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Senate

The Senate met at 10 a.m. and was called to order by the President pro tempore (Mr. HATCH).

PRAAYER

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

Let us pray.

Eternal Spirit, thank You for sustaining us with Your steadfast love and unchanging mercy. Without Your compassion, all of our efforts would be in vain. Your wondrous deeds keep us secure.

May our lawmakers remember that true greatness comes through service. May they embrace their accountability to You to be responsible stewards of the opportunities You provide them each day. Lord, strengthen them in their challenging work, reminding them often of the fragility of life. Empower them to trust You without wavering.

We pray in Your great 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 PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. COTTON). The majority leader is recognized.

SENATE AGENDA

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, this week looks to be a busy one in the Senate. We have a lot of important legislation to consider. We are hoping our friends across the aisle will work with us to do so in an expeditious manner. For instance, we will begin the process

of finishing our work on the balanced budget before the Senate, which the Senate passed just before Easter. Passing that balanced budget was a big moment for the new Senate. For years, the budget process was ignored almost entirely in this Chamber, and the idea of a balanced budget passing was basically unthinkable. But now the Senate is under new management. Things are changing. Soon we will conference with the House to work out a final budget that will be passed by the full Congress. That is just the latest example of Congress getting back to work. I know a lot of Americans are happy to see that.

But the budget is far from the only item on the Senate's near-term agenda. The Senate will soon consider bipartisan legislation that is designed to ensure that seniors on Medicare don't lose access to their doctors. It is a solution to a broken Medicare payment system that has vexed congressional leaders of both parties for years. It would mean an end to the annual exercise of Congress passing a temporary fix to the problem one year and then coming right back to the very same cliff the next year without actually solving the underlying problem.

So the fact that we have a bipartisan reform bill here is significant in itself. The fact that it passed the House overwhelmingly is even more significant. It doesn't mean the legislation is perfect. It doesn't mean we won't have some disagreements about it. But I do think the bill deserves a vote, and it is my hope that the Senate will soon take one.

We will also continue to work to pass the bipartisan Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act. It is legislation designed to prevent women and children from being sold into modern-day slavery. It was reported out of the Judiciary Committee with the support of every single Democrat, and the Senate took up this bill with the consent of every single Democrat. There is no rea-

son they should now turn around and filibuster this antislavery bill at this point. As a victims advocate put it, Senate Democrats should stop choosing a phantom problem over real victims.

A large, bipartisan majority of the Senate has voted repeatedly to end a very regrettable Democratic filibuster of this antislavery bill. It will only take a few more votes from our friends across the aisle to bring hope to children in chains and women suffering in the shadows. So we have been reaching out to our friends to work with them to end this Democratic filibuster of human rights legislation. The Senate should pass this bipartisan bill right away, and as soon as that happens, we will turn to the Loretta Lynch nomination.

Committees in the new Senate are also working hard to advance more bipartisan legislation. We already saw the Intelligence Committee vote 14 to 1 to approve bipartisan legislation aimed at protecting the personal and financial information of middle-class Americans from cyber criminals. Over in the Finance Committee, we see the top Republican and the top Democrat continue to discuss the best way forward to increase American exports with new trade legislation. Today, we will see another product of negotiations between a top committee Republican and a top committee Democrat—legislation aimed at reforming our education system—considered in the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee. We hope to bring all of these issues to the Senate floor for debate in the very near future.

Another important bipartisan bill that will be considered by committee today is the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act. The Foreign Relations Committee is set to mark that up today. The legislation is supported by a large number of Democrats, and it is no wonder why. The bill is aimed at giving Congress and the American people a say—a say—in reviewing and approving an international agreement

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



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with such wide-ranging consequences. And the American people should have a say.

The interim agreement we saw from the administration would not only allow Iran to continue to enrich uranium and retain thousands of centrifuges but also allow it to continue researching and developing even more advanced centrifuges. In other words, it seems more like an agreement built around Iran's terms rather than a plan to advance what should be our national goal, which is ending Iran's nuclear program.

It is a matter of great concern not just to our country but to the entire world. The concerns of our allies and partners with regard to Iran's aggressive behavior throughout the Middle East were made clear when I recently led a Senate delegation to Israel, Jordan, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

This is a gravely important matter, and the American people aren't just spectators here; they and the representatives they elect deserve a seat at the table too. Today's bipartisan action in the Foreign Relations Committee will help ensure they do.

As I mentioned earlier, there will be a lot of activity in the Senate this week on a range of issues. It is good for the functioning of the Senate, but it also helps underline one clear point: The new Congress is back to work again on behalf of the American people.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Democratic leader is recognized.

