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Senate

The Senate met at 9:30 a.m. and was called to order by the Honorable DEAN HELLER, a Senator from the State of Nevada.

PRAYER

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Today's prayer will be offered by our guest Chaplain, Father Patrick J. Conroy, the Chaplain of the U.S. House of Representatives.

The guest Chaplain offered the following prayer:

Let us pray.

Eternal Lord God, we are astounded by the bountiful flow of Your blessings. We thank You for the gift of this day that we receive from Your generous bounty.

Inspire our lawmakers to use these precious hours and minutes for Your glory. Help them to understand that when they have an awareness of the brevity of their days on Earth, it will provide them with hearts of wisdom.

Bless also and strengthen the many staffers who provide the wind beneath the wings of our leaders.

We pray in Your Holy Name.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The Presiding Officer 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.

APPOINTMENT OF ACTING PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will please read a communication to the Senate from the President pro tempore (Mr. HATCH).

The legislative clerk read the following letter:

U.S. SENATE,
PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE,
Washington, DC, May 4, 2017.

To the Senate:

Under the provisions of rule I, paragraph 3, of the Standing Rules of the Senate, I hereby appoint the Honorable DEAN HELLER, a Senator from the State of Nevada, to perform the duties of the Chair.

ORRIN G. HATCH,
President pro tempore.

Mr. HELLER thereupon assumed the Chair as Acting President pro tempore.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Morning business is closed.

HIRE VETS ACT

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the Senate will resume consideration of the House message to accompany H.R. 244, which the clerk will report.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

House message to accompany H.R. 244, a bill to encourage effective, voluntary investments to recruit, employ, and retain men and women who have served in the United States military with annual Federal awards to employers recognizing such efforts, and for other purposes.

Pending:

McConnell motion to concur in the amendment of the House to the amendment of the Senate to the bill.

McConnell motion to concur in the amendment of the House to the amendment of the Senate to the bill, with McConnell amendment No. 210 (to the House amendment to the Senate amendment), to change the enactment date.

McConnell amendment No. 211 (to amendment No. 210), of a perfecting nature.

McConnell motion to refer the message of the House on the bill to the Committee on

Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, with instructions, McConnell amendment No. 212, to change the enactment date.

McConnell amendment No. 213 (to the instructions) amendment No. 212), of a perfecting nature.

McConnell amendment No. 214 (to amendment No. 213), of a perfecting nature.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Missouri.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Mr. BLUNT. Mr. President, I will speak in a few minutes about the business before the Senate today, but first I wish to speak about what is happening at the White House today.

President Trump is expected to sign an Executive order to protect religious freedom. Many times during the last year, the President has talked about his commitment and our commitment as a nation to religious freedom, but I expect that today he will lay down, specifically, by Executive order the policy of this administration to protect and to vigorously promote religious liberty—not to vigorously promote religion but to vigorously promote religious liberty.

Reports are that the President will tell the IRS that we can't challenge churches and what they say, as well as challenge their not-for-profit status, simply because of what that pastor or that rabbi or that imam believes in the place where they deliver their message and how they live out their faith. It also tells Federal agencies to stop forcing religious organizations to pay fines if they don't want to cover certain healthcare items that conflict with their faith views.

In fact, just this week, Senator STRANGE and I sent a letter to the Attorney General after we saw that in the Fifth Circuit the Attorney General's office had said that they want 60 more days for all of these pending cases on this very matter. In the letter that Senator STRANGE and I sent to our former colleague, the Attorney General, we just pointed out to him that the President repeatedly said, as a candidate for President, that this sort of

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



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continued action of taking religious organizations to court that simply want the ability to practice their faith is going to stop, and we hope it stops and we hope it stops now.

Lastly, I think this order has the potential to be either more specific or to really instruct the Attorney General to look throughout the agencies of government and issue guidance, so that in all of those agencies, as they go about the work that they do, one of the things they want to be sure they are doing is promoting religious liberty; so that religious organizations that have traditionally or are hoping in the future to be delivery services for adoption, delivery services for addiction, delivery services for other problems that people face, would continue to have the ability to be competing to provide those services.

