

So why has the meaning of “Assad has to go” evolved? Because this administration was overpowered, outplayed, and outmatched. This administration consoled themselves with the mantra of “there is no military solution” rather than facing the reality that there is a clear military dimension to a political solution in Syria. That is what Russia and Iran have demonstrated. They have changed the military faction on the ground and created the terms for a political settlement much more favorable to their interests. I believe as a result the conflict will grind on, ISIS will grow stronger, and the refugees will keep coming.

Unfortunately, America’s troubles in 2015 were not contained in Iraq and Syria. Despite conditions on the ground, President Obama elected to withdraw roughly half of the U.S. forces from Afghanistan by the end of next year.

Do you know the President of the United States, even when he announces a buildup, announces a withdrawal. So he sends the message to any potential enemy or any enemy we are engaged with: We are going to build up now, but don’t worry, we are going to pull out. We will withdraw.

So what happens? Here we are. The Pentagon says violence is on the rise in Afghanistan. The AP report says “Violence in Afghanistan is on the rise, according to a new Pentagon report to Congress that says the Taliban was emboldened by the reduced U.S. military role and can be expected to build momentum from their 2015 attack strategy.”

It is inevitable, I say to my colleagues, there will be greater violence in Afghanistan, an increase in Taliban activity, and—I am sorry to say—ISIS, who is already establishing a foothold there, will increase their presence. Meanwhile, the Iranians, in their attempt at hegemony, will provide weapons to the Taliban.

This Senator will save the rest of my comments about what is going on with the Iran nuclear deal, about what the Iranians have already violated, and what continues with the Russian occupation of Ukraine.

Our much respected leader in Europe, General Breedlove, has said that he expects increased military activity by Vladimir Putin in eastern Ukraine. He still has the ambition of establishing a land bridge all the way across eastern Ukraine to Crimea so he doesn’t have to continue to supply by air and sea. We seem to have forgotten that over 8,000 people have died since Russia’s invasion, including 298 innocent people aboard Malaysia’s Flight 17, murdered by Vladimir Putin’s loyal supporters with weapons that were sent to Ukraine by Putin—not to mention the murder of Boris Nemtsov, one of the great leaders of the opposition, in the shadow of the Kremlin. The destabilization continues, even in countries as far away as Sweden. I will not go

into that because the Defense authorization bill calls for the provision of defensive weapons to Ukraine.

One of the more shameful chapters—although they have written more shameful chapters—but one that is really shameful is our failure to provide defensive weapons to Ukraine. There are Russian-supplied tanks in eastern Ukraine. All of us have seen the pictures of them. They have slaughtered many Ukrainians, and we refuse to give the Javelin, the most effective anti-tank weapon we have, to Ukrainians. It is beyond shameful.

So I will not talk about China, which has reclaimed 400 acres earlier and now has reclaimed more than 3,000 acres in the South China Sea, and our one foray within the 12-mile limit, the Secretary of Defense failed to acknowledge before the Senate Armed Services Committee.

So, my colleagues, we depart on this holiday season, hopefully sooner rather than later, with a world in turmoil, with a world that because of a failure of American leadership now poses direct threats, as we just found in San Bernardino, to the United States of America.

We saw too many dark days in 2015. It didn’t have to be this way. It is still within our power to choose better courses. We must never be disheartened or resigned to a world where suffering and evil are always on the ascent. On the contrary, it is in our character as Americans to face adversity with hope and optimism. We must see plainly and fully the threats to our values in order to defeat them.

As Churchill said, we recover our “moral health and martial vigor, we rise again and take our stand for freedom.”

I have no doubt America can succeed and will succeed.

Madam President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Vermont.

ONE-YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF THE RELEASE OF ALAN GROSS

Mr. LEAHY. Madam President, today is an important day for two reasons. One, it is a sad day because it was just a few years ago today when a dear friend, Senator Dan Inouye, died—one of my closest friends and former President pro tempore and senior Member of this body.

