

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. SULLIVAN). The majority leader is recognized.

APPROPRIATIONS AND TAX RELIEF AGREEMENT

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, I said yesterday that committees and Members from both sides were making important progress in the appropriations and tax relief negotiations.

As colleagues now know, last night the committees and Members reached agreement and filed legislation over in the House. I just participated in a productive meeting where the committees walked our conference through details of this legislation. I know our colleagues across the aisle are discussing the matter as well. I will have more to say on this soon. Now is the time for Members to review the legislation for themselves. I would encourage them to do so. I would also encourage Members to debate it.

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Democratic leader is recognized.

OMNIBUS AND TAX EXTENDERS AGREEMENT

Mr. REID. Mr. President, as the Republican leader mentioned, last night the Senate and House leaders finalized a bipartisan compromise that keeps our government open and funded and extends important tax policies for American families and businesses.

I said last night—define “last night.” The last email I got was 2:45 this morning from my chief of staff, who was one of the negotiators. Sometime in the darkness, the bill was finalized. When I say “the bill,” it is really two bills—a bipartisan compromise keeps our doors opened and funded and extends important tax policies for American businesses.

This was not an easy process. Members and our staffs worked intensely for weeks to craft this agreement. As I mentioned yesterday and I say again today, I appreciate the cooperation, expertise, and all the good work done by Speaker RYAN, Leader PELOSI, Senator McCONNELL, and their staffs. They were, I am told—and in all my dealings with them, I underscore and underline what my chief of staff Drew Willison, chief negotiator, said of the staff. They were a pleasure to work with. They

were professional and did exceptional work on the agreement that we reached.

It is a good compromise. The Presiding Officer, not being a longtime Member of Congress but a longtime legislator, knows that no legislation is perfect, but this is good legislation. This is truly a fine definition of legislation—the art of compromise. When we say “compromise,” it doesn’t mean anyone is doing away with their principles; what it simply means is that people can’t be bullheaded and unreasonable in what they are doing to accomplish their goals.

In spite of Republican majorities in the Senate and the House, we Democrats were able to ensure that this legislation creates and saves middle-class jobs, protects the environment, and invests in renewable energy sources. For example, by extending tax incentives for wind, solar, geothermal, and other technologies, the omnibus spending bill will create and protect over 100,000 jobs in the clean energy sector. A 5-year extension of wind and solar credits will promote growth and help curb carbon emission by roughly 25 percent by the year 2020. And to those who will argue that lifting the oil export ban will counteract these important steps to limit pollution, that is simply not the case. It is not true. Extending the wind and solar tax incentives will eliminate over 10 times more carbon emissions than lifting the oil export ban will create.

The omnibus spending bill is good for jobs, and good for clean energy and the environment. It also helps American families by including a provision that will lower health insurance premiums.

To fully appreciate the compromise, we can’t simply tick off the many beneficial policies the agreement includes. We must also consider that many troublesome provisions the Democrats fought to exclude didn’t wind up in the legislation. When this matter came from the House, there were more than 200 so-called riders, and they didn’t wind up in the bill. Many of these riders represented the worst of legislative priorities: weaken Dodd-Frank banking regulations; undermine the Department of Labor’s fiduciary rule; roll back the National Labor Relations Board’s joint employer standard; eliminate protections for clean air, water, land, and climate; weaken the consumer protection bureau’s ability to protect consumers; curb the President’s powers under the Antiquities Act to create national monuments; and destroy the candidate contribution limits. These are only a few of the many special riders that were sent to us from the House, and we did not allow 99 percent of these to be included because they are harmful policies.

I say again, this compromise isn’t perfect, but it is good. It is good for the American people. And if it weren’t for Democratic efforts, it would have been a lot worse.

I also extend my appreciation to the great staff of the White House—first of

all, the President’s Chief of Staff, Denis McDonough. He is a former college football player, he is a strong man emotionally and physically, and he is very forthright, which I appreciate in the positions that he takes with everybody. He helped guide this legislation through.

We have a number of people who work at the White House with whom we worked intensely. All the Cabinet officers—we had a very good relationship with Brian Deese, who is a jack-of-all-trades at the White House and does so much in many different areas. I appreciate very much his involvement in many different ways.

Longtime Senate employee Katie Beirne Fallon has been available anytime we needed her, and this has been very difficult for her because she is a new mom to two little twins. She was always available. We were disappointed when she went to the White House from the Senate, but her knowledge of the Senate has been helpful in our being able to move this bill as far as it has been.

A longtime staffer who operated on the floor here for many, many years was Marty Paone, who was available whenever we needed him. He is a fine man. We still miss him here in the Senate. He does such a great job for the country and the Senate.

We must pass the legislation, as the Republican leader said, as quickly as we can. Christmas is fast approaching. I hope Republicans in the House and the Senate will move quickly to move this legislation to the floor so we can vote on it and give the American people every confidence their government will remain open.

Would the Presiding Officer state what the Senate will be doing the rest 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, the Senate will be in a period of morning business until 6 p.m., with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

THE BUDGET AND TAX EXTENDERS

Mr. WARNER. Mr. President, I rise today to call attention to the significant contributions public servants

make to our Nation each day. It appears that we are close to the final conclusion to the budget and tax extenders debate, and hopefully we will soon all be able to go home to see our families. I have a little easier opportunity with that than the Presiding Officer.

It does appear that this year we may be able to put together a 2-year budget process, which is a step in the right direction. Too often Congress punts on its public responsibilities with stopgap solutions to our country's problems. Through all these challenges, though, our public servants, particularly our Federal employees, with little recognition and less fanfare work through these ups and downs to improve Americans' lives.