NATIONAL EQUAL PAY DAY

Mr. REID. Mr. President, people at home cannot see it, but every desk here on the Senate floor has a name on it. Mine says "Mr. REID." Right behind me is one that says "Mrs. MURRAY." To my right is one that says "Mr. McCANNELL." Why do I mention this? Today is National Equal Pay Day, a day that symbolizes how far into 2015 American women must work to earn what their male counterparts earned in 2014. That day is today. Women basically worked for nothing until today. This pay disparity between men and women doing the same work is known as the wage gap. Unlike the desks here in the Chamber, the wage gap does not bear a visible stamp of ownership, but make no mistake—Republicans in Congress absolutely own the wage gap. Their names are all over it. The Republicans

refusal to address income disparities makes them responsible for the additional 3 months and 14 days that American women work to earn what their male counterparts earn doing the exact same work at the exact same time.

Who are these working American women who are being forced to work for months just to catch up on wages? They are our daughters, our wives, our granddaughters, and our neighbors. Republicans' repeated filibusters of equal pay legislation makes them responsible for working women in our families having to make due on 78 cents for every dollar their male counterparts make.

Democrats have tried repeatedly to pass Senator MIKULSKI's Paycheck Fairness Act, which would take away the disparity. It is pretty simple: If a man and a woman do the same work—no different—they should be paid the same amount of money. Very simple. We repeatedly tried to pass this simple legislation. This legislation provides working American women with the tools they need to close the wage gap. Yet, time and time again, Republicans have stonewalled this most basic issue of fairness. Five years ago, the Republicans filibustered the Paycheck Fairness Act. Two years later, the Republicans did the same thing. Last year, they blocked the bill two times. Just last month in the budget debate, Senator MIKULSKI gave the Republicans another chance. Once again, the Republicans blocked it. Five times in 5 years Republicans have blocked equal pay for women. Five times in 5 years Republicans have told their very own sisters, daughters, and wives, and, of course, their grandchildren that they are not interested in fixing this unfair income disparity. That is why I say the Republicans own the wage gap. They own it.

Today, as we recognize Equal Pay Day, I hope my Republican colleagues come to their senses and address this injustice which is hurting millions of American families.

American women deserve equal pay for equal work. My daughter deserves equal pay for equal work.

Would the Presiding Officer announce the business of the day.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

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

MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, there will now be a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

The assistant Democratic leader.

ILLINOIS TORNADOES

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, last week on Thursday, the evil forces of nature struck in Fairdale, IL. Since

that moment of terrible loss—two lives and many injuries, terrible property destruction—we have seen the better angels of our nature come forward.

This is an all-too-common picture in my part of the world in central Illinois and downstate Illinois. This is the devastation from a tornado of dramatic power and strength. Two twisters—one of them a category EF-4, with wind speeds of up to 200 miles an hour—took through DeKalb and Ogle Counties and badly damaged the towns of Fairdale and Rochelle last Thursday evening. That picture tells part of the story of the tornadoes' path, where giant trees were uprooted, homes ripped from their foundations. The damage is stunning.

Sadly, two women, neighbors who lived in Fairdale, lost their lives in the event. Geraldine Schultz and a close friend and neighbor, Jacklyn Klosa, both fell victim to the tornado that struck their homes. Neighbors say the two friends were inseparable in life and both departed life at the same moment.

The tight-knit communities of Fairdale and Rochelle are pulling together today to help victims sort through the rubble. One tornado tracked a 25-mile continuous path from near Rochelle through Fairdale, to near Belvidere.

This is a photo of what was, until Thursday, a popular restaurant in the town of Rochelle, IL, about 80 miles from Chicago. Twelve people, including diners and staff, were inside Grubsteakers Restaurant when the tornado struck. It was a miracle. Everybody made it into the basement just in time before the twister hit. They all survived, though they were trapped in the basement for an hour and a half waiting for rescue crews to clear them.

A few people had to be treated for cuts and bruises. Everyone was covered in thick dust that had blown from overhead, but they lived through it, a terrible, terrifying ordeal. On Friday I spoke and again on Saturday with the director, the head of the Illinois Emergency Management Agency, James Joseph. Governor Rauner was out at the scene the next day after the tornado. We sent our staff there to monitor any possible Federal assistance that might be coordinated with the State and local effort.

We are continuing to gather the information together to see if there is a possibility of Federal help, but I have been very wary because of two recent experiences in Illinois—in Washington, IL, and Harrisburg—where tornado damage there looked so devastating and still did not meet the threshold qualification for Federal assistance.

When I spoke with Rochelle Mayor Chet Olson, and DeKalb County board chairman Mark Pietrowski, I told them to do their homework and keep track of their expenses but that it was a long shot for Federal help. I made it clear the delegation and I stand ready to help in any way we can, particularly working with the Governor.