

not against one another, to confront the challenges we face.

But, I am beginning to wonder if these stories are just stories.

Although I have served in this Chamber for only a short time, I recognize that the atmosphere in this body is not what it once was.

I hear the accounts of bipartisan cooperation in the past, but I see fewer and fewer examples of it today.

In fact, just last week, the country watched as two centuries of Senate procedure and privilege were abused for partisan gain.

My colleagues and I were trying to move forward with a bill that extended unemployment benefits, health insurance for the unemployed, lending assistance for small businesses, and other important programs.

No part of this bill was new or controversial. No part of it would significantly change the existing programs that were in place, which were due to expire at the end of the week. We all knew that, if this Senate failed to take action, all of these programs would grind to a halt almost immediately.

Ordinary Americans across the country would stop getting their unemployment checks and their COBRA health benefits. Small businesses would see credit dry up literally overnight. In the middle of the worst economic crisis in decades, this would be a disaster. It would be the last thing that America needed as we tried to help people get back on their feet. But that is exactly what happened when my friend from Kentucky decided to raise objection. In an instant, a single Republican Senator slammed the door on the American people, and left thousands of ordinary folks out in the cold.

He cut off assistance for those who need it most. He denied unemployment insurance to those who lost their jobs through no fault of their own.

Just when folks were beginning to feel a bit more optimistic, my good friend from Kentucky held up his hand and said, "Not so fast."

As a result, on Sunday night, 15,000 Illinoisans lost their unemployment benefits. Another 15,000 will lose their benefits next week, and the week after, until my Republican friend drops his objection and allows us to pass an extension. These are folks who have felt the worst effects of the economic crisis. They are ordinary people, ordinary American families, who cannot afford to miss a check.

But the Senator from Kentucky has objected to continuing these programs. He has prevented the government from putting these checks in the mail. He has frozen the credit that will allow small businesses to create jobs and put more people back to work. He has sent thousands of Federal workers home without pay. He has shut down important highway projects all across America.

I have been in public service for almost 30 years. In all that time, I have never seen anything like this outrageous abuse of senatorial privilege.

We can argue about policy. We can debate legislation. We can discuss procedure and disagree about political tactics. But I believe it is wrong to play politics with people's lives. And I urge my friend from Kentucky to stop.

If my colleagues and I are able to overcome these objections and pass this bill in the next few days, we may be able to restore these benefits retroactively. But the damage has already been done. These programs are not designed to help people who can get by without unemployment insurance for a few days here and there.

These programs are targeted at those who can barely survive paycheck to paycheck. They are for people who need help keeping food on the table, until they have the opportunity to get back on their feet. They are for people who do not have the luxury of waiting just a few more days to pay the bills, as my colleague seems to think.

The Senator from Kentucky has brought our economic recovery to a grinding halt. He is playing politics with hard-working Americans, and he is wasting the time of this distinguished body.

What has happened to the Senate of our forefathers?

What has happened to the atmosphere of friendship that drove past Senators to work together to solve big problems?

My colleagues and I have offered a solution that is acceptable to almost every Member of this Chamber. There are 99 Senators who either support this measure or would like to see an up-or-down vote. But my friend from Kentucky does not mind taking advantage of the rules of this Chamber to make a political point, even if it means adding to the misery of hundreds of thousands across this country, including his home State.

Perhaps we should not be surprised. After all, we have seen this kind of obstruction time and time again from our Republican colleagues, even on issues that are critical to the well-being of more than 30 million Americans.

So maybe it should come as no surprise that a Republican Senator would once again choose to manipulate Senate procedure for partisan gain. In many ways, I suppose that is all we can expect from a party that has refused to offer solutions of their own.

I believe the American people deserve much better than that. I believe regular folks expect us to help make their lives better, not worse. And I believe they are tired of obstructionism. They are tired of hearing that their representatives in Washington can not get things done.

I would urge all of my colleagues to reach for the generous spirit of our forefathers, which defined this Chamber as a friendly and inclusive place for so many decades.

