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Senate

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

PRAYER

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

Let us pray.

God of grace and glory, on Your people place Your power. As we turn our hands and hearts in grateful praise to You, use us for Your glory.

Touch our Senators. Lift them from valleys of pessimism as You fill them with Your abiding hope. Prepare them to receive Your best gifts, helping them to remember that You are able to do more than they can ask for or imagine.

Thank You that You are the beginner of our yesterdays, the mystery of our today, and the hope for our tomorrows.

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 PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. COTTON). The majority leader is recognized.

RESTORING AMERICANS' HEALTH-CARE FREEDOM RECONCILIATION ACT

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, when Washington Democrats passed ObamaCare over the objections of the American people, they were confident Americans would soon warm up to this new law, but more than 5 years later,

the American people continue to oppose this unprecedented Democratic attack on their health care. Is it any wonder? When Americans think ObamaCare, they think increased costs, runaway premiums, surging deductibles, and tax hikes on the middle class. When Americans think ObamaCare, they think decreased choice, fewer doctors, far-away hospitals, and a frightening scarcity of options for too many when they get sick. When Americans think ObamaCare, they think broken promises and endless failure, imploding State-based exchanges, collapsing co-ops, insurers eyeing the exit door, fewer jobs, and the lie of the year: If you like your health care plan, you can keep it. It is not as though ObamaCare's structural failures are just going to go away. They are baked right into the law. They only seem to get worse as time moves along.

Just as we have seen costs rise, choices narrow, and failures mount, we have seen congressional Democrats block attempts to start over with real health care reform. Well, this week we finally have a chance to vote to end ObamaCare's cycle of broken promises and failures with just 51 votes. This week we will take up the Restoring Americans' Healthcare Freedom Reconciliation Act of 2015 that already passed the House of Representatives. It is a bill that will take the first steps necessary to build a bridge away from ObamaCare. By building upon the House's good work, this bill will also save billions in spending and eliminate more than a \$1 trillion tax burden on the American people.

By employing the same tactics Democrats used to help get ObamaCare across the finish line, this bill will not be subject to a filibuster. In other words, it cannot be blocked by defenders of ObamaCare's failed status quo. In other words, the President cannot be shielded from the weighty decision he will finally have to make when this

measure lands right on his desk. When the President picks up his pen, he will have a real choice to make. He may decide to stick to his rhetoric that the law is working better than even he intended and veto the bill, but he should instead decide to finally stand with the middle class that has suffered enough from this failed law and actually sign it. We will see. It is a choice the President has never faced before. It is a choice he is going to face after Senate action this week.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE NEW SENATE

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, on another matter, the new Republican Senate has been working hard to get Congress back to work over the past year. We have obviously had a lot of success. As I noted yesterday, the new Republican Senate will soon pass two very significant bipartisan bills for a second and final time: the bipartisan multiyear highway bill and the bipartisan replacement for No Child Left Behind. We will send them to the President for his signature.

These are the latest examples of a new Congress that is back to work on behalf of the American people. They are hardly the only examples we will be talking about. Take another important issue that languished for too long but passed the new Senate: cyber security. By a vote of 74 to 21, we ended years of Senate inaction on this issue by passing an important bipartisan cyber security bill that even the White House has endorsed. That bill was the product of a lot of hard work by the top Republican and the top Democrat on the Intelligence Committee. I am glad that the new, more open, and more inclusive Republican Senate made their cooperation possible because even though the old forces of gridlock tried to trip that bill up several times along the way, we kept moving forward, and we always knew we were doing the right thing for the American people.

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



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My hope is that we can ultimately get this bill into conference and send it to the President closer to its current form because the challenges posed by cyber attacks are real and they are growing. A cyber attack can be a deeply invasive attack on personal privacy. The voluntary information sharing provisions in the bill we passed are key to defeating cyber attacks and protecting the personal information of the people we represent.

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

THE PRESIDING OFFICER. The Democratic leader is recognized.

CYBER SECURITY

MR. REID. Mr. President, my friend the Republican leader talked about the old forces of gridlock when he talked about cyber security. He and his caucus were those old forces of gridlock. We tried for 5 years to pass a cyber security bill; it was filibustered every time. The bills, quite frankly, that were filibustered were very strong, good, in-depth bills. We passed a cyber security bill—better than nothing, but that is about it. It was not really a resoundingly good effort to go after the problems we are having with cyber security, but we finally got it done because the problems on the Republican side disappeared.

AFFORDABLE CARE ACT

MR. REID. Mr. President, my friend the Republican leader has an obsession with the Affordable Care Act, ObamaCare. He cannot give up on this obsession. The share of Americans without insurance is at the lowest point in history. And one need look no further than renowned Republican—Republican—columnist of the New York Times, David Brooks. Here is what he wrote. I am sorry to take so much time reading something that was written by this man who is a Republican columnist for the New York Times. Here is what he said. Regardless of what the Republican leader may claim, the Affordable Care Act continues to work. It is increasing quality health care coverage and improving care, and there is no question about that. Brooks noted that health care costs are rising at the lowest rate in years. He said:

The good news is that recently health care inflation has been at historic lows. As Jason Furman, the chairman of President Obama's Council of Economic Advisers, put it in a speech to the Hamilton Project last month, "Health care prices have grown at an annual rate of 1.6 percent since the Affordable Care Act was enacted in March 2010, the slowest rate for such a period in five decades—

Fifty years—

and those prices have grown at an even slower 1.1 percent rate over the 12 months ending in August 2015."

