

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Georgia.

Mr. ISAKSON. Mr. President, I thank the distinguished President pro tempore of the Senate, the chairman of the committee. I am honored to take that 5 minutes.

VETERANS HEALTHCARE

Mr. President, a lot of us wake up in the morning with a plan for the day, and we know what we are going to do each hour—and every 5 minutes if you are a Member of the Senate. Some days surprise you. I went to breakfast this morning for Members of the Senate who are veterans of the U.S. military. There were three of us at that breakfast. There were supposed to be more, but some did not come at the last minute.

One of the people at the breakfast handed me a piece of paper—four pages as a matter of fact—and asked: Have you seen this?

I did not know what it was, but I turned and looked at it. It was a white paper on the impact of President Trump's proposed budget on the American veteran.

The guy said: You are the chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee. I want you to explain why all of this is true.

I quickly turned through it, from one page to another, and looked at each of the headlines and subtitles. Every one of them was wrong. There was not a statement of fact in it, but there was a purpose to the paper.

So I thought all morning about what I would do today to try and get the word out about what is true without getting into a partisan or a bickering battle on the floor of the Senate about documents that have been sent out circuitously by one Member of the Senate or another. Facts are facts, and facts are stubborn things. It is very important for me as chairman of the committee to make sure that the Members of the Senate know what we are dealing with as we lead up to making important decisions.

This white paper alleges that President Trump's budget is a circuitous route to privatize VA health services for our veterans, which is patently untrue and wrong, and the authors of this in the Senate who have written it know it is untrue because they are on the committee. It further alleges that the funding of healthcare for veterans has been cannibalized by privatization programs in order to take healthcare out of the Veterans Health Administration and put it into the private sector.

I know, within a few weeks, that I am going to be coming to the floor with, hopefully, the entire Veterans' Affairs Committee and will be seeking additional funds for the Choice Program so as to continue to meet the demand for our veterans and their healthcare.

It was 2½ years ago that this Senate and this Congress and the former President passed and signed legislation that guaranteed that every veteran, no matter where he lived, could get services

within the private sector in his community that were approved by the VA—services that he could not get from the VA anywhere. In other words, he got a choice. If he were denied an appointment within 30 days, he got a choice if he lived more than 40 miles from the service area. It became known as the Choice Program—popular but difficult to manage. It was popular in that 2.7 million appointments were held in the next 2 years over the previous 2 years because of the increased accessibility of healthcare for our veterans.

I come to the floor to say that the Veterans' Affairs Committee is working with the appropriators and the authorizers to see to it that the healthcare money that needs to be appropriated for our veterans is appropriately done in the budget proposal that we pass out of this body.

I want everybody on the floor to remember, every time you allege as a Member of the Senate that money for veterans is being cannibalized and that they are not going to get their health services, you are accusing the Congress and the Senate of not doing their constitutional duty of providing the funds we guarantee these men and these women when they voluntarily sign up to serve our country, serve for the eligible time necessary, and get VA status.

I am never going to forsake my obligation to the men and women who serve us today, have served us in the past, and will serve us in the future. I am never going to be one of those politicians who is not trustworthy in standing behind every promise that is made.

We have made a great promise to the veterans of America, and we are going to keep it because they made the greatest promise of all—that they would risk their lives for each of us.

So, if you get a document that reads "The Impact of President Trump's Proposed Budget on America's Veterans" and read it and it talks about the cannibalization of VA healthcare and its going to a privatized system of healthcare, put it in the trash can because that is where it belongs. It is full of quotes that have been taken out of context and that have been put together to tell a story to frighten folks.

Today and every day, we are in the process in the Veterans' Affairs Committee of working toward seeing to it that we meet the funding shortfalls that exist, to see to it that our veterans get the healthcare that they deserve and they come to our Veterans Health Administration for or that they have a choice, and we will continue to do so.

I have but one responsibility in the U.S. Senate, which is of paramount importance, and that is my chairmanship on the Veterans' Affairs Committee. I am not going to let our veterans down, and I am not going to let somebody else allege that we on the committee are trying to do something that would

not help the veterans or guarantee them their healthcare. On the contrary, we are going to see to it that nobody else takes it away. We are going to do for our veterans what they have done for us—pledge our sacred honor to see to it that they get the service they deserve, have fought for, and have risked their lives for.

I thank the Senator from Utah for yielding the time.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Utah.

HEALTHCARE LEGISLATION

Mr. HATCH. Mr. President, for the last several weeks, I have been hearing quite a bit about process here in the Senate, particularly as it relates to the ongoing debate over the future of ObamaCare.

