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Senate

The Senate met at 9:30 a.m. and was called to order by the Honorable LUTHER STRANGE, a Senator from the State of Alabama.

PRAYER

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

Let us pray.

Faithful Father, as our lawmakers face the challenges of this day, infuse their minds with a renewed sense of how much You have invested in them. Lead them to live for Your glory, embracing Your vision for our Nation and world. Lord, guide and inspire them with the great plans You want to accomplish through their work. May the knowledge that You are with them eviscerate fear, for You are our Lord and Savior.

Help us all to surrender to Your transforming power so that Your will may be accomplished on Earth, even as it is done in Heaven.

And, Lord, bless our wonderful pages as they prepare to leave Capitol Hill.

We pray in Your merciful Name. Amen.

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, June 8, 2017.

To the Senate:

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

ORRIN G. HATCH,
President pro tempore.

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

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The majority leader is recognized.

MEASURES PLACED ON THE CALENDAR—H.R. 1628

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I understand there is a bill at the desk due for a second reading.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will read the bill by title for the second time.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (H.R. 1628) to provide for reconciliation pursuant to title II of the concurrent resolution on the budget for fiscal year 2017.

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, in order to place the bill on the calendar under the provisions of rule XIV, I object to further proceedings.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Objection is heard.

The bill will be placed on the calendar.

IRAN SANCTIONS BILL

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, yesterday, Senators voted on an overwhelming bipartisan basis—91 to 8—to advance critical legislation granting the administration more of the policy tools it needs to hold Iran accountable for its actions. We must now keep

working toward final passage. The bill makes clear that Congress recognizes that Iran's aggressive behavior and efforts to expand its revolution across the broader Middle East must be stopped.

Unfortunately, the Obama administration's desire to draw down our conventional military presence from the Persian Gulf and Iraq created the self-defeating imperative to avoid nation-state conflict at any cost, and they were reluctant to take any action that might upset the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—in other words, the so-called Iran deal. They kept this hands-off approach even when Iran supported terrorism and Shia militias and even as they harassed U.S. ships at sea—actions that were not part of the nuclear program or the Iran deal.

Advancing this bill makes the logical point that our Nation needs a comprehensive strategy to deal with all areas of Iran's aggression. It will give the current administration more of the tools it needs to take a stronger approach than the previous administration. It includes new mandatory ballistic missile sanctions, new terrorism sanctions, and a mechanism to ensure better enforcement of the arms embargo. These sanctions represent another key measure we can take now to keep American families safer and to support our allies over in that region.

I want to again note the broad bipartisan support this legislation has already received and encourage my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to continue working together so we can pass it.

HEALTHCARE LEGISLATION

Mr. MCCONNELL. On another matter, Mr. President, just this week, Ohioans learned that a major insurer will exit their State's ObamaCare exchanges next year, leaving thousands in at least 18 counties without a single option—not one; not a single option—

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



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in the marketplace. The State's insurance department cites ObamaCare as the reason behind this troubling news, saying:

Before the Affordable Care Act (ACA) Ohio had a very competitive health insurance market. [But] new regulations from [the] ACA have driven some companies out of Ohio and made it harder for them to do business, both of which have driven up the cost of health insurance in Ohio.

Forcing insurance options out of the marketplace, making it harder for people to find coverage, driving up costs of health insurance—these are the results of ObamaCare in Ohio and across the country, and the pain is all too real for thousands of Americans like those the President visited with just yesterday.

As he addressed a crowd in Cincinnati, the President shared the story of a small business owner from Louisville—my hometown—who, as the President said, is just one of the “many victims of the ObamaCare catastrophe” forced on the American people. Before ObamaCare, this Kentuckian's employees had access to multiple options for high-quality, affordable healthcare. Now, under the failed healthcare law, these workers face premiums that are 150 percent higher, while having fewer choices. To make matters worse, health insurance under ObamaCare has become so unaffordable that he now has difficulty creating new jobs that would employ even more Kentuckians.

This Louisville man is not alone either. Just a couple of days ago, Dr. Tom Price, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, met with small business owners who have faced similar challenges because of ObamaCare, people like one Kentuckian from Richmond. Here is what this Kentuckian and founder of a CPA firm said of her experience with the failed healthcare law:

Of all the clients that we see, there's not one good story about ObamaCare. And it's mostly without exception, horror stories of what has happened to themselves and their own employees.