We know this hasn't happened over the last several months. Religious groups that have had contracts for a long time and the availability to provide those services, even when they scored the highest on the scoring of the competitive bids for these contracts, were not given the contracts because they were faith-based.

Well, if there is any country in the world that has understood the importance of religious liberty, it has been the United States. Religious freedom is the first freedom in the First Amendment to the Constitution, the first right in the Bill of Rights, and I don't believe that is by accident. No other country in the history of the world ever committed itself to religious freedom as our country did from the very first weeks of the government under the Constitution. No country ever held this as a principled tenet of what they would stand for as a country prior to the United States doing that.

We might recall how we come to the place today where the President has to issue an Executive order protecting religious freedom. In 1993, President Clinton signed into law the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. That act really affirmed that the Federal Government shouldn't infringe on individual religious beliefs unless there was an overriding public purpose to do so. If, in fact, it was found to be necessary to infringe on somebody's religious beliefs because of that overriding public purpose—if there was justification that there was one—then we should really only interfere with it in the least intrusive way and we should do the minimum necessary to meet whatever that greater public need might be.

It is unbelievable to me that in recent years, groups like the Little Sisters of the Poor, Christian colleges, or other groups that are traditionally providing services are suddenly finding themselves in court defending who they are and who they hope to be. The order issued today would finally provide that relief in a case like the Little Sisters of the Poor. I looked a few months ago at their stated purpose and it is, for the Little Sisters of the Poor,

to receive older people without means, regardless of their faith, and treat them like they were Jesus Christ. Now, that doesn't sound like a group that the Federal Government would have to crack down on. But the Federal Government, in recent years, decided that, in fact, they should force this group to do things that violate its faith principles. There is no possible greater good to be accomplished by that. Hopefully, this Executive order makes it clear today that harassment of religious groups is going to stop and that the Religious Freedom Restoration Act principles are still principles in our country and, more importantly, that the First Amendment is still a founding principle in our country.

There is no question in the mind of any American, I think, that the U.S. Government should do everything in its power to defend and protect religious freedom. Whether you are a person of faith or a person of no faith at all, you should be able to pursue those beliefs.

When Jefferson was asked in the last year of his Presidency which freedom is most important, he said that the right of conscience is the freedom that we should most vigorously defend—the right to believe what we believe and pursue what we believe. That has been further defined over the years by this: If there are times when that creates a true hazard to others, others have a right to come in and explain that, and the government has a right to see what can be done about that and still maintain in every way possible the essence of belief that people have.

So I commend the President for the action that he is reported to be taking later today. I continue to be not only supportive of the President's view that religious freedom is a critical tenet of who we are, but also I look forward to working with his administration as they further put this Executive order into place throughout the agencies of government.

Mr. President, I also wish to speak for a few minutes while I am here about the bill before the Senate today. I think the fact that we are moving forward with an update on how we spend our money and a prioritization of how we spend our money is incredibly important. I would have been and would be, if somehow we failed to do our job today, very disappointed if we think that the priorities of a year ago have to be the exact same priorities today.

Now, many of them will be the same, but many of them will not. So all of these appropriating committees have worked together, House and Senate, and have come to a process where we will have 12 bills—not debated on the floor as intensively as I would have liked to have seen them debated—that should be our goal for this year—but 12 bills where House Members and Senate Members, Republicans and Democrats, came together and decided what our priorities should be.

The subcommittee that I chair—the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Subcommittee—dollar-wise, after we take Defense off the table, that is the biggest of the committees and, in some ways, it has the most challenging debates as to where we wind up in these areas, but I think we have made good choices that hopefully can be improved on next year, but I am absolutely confident they are better than last year.

It is really important for the people we work for to understand that we had to make choices. There is very little difference in the money that will be spent this year and the money that was spent last year, but there is a difference in priorities. I think in the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Subcommittee, we have either eliminated or consolidated in a dramatic way 28 programs so that we could find that money and use it for what we now believe to be a better purpose.

