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Senate

The Senate met at 10 a.m. and was called to order by the Honorable JOE DONNELLY, a Senator from the State of Indiana.

PRAYER

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

Let us pray.

Almighty and ever blessed God, we thank You for Your divine grace that sustains us and for each evidence of Your Spirit's leading in our Nation and world.

Lord, inspire our Senators to walk in Your light, as they grow in grace and develop a greater knowledge of You. Make them this day human channels through which Your love can flow to bring harmony where there is discord and hope where there is despair. Empower them to lift high the lamp of truth to illuminate our Nation and world. Incline their hearts to follow Your leading, knowing that in due season they will reap if they persevere.

We pray in Your great Name. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The PRESIDING OFFICER 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. LEAHY).

The legislative clerk read the following letter:

U.S. SENATE,
PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE,
Washington, DC, July 10, 2013.

To the Senate:

Under the provisions of rule I, paragraph 3, of the Standing Rules of the Senate, I hereby

appoint the Honorable JOE DONNELLY, a Senator from the State of Indiana, to perform the duties of the Chair.

PATRICK J. LEAHY,
President pro tempore.

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

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

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

NEVADA FIRES

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I returned from Nevada this Sunday. On Saturday I had a briefing by the head of the Forest Service in Nevada. We thought things were going very well with the fires in Nevada, and they were. Progress was being made—limited but progress was being made. But since that time the fires have gotten much worse.

Not everyone can see this, but I have a picture—of course, I didn't get this until early this morning and didn't have a chance to enlarge it so we could put it on an easel—but this is the beginning of the Las Vegas strip. This is downtown Las Vegas. It is called the Carpenter fire. You can see it burning.

It is only about 10 miles from Las Vegas, maybe 12 at the most. We can see Mount Charleston, a 12,000-foot mountain. The flames are shooting above that. We don't get many clouds in southern Nevada, but the smoke cloud here is intense. One of my staff indicated that where she lives it is raining ash. This is a very devastating fire, and the firefighters are doing the very best they can in a very difficult situation.

My thoughts go out to the thousands who have been evacuated from their homes in southern Nevada's Mount Charleston area—I think hundreds

would be a better way to say this. Out where the Carpenter 1 fire is, as it is called, it has burned more than 30 square miles of forest and desert.

My heart goes out to the first responders. They are working very hard in extremely rugged terrain. They are doing a lot in the air with helicopters and large airplanes. A couple of areas have been saved because these firefighters have been able to cut waves so the flames don't jump over into these houses. Yesterday the wind changed, and one of the roads going up to Mount Charleston, Kyle Canyon—it jumped that road, burning there, getting closer to some of the homes we are so concerned about.

Lives have been saved as a result of what the firefighters are doing. They have been working around the clock to contain the blaze and protect their communities. Unfortunately, this is southern Nevada where we had heat last week virtually every day of 112 to 117 degrees. It is hot in Las Vegas without this fire; we don't get much rain. In the entire year we get 4 inches of rain. The summer heat, these dry conditions, and the winds are really working against the firefighters, but they are working very hard.

The progress we were making was erased yesterday. The fire jumped Kyle Canyon Road, as I said, and spread to new forest and new desert land. We thought everyone would be able to return to their homes in Kyle Canyon yesterday, but with the fire having spread the way it did, we hope they can get back in their homes soon. We have had a number of hotels in Las Vegas that allowed people who have been displaced to have free lodging.

As I indicated, smoke can be seen everywhere. We have 2 million people now in Las Vegas. Everybody can see the fire. These flames, one can see them well over the 12,000-foot mountain.

The Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service are all working with other Federal agencies and State agencies. They are assisting firefighters in

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



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containing the blaze and helping residents to move.

There is also a fire burning in Reno, south of Reno. It is called the Bison fire. It is the largest fire ever recorded in western Nevada. People have been—especially in the Pipeline Canyon area—urged to evacuate. I am going to continue to monitor both of these fires because they are disasters.

I appreciate all the work done at the State level. My office has extended support to Governor Sandoval to do everything we can to assist the State in anything they need, and I will do everything I can to ensure every Federal resource that is available will be made available to support local officials and fire crews.

There are currently more than 20 active fires in 11 States, including Nevada's neighbors: California—and we all know about the fire in Arizona, but there are others—Oregon, Idaho, and Utah. There are thousands of firefighters working around the clock to save lives and to save property. I will do everything I can, I repeat, to help them.

STUDENT LOANS

Mr. REID. In a couple of hours we will vote on whether to begin debate on our plan to keep loan rates low for students for an additional year. Last month Republican obstruction forced interest rates to double from 3.4 percent to 6 percent for about 7 million college students.

If we fail to roll back this increase, those students will each pile on lots of new debt to get a college education. These rates will be particularly harmful to low- and middle-income families that rely on these Federal loans more than anyone else.