It is also a good day because it marks one year since the release of Alan Gross from a Cuban prison where he had spent 5 years. During that time he lost more than 100 pounds, he lost five teeth, his mother died, his mother-in-law died, his brother-in-law died, and he missed his daughter’s wedding.

I worked for years to help obtain Alan Gross’s release and the return of the remaining members of the so-called Cuban Five, who had served more than 15 years in U.S. prisons. Scott Gilbert, Alan Gross’s lawyer, did an outstanding job, traveling countless times to Cuba. He skillfully advocated on

Alan’s behalf with Cuban and U.S. officials. My foreign policy adviser, Tim Rieser, went down several times to boost Alan Gross’s morale, visiting him in prison and bringing him messages.

My larger purpose, like my good friend from Arizona Senator FLAKE, who has been a real partner in this, was to finally put the Cold War behind us and to start looking forward to a new era.

Like Senator FLAKE and many others, I was convinced that such a step would be widely embraced by the U.S. business community, by religious groups, by academia, the scientific community, the media, and Americans across the political spectrum. I also knew it would be welcomed around the world, including in countries where people believe in democracy and human rights as strongly as we do.

I remember when an ambassador from a South American country came up to my wife Marcelle, saying: We have always respected the United States but also we respected Cuba, and your relationship with Cuba was like a stone in our shoe. Now, by restoring relations with Cuba, you have removed the stone from our shoe.

He, like so many others, recognized that Alan Gross’s release ushered in a new day in United States-Cuba relations. I will never forget on August 14, standing there when our flag was raised at the U.S. Embassy in Havana, listening to our national anthem played, and I heard Cubans standing just outside the gates of the Embassy cheering when the American flag went up. It was a deeply moving experience to be there on a swelteringly hot day.

We had 54 years of a failed, punitive policy that achieved none of its objectives. President Obama and President Raul Castro wisely decided it was time to chart a new path.

The reaction of the people of the United States and Cuba has been overwhelmingly positive. Even some of Cuba’s most vocal critics of the Castro government have welcomed this new opening.

Which brings me back to Alan Gross. He had every reason to be a bitter defender of U.S. sanctions, but instead he strongly supported the new policy of engagement. He has never expressed anything but warmth and admiration for the Cuban people.

Contrast that with the small handful of Members of Congress who continue to defend a discredited policy of isolation that has been repudiated by large majorities of their own constituents, denounced by every other government in the hemisphere, and which even they acknowledge it has not succeeded. Their answer is to keep it in place, even opposing efforts by the State Department to improve security and staffing at the U.S. Embassy in Havana, to which the Cuban Government has agreed.

I ask that you to look at this photograph of Alan Gross and his wife. I took this just minutes after he was told he

was going home. Senator FLAKE, Congressman VAN HOLLEN, and I were there to pick him up. This is not the face of a bitter man. When I took this picture, I thought as I pressed the shutter that this is the face of a man who knows we can have different days.

I am not so naive to think that reestablishing diplomatic relations with Cuba is going to result in the rapid transformation of Cuba into a democracy. Cuba's leaders are steadfast believers in a repressive political system that has enabled them to hold power unchallenged for more than half a century. Their economic policies have been a disaster, resulting in daily hardships for the Cuban people. You can see it whenever you travel to Cuba. While the Cuban Government blames its economic problems on the U.S. embargo, no one seriously believes that, although it is undeniable that the embargo has exacerbated the hardships.

It is also undeniable that support for the embargo in the United States, from the business community to the human rights community, has evaporated. I wonder how many Members of Congress know that in the past 5 years the Government of Cuba, while blaming us for the embargo, has imported more than \$1 billion in U.S. agriculture and medical products. American exports mean American jobs.

There would be a lot more exports if we got rid of the embargo. Right now it is punishing American workers, as well as Cubans.

Why are we also punishing half a million Cuban entrepreneurs who already work in the private sector and are no longer dependent on the government? Why not support the private sector in Cuba as we do everywhere else in the world? Why not open the United States to the emerging Cuban market?

I think it is past time to replace vindictiveness and personal family grievances with what is best for the American people.

