did in his speech today. So it was a great day, not only for President Obama and Michelle and their family, for our great friend, JOE BIDEN, now our Vice President, and Jill and his family, a great day for America, a real turning point, I think, in our history.

So we look forward with confidence and with optimism to the future. I wished to take the floor today to say a few words about my friend, Tom

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



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Vilsack, who I hope the Senate today will concur in his being passed through for being Secretary of Agriculture.

I have known Tom well since the 1980s. He was a lawyer in Mount Pleasant, IA, at that time. We had a terrible catastrophe in agriculture; farmers were going broke, a lot of suicides were being committed in my State and around rural America.

Tom Vilsack was a small-town lawyer. I did not know him from anybody. But he took upon himself the job of defending a lot of these small farmers, helping them to work through their problems, and getting them through these hard times.

That is the first time I ever came in contact with him. I thought he was one of those rare individuals who saw something that was wrong which needed to be done and he would involve himself in it. He did not make any money doing this. There was no money to be made. But he got involved in it, and I can tell you, he helped many small farmers hang onto their farms.

Well, later on, by then a tragedy happened in Mount Pleasant, IA. Tom Vilsack was then on the city council. There was a terrible tragedy in which the mayor had been murdered, and they asked Tom to take over as mayor—again, another catastrophe in that small community. So Tom Vilsack then took over as mayor of Mount Pleasant, pulled the city together, kept it going, and lifted it up.

Shortly after that then, he ran to be a State Senator and was elected as a State Senator. He served very admirably there. He then later ran to be Governor and served for two terms as the Governor of our State of Iowa. He had a great two terms—8 years, 4 years each—as our Governor. Again, he showed he could bring people together. That is why I think he is going to be good with our former colleague, now President Obama.

For the entire 8 years Tom Vilsack was Governor, he had a Republican legislature, but he worked with them. They worked together. We got some good things done in the State of Iowa, both with a Republican legislature and a Democratic Governor. I think that showed his method. That, plus what he had done earlier, I think showed the true mark of this individual.

So I could not have been happier when I found that President Obama had picked him to be Secretary of Agriculture. Tom Vilsack knows production agriculture. He knows what is happening out on the farms. He also is one of the strongest proponents of the conservation of natural resources and clean water and clean air. Suffice to say, I think all my friends at Pheasants Forever and Ducks Unlimited and all the people I go hunting with every year love Tom Vilsack because of all he has done to encourage wildlife habitats and the conservation of our natural resources—something, again, I feel very strongly about.

Then, again, in his hearing before our Agriculture Committee, he talked

about nutrition and the role nutrition plays in health care reform and how we have to think about prevention and wellness. That starts with our kids. And what starts with our kids? School lunches and school breakfasts and the foods they eat in school, the women, infants, and children's supplemental feeding program, what kind of food are they getting?

Now, before the Agriculture Committee this year, Senator CHAMBLISS and I will be working together on our committee to reauthorize the Child Nutrition Act. That is the school lunch, school breakfast, and the WIC program, the women, infants, and children's supplemental feeding program. We have to do better for our kids. We have to get better food, locally grown foods, healthier foods, fruits and vegetables, and things such as that for our kids to eat. He talked about this in his hearing before our committee.

So I do not wish to take any more time of the Senate. I see our distinguished leader is in the Chamber. But I wished to thank President Obama for asking Governor Vilsack to be Secretary of Agriculture. I have asked Senator CHAMBLISS. We know of no objections—not one objection on our committee—to his nomination.

So I hope the Senate will, this afternoon, by unanimous consent, clear him so tomorrow he can be at the door. He said: As soon as I am confirmed, the first thing I want to do is go to the Department of Agriculture and stand outside at 7 o'clock in the morning to greet all the people coming in because I want them to know I care about them, that I honor their work and look forward to being Secretary of the Department. The one Department I always say, of all the Secretaries we have—the Secretaries of State and Treasury get all this publicity, and they travel around the world and all that and get a lot of publicity—the Secretary of Agriculture hardly gets any publicity. But no Department—no Department—touches every American every day as closely and as intimately as the Department of Agriculture: the food you eat, the clothes you wear, the food safety programs. Things happen to our kids in school, what they eat—all this is in the Department of Agriculture.

So I hope the Senate will, by unanimous consent, follow the lead of the Agriculture Committee in unanimously approving Tom Vilsack to be our next Secretary of Agriculture.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that a letter, dated January 20, 2009, be printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

U.S. SENATE, COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY,

Washington, DC, January 20, 2009.

Re Nomination of Thomas J. Vilsack to be Secretary of Agriculture

Hon. HARRY REID,
Majority Leader.

Hon. MITCH MCCONNELL,
Republican Leader.

DEAR LEADERS: On December 17, 2008, President-elect Obama announced his intention to nominate Thomas J. Vilsack, of Iowa, to be Secretary of Agriculture.

The Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry forwarded the Committee's nomination questionnaire to Secretary-designate Vilsack. The Committee requires each nominee to complete a questionnaire relating to the nominee's qualifications and potential conflicts of interest. Governor Vilsack's responses to the questionnaire provided basic biographical and financial information.

As part of the confirmation process, the Committee received the nominee's Public Financial Disclosure Report and a copy of Governor Vilsack's letter to Mr. Raymond J. Sheehan, Designated Agency Ethics Official, U.S. Department of Agriculture. This letter details the steps that Governor Vilsack will take to avoid potential conflicts or the appearance of a conflict of interest.

In anticipation of the nomination, the Committee conducted a hearing on January 14, 2009, in public session, to carefully review the credentials and qualifications of Secretary-designate Vilsack. Governor Vilsack was the only witness at this hearing.

After the hearing and after Committee Members had the opportunity to review responses to written questions submitted for the record, the Committee polled all Members of the Committee to ascertain their positions regarding this nominee. We are pleased to report that the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry unanimously supports the nomination of Thomas J. Vilsack for the position of Secretary of Agriculture.

TOM HARKIN,
Chairman.

SAXBY CHAMBLISS,
Ranking Member.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

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

SCHEDULE

Mr. REID. Mr. President, following leader remarks, there will be a period of morning business, with Senators allowed to speak for up to 10 minutes each. There will be no rollcall votes today.

SENATOR TED KENNEDY

Mr. REID. Mr. President, we have just left the memorable inauguration of Barack Obama. But as President Obama said a few minutes ago, our minds are not on the events of today but for the fact that Senator KENNEDY took ill during the lunch. Senator KENNEDY is now in a Washington hospital.