

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

Mr. MORAN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to speak as in morning business.

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

AUTHORITY FOR COMMITTEES TO MEET REQUEST

Mr. MORAN. Mr. President, all of us, every Member of the U.S. Senate, all 100 of us, whether we are Republicans or Democrats, want the U.S. Senate to function. We ought to want the Senate to be able to accomplish its work. It is a challenge all the time but learning what transpired this morning on the Senate floor, in my view, reaches another low for the Senate.

It is hard to explain, but it takes unanimous consent for committees to meet while the Senate is in session, and that is a request that is made on an ongoing basis when the Senate convenes, and it happened again this morning. Almost without exception, it is routine. The rules require that 2 hours after the Senate convenes, no committee can then meet unless there is agreement. So the majority leader today requested that the unanimous consent be granted, just like in almost every other day in the Senate, but what was different today was an objection was raised by the minority whip, and apparently the explanation is it is because of the firing of the Director of the FBI last night.

Now, how the Senate is functioning or not functioning seems to me to be unrelated to what transpired last night relating to the Director of the FBI. So in this place, where we are trying to do the people's work and make decisions and do good for America, the spillover over partisan politics, the spillover about playing a political game, highlighting a point has now caused the Senate to not be able to conduct hearings today. In fact, the minority Members of the Senate were instructed, requested, on their own volition—all left the hearings that were already being conducted this morning in protest over what transpired last night.

I am of a view that this is a diverse country. I am of a view that people of the U.S. Senate represent folks from across the country with different philosophies, different political parties, different people, different backgrounds. We all bring to the Senate a set of characteristics that are different, one from another, but I have great regard and respect for every Senator's point of view, and I would say that every Senator ought to have the ability to express their views on behalf of their constituents, but we can only do that if we allow the Senate to function.

I was on the Senate floor not long ago praising the fact that we finally were successful in the appropriations process; that we passed the fiscal year 2017 appropriations bill. For too long, the appropriations process has been broken down, and we have conducted business in the United States by continuing resolution. I thought we were

back on a path in which there was enough agreement, respect among Members, enough setting aside of partisan differences to actually accomplish legislation. I was pleased that we did that, but today we fall back into the pattern of when something happens we want to make a political point. We then obstruct the ability of others in the Senate to conduct their work, to express their opinion, to gather the information they need.

This came to my attention—what transpired today—because this afternoon at 2:30 was scheduled a hearing by the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee. That hearing has absolutely nothing to do with the FBI. We have the new Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs scheduled to testify about the Department's plan for modifications to a program called Choice that is important to me, my constituents, and to the veterans of Kansas. I was so pleased the hearing had been scheduled, and I was looking forward to the questioning and having a conversation with the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs about how to make this system of Choice work for veterans who live in Kansas, from the rural side of our State to the suburban and urban side of our State, but because of a pique of anger, political posturing, and partisanship, the hearing is apparently no longer able to take place. The hearing this morning, which could only last for an hour and a half and which I guess the minority members walked out—seemed to me, at least sounded like, to be things that would be very important for us to pursue.

The Armed Services Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities was to have a closed briefing this morning. The Homeland Security Committee was to examine cyber threats facing America, focusing on an overview of the cyber threat landscape. The list is significant in the things that we ought to be paying attention to, and yet, because of an objection, those hearings will not take place or were shortened or disrupted by only one party's participation.

I am not here trying to create further partisanship between Republicans and Democrats. I am here trying to remind ourselves that there is value in allowing cooperation between the minority and majority, not for our own benefits but for the benefit of the country and the citizens we represent. Everything does not have to be partisan. Everything does not have to be political.

Today we see the Senate sliding back into the habit of making things that we have really nothing to do with and weren't the cause of taking place—apparently to make a political point and perhaps to score votes for support in a political way. We ought to all, as U.S. Senators, respect the opinions, values, and the positions of others, but we do that in a setting in which we all come together, not in which we cancel meet-

ings as a result of a political statement.

I appreciate the opportunity to express my concerns about what has transpired and to ask for us to go back to the time in which we worked together on a daily basis and we don't use an excuse to shut down the committee hearing process.

With that, Mr. President, I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

AMERICAN HEALTH CARE ACT

Mr. KING. Mr. President, I rise to speak briefly about the American Health Care Act that was passed last week in the House of Representatives. I thought a lot about this bill over the past few days and over the weekend. I talked to friends, I read about it, and I did as much analysis as I possibly could, given the fact that we don't have a Congressional Budget Office analysis of this complicated and important piece of legislation. I have concluded that it is the most ill-conceived, damaging, and downright cruel piece of legislation that I have ever seen a legislative body pass in my adult life.