I have condemned the Cuban Government's arrest and imprisonment, after unfair trials, of individuals that have done nothing more than peacefully protest against the government's repressive policies. At least two of them were among the 53 who were released as part of our agreement a year ago. Eleven others released earlier still cannot travel freely.

But Cuba's leaders cannot stop the tide of history any more than any of us can. The majority of Cubans were not even born at the time of the 1959 revolution. They have very different priorities and aspirations than those who overthrew Batista's corrupt, abusive regime. Cuba is changing in ways that will mean more freedom and more engagement in the world, and more economic opportunities.

During the past 12 months, the Obama administration has taken historic steps to implement the new policy. After so many decades, when U.S.-Cuba relations were frozen, the progress in the last year has been

breathtaking. Talks are underway between both governments on a wide range of issues, including one wrapping up last night on resuming direct mail and air service, but also on law enforcement cooperation and property claims.

Senator FLAKE, who has been such a leader on this—he and I have introduced legislation, cosponsored by 45 other Democrats and Republicans, to end restrictions on travel by Americans to Cuba. Those restrictions don't exist for travel to any other country, including North Korea and Iran. If our bill were called up for a vote, and if we listened to the American people, it would pass easily.

This year the Senate Appropriations Committee passed, with bipartisan majorities, a similar travel amendment by Senator MORAN and me and two other amendments to facilitate U.S. agriculture exports and shipping to and from Cuba.

In contrast, the House of Representatives adopted half a dozen provisions offered by just one Member that would turn back the clock.

I have no doubt that the path begun by President Obama and President Raul Castro is the right one for the people of both countries, and that the dwindling few who continue to try to stand in its way will fail.

History is not on their side. Rather than continue to cling to a policy that was misguided from its inception and that did nothing to help the Cuban people, they should respect the will of their constituents and the Cubans on whose behalf they erroneously claim to speak.

It was only 12 months ago that Senator FLAKE and I walked up the gangplank onto the President's plane with Alan and Judy Gross. I took many photographs that day, and our son-in-law, Lawrence Jackson, one of the President's photographers, was also there recording it for posterity.

Look at how much has been accomplished in those 12 months for the benefit of the people of Cuba and the United States. It has done more for the reputation of the United States and its influence in this hemisphere than has been done in the past half century.

I ask unanimous consent that a chronology of those accomplishments prepared by the Engage Cuba coalition be printed in the RECORD at the conclusion of my remarks.

I hope that before another year passes the Congress will finally recognize that it too has a responsibility to respect the will of the people, to end the embargo and to stop interfering with the right of Americans to travel. And that exposing the Cuban people to our ideas, our principles, and our products is the best policy for the future.

I see my dear friend, the Senator from Arizona, on the floor.

I yield the floor.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

A LOOK BACK AT THE FIRST YEAR OF THE U.S.-CUBA RELATIONSHIP

DECEMBER 17, 2014—PRESENT

KEY ACTIONS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

December 17, 2014: President Obama moves to normalize relations with Cuba.

Decision follows 18 months of secret negotiations between U.S. and Cuba and the release of American aid contractor Alan Gross.

Announcement of plans over the coming months to ease travel and financial restrictions on Cuba.

Paves the way for U.S.-Cuba to restore diplomatic ties, reopen embassies, and potentially lift the embargo.

January 16, 2015: Departments of Commerce and Treasury announce regulatory changes to Cuba sanctions.

The amendments implement the changes President Obama announced on December 17, 2014.

March 31, 2015: U.S. and Cuba hold first formal talks on human rights.

April 8, 2015: A public opinion poll of Cubans on the island is released; shows that an overwhelming majority of Cubans support an end to the embargo.

Nearly all Cubans (97 percent of those polled) believe normalization of the relationship between Cuba and the United States is good for Cuba.

April 11, 2015: Presidents Obama and Castro meet at the Summit of the Americas in Panama.

Marks the first time the two nations' top leaders have sat down for substantive talks in more than 50 years. Both presidents agree it is time to end the embargo.