As a result of the slowdown in health care inflation, the Congressional Budget Office

keeps reducing its projections of the future cost of federal health programs like Medicare. As of October, projections for federal health care spending in the year 2020 were \$175 billion lower than projections made in August 2010. That would be a huge budget improvement.

"Historic lows" and hundreds of billions of dollars saved by the Federal Government tell me that ObamaCare is working.

Enough of this haranguing about ObamaCare from my Republican friend. One need only go home and people come up to you and say: You know, ObamaCare is so good.

My daughter, who could never get health insurance because she was a diabetic—now she can get it. No one with a preexisting disability can be denied insurance. Young men and women struggling to finish their college education can stay on their parents' health insurance until age 26. That is important. That is part of ObamaCare. Community health centers around this country are booming. Why? Because of the Affordable Care Act, we put \$11 billion in there to provide for those essential community health centers.

I will have more to say about this because I am sure the Republican leader is going to come and talk about what a great victory it was on this reconciliation, which is an anomaly that we face every year. They are passing something that is just to satisfy the haranguing about ObamaCare. It means nothing substantively. It will pass and go to the President. He will veto it in about 10 seconds, and, of course, the veto will certainly be sustained.

Even in Kentucky—here is what one article said in Kentucky:

In a state of 4.4 million people, 500,000 people gained coverage because of [ObamaCare in that State]—4 in 5 through Medicaid. The effects were particularly dramatic in one Appalachian county, where many coal jobs have vanished and the poverty rate is 23 percent. From 2013 to 2014, the proportion of residents lacking health coverage plummeted by half—from 13 percent to 6.6 percent.

Half a million Kentuckians are using the Affordable Care Act. That is more than 10 percent of the State's population.

There are all kinds of personal accounts of how this has literally saved people's lives. One account is of an uninsured mother and daughter. This is from a news article:

Amid the coal fields of eastern Kentucky, a small clinic that is part of the Big Sandy Health Care network furnishes daily proof of this state's full embrace of the Affordable Care Act.

It was here that Mindy Fleming handed a wad of tissues to Tiffany Coleman when she arrived, sleepless and frantic, with no health insurance and a daughter suffering a 103-degree fever and mysterious pain. "It will be all right," Fleming assured her, and it was. An hour later, Coleman had a WellCare card that paid for hospital tests, which found that 4-year-old Alexsis had an unusual bladder problem.

Quoting another Washington Post story:

[Dennis Blackburn] has a hereditary liver disorder, numbness in his hands and legs, back pain from folding his 6-foot-1-inch frame into 29-inch mine shafts as a young man, plus an abnormal heart rhythm—the likely vestige of having been struck by lightning 15 years ago in his tin-roofed farmhouse.

Blackburn was making small payments on an MRI he'd gotten at Pikeville Medical Center, the only hospital in a 150-mile radius, when he heard about Big Sandy's Shelby Valley Clinic. There he met Fleming, who helped him sign up for one of the managed-care Medicaid plans available in Kentucky.

So the facts never seem to get in the way of my Republican friend when it comes to ObamaCare—anything he could do to denigrate this system that is helping 17 million people.

NOMINATIONS

MR. REID. Mr. President, one need only watch the news to see how our Nation is facing threats abroad. We are doing the best we can, but as the world grows more dangerous, Senate Republicans continue to block and obstruct the President's national security. They are blocking the very people who could help us respond to these threats.

Take, for instance—for week after week after week—Azita Raji, who has been nominated to be our Ambassador to Sweden. Nearly 300 Swedish citizens have left to fight in Syria or Iraq, making this nation the second largest country of origin per capita for foreign fighters in Europe. The Swedish Government is on heightened alert for an attack. Yet the United States doesn't have a Senate-confirmed Ambassador to represent us in Stockholm.

Similar to Sweden, Norway is also dealing with the growing threat of terror, and some of their citizens have joined the radical ranks of foreign fighters, but due to Republican obstruction, our Nation does not have a confirmed Ambassador in Norway.

Sam Heins, a Minnesota attorney nominated by President Obama, has been pending on the floor since July. We are now in December. So I personally applaud the Presiding Officer today for finally removing the holds on these two good people. I appreciate it very much. He and others have held up these nominees, and it is unfortunate. It is gone. I am pleased. In the wake of the Paris attacks and threats across the continent, it is imperative that we have Ambassadors working with European governments at the highest levels.

Perhaps the most egregious example of Republican obstruction is the nomination of Adam Szubin. This man would lead—if he were approved in the Senate—a team within the Department of State that disrupts terrorist financing networks, cutting off money for terrorists so they cannot finance their attacks. Hand in hand, they work with the Treasury Department. You would think that such an important nominee would be quickly confirmed, but Mr. Szubin's nomination has been pending