TRIBUTE TO FEDERAL EMPLOYEES

KEVIN STRICKLIN

Mr. WARNER. Mr. President, since 2010, I have come to the Senate floor on an occasional basis to honor exemplary Federal employees, a tradition started by my friend, the former Senator from Delaware Ted Kaufman. Today I am going to continue that tradition as we get to the close of this year.

I am pleased to honor a great Federal employee, Kevin Stricklin, who also happens to be a Virginian. As the administrator for coal at the Mine Safety and Health Administration, Mr. Stricklin leads a team that enforces safety rules, improves industry compliance, and executes rescue and recovery operations.

On his watch, the number of coal miners who died in accidents last year, 16, while still too high, was the lowest ever recorded in the history of the United States. In addition, the number of mines with chronic violations dropped from 51 in 2010 to 12 in 2014, and the number of citations against mines fell from more than 96,000 in 2010 to less than 63,000 in 2014, even as inspections increased.

After the Upper Big Branch Mine disaster in 2010, Mr. Stricklin was at the frontlines of implementing reforms to improve mine safety, including quarterly inspections, surprise inspections for repeat violators, and a program that identifies habitual safety lapses.

When accidents have occurred, Mr. Stricklin's creativity and calm under pressure have saved countless lives. In a 2002 accident, a Pennsylvania coal mine flooded, trapping nine miners. Mr. Stricklin and his team devised a plan to drill a 6½-inch hole and inject compressed air into it. Their plan provided oxygen to the miners and prevented the water level from rising any further. The miners survived and were hoisted to the surface using a capsule the team helped design.

Following a 2006 accident in West Virginia, rescuers' efforts were impeded by limitations in communicating over long distances. The protocol at that time was 1,000 feet. The team's solution was to develop a wireless fiber-

optic system that extended communication up to 5 miles. Mr. Stricklin and his team improved the standard by more than 26 times.

Like so many other Federal employees, they went above and beyond because it was in the country's best interest, not because they expected praise or recognition. Mr. Stricklin, whose two grandfathers and father were all coal miners, describes his objective as being "for each miner to go home as safe and as healthy at the end of the day as they started at the beginning of the day."

I am proud to rise today to recognize Mr. Stricklin's dedication to public safety and commitment to public service. I hope my colleagues will join me in thanking him, his team, and, frankly, during the holiday season, all Federal Government employees at all levels of service to our country for their contributions and hard work.

As we go through these final days of debate—and hopefully, as I said at the outset, we will get a chance to spend time with our families over the holidays—I do think it is important that we also take a moment to reflect on the close to 2 million civilian Federal employees who serve our Nation in so many ways each and every day without fanfare.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

Mr. HATCH. Mr. President, I also ask unanimous consent that I be permitted to complete two sets of remarks.

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

PROTECTING AMERICANS FROM TAX HIKES ACT

Mr. HATCH. Mr. President, last night after months of discussion and several weeks of intense negotiations, bipartisan leaders from both the House and the Senate reached an agreement on both the substance and a procedural path forward for legislation that will provide millions of American families and businesses with much needed tax relief and set the stage for comprehensive tax reform in the future.

The bill, which we are calling the Protecting Americans from Tax Hikes Act—or PATH Act—of 2015, would make a number of temporary tax provisions permanent, putting an end to the repeated tax extenders exercise that has plagued Congress for decades and giving greater certainty to U.S. taxpayers across the board.

There are no two ways about it; this is a historic bill. It is actually the latest in a long line of historic bills we have considered in the Senate this

year, and it has quite a bit in common with some of the other efforts we have tackled in 2015.

For example, for many years now, much of what we have done in Congress has been dictated by the next deadline, cliff or crisis around the corner. More often than not, the tendency has been to simply kick every can down the road and then give speeches about why we shouldn't do that anymore. This year the Senate has worked to end the practice of governing by crisis.

Among other things, we have passed bipartisan legislation to repeal and replace the Medicare sustainable growth rate, or SGR, formula and to provide long-term funding for highway and infrastructure projects. Both of these issues had plagued Congress for decades, with permanent or long-term fixes seemingly always out of reach, regularly demonstrating that Congress was too divided and too ineffective to reach any meaningful solutions.

The same could be said for tax extenders, which has been an almost yearly exercise in relative futility, characterized by partisan bickering as the deadlines approach, with short-term extensions enacted at the last minute, leaving no one—certainly not American taxpayers—feeling better in the end. Yet, with the PATH Act, as with the SGR and highway funding bills, we have been able to reach a bipartisan agreement that would effectively end this cycle.

We have to pass it. According to the Joint Committee on Taxation, 52 separate tax provisions—what we typically refer to as extenders—expired at the end of 2014. That is 52 separate provisions that, on a relatively frequent basis, face expiration and require us to reach agreements on further extensions. Our bill would reduce that number down to 33 provisions—still far too many—but a significant relief in terms of ongoing extenders pressure.

Most importantly, the bill makes permanent many of the most consequential extenders provisions, the ones that tend to drive the crisis-and-cliff mentality when it comes to tax extenders, further relieving the pressure and allowing Congress to function more effectively.

By adding more permanence to the Tax Code, we will allow families and businesses to better plan for the future. In addition, we will adjust the tax and revenue baseline to make conditions vastly more favorable for comprehensive tax reform in the future, a major priority for members of both parties.

Most importantly, passing this legislation and making more tax policies permanent will provide significant tax relief for hardworking taxpayers in every walk of American life, from the middle class to military families to the working poor. It will do the same for businesses and job creators throughout our country, resulting in a healthier U.S. economy, increased growth, and more American jobs.

Put simply, more permanence in the Tax Code will be a good thing for our