The inclusion of Cuba in the Summit of the Americas comes after Latin American countries pressured the United States to allow Cuba to participate.

April 20, 2015: Governor Andrew Cuomo leads delegation to Cuba.

Governor Andrew Cuomo leads a delegation of New York business owners and politicians to Havana.

His visit marks the first time a U.S. governor has travelled to the island since the U.S. and Cuba normalized relations.

The trip includes officials from JetBlue Airways, the Plattsburgh International Airport, Pfizer, MasterCard, and the founder of Chobani.

The trip leads to an agreement between Cuba's Center for Molecular Immunology and Roswell Park Cancer Institute in Buffalo, New York to import a lung cancer vaccine and begin clinical trials in the United States.

May 4, 2015: New Cuba PAC launches.

New Cuba PAC pledges to donate to political candidates who support favorable policy toward ending the Cuban embargo.

May 29, 2015: United States removes Cuba from state terror sponsors list.

President Obama informs Congress of his decision in mid-April; Congress has a 45-day review period.

Some congressional Republicans oppose the move; however, they do not make any effort to block the decision.

Cuba had been on the list since 1982. Being listed subjects a country to U.S. restrictions on such things as foreign aid and defense sales.

June 18, 2015: Cuba expands Wi-Fi access across the island.

35 Wi-Fi hotspots are created.

Previously, Wi-Fi was only available at tourist hotels at hourly prices that would amount to nearly a quarter of the average monthly salary for Cubans.

July 2015: United States restores diplomatic ties with Cuba.

On July 1, President Obama announces that the U.S. and Cuba would reopen their

embassies nearly 55 years since they first closed.

On July 20, diplomatic relations are officially re-established; Cuban embassy holds flag-raising ceremony in Washington. Engage Cuba hosts private dinner between Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez-Parrilla and American business leaders.

On July 22, Engage Cuba hosts a briefing at the White House for the Cuban-American community about U.S.-Cuba relations.

July 23, 2015: Senate Appropriations Committee approves three amendments favorable to lifting sanctions on Cuba.

The amendments would end restrictions on travel to Cuba, allow private financing for agricultural sales to Cuba, and lift restrictions on ships docking at Cuban ports.

August 14, 2015: Secretary of State John Kerry presides over the flag-raising ceremony at American embassy in Havana.

Sec. Kerry's visit marks the first time in 70 years that a U.S. Secretary of State has visited Cuba.

August 2015–October 2015: American airline companies announce new flights to Cuba.

American Airlines and Cuba Travel Services announce a new charter service providing nonstop service from Los Angeles to Havana. American Airlines also begins offering a once-weekly flight from Miami to Havana in partnership with Cuban travel services.

JetBlue announces the addition of a second charter flight from JFK to Havana.

Delta establishes charter flights from Atlanta to Havana, set to start April 2, 2016.

September 8, 2015: Leading Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump comes out in support of diplomatic reengagement with Cuba.

Trump's stance means that for the first time in over a half-century, the leading presidential candidates from both parties support normalization; Hillary Clinton had stated her support a year prior.

September 18, 2015: Obama administration further eases travel and business restrictions against Cuba.

The announcement expands telecommunication opportunities in Cuba and allows certain American businesses to establish offices and bank accounts on the island.

Cuban businesses and residents are now able to set up offices and bank accounts in the United States.

However, significant barriers to open trade and travel still exist with Congress' refusal to lift the embargo.

September 19, 2015: Pope Francis arrives in Cuba.

The Pope visits Cuba before coming to the United States. During his visit, he lauds the normalization process between the two countries.

September 2015–November 2015: Telecommunications contracts begin to be signed on the island.

Verizon begins to offer voice and data roaming in Cuba through a third party.

Sprint signs an interconnection agreement with Cuba's state telecoms monopoly Etecsa.

September 28, 2015: Governor Asa Hutchinson leads Arkansas delegation to Cuba.

Governor Asa Hutchinson asks Congress to lift restrictions that prevent U.S. food companies from selling to Cuba on credit.