I would urge my colleagues to debate the issues honestly and without resorting to distractions and obstructionism. No legislation will ever be perfect. But

I believe it is irresponsible to hold up an important and fundamentally good bill for political reasons.

I ask my friend from Kentucky to drop his objection, as others in this Chamber have asked him many times over the last few days.

Let us move forward together. Let us be constructive. Let us recapture the friendly atmosphere that helped our predecessors rise above partisan politics and achieve great things.

This is not how the Senate was intended to function. So let's prove to the world that this is still the greatest deliberative body on the planet. Let's reject these tactics and move forward together. And let's, without delay, stop the obstruction on this important legislation.

Madam President, I would like to speak on another issue as in morning business.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. BURRIS. Thank you, Madam President.

HONORING THE ILLINOIS ATHLETES OF THE 2010 WINTER OLYMPIC GAMES

Mr. BURRIS. Madam President, we live in a world divided. International tension, mistrust, and even war too often separate nation from nation. But every 2 years, thousands of athletes from countries all over the world come together to celebrate the human spirit.

They meet in competition, arriving on the world stage from all five inhabited continents. Each of these five continents is represented by a simple, colored circle—a ring intertwined with four others to form the familiar symbol worn by every Olympic athlete.

The Olympic Games are a powerful force for world unity. And this year, for the 21st Winter Olympics, the eyes of the world turned to Vancouver, Canada—just across the border we share with our good friends to the north.

As always, the competition was fierce in every sport. The greatest athletes in the world tested their skills on some of the most challenging courses in history. Records were set and broken.

The world witnessed many triumphs—such as the success of a young Canadian figure skater, only days after the sudden loss of her mother.

We also came together in the face of great tragedy, mourning the shocking death of a young athlete from the Republic of Georgia.

Such Olympic moments, both triumphant and tragic, are blind to region or nationality. They remind us of the qualities and the limitations we share in every field of human endeavor. And at every moment, from the opening ceremonies until the Olympic flame was extinguished, these Winter Games served as a testament to all that we have in common. In a divided world, they served as an affirmation of the human spirit, and the value of friendship through sport.

I am proud to note that the United States Olympic team ended these games with a total of 37 medals—more than any other country, and a new record for the most medals won at a single Winter Games.

I would especially like to recognize and congratulate the Olympic athletes who hail from my home State of Illinois. These young men and women had the great honor of representing this country on the world stage, and they did us proud. In fact, 8 of the 37 total U.S. medals were won by Illinoisans.

From Champaign to Chicago—from Wheaton, to Glenview, to Plainfield, to Glencoe, to Naperville—these 10 athletes took to the ski slopes, and the ice rinks, and the bobsled tracks, and they gave it their all. Some came home with Olympic gold. Some fell short of the finals. But they are all Olympians, and they all represented our country—and our State—with honor, integrity, and sportsmanship.

So I take great pride in thanking the following Illinoisans for their dedication and hard work at this year's Olympic games: Lana Gehring, Katherine Reutter, Brian Hansen, Nancy Swider-Peltz, Jr., Shani Davis, Jonathon Kuck, Lisa Chesson, Evan Lysacek, James Moriarty, and Ben Agosto.

I ask my colleagues to join me in congratulating these 10 Illinoisans, along with their teammates, and every coach, parent, and supporter who contributed to the success of Team USA. I thank them for all they accomplished in Vancouver, and wish them nothing but continued success in the future.

There are few international spectacles as singular and as inspiring as the Olympic games. A force for unity in a world divided, these competitions have the power to bring us together as one people, celebrating the human spirit with one voice.

Thanks to the world-class athletes who took part, from the United States and more than 80 countries in every corner of the globe, this year's Winter games in Vancouver were no exception.

I hope that as the world's athletes return to their respective countries, and as we turn our attention back to the challenges we face in our daily lives, this Olympic spirit of unity will persist until we meet again on the world stage, in London, for the 2012 Summer games.

Congratulations to the Illinoisans and all of those who participated from the great United States of America in these games.