One of those better purposes would be an increase for the second year in a row, and the second year in the last 14 years, in health research at the National Institutes of Health. There were 12 years with no increase at all, and now, for 2 back-to-back years, we are trying to get us back to the research buying power we were at 12 years ago. Again, as to the programs that weren't performing, many of them wound up with zero appropriations in both of these last 2 years so that the NIH appropriation could increase.

At a time when we are looking at precision medicine, when we are looking at immunotherapy, when we no longer look at cancer as just cancer and throw everything at it we want to throw at it, in fact, we look at the individual cancer, and we are at that moment because we understand now what we didn't understand a decade ago. We can look at the individual cancer and the individual patient and figure out how that patient has a unique potential to fight that cancer in their body. We looked at things that may not be required for people with cancer and other diseases, and if we can figure out which people need this procedure and which people don't, not only do you not pay for the procedure for people who don't need it, but also people don't go through the physical challenge of procedures they don't need.

As to Alzheimer's, one of the growing concerns in American families today—right up there now with cancer as one of the things that people worry about most as they look to the future—if we could reduce the onset of Alzheimer's by an average of 5 years, we would be spending almost 50 percent less in 2050 than we will be otherwise. In 2050, spending of tax dollars on Alzheimer's care will overwhelm the budget, but research commitments can do something about that.

The Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Subcommittee bill puts us back, for

the school year that begins next fall, where we will be back to year-round Pell. What does that mean? What is year-round Pell as opposed to what we have now? Right now, we have two semesters where you can qualify for the Pell grant. A Pell grant is given based on income and need. If you qualify for a full Pell—I believe, in the Acting President pro tempore's State and, I know, in my State—there is no community college where full Pell doesn't pay for all tuition, all books, all fees. If you are at the level of need where you qualify for the full Pell grant, you have other things you have to worry about to sustain yourself, but paying for school is not one of them. As an adult going back to school and someone paying for your own school with your own effort, if you are the first person in your family to hope to graduate from school, anything that disrupts whatever pattern you are in minimizes the chances to achieve your goal. So if you have things working in the fall and the spring and you can also stay in a summer term, not only do you get done quicker, but you don't disrupt the pattern you found yourself in.

For 8 years now we haven't had year-round Pell. This vote we will take today allows that to happen, and it will make a big difference. It will also make a difference when you are in a program where you are being prepared to do a job that is uniquely available or available in your community. It is pretty hard to explain why we can do this and we have ways to pay for it through the fall and spring, but by the summer we just have to take a break. That is not a very easy thing to explain to an employer who has come to the community because you have that training potential in your community.

The third major allocation of money that had to come from somewhere else is opioid abuse. This bill will increase by 430 percent our commitment on this issue. It is not because we had 650 million new dollars to spend on opioid abuse. It is because in many places in our country today and in many States in our country, more people die from opioid overdoses than die from car accidents. It is because many families are destroyed by addiction to prescription drugs that leads to other drugs when those prescription drugs can't be available and, frankly, the abuse of prescription drugs, in some cases, where they are available. So we are looking at new ways to deal with pain and looking at new ways to deal with this growing problem.

In 2014 and 2015, each year more than 1,000 people in Missouri died of drug overdoses. In my State and most States, a fire department that also has a first responders unit is three times more likely to respond to a drug overdose than the average fire department to a fire. So there is a third area where this bill prioritizes what needs to be done.

In the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, title I, charter schools,

all those things have a new focus as this bill passes. The mental health initiatives, rural healthcare, and Head Start are all benefited by a reprioritization of what happens here, as are veterans workforce issues and Job Corps issues.

I think this bill is far from perfect, but it is better than the way we are spending our money today and better than we were spending our money a year and a half ago. Hopefully, it will not be quite as good as the way we spend our money starting October 1.

