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Senate

The Senate met at 9:30 a.m. and was called to order by the Honorable BRIAN SCHATZ, a Senator from the State of Hawaii.

PRAYER

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

Let us pray.

Eternal God, we find joy in obeying Your commands. With all our hearts, we thank You for Your guidance that keeps us on the road of abundant living. Today, make our lawmakers instruments of Your providence, measuring up to the challenges of these momentous times. As they seek to honor Your great Name, transform their common days into transfiguring and redemptive moments. Cleanse the fountains of their hearts from all that defiles, making them fit vessels to be used for Your honor. Guide today's deliberations, debates, and decisions.

We pray in Your holy 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 bill clerk read the following letter:

U.S. SENATE,
PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE,
Washington, DC, February 27, 2014.

To the Senate:

Under the provisions of rule I, paragraph 3, of the Standing Rules of the Senate, I hereby appoint the Honorable BRIAN SCHATZ, a Sen-

ator from the State of Hawaii, to perform the duties of the Chair.

PATRICK J. LEAHY,
President pro tempore.

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

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

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

CHILD CARE AND DEVELOPMENT BLOCK GRANT ACT OF 2014—MOTION TO PROCEED

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I move to proceed to Calendar No. 309, the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will report the motion. The bill clerk read as follows:

Motion to proceed to Calendar No. 309, S. 1086, a bill to reauthorize and improve the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act of 1990, and for other purposes.

SCHEDULE

Mr. REID. Mr. President, following my remarks and those of the Republican leader, the Senate will be in a period of morning business for one hour. The majority will control the first half and the Republicans the final half.

Following morning business the Senate will resume consideration of S. 1982, the veterans benefits bill.

I filed cloture on the substitute amendment and the underlying bill. As a result the filing deadline for first-degree amendments is 10:30 this morning and for second-degree amendments it is 1:30 p.m.

At 2 p.m. there will be a series of votes in relation to the veterans bill. We also expect to consider the nomination of Michael Connor to be Deputy Secretary of the Interior today.

PROTECTING VETERANS

Mr. President, there are lots of issues on which Democrats and Republicans

will always disagree. That is OK. But, historically, Democrats and Republicans have been able to agree on one issue: Congress should do everything in its power to protect those who risk their lives to protect our country.

I had hoped this work period would be more bipartisan; that the Senate could tackle issues and would be able to stop the political games we have seen so often from the minority.

That is why I scheduled floor time for a bill to expand health care and job training for veterans of the Armed Forces—a very, very comprehensive bill, worked on by the Veterans Affairs' Committee, led by Senator SANDERS. The bill is loaded, as Senator SANDERS and I discussed yesterday in detail, with Republican provisions that he put in the bill.

Democrats and Republicans alike should be able to support this bill, which is sponsored, as I have indicated, by Senator SANDERS from Vermont.

Democrats were even willing to work with our Republican colleagues to consider relevant amendments to this legislation. So it was disappointing—but, sadly, not surprising—when Republicans almost immediately injected base partisan politics into a debate over a bill that should—should—be bipartisan, insisting on an unrelated amendment on Iran that they knew would kill the bill.

I do not know what they say to the 26 veterans groups. Millions of veterans really supported this bill and did everything they could to help the chairman of the committee, the junior Senator from Vermont, to move this bill forward. But they did it on an unrelated amendment on Iran that they knew would kill the bill. I do not know all the reasons, but we had a number of speeches, especially one from Dr. COBURN, the junior Senator from Oklahoma, who came to the floor and had questions about the bill.

I did not agree with all of his assertions, but he has a right to dispute

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



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what is in the bill, and he wanted to offer amendments to the bill. We agreed he should be able to offer amendments to the bill, but the Republicans, I guess, are in turmoil internally and did not want him to be able to offer any amendments that they may have to vote for or vote against, so they figured the way to do it is to just kill the bill.

I hope all the veterans groups have witnessed this contortion the Republicans have done to defeat this bill—because it will be defeated. That was their aim from the very beginning.