Madam President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mrs. SHAHEEN. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mrs. SHAHEEN. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent to speak as in morning business.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS

Mrs. SHAHEEN. Madam President, last week Senate leadership reached agreement on a short-term extension of Federal unemployment benefits and other critical programs that were set to expire. But when we tried to pass the bill, sadly, one single Senator objected. Because of that one Senator and his filibuster, Federal unemployment benefits and health care subsidies for people who have lost their jobs have now expired. This Senator also single-handedly halted highway projects across the country and put workers' futures in jeopardy. The obstruction of this bill has brought to a standstill small business lending programs that have been successful at boosting the number of SBA-guaranteed loans since the Recovery Act was passed. Because of the Senator's actions, physicians will see their immediate care reimbursements slashed by over 21 percent, threatening the health care of too many seniors in New Hampshire and across this country.

There may be some people who don't realize the damage caused by these lapses, so I am here, as so many people have been here on the floor over the last several days, to talk about what is happening to too many people because of this filibuster.

First, this is about the struggles faced by individual workers and their families. Right now, with a record number of unemployed workers competing for each job, it has become harder than ever for people who lose a job to get back to work. Of the 16 million Americans who are out of work today, nearly 6 million—more than 1 in 3—have run through the benefits provided by their States. These 6 million people are the ones served by Federal unemployment, which is a critical safety net that helps families buy gas and groceries and helps them heat their homes and pay their mortgages and their rents while they look for the next job. Because of the actions of just one Member of this body—actions that I believe are irresponsible—more than 1.2 million people will get their last check during the month of March.

My office has heard from hundreds of constituents in the last week who are on the verge of losing their benefits, and their stories are heartbreaking. I wish to tell my colleagues about just one.

A woman named Linda wrote me. She said:

I've been unemployed for the first time in my life since August. I will be 60 on March 14, and I have not been able to find another full-time job. I own an older mobile home in Epping and don't have a retirement plan, a nest egg, or anything of that nature. The prospect of my unemployment benefits going away very soon (I may only have two to three weeks left) because of one Senator digging in his heels makes me feel sick. Please, please do everything you can to get

an extension for unemployment benefits passed. God has a plan for us all; I just pray that I don't lose everything, as many others have, and that one Senator isn't playing the partisan card just because he can. I'm not sure that America is the land of opportunity that it used to be.

That is the end of her quote.

While some may think it is no big deal to make people such as Linda wait a week or 2 weeks to get another unemployment check, even short-term expirations have damaging results. When State workforce agencies are forced to shut down and restart complicated Federal benefits programs, they experience huge backlogs in their systems that delay getting checks out the door. Phone lines at call centers are jammed with claimants, holding up others from filing for benefits, and lines at one-stop centers get longer and longer. In the best of circumstances, individuals who see their benefits lapse while this filibuster continues will have to wait weeks before they begin receiving checks again. That is a long time when you are living on unemployment.

Then there is the uncertainty and the fear that comes when someone opens the mail to find a notice that this check is the last one they will receive. Families can't make responsible budget choices when we abruptly interrupt safety net programs.

So this filibuster isn't just holding up benefits to those who are already out of work; it is causing more Americans to lose their jobs. By cutting off highway funding, one Senator has put thousands more Americans at risk of losing their jobs. For the first time in 20 years, construction projects across the country have halted. Without an extension of highway programs, construction companies in New Hampshire can't plan ahead. Workers in New Hampshire don't know whether there will be a job for them when construction season starts back up in the spring. Due to the actions of just one Senator, the future of these workers is uncertain.

This filibuster is especially egregious because it abuses the Senate rules, but, unfortunately, abusing the rules in order to prevent us from addressing the needs of families and small businesses has sadly become too routine. That is why I believe we need to take a very hard look at changing the Senate rules. It is time to stop playing political games with the lives of the American people. I hope that at least on this bill, every Member of the Senate can come together to support the millions of people who are counting on our leadership.

Thank you very much. I yield the floor and note the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

The Senator from South Carolina.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.