The measure, led by Senator John Boozman (R-AR), was approved by the Senate Appropriations Committee in July but has yet to receive a floor vote in the Senate and House.

In 2000, the U.S. authorized cash-only agricultural exports to Cuba, which brought \$30 million in sales to Arkansas annually. Since Cuba prefers to buy on credit, sales have fallen.

September 29, 2015: Presidents Obama and Castro meet on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly.

For the first time in more than 60 years, a U.S. president meets with a Cuban president on U.S. soil.

October 6, 2015: Secretary of Commerce Pritzker makes official trip to Cuba.

Sec. Penny Pritzker becomes the second U.S. cabinet official to visit the island since Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution.

Sec. Pritzker meets with the country's ministers of foreign affairs and foreign investment.

Sec. Pritzker tours Mariel, the site of a \$1 billion investment to create a major shipping hub in Cuba.

October 14, 2015: Nine state governors sign onto bipartisan letter supporting end to Cuban embargo.

The governors of Alabama, California, Idaho, Minnesota, Montana, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Virginia and Washington write letter to Congressional leadership highlighting the harm that the embargo has done to American agriculture exports.

October 25, 2015: North Dakota Agriculture Commissioner Doug Goehring leads North Dakota agriculture delegation to Cuba.

North Dakota Agriculture Commissioner Doug Goehring leads a delegation of representatives from commodity, agricultural, and commerce organizations to the island.

Full list of participants: North Dakota Department of Agriculture; Bank of North Dakota; Fredrikson & Byron, P.A.; Great Northern Ag; Northharvest Bean Growers Association; North Dakota Grain Growers Association; North Dakota Mill & Elevator; North Dakota Trade Office; North Dakota Wheat Commission; and Red River Farm Network.

November 2, 2015: Cuba hosts annual international trade fair.

It is estimated that 50 U.S. companies attend the fair, more than ever before.

Cuba signs first-ever roaming agreement with U.S. telecom company Sprint Corp.

November 17, 2015: Engage Cuba partners with the Atlantic Council to release a poll from America's "Heartland" voters profiling their opinions on Cuba.

The poll's findings show bipartisan support in "Heartland" states—Iowa, Ohio, Indiana, and Tennessee—for restoring diplomatic relations with Cuba, lifting the travel ban and ending the embargo.

November 18, 2015: U.S. and Cuba sign historic environmental pact.

The agreement marks the first accord between the two countries since the announcement that they would be normalizing diplomatic relations.

The accord will protect nearby fish and marine life living off the coasts of both countries and allow U.S. and Cuban scientists to collaborate on research.

Cuba's marine ecosystem is considered one of the best preserved and most diverse in the world.

November 19, 2015: Debit cards become available for use in Cuba.

MasterCard and Stonegate Bank (based in Ft. Lauderdale) announce that their cards are now active for use in hotels, restaurants and other stores in Cuba.

They become the first financial institutions to take advantage of new business openings with Cuba.

Americans travelling to Cuba will be able to use these cards at 10,000 merchants that accept the cards.

ATM transactions will be available in 2016.

November 29, 2015: Governor Greg Abbott leads Texas delegation to Cuba.

Governor Greg Abbott leads a delegation of Texas agriculture and port officials and local businesses to Cuba.

While in Cuba, the delegation meets with the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Investment, the Port of Mariel, the Chamber of

Commerce and two Cuban entities, Alimport and Cimex.

Texas-Cuba trade relations have decreased over the years due to restrictions and regulations. If full trade were allowed, Texas could see an economic impact of \$43 billion.

December 7, 2015: Engage Cuba launches Tennessee State Council.

The 16-person council includes representatives from a range of industries, including agriculture, academia, manufacturing, business, and the arts.

December 8, 2015: U.S. and Cuba hold the first round of discussions on mutual property claims.

The two governments begin negotiations over U.S. individuals' and companies' properties that were seized after the 1959 revolution; Cuba also presents counterclaims of economic damages stemming from the embargo.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Arizona.