It drastically cuts support for Americans' ability to obtain health insurance. In Maine—again, as near as we can tell, because we don't have the final analysis—the preliminary numbers are this. Maine, under the Affordable Care Act, through the payments to individuals and other support, is receiving about \$354 million a year coming via the Affordable Care Act. After this bill, it appears that the number is \$80 million a year—\$364 million to \$80 million. That is almost an 80-percent cut. No one can tell me the people of Maine are going to have better healthcare with an 80-percent cut in the funds going to support their ability to do so. It just doesn't make sense.

The way this bill works is, it is a tax on the elderly. Under the Affordable Care Act, there is a rule that policies for older people, 50, 55, 60, cannot exceed three times the rate of policies for younger people. We all know that younger people's policies do in fact cost somewhat less because they tend to be healthier, but the rule was no more than 3 to 1. Under the bill that was passed by the House last week, it is now 5 to 1. That is an elder tax, and Maine happens to be the most elder State in the United States. If they had taken a blank sheet of paper and said: We want to write a bill to harm the people of Maine, it would have been this bill.

There also is a massive cut to Medicaid—\$880 billion—and the sponsors to this bill claim that they are helping the deficit. How are they doing it? By

shifting the cost to the States—shift and shaft. Balancing the Federal budget by simply taking costs that are now borne by the Federal Government and passing them off to the States is not responsible fiscal policy.

Why don't we just have the States fund the U.S. Air Force? That would save us billions of dollars a year—probably \$100 billion a year. Shift that to the States—and \$880 billion shifted to the States.

Then there is what I call the figleaf—the preexisting condition provision which talks about the Maine plan, which was a plan that preceded the Affordable Care Act, which did give protection for preexisting conditions, but it was adequately funded. It cost about \$64 million a year to fund our preexisting plan. Again, because we don't have the precise figures—but it looks like under this new bill, that \$64 million would be \$20 million, one-third as much, a two-thirds reduction. It is not a real preexisting condition plan; it is a figleaf. It is to say to people: We are covering preexisting conditions—non-sense, not true.

Of course, the final piece of this bill is a massive tax cut for the top one-tenth of 1 percent of people in this country. They will not even notice it, but the people who lose their healthcare will notice.

Now, under the Affordable Care Act, there is a list of essential benefits which includes mental health and substance abuse. That is a big deal. That allows and assures people to have coverage for these very damaging and dangerous, in the case of substance abuse, conditions. Under this bill that passed in the House, States can waive those provisions and the waiver is very easy. The standards for the waiver are very easy, and if the Federal department doesn't respond in 60 days, the waiver is automatically provided. In those States when they have a waiver, mental health and substance abuse services could be covered under a specialized plan which would be very expensive. By the way, this waiver covers both the individual market and employer-based coverage. How many people will be impacted? We do not know because we do not have an analysis from the Congressional Budget Office.

I want to talk for the remainder of my time about opioids and what this bill would do on that.

We are in the midst of a crisis in Maine and across the country. It is the most serious public health crisis in my adult life. In Maine, with regard to substance abuse and overdose deaths, you can see what has happened in the last 5 years. More than one person a day is dying of an overdose. Across the country, it is four an hour. We have turned ourselves inside out in this country in order to deal with the threat of terrorism, for example, which was entirely appropriate. Yet what if we had a terrorist attack that was killing 37,000 people a year across our country, and we were just sort of going along, business as usual?

I have been working on this issue since I got to the Senate. I have been meeting with people throughout Maine—in hospitals and in recovery—and meeting with families and parents and law enforcement. The one thing that comes through loud and clear is that treatment works and that we need it and that we do not have enough available beds in Maine and across the country.

This is a terrible disease, but the most tragic thing of all is when someone finally reaches the point at which he is ready to ask for help and he is told “Sorry, there is a 3-week wait” or “There is a 3-month wait.” That is when lives are lost and families are destroyed.

Treatment does work. I have met with people for whom it has worked and changed their lives. I have a friend in Portland named Andrew Kiezulas, who I believe is graduating this weekend from the University of Southern Maine. He has been through this. He has been to the bottom, and he is now on the mountaintop. He knows treatment works, and it has made a difference in his life. Without it, he would not be where he is today. Justin Reid, another young man from Southern Maine, was in the throes of addiction and escaped. He now runs a sober house and volunteers for a program with his local police department.