We have the Pell grants, which go to low-income people, but people who are middle class have to do these loans; schools have become so expensive. States have cut back on the support they give to colleges, so this is a very difficult situation.

Students shouldn't suffer because some Senators are standing in the way of that compromise. That is why we have proposed a 1-year extension of last year's 3.4 percent rate. We don't want it to double. The extension will allow us to craft a long-term solution to mounting college debt without harming students in the short term. However, a number of Senators met at my direction this morning at 9 o'clock, and there is progress being made. Maybe we can come up with a compromise. It will be imperfect, like a lot of things that happen legislatively, but it will be a way for us to move forward. The meeting went very well. It was done in Senator DURBIN's office. Democrats and Republicans attended that meeting. I think we are making some progress.

KEEP STUDENT LOANS AFFORDABLE ACT OF 2013—MOTION TO PROCEED

Mr. REID. I move to proceed to Calendar No. 124, S. 1238, Senator REED's student loan bill.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will report the bill by title.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (S. 1238) to amend the Higher Education Act of 1965 to extend the current reduced interest rate for undergraduate Federal Direct Stafford Loans for 1 year, to modify required distribution rules for pension plans, and for other purposes.

SCHEDULE

Mr. REID. Mr. President, following the remarks of Senator MCCONNELL, the time until noon will be equally divided and controlled between the two leaders, with each Senator permitted to speak for up to 10 minutes each.

At noon there will be a cloture vote on the motion to proceed on S. 1238, the student loan bill.

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

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

Mr. MCCONNELL. For more than a month, I have been coming to the floor to talk about student loan reform. I have said that to an outside observer, this is an issue that should have been an easy bipartisan slam dunk. I have noted that the proposals put forward by both President Obama and congressional Republicans have been strikingly similar. We both agree on the need for a permanent reform, and we agree on the need to help all students and not just some of them. Yet here we are after the July 1 deadline and Democrats are still blocking bipartisan student loan reform.

You have to ask yourself why. It is because they have prioritized politics over helping students. There are basically two different Democratic groups battling for supremacy: a more responsible reform-permanently faction and a more political campaign-permanently faction.

In the first group are the sensible Democratic Senators who agree with both President Obama and Republicans that it is time to finally solve this issue. Washington should actually help students and stop using them as pawns in a political chess match. They support the bipartisan compromise plan put forward by Democratic, Republican, and Independent Senators alike.

Unfortunately, this faction is opposed and outnumbered by the campaign-permanently Democrats. They are the ones whom I suspect would actually prefer to see rates lapse so they can manufacture another campaign issue. To hear the musings of some top Democrats, one would have to conclude that the Democratic leadership is on the side of campaigning permanently and against helping students.

As the majority leader put it a few weeks ago: "[We're] not looking for compromise."

Another Democratic Senator in leadership boasted a goal in this debate was to show "the difference between the two parties on a key issue."

I mean, this is just the kind of thing that makes people so cynical about Washington. Washington Democrats yell and wave their arms about the need for something, and then they appear to do everything possible behind the scenes to sabotage it, apparently so they can manufacture a politically convenient crisis. They are doing it on student loans, and they have been doing it with nominations too.

All week it seems they have been breathlessly telling any reporter who will listen that we have a nominations crisis around here; that Republicans are holding up the President's nominees. It is really laughable.

To hear some of the over-the-top rhetoric, one would think Republicans have blocked all of the President's second-term Cabinet nominees. But then, of course, you would be entirely wrong.

The truth is, since the President swore his oath of office in January, the Senate has confirmed every single Cabinet pick that has been brought up for a vote—every single one of them.

Let me repeat that. Every single one that has been brought up for a vote, all of them have been confirmed. Many of them have been confirmed on unanimous or nearly unanimous votes. Yesterday, the ranking Republican on the Environment and Public Works Committee announced his support for an up-or-down vote on Gina McCarthy's nomination to be EPA Administrator. So there is no question she is going to be confirmed.

It is clear that facts are getting in the way of the Democrats' arguments, which is why they are forced to gin up this fake—absolutely fake—nominations "crisis." It is why we see them bringing out all the nominees who have been appointed to office either illegally or who are exceedingly controversial. Democrats themselves have delayed consideration of these nominees literally for months—because the majority leader determines the timing—so they could pull them all out of the woodwork at the same time, in the hopes the Senate would reject them.

Democrats are out there daring the Senate to do it. They want it so badly it appears to be their goal. And there is a reason for this. It is because the far-left base seems to be getting fed up with the democratic process. The big labor bosses are sick of waiting for the special interest legislative kickbacks they must feel they are owed, and now they know that altering the rules of our democracy is the only way to get what they want.

This isn't going to work. The facts show the truth, and the truth is that any crisis over nominations is a crisis of Washington Democrats' own making—one they have stirred up intentionally—an absolutely manufactured crisis by any objective analysis.

As of last night, there were 140 nominees pending in various committees.