Mr. FLAKE. Madam President, I want to first pay tribute to Senator LEAHY for the long path to getting here with Cuba, for all of the work that he has done, and to his capable staff, including Tim Rieser and people on my staff, including Chandler Morse and others, who have worked on this issue for so long. I have appreciated working with Senator LEAHY on this issue.

It was 1 year ago today, as Senator LEAHY mentioned, that we had received a call just a few days prior, asking if we would participate in a quick mission down to Cuba, but we had to keep quiet about it for a few days, which was a bit difficult. One year ago today, we got on the President's plane, as Senator LEAHY mentioned, and went down and picked up Alan Gross. It was wonderful to have Alan's wife Judy on the plane with us. What a joyous occasion that was to see that reunion there in Cuba and then to climb on the plane.

As we climbed away from Cuba, I will never forget that about 20 minutes into the flight, the pilot came on and said that we had now entered U.S. airspace. Alan Gross stood up, threw his arms in the air, and then breathed deeply. Then he said, "Now I finally know I am free."

Then we watched on the news on the plane as the announcement came that we would be changing our policy, that we would be seeking full diplomatic relations, and that many of the policies of the past would go away.

It has been a wonderful year to see some of that happen. One of my best moments—favorite moments—in Congress was going down with Senator LEAHY again and watching the American flag being raised over the U.S. Embassy in Havana after 54 long years, to have those marines there, the same three marines who had lowered the flag in 1961 and who returned to Cuba to help raise the flag back up. What a wonderful symbol. What a wonderful thing about a new policy and a new way forward with Cuba.

It is significant to note, as Senator LEAHY mentioned, that after spending 5 years in prison in Cuba, Alan Gross came out of prison without bitterness. From that time forward, he has promoted meeting with colleagues of ours

and telling anybody who will listen that this way forward is the right way forward on Cuba; that we should change our policies; that we ought to have closer cooperation and diplomatic relations; and that the problems that Cuba has are the problems of the Cuban Government, not the Cuban people.

I want to pay tribute to Alan Gross for that. He continues to work till this day for better relations between Cuba and the United States. That is a significant thing. When Senator TOM UDALL and I visited Alan Gross in prison in November of last year, just 1 month prior to his release, he was in a bad way. He had lost a lot of weight. He had lost some of his teeth. It was a tough time to be in prison. Being there for 5 years, he missed many events at home with his family.

I cannot imagine coming out of that experience and still feeling the compassion that he has for the Cuban people. Just last night it was announced that the U.S. and Cuba have agreed to enter into a bilateral agreement on flights to allow airlines from America, U.S. carriers to fly to Cuba. Instead of just charter flights, we will now have directly scheduled flights. That will allow Americans to travel to Cuba easier and more inexpensively.

I would encourage all Americans who can find themselves in 1 of the 12 categories for travel to do so. There are a group of Cubans who came to the United States a while ago. They were asked: What can America do for you? These were Cuban entrepreneurs who are looking to change the system in Cuba.

They said: Visit Cuba. Come see us. Come to our private restaurants. Stay in our homes. Spend money in Cuba that we have access to. I should note that those who oppose a new policy—the new policy that we have with Cuba—often say that if you travel to Cuba, every dime that you spend goes right to the Cuban Government. That is not the case.

In Cuba right now, you can stay at a bed and breakfast. In fact, Airbnb has 2,500 listings in Cuba. You can stay at an Airbnb. The bulk of that money, most of that goes to those Cubans who are hosting you, not the Cuban Government. You can eat at a private restaurant where those who prepare the meal, serve the meal, and cook the meals will see the bulk of that money to them.

In fact, about 20 percent of the Cuban workforce is now outside of the Cuban Government. So, when Americans travel to Cuba, Cubans benefit. So I would encourage my colleagues and others to take the opportunity to go down to Cuba and travel. The policy that we had for 54 years in Cuba failed to produce the results that we want to see. We want to see a democratic Cuba that respects human rights.