Access to treatment is much easier with health insurance and with sufficient Medicaid support. The House bill simply makes it more difficult to access treatment. It penalizes the very people who have taken the hard step to say that this is what they need.

Let me tell you a story. Matt Braun is from Cape Elizabeth, ME, right outside of Portland. In 2009 Matt entered treatment for opioid addiction. His parents, who were strong, middle-class, professional people, purchased what they thought was good health insurance for their family. After 5 days of treatment, they received a call that the insurer was not going to pay for any more. We have decided your son only needs 5 days. His parents argued, and the medical staff argued. They finally won. They got 7 days of treatment. Those extra 2 days made a difference.

The insurance company said that it was not going to help, that he was going to be a chronically relapsing, drug-addicted person, so they were going to stop at 7 days. They said he would not make it. His parents did not give up.

Matt stayed in treatment and has been sober ever since 2009. He is successful. He is getting ready to take the MCAT. He wants to go to medical school. His goal is to approach addiction from the perspective of a health professional and offer care and support to people who are struggling in the way he did.

“It is frustrating how insurance companies dictate what treatment looks like and what a life is worth,” said Matt.

Getting treatment for substance abuse disorder is not easy, but this bill, the American Health Care Act, which is a misnamed bill—it should be the American Take Away Health Care Act—only makes it worse.

On top of all of this, the administration has recently indicated that it is talking about essentially dismantling the Office of National Drug Control Policy—the highest level to be working on this problem in a coordinated way in the Federal Government. Here we are, in the midst of the most serious drug crisis in the history of this country, and the administration is talking about gutting the very office that is supposed to lead the fight. It would have been as if, in the middle of World War II, we had abolished the Department of Defense. It makes no sense. It is moving in absolutely the wrong direction.

By supporting this healthcare bill—or non-healthcare bill—in the House of Representatives, which will drastically cut Medicaid, drastically cut reimbursements for health insurance, drastically limit the availability of coverage for preexisting conditions—by the way, drug addiction could be one—and drastically eliminate the essential benefits provisions of the Affordable Care Act, we are just making it worse.

The Office of National Drug Control Policy has things like the Drug-Free Community Support Program, which administers small grants to small towns. That can make a real difference. Last fall, 18 Maine programs each received \$125,000, and the DFC's 2014 national evaluation report said that there was a significant decrease in the 30-day use of prescription drugs for youth in communities with one of these programs.

Prevention is one of the things we need to work on, and it is one of the things we need to understand. Yet talking about this problem is not going to solve it. Treatment is going to solve it. Money for treatment is going to solve it. Beds for treatment are going to solve it. Detox centers are going to solve it. More resources to law enforcement are going to solve it. More resources to the Coast Guard, in order to interdict drug shipments coming into this country, are going to solve it.

There is no single answer, but at the core is commitment. Passing this bill from the House, which drastically undermines all of those elements of treatment and prevention, and then talking about dismantling the office that has led this fight in the entire Federal Government, is beyond comprehension in the midst of where we are.

If this graph were doing this, if it were going down, I would be OK with it. But it is not going down; it is going up. It is getting worse, and we have to deal with it.

As we work through this issue of healthcare—hopefully we are going to start with a blank sheet of paper over here—I hope we will bear in mind that one of the most serious health problems in the country today is opioid

abuse. This is not all about ideology, and it is not about policy. It is about people. It is about Matt, and it is about Andrew. It is about the thousands and millions of people across this country who are struggling, who want to lead productive lives, and who want to contribute to their communities. All they need is to have that moment when treatment is available, when a helping hand is available, when caring is available to help them escape the throes of this terrible disease and rejoin their communities and their families. That is what we have to keep in front of us as we work here in this body. We can make a difference in people's lives, but in leaving them behind, we will certainly not do so.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mrs. ERNST). The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

Mr. LEAHY. Madam President, what is the parliamentary situation?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senate is considering the Lighthizer nomination.

Mr. LEAHY. I thank the Chair.

FIRING OF JAMES COMEY

Madam President, I couldn't help but think, with the discussions earlier today, that the President's dismissal of FBI Director James Comey is so inappropriate that it is hard to know where to begin.

In less than 4 months, this President has pushed our country to the edge of a constitutional crisis—a crisis that in many ways seems more complex, and potentially more threatening, than the one instigated by President Nixon's order to fire the special prosecutor who was investigating Watergate.

First, I think we can easily dismiss President Trump's transparent pretext for dismissing FBI Director Comey.