Like our support for veterans, the Senate's Iran sanctions policy has historically been solidly bipartisan. The idea of Iran obtaining a nuclear weapon is unthinkable. Democrats and Republicans always worked together on this policy. Iran should not have nuclear capability. We all agree on that—I hope so at least. I know on this side of the aisle we do. But it seems Republicans are trying to erase that history and politicize an issue that has historically been above partisanship.

They are trying now—the Republicans—to mislead the American public by saying that a bipartisan majority supports moving forward with new sanctions right now. Of course, it is wrong. Absolutely, of course, it is wrong.

In fact, many Senators, including some who have cosponsored the new sanctions bill, believe we should not move forward with the bill at this time or on this important bill for veterans. It should not be used as an effort to kill this veterans bill.

But in addition to that, 10 committee chairs wrote a letter to me saying: Do not do anything now. They are some of the biggest supporters of Israel there are. But we also have Israel's strongest supporter, AIPAC, also agreeing it is not the time now to bring a sanctions package to the floor. AIPAC was unequivocal in its request for a delay on additional sanctions. In fact, this is what they said: "Stopping the Iranian nuclear program should rest on bipartisan support and . . . there should not be a vote at this time on the measure."

Many veterans groups have also come out against including the Iran amendment on this bill, including virtually every veterans organization but especially the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, consisting of millions and millions of veterans. We also have the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America saying: Do not do it at this time. We need help. We, the veterans, need help. This legislation would give us that help. Here is specifically what the American Legion said:

Sanctions against Iran have no place in a U.S. Senate debate over legislation that aims to expand health care, education opportunities, employment and other benefits for veterans.

But Iran should make no mistake. We know that. If they fail to comply with the current interim agreement or fail to make progress toward a com-

prehensive agreement eliminating their nuclear weapons development efforts, Congress will act without hesitation to pass additional sanctions. We have said that time and time again.

That decision will be made in the interest of our national security, not on a partisan ploy. There is too much at stake to play politics with our Nation's Iran policy. Likewise, Republicans should stop putting American veterans at risk and help Democrats pass this crucial legislation.

Shame on the Republicans for bringing base politics into a bill to help the veterans. I have learned that the Republicans here in the Senate have many different ways of saying no, but, as always, it is just plain obstruction. I am sorry to say, again, on a bill to help millions of veterans.

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

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

THE IRS

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, today is an important day. It is the last day of the so-called comment period when Americans can officially register their opinions on the IRS's latest effort to suppress free speech. So far, nearly 100,000 comments have come through—100,000. Nearly every one I have seen is opposed.

Just to put things in perspective, that is basically the largest number of comments ever—for a rule like this. Even the head of the IRS said he saw more comments on this proposal than ever before "on any regulation," and that was 70,000 comments ago; 70,000 comments ago the Commissioner of the IRS said this was the most comments he had seen on any regulation.

So people are certainly making their voices heard—and loudly—and the message they are broadcasting is pretty clear: Leave the First Amendment alone. Leave it alone. Get out of the censorship and harassment business. Stick to the job you are actually supposed to be doing.

Let's be clear. The folks who are logging opinions like these run straight across the political spectrum.

Labor unions are upset. Business organizations are upset. Civil liberties activists are upset. Taxpayer groups are upset. Grassroots groups right across the political map are upset at what they view as an assault on their First Amendment rights. All you have to do is read their own words.

One group of primarily left-leaning First Amendment advocates said the new regulation would "impose serious burdens on free speech and hinder the democratic processes it serves."

An official with the ACLU described the IRS's proposed regulation as creating "the worst of all worlds." The proposal, he wrote, could "seriously chill legitimate issue advocacy from nonprofits on [both] the right and left," and would "disproportionately affect small, poor nonprofits that cannot afford the legal counsel to guarantee compliance. . . ."

Here is what one labor union had to say:

Given the history of misuse and abuse of the IRS' immense powers in the not-so-distant past, it is disappointing and disturbing that this fundamental principle has been forgotten and that this . . . [regulation] is the IRS' proposed response to its recent missteps.

