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Senate

The Senate met at 2 p.m. and was called to order by the President pro tempore (Mr. LEAHY).

PRAYER

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

Let us pray.

King of glory and peace, Your love sustains us. Each day You give us Your peace and joy, providing rest to the weary and renewing the strength of those exhausted by life's trials.

In Your compassion lead our law-makers to Your desired destination. When they cry to You for help, be their strength and shield. Lord, You are peace, joy, gladness, gentleness, beauty, and truth. Be our protector, guardian, and defender from this time forth even forever more.

We pray in Your sovereign Name. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The President pro tempore 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.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. The majority leader is recognized.

BANK ON STUDENTS EMERGENCY LOAN REFINANCING ACT—MOTION TO PROCEED

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I move to proceed to Calendar No. 409, the Warren college affordability legislation.

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

The bill clerk read as follows:

A bill (S. 2432) to amend the Higher Education Act of 1965 to provide for the refinancing of certain Federal student loans, and for other purposes.

SCHEDULE

Mr. REID. Mr. President, following my remarks and those of the Republican leader, if any, the Senate will be in a period of morning business until 5:30 p.m. this evening. At 5:30 there will be three cloture votes on nominations of U.S. district judges: Lauck of Virginia, Sorokin of Massachusetts, and Boulware of Nevada.

(Ms. HIRONO assumed the Chair.)

LAS VEGAS TRAGEDY

Mr. REID. Madam President, it is with a lot of sadness that I come to the floor today following the tragic event that took place in Las Vegas yesterday.

I spoke with Sheriff Gillespie this morning.

Two police officers were having lunch in a pizza restaurant on Nellis Boulevard in Las Vegas, and two people walked in, shot them both and killed them, took their guns and their badges, put some kind of a flag over them representing whomever they were representing, and walked across the street to Wal-Mart and killed an innocent woman. Then they killed themselves. All the details are not available, but there is no question they were murdered in cold blood—for no reason other than the weirdness or craziness of this couple.

So all of Nevada mourns the loss of our neighbors, our friends and, in the case of Officers Alyn Beck and Igor Soldo, our protectors. My sympathy goes to their family members and loved ones. This hits very close to home.

Many years ago when I practiced law, I brought a fine young man into my law firm named Claude Zobell. Claude has been with me for all these years. He ran my Washington office. He went on to become dean of a law school, and he is now an attorney for a hotel chain in Tennessee. But he has helped me all these years fill out my financial disclosures. His nephew, his wife's mom's son, was one of the police officers killed. Anne, Claude Zobell's daughter,

works for me here in Washington. I talked to him this morning. The cousin was killed. The pain that people go through in these unnecessary tragedies and senseless shootings is awful.

No words can undo the unspeakable act which claimed the lives of these two men. They have families—wives, children. So that their families know, not only is Nevada grieving but all of America is grieving.

My thanks go to the law enforcement officers who were called in after the killings to work at that scene and the scene across the street, putting their lives in peril every step of the way. It seems that our law enforcement officers respond to these scenes every day—in Santa Barbara, in Seattle, and on and on with the names of cities where people are shot. I so appreciate these law officers every day putting their lives on the line.

We take for granted here in the Senate the people looking after us. There are people out there who are so evil, who try every day to do harm to not only the Presiding Officer, not only me, but to people who work in these buildings, the tourists that come to these buildings. So if there are any complaints about having too much security, come to me and I will try to explain why we need it.

So without elaborating, my deepest sympathies are with the families of those who died.

We in Congress have a duty to put in place legislation that helps prevent these deranged, weird, and evil people who carry out such savage acts of violence. A step in the right direction would be background checks so that people who are criminals, who are deranged, can't buy a gun. The American people are depending on us to pass legislation to prevent gun violence to safeguard our communities, schools, and families.

There is not a single Senator I know of who says: Let's get rid of all the guns; let's make sure that people don't

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



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have guns. We are not saying that. Listen to what we are saying.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Madam President, we have a lot to do this week. We need to confirm some people as we are still way behind.

Senator SHELTON WHITEHOUSE—the junior Senator from Rhode Island has been a real trooper—has been so enthused and so invigorated; he has traveled the country alerting the American people to the dangers of what is happening to our world regarding climate. It has been a one-man show. Tonight he is going to work with a number of Senate Democrats in highlighting the need for congressional action to fight climate change. I applaud him for his work on this issue. He has focused like no other on our changing world.

VETERANS HEALTH CARE

The care of our Nations' veterans is another issue we need to talk about, and we will talk about that today, also.

Last Thursday Senator BERNIE SANDERS, Chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, and Senator JOHN MCCAIN announced a bipartisan agreement on legislation to address patient wait times at VA hospitals. The details of the agreement are not in writing yet. At least they weren't a few minutes ago. They are being drafted. The legislation is a comprehensive approach to ensure that veterans are getting the care they deserve. This agreement is very important to all Nevadans, to all Americans, and of course it is extremely important to countless veterans and their families.