She, like so many others, knows that the so-called Affordable Care Act has really been anything but affordable for too many small business owners and their employees.

These Kentuckians' stories provide just a glimpse into the disastrous impacts ObamaCare has had on Americans across the country. Although some may try to paint a different picture now, ObamaCare is responsible for the failures and the hurt it has created—not the American people, not those of us trying to help rescue families from this ill-advised law.

Since ObamaCare was fully enacted in 2013, premiums have increased by an average of 105 percent and millions of Americans have lost their plans. This year, people in just under three-quarters of counties nationally have only one or two choices on the ObamaCare exchanges, and the situation is likely to only get worse next year. That is

why Senate Republicans believe we must act. That is why we are working to keep our commitment to the American people and finally provide relief from ObamaCare. This law has failed the American people, and the status quo is clearly unsustainable.

As Senate Republicans continue our conversations on a path forward, I hope our Democratic colleagues will finally put aside their last-ditch efforts to salvage this failing law that is hurting so many people in the States they represent. It is time to face reality, no matter how inconvenient it may be, and help those who are counting on relief from ObamaCare.

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.

Mr. SCHUMER. 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.

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Democratic leader is recognized.

TESTIMONY OF JAMES COMEY

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, this morning the Intelligence Committee is hearing testimony from former FBI Director James Comey. I hope and expect him to be as forthright and straightforward as he can. The Senate and, by extension, the American people deserve to know the truth about Mr. Comey's interactions with the President.

Based on the opening statement Mr. Comey submitted to the committee, we know that he will confirm much of what we have already learned about the events of the past few months through the press. That is important in and of itself. Until now, we have read these reports with a healthy dose of skepticism, waiting for Mr. Comey to confirm or to refute their veracity. It appears the bulk of what we learned from the reports about Mr. Comey's memos is true.

The President asked Mr. Comey to pledge “loyalty” to the President and asked him if he could “let go” of an investigation into one of the President's close associates, former National Security Advisor General Flynn. That conversation took place in a meeting during which the President raised the prospect of Mr. Comey not continuing in the job.

The Senate appreciates this testimony. I am sure members of the Intelligence Committee will seek answers to many of the remaining and new questions the testimony raises.

There are so many questions that Mr. Comey's testimony leaves hanging out there. Every single lead should be pur-

sued. Let's not lose sight of the very heart of this matter: a foreign adversary interfering with our democracy. There is an open counterintelligence investigation into whether members of the Trump campaign worked with that foreign adversary to help that campaign win the White House. This issue gets to the very foundation of our democracy: free and fair elections and the rule of law.

There is no process more sacred in democracy than the people exercising their voice at the ballot box. There is no principle more enshrined in our legal system than the principle that no one—no one—is above the law. Members of both parties should deeply care about getting the truth, whole truth, and nothing but the truth. I hope that spirit will direct Senators in their questioning today.

RUSSIA AND IRAN SANCTIONS LEGISLATION

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, Senators from both parties are negotiating the content of an amendment to the bill for tough, bipartisan Russia sanctions legislation.

On the Democratic side, we feel very strongly that we need a tough, effective package of Russia sanctions to move alongside Iran sanctions. I believe many of my Republican colleagues do, as well, so there is very likely an agreement to be reached.

President Putin has violated the sovereignty of Ukraine by annexing Crimea. He has committed human rights abuses, including the propping up of the brutal Assad regime in Syria, of stifling political dissent and the rights of his own people, and our intelligence community has concluded that Russia made a direct assault on our democracy by conducting a campaign to interfere in our elections.

That is why, principally, I proposed a vote on a bill put forward by my friend, the Republican Senator from South Carolina, Senator GRAHAM. This is a bill that includes as its cosponsors Senators MCCAIN and RUBIO on the Republican side and Senators CARDIN, BROWN, and MCCASKILL on the Democratic side. It is a strong bipartisan bill.

The bill would establish a process for Congress to review any Russia-related sanctions relief. The President and administration officials have demonstrated they are willing to consider lifting sanctions on Russia in exchange for vague, yet-to-be-articulated concessions, if any concessions at all. Congress ought to have the power to review any decision made by this administration before sanctions on Russia are lifted.

Senator MCCAIN has also introduced an amendment, along with Senator CARDIN, which would impose new sanctions on Russia. Given the revelations of Russian interference in our elections, new sanctions are warranted in addition to the existing sanctions. In addition to the Graham-Cardin bill,