So left, right, center—folks understand what a threat this rule poses to the most cherished of civil liberties.

They also realize that a group the administration favors today could easily become a group the IRS targets tomorrow. That is why this fight is so important, why it is so inappropriate to hand this kind of power to any administration. I do not care what party the President is in. That is why I, along with several of my colleagues, recently sent a letter to the new Commissioner of the IRS explaining in some detail why the agency's proposal was such a bad idea, a terrible idea.

In that letter we also reminded the Commissioner of something else: The ball is in his court on this one. The ball is in his court. He could stop this rule tomorrow. And given the comments he made about restoring integrity to the IRS when the Senate voted to confirm him, that is exactly what we expect of him. In fact, that was essentially the mandate on which he was confirmed.

So here is the choice before him. This is the choice the Commissioner of the IRS has. He can either fulfill that mandate to the American people by restoring integrity to an agency they no longer trust, he can be a hero and say no to those who are pressuring him to crack down on the First Amendment rights of ordinary citizens—that is what the IRS Commissioner told Richard Nixon. He said: I am not going to cooperate with your efforts to target your enemies—or he can serve political masters over in the White House, and he can implement regulations that would erode our most fundamental civil liberties, regulations that would almost certainly lead to the harassment of conservative groups today and, quite possibly, the harassment of left-leaning groups in the future. In fact, a recent letter Representative CAMP received from the Treasury Department appears to suggest that unions in particular have a lot to fear from this proposal.

So, look. Now is the time to act. America's free speech advocates are standing with one voice. Thousands upon thousands made their voices heard in the opinion process. I suspect millions more are right there with them in spirit. Some who oppose this rule picked the President in the last election. Some voted for his opponent. Some may have even cast a ballot for another person entirely. But what unites us is our love of the liberties that have allowed Americans to disagree civilly for centuries.

Commissioner Koskinen, do the right thing. Stop this regulation.

IRAN

Later today the Senate will vote on the motions related to S. 1982, a bill

that was not considered in committee, that greatly expands spending without any realistic offset and would vastly overwhelm the Veterans' Administration health care system. It is shameful that Senate Democrats would seek to score political points by rushing to the floor a bill which the committee did not consider and which could otherwise have been handled in a bipartisan manner through the regular order.

Unfortunately, it has become standard practice around here for the majority to pursue partisan legislation in a sort of "take it or leave it" manner, so it is unsurprising that nobody other than the majority leader and the committee chairman have been allowed the opportunity to amend the bill. Senators on both sides have been shut out of the legislative process. For example, we cannot even vote on the ranking member's veterans amendment—legislation I support—which will not add to the deficit. I am a cosponsor of this legislation, which provides full COLA restoration for servicemembers entering the military in 2014, provides advanced appropriations for VA mandatory accounts, improves services and benefits for victims of military sexual trauma, enhances benefits for survivors and dependents of disabled veterans, encourages the hiring of veterans, and, unlike the Sanders bill, is fully paid for.

As for the Iran sanctions language in the Burr amendment, as I noted yesterday, there is significant disagreement between the President and many Members from both parties in both the House and the Senate concerning the best way to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

The Iranian regime has carried out its best attempt at a charm offensive to forestall not only the implementation but the legislative consideration of even tougher sanctions should the regime fail to fulfill its commitments according to November's interim agreement.

The interim agreement included a Joint Plan of Action, agreed to by Iran. According to that Joint Plan of Action, the U.S. administration, acting consistent with the respective roles of the President and the Congress, will refrain from imposing new nuclear-related sanctions. The agreement is spelled out clearly to the Iranians: Acting consistent with our respective roles. The Iranians can read the plain language and understand that this Congress did not agree to renounce additional sanctions. We did not agree to do that. Yet the majority leader is determined not to allow a single vote on the Kirk-Menendez bill, which could be fully debated by this body prior to a vote. We will not have that debate, apparently, nor will we vote on any amendments related to the bill before us.