The Cuban Government still has a long way to go, but I truly believe that the best way forward, the best way to make progress on those areas that we

still need to make progress on, is with full diplomatic relations. Hopefully, we soon will have an Ambassador in Cuba who is the Ambassador. Our diplomatic team, led by Jeff DeLaurentis, does a great job in Cuba, but we ought to have a U.S. Ambassador there.

Americans traveling to Cuba doing legal business in Cuba ought to have the same protections they have anywhere else in the world. We need good representation, full representation, in countries that are not friendly to us more than we need it in countries that are friendly to us. So I would encourage the Obama administration to move forward on those and other areas as well.

There are still some measures the Obama administration can take that will improve the lives of Cubans and make it more likely that we can make progress in these other areas. Having said that, let me just say—you often don't hear it from this side of the aisle—but I want to praise and applaud this President, President Obama, for taking the measures that he has taken on Cuba. It took guts to do so.

There is still opposition to the positions that he has taken, but he has taken a position that helps the Cuban people, and it helps Americans. It is good for our national interests. It is good for our security interests.

With that, I want to thank again the Senator from Vermont for the work that he has done on this issue. It has been a pleasure working with him. This past year has been a great year in terms of U.S.-Cuba relations. Here is to an even better year ahead.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority leader.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT AGREEMENT—H.R. 2029

Mr. MCCONNELL. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that when the Senate receives a message from the House to accompany H.R. 2029, the majority leader be recognized to make a motion to concur in the House amendments; further, that if a cloture motion is filed on that motion, that notwithstanding rule XXII, the Senate immediately vote on the motion to invoke cloture; that if cloture is invoked, all postcloture time be yielded back, the majority leader or his designee be recognized to make a motion to table the first House amendment; that following the disposition of that motion and if a budget point of order is raised, the majority leader or his designee be recognized to make a motion to waive the point of order and that following disposition of that motion, the Senate then vote on the motion to concur in the House amendments with no further motions or amendments in order unless the motion to table is successful or the budget point of order is sustained, and with 2 minutes of debate equally divided in the usual form prior to each vote.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Mr. REID. No objection.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. SASSE). The Senator from Maine.

PROTECTING AMERICANS FROM TAX HIKES ACT

Ms. COLLINS. Mr. President, tomorrow the Senate will vote on the Protecting Americans from Tax Hikes Act of 2015, which will provide needed tax certainty and predictability for our Nation's small businesses, enabling them to create more jobs and boost our economy.

Several months ago, on April 30, I was joined by my friend and colleague from Pennsylvania, Senator CASEY, in introducing the Small Business Tax Certainty and Growth Act of 2015. Our bill aimed to help small businesses invest, grow, and create jobs by providing needed tax relief and certainty. Senator CASEY has been a true partner in advancing this bill, and we are so pleased that the Protecting Americans from Tax Hikes Act takes three key provisions from our bipartisan bill. These provisions include, first, the permanent extension of section 179 expensing, indexed for inflation, which will allow small businesses to write off up to \$500,000 of the cost of certain equipment. I would note that this provision is so important to our smaller businesses that it is the No. 1 tax priority of our Nation's largest small business advocacy group, the National Federation of Independent Business. Second, the bill includes the permanent extension of the 15-year deduction period for restaurants and retailers to improve their space and to buy new equipment. This is so important because otherwise the Tax Code reverts to a 39-year depreciation schedule. That is totally unrealistic. No restaurant could wait 39 years before investing in new flooring, new equipment, and other kinds of renovations and expect that customers will still come flocking to their doors. The third provision of our bill would be an extension of so-called bonus depreciation to allow companies to deduct the cost of certain equipment and software.

These three provisions will give our small businesses the predictability they require to plan for capital investments that are vital to expansion and job creation.

I know I don't have to tell the Presiding Officer that small businesses create the majority of new jobs in this country. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, small businesses generated 63 percent of net new jobs that were created between 1993 and 2013. Even the smallest firms had a notable effect on our economy. The Small Business Administration data indicate that businesses with fewer than 20 employees accounted for 18 percent of all private sector jobs in 2013.