So we need to get this work done and get started immediately doing the business of setting priorities, making difficult choices, and spending people's money in a way that has a long-term plan to benefit them, their families, and our growing economy. I look forward to that vote later today, and then to have, I would hope—as I know the majority leader hopes—a greater effort this year than ever before to get these bills on the floor and to have them fully debated. The best possible thing would be to pass them one at a time and put them on the President's desk one at a time. But the next best thing is to look at the bills and reach individual conclusions about these individual bills. That is what the bill before us today does, and I urge its passage.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

U.S. WANTS TO COMPETE FOR A WORLD EXPO ACT

Ms. KLOBUCHAR. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the immediate consideration of Calendar No. 48, H.R. 534.

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

The legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (H.R. 534) to require the Secretary of State to take such actions as may be necessary for the United States to rejoin the Bureau of International Expositions, and for other purposes.

There being no objection, the Senate proceeded to consider the bill, which had been reported from the Committee on Foreign Relations, with an amendment to strike all after the enacting clause and insert in lieu thereof the following:

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the "U.S. Wants to Compete for a World Expo Act".

SEC. 2. FINDINGS.

Congress finds the following:

(1) The Bureau of International Expositions (BIE) is the organization responsible for governing World Fairs and International Expositions.

(2) Section 1(a) of Public Law 91-269 (22 U.S.C. 2801(a)) found that "international expositions . . . have a significant impact on the economic growth of the region surrounding the exposition and . . . are important instruments of national policy".

(3) The United States has not been an active member of the BIE since 2001.

(4) State and local governments and private entities in the United States have continued to participate in international expositions held in foreign countries as a means of promoting United States exports and creating jobs, but face significantly higher costs for such participation because the United States is not an active member.

(5) State and local governments and private entities in the United States have expressed interest in an international exposition being hosted in the United States, but the bid of a United States city, region, or State to host an international exposition is unlikely to be successful if the United States is not a member of the BIE.

SEC. 3. SENSE OF CONGRESS.

It is the sense of Congress that—

(1) the United States should rejoin the BIE immediately to promote domestic job creation, global branding, and tourism to the United States; and

(2) the Secretary of State, in partnership with the Secretary of Commerce, State and local governments, and private and non-profit entities, should take all necessary steps to facilitate the timely submission of a request to rejoin the BIE.

SEC. 4. AUTHORIZATION.

(a) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary of State is authorized to take such actions as the Secretary determines necessary for the United States to rejoin and maintain membership in the BIE.

(b) AUTHORIZATION TO ACCEPT PRIVATE CONTRIBUTIONS.—In addition to funds otherwise available to the Secretary to carry out this section, the Secretary is authorized to accept contributions for such purpose.

(c) NOTIFICATION.—The Secretary of State shall notify the Committees on Foreign Affairs and Appropriations of the House of Representatives and the Committees on Foreign Relations and Appropriations of the Senate upon taking any action under subsection (a).

SEC. 5. CONTINUATION OF PROHIBITION ON USE OF FEDERAL FUNDS FOR WORLD'S FAIR PAVILIONS AND EXHIBITS.

(a) CONTINUATION OF PROHIBITION.—Nothing in this Act may be construed to authorize any obligation or expenditure prohibited by section 204 of the Admiral James W. Nance and Meg Donovan Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 2000 and 2001 (22 U.S.C. 2452b) (relating to limitations on the obligation or expenditure of funds by the Department of State for a United States pavilion or exhibit at an international exposition or world's fair registered by the BIE).

(b) PROHIBITION ON SOLICITATION OF FUNDS.—Section 204(b)(1)(C) of the Admiral James W. Nance and Meg Donovan Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 2000 and 2001 (22 U.S.C. 2452b(b)(1)(C)) is amended by inserting after "expositions" the following: ", except that no employees of the Department of State may, in their official capacity, solicit funds to pay expenses for a United States pavilion or other major exhibit at any international exposition or world's fair registered by the Bureau of International Expositions".

Ms. KLOBUCHAR. Mr. President, I further ask unanimous consent that the committee-reported amendment be agreed to; the bill, as amended, be read a third time and passed; and the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table with no intervening action or debate.