I yield the floor.

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 will be in a period of morning business for 1 hour, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each, with the time equally divided and controlled between the two leaders or their designees, with the majority controlling the first half.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from New Mexico.

VETERANS LEGISLATION

Mr. HEINRICH. Mr. President, lest we forget, more than 30,000 brave Americans are still serving in harm's way in Afghanistan. Hundreds of thousands of men and women in uniform are serving around the world. They all volunteered. In return for their volunteerism, we made a number of promises. The ability to maintain the strongest and most dedicated military force in the world depends on our Nation's ability to keep those promises.

I am a proud cosponsor of the legislation being debated this week, S. 1982, which is perhaps the most significant veterans legislation to come before Congress in many years. This legislation has the strong support of virtually every veterans organization in the country, including the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Disabled American Veterans, the Vietnam Veterans of America, and the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. These organizations support the bill because it renews our promise to our veterans.

I am very fortunate to represent the State of New Mexico, which has one of the highest rates of military volunteerism in the Nation. New Mexico, a small State of 2 million people, is home to more than 170,000 veterans, and 2,000 New Mexicans endured the Bataan Death March during World War II.

New Mexico is home to many of our Nation's finest military installations: Kirtland Air Force Base, the Air Force's sixth largest base, with over 100 partners and a strategic role in ensuring our Nation's safe, secure, and reliable nuclear weapons complex; Cannon Air Force Base, the fastest growing Air Force base in the country, leading the fight in special operations; Holloman Air Force Base, an indispensable Air Force base with unparalleled airspace now and into the future; and White Sands Missile Range, the largest military installation in the Nation, with a testing and training environment that is unmatched anywhere in the world.

Additionally, New Mexico's National Guard employs roughly 3,800 full-time and part-time military personnel.

Collectively, there are 18,000 military personnel serving today in New Mexico. Volunteerism is not simply a career choice for New Mexicans; it is a way of life. It is ingrained in our State's rich

history of putting community and country first.

The bill before us today renews our promise to all of them and to all of those who are willing to lay down their lives for their country. It provides benefits to all generations of veterans and their families, and it eliminates the cost-of-living adjustment penalty on military retirees.

The legislation incorporates bills and ideas from both Democrats and Republicans to address the disability claims backlog, including one of my own. Across New Mexico I have heard from too many veterans who are frustrated with the delays they experience in receiving their disability benefits.

Last June Senator HELLER of Nevada and I introduced the Veterans Benefits Claims Faster Filing Act, which requires the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to ensure that every veteran is informed of the vast differences in times for processing compensation claims when filing a fully developed claim versus a non-fully developed paper claim.

It takes, on average, 113 days for veterans to receive a final disability rating if they file a fully developed claim online. Compare that to over a year if they file a non-fully developed paper claim. Filing claims online through the Fully Developed Claims Program accelerates turnaround time and makes processing more efficient. Doing so also provides an additional year of retroactive benefits as an incentive to veterans who file a fully developed claim.

The Faster Filing Act and other legislative efforts represent a collective effort to reduce the backlog and ensure that our veterans receive the benefits they have earned.

I am also proud to have cosponsored legislation introduced by my colleague from Alaska Senator BEGICH to provide advanced appropriations for all—all—VA spending accounts. This would ensure that veterans receive uninterrupted access to the benefits they have earned, even in the midst of a government shutdown such as the one that so irresponsibly occurred last fall. It is unacceptable that veterans would fall victim to the partisan politics of a government shutdown. The legislation today includes a fix to ensure that never happens again.

The bill also helps put veterans back to work. It reauthorizes a 2-year extension for the Veterans Retraining Assistance Program, which retrains unemployed veterans for high-demand occupations. It requires the VA to establish a 3-year program to provide young veterans under 30 the opportunity to serve in an internship that would pair veterans with private sector employers so they can gain civilian work experience.

The bill expands the VA's successful caregivers program to provide caregiver benefits to veterans of all generations, in a similar manner as post-9/11 veterans.