President Trump claims to have removed the FBI Director because of his unfair treatment of Secretary Clinton. This does not pass the laugh test, and we know it is not true. President Trump celebrated Director Comey's mistakes in handling the Clinton email investigation. He encouraged leaks from the FBI. He pressed Director Comey to release more embarrassing evidence. He even praised Director Comey after the Director's misguided letter to Congress last October. Yet, now, the President would have us believe that these same events compelled him to fire the FBI Director more than 6 months after it occurred. This unbelievable claim, if it was not so sad, would be laughable.

The truth is that the President removed the sitting FBI Director in the midst of one of the most critical national security investigations in the history of our country and, certainly,

one of the most critical in my 42 years in the Senate—a sprawling inquiry that implicates senior officials in the Trump campaign and administration.

The press is now reporting that President Trump weighed firing the FBI Director for more than a week, after he became enraged at Director Comey's statements and actions in the Russia investigation. There are even reports that his firing may have been precipitated by grand jury subpoenas issued to associates of President Trump's former National Security Advisor. I have no doubt that we are going to learn more disturbing details as to the President's true motivations. I am willing to bet anything that none of them will be because of the feeling that the FBI was too tough on Secretary Clinton.

I am also troubled that Attorney General Sessions played a role in Director Comey's firing. The Attorney General had supposedly recused himself from the Russia investigation—and for good reason: He was a central figure in the Trump campaign that is now under investigation. And he provided false testimony to the Judiciary Committee to hide his own contacts with Russian officials. Having done that, it is beyond inappropriate for him to then recommend the firing of the official overseeing the Russia investigation.

I ask: Does anyone really believe that President Trump is interested in getting to the bottom of Russia's interference with our elections? Based on his past performance, does anyone believe the Attorney General is interested in getting to the bottom of Russia's interference with our elections? Does anyone believe that the White House will allow investigators to follow the facts without interference or obstruction at every turn?

In fact, a quick review of President Trump's Twitter account, where he does most of his deep thinking, would dispel any such illusions.

This is the same White House that interfered with the House Intelligence Committee's investigation—interference so strong that the Republican chairman in the House investigation had to recuse himself.

This is the same White House that reportedly sought access to the highly classified FISA Court surveillance order that purportedly authorized surveillance of Trump associates.

This is the same White House that demanded the FBI Director and the Department of Justice issue perfunctory statements to clear President Trump's name.

Even the President's letter informing FBI Director Comey of his dismissal indicated the President had directly asked the FBI Director whether he was under investigation—three times. That should never happen. No President should be asking such a question. It is stunning, but it should also be informative. It is clear that any credible investigation must take place outside the political chain of command.

That is why I and others have said for months that a special counsel must be appointed to lead the Russia investigation. A special counsel, unlike an FBI Director or a Deputy Attorney General, cannot be fired by the President. The American people must have confidence that ours is a government of laws, not of the whim of a President—any President.

Frankly, our Nation is at a precipice. There is a counterintelligence investigation into the campaign and administration of a sitting President. There is evidence that that campaign colluded with a foreign government that is an adversary of ours to sway our Presidential election. Now the President has fired the lead investigator, FBI Director Comey, under what any fairminded person would say is absurd and false pretenses.

There are several inquiries underway into Russian interference and collusion with Russia in the elections, but the President has fired the head of the only investigation that could bring criminal charges. In fact, it has just been reported that this came just days after Director Comey asked for additional funding for the investigation. None of this is normal—it is something I have never seen in Republican or Democratic administrations—and we cannot treat it as such.

President Putin's goal, as we now know, last year was to undermine our democratic institutions, to corrode Americans' trust and faith in government, and to sway the outcome of the election in favor of Donald Trump. If we do not get to the bottom of Russia's interference in our democracy, Putin will be successful. The President appears to be content with that result. But I know, in talking with many Republican Senators as well as Democratic Senators, that they are not content with it.

We have to understand, in our great democracy, in the greatest Nation on Earth, that we cannot allow any country to try to interfere in our elections. We know the Russians wanted to do that. We know President Putin wanted to do that. We know he wants to do it in many other countries. I think we owe it, not only to ourselves but all these other countries, to stand up and say: We know what you are trying to do; here is how you tried to do it. America won't stand for it, and we hope none of our democratic allies will.

We 100 Senators may disagree on policy matters and we may have supported different candidates last November, but I respect all Senators, and I believe we all agree on the supremacy of the rule of law. No person, no President should be above the supremacy of the rule of law. I believe we fulfill our duty to the country if we stand united in calling for a truly independent investigation. There simply is no avoiding the fact that this cascading situation demands the prompt appointment of an independent special counsel to pick up the pieces of these investigations. How we respond at this moment