Recently, along with America and this body, I was shocked to learn that VA hospitals all over the country—and in Nevada in particular—were affected by dangerous wait times for patients. That is unacceptable. This legislation worked on by SANDERS and MCCAIN is not going to solve all the problems that exist, but it is certainly putting the VA on the right track.

This bipartisan agreement aims to improve accountability throughout the entire Veterans Affairs Administration, holding VA officials responsible for poor job performance. One of the things we learned is that they covered up wait times. Why? Because by doing that they would get bonuses at the end of the year. So that will stop.

This legislation will also take big steps in addressing accessibility to health care at VA institutions nationwide. The agreement will allow veterans facing long delays to seek health care outside of the VA—in private doctors' offices, community health centers, military hospitals, and other places that SANDERS and MCCAIN are now working on.

Their legislation will expedite the hiring for VA doctors and nurses and authorize 26 new medical facilities nationwide.

In addition to improving access and accountability throughout the Veterans Administration, this bipartisan agreement addresses other important issues such as GI eligibility for sur-

viving spouses and in-state tuition to veterans enrolling in colleges and universities.

Much will depend on the details of the final bill, but Senators SANDERS and MCCAIN have put together an agreement which is good for American veterans and our country. I commend them. I commend especially Senator SANDERS for his leadership in this issue since he has been working on veterans care. It is a clear indication how much he values this Nation's servicemembers. In JOHN MCCAIN we could not have a more exemplary person dealing with VA health care as a result of his having spent long periods of time in VA facilities around the country as he was recovering from his ordeal in Vietnam. So I appreciate him in many different ways, but today for his labors in bringing both sides to the table to get something done on behalf of our veterans.

I look forward to this legislation coming before us, and I will be happy to schedule a vote on it as quickly as possible. America's veterans are depending on us to complete this legislation to ensure that our veterans get the care and resources they were promised by a grateful Nation.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

It appears there is no one rushing to the floor to speak, so I would ask unanimous consent that the Presiding Officer announce the business of the day.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will be in a period of morning business until 5:30 p.m., with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

Mr. REID. Madam President, I note the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Tennessee.

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

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

Mr. ALEXANDER. Thank you, Madam President.

HIGHER EDUCATION ACT

Last year something happened in Washington, DC, that most of us in the Senate and most Americans would like to see more of. The President and the Republican House of Representatives and a bipartisan group here in the Senate worked together to reform the student loan program. It is a lot of money, and it affects a lot of students.

Every year the Federal Government loans about \$100 billion to students who attend colleges and universities

around this country. We have 6,000 of those higher education institutions. In addition to those loans—which, of course, students pay back—the Federal Government grants about \$33 or \$34 billion each year in Pell grants—up to \$5,645—which students don't pay back.

Last year we were in this usual pattern that has developed around the Congress where student loans become a semi-annual political stunt. Every 2 years, before an election, one party or the other would show up with a student loan proposal to try to appeal to students, hoping that students and others in America would reward them with their votes.

Last year we changed that for new student loans. The President and the Republican House of Representatives and the Democratic Senate in a bipartisan way worked together to reform the student loan program by applying a market-priced system to the \$100 billion or so we loan every year, and saying to the students: We will give you the benefit of that. You don't have to wait for Congress to engage in its semi-annual political stunt to know what your loan is.

The result was that for loans for undergraduate students, which are 85 percent of all the loans, we were able to cut in half the interest rate on student loans for undergraduate students in America without raising taxes and without raising the debt. That resulted from overwhelming bipartisan support in the Senate. It had strong support of the chairman of the Senate education committee, the HELP Committee, Senator HARKIN and I supported it, as did many others. It worked the way the Senate is supposed to work.

This body is for the purpose of taking an important issue, which student loans are, having an extended debate on it until we come to a consensus, which we did, and then coming to a result the American people could approve. We did that as well.

Now this week we are seeing something entirely different. Senate Democrats would interrupt a serious discussion that is going on in the Senate education committee about reauthorizing the Higher Education Act, which was first enacted in 1965. Senator HARKIN, the Senator from Iowa, is our chairman. I am the ranking Republican on that committee. We have had 10 hearings. We have been hard at work. We have had terrific testimony, some very good ideas about the student loan program and about a lot of issues affecting higher education. We are doing what we are supposed to do in the Senate: We are trying to come to a conclusion so that we can recommend in a bipartisan way to this full body what to do about higher education for the next several years, including student loans.

Yet, all of a sudden, we hear that Senate Democrats want to show up on the floor with a partisan, political stunt that interrupts the work of the Senate education committee, and here is what they would do: They would