My friends on the other side of the aisle have, apparently, poll-tested the strategy of decrying the supposed secrecy surrounding the healthcare bill and the lack of regular order in its development. They have come to the floor, given interviews, and even hijacked committee meetings and hearings to express their supposedly righteous indignation about how Republicans are proceeding with the healthcare bill.

Of course, hearing Senate Democrats lecture about preserving the customs and traditions of the Senate is a bit ironic, but I will get back to that in a minute.

Last week, the Senate Finance Committee, which I chair, held a routine nominations markup to consider a slate of relatively uncontroversial nominees. On that same day, several of our colleagues and congressional staffers had been viciously attacked by an armed assailant, and a Member of the House of Representatives, of course, was in critical condition in the hospital.

I opened the meeting by respectfully asking my colleagues to allow the committee to use the markup as an opportunity to demonstrate unity in the face of a violent attack against Congress as an institution. Even then, my Democratic friends were, apparently, unable to pass up an opportunity to try to score partisan points and rack up video clips for social media by playing for the cameras as they lamented the committee's position in the healthcare debate.

Once again, the situation is dripping with irony. As I said, I will get to that in a minute.

If my Democratic colleagues are going to continue grandstanding over the healthcare debate, I have a few numbers I would like to cite for them.

Under ObamaCare, health insurance premiums in the State of Oregon have gone up by an average of 110 percent. In Michigan, they have gone up by 90 percent. In Florida, they have gone up by 84 percent. In Delaware, they have gone up by 108 percent. In Ohio, they have gone up by 86 percent. In Pennsylvania, they have gone up by 120 percent. In

Virginia, they have gone up by 77 percent. In Missouri, they have gone up by 145 percent.

I have not picked those States at random. Each of these States is currently represented by a Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee. Of course, those trends extend well beyond the committee.

In Illinois, where the Senate minority whip resides, premiums have gone up by 108 percent.

In West Virginia and Wisconsin, both of which are also represented by Democratic Senators, premiums have gone up by 169 percent and 93 percent, respectively.

Montana is in a similar situation with premiums rising by 133 percent under ObamaCare.

Now, just so people do not go thinking that I am picking on the Democrats, I will note that, in Utah, health insurance premiums have gone up by an average of 101 percent.

In Wyoming, they have gone up by 107 percent, and, in Nebraska, they have gone up by 153 percent.

I can go on, but I think my point is clear: Health insurance premiums have skyrocketed all over the country by an average of 105 percent. I will repeat that. Under ObamaCare, the average health insurance premiums in the United States have seen triple-digit increases.

These are the fruits of the so-called Affordable Care Act. This is the burden that ObamaCare has placed on patients and families throughout our country, and people are feeling that burden whether they vote for Democrats or Republicans.

The only difference is that, for 7½ years, my Republican colleagues and I have been talking about the failures of ObamaCare, and for 7½ years, Senate Democrats have done virtually nothing to address these problems.

For 7½ years, Republicans like myself have pleaded with our Democratic colleagues and with the previous administration to work with us to address the failures of ObamaCare, and for 7½ years, it has been virtually impossible to get any Democrat in Washington to even acknowledge that there have been any problems with ObamaCare to begin with.

As the cost of healthcare in this country has skyrocketed out of control and the system created by the so-called Affordable Care Act has been collapsing under its own weight, Democrats in the Senate have been cherry-picking what few positive data points they can find and telling the American people that everything is fine and that ObamaCare is working.

Give me a break.

By no honest or reasonable measure is ObamaCare living up to the promises that were made at the time it was passed. As a result, the American people are saddled with a healthcare system that has been poorly designed and recklessly implemented.

Sure, it has made for partisan political theater for my colleagues to ex-

press shock and dismay at the current state of the healthcare debate. I am quite certain the strategy has polli-tested very well among the Democratic base, and the Senate minority leader clearly has an elaborate media campaign in mind.

Before they begin berating Republicans, I hope my Democratic colleagues were able to come up with something to tell their constituents whose healthcare costs have exploded as a result of ObamaCare. I have just mentioned a few things.

I hope they have answers for their voters for wondering why they only have one insurance option available to them, if they even have that, and, most importantly, I hope they have an explanation as to why they have been more or less silent while the law they supported—and still support—has wreaked havoc on our Nation's healthcare system.

Until they can answer those questions and provide those explanations, my good friends should spare anyone within earshot their lectures about what is currently happening in the Senate.

Finally, let me address the irony of my Democratic colleagues' process complaints. Some of them have selective memories when it comes to the history of ObamaCare. We have heard our colleagues talk about the number of committee hearings held in advance of ObamaCare's passing. What we don't hear is that there was not a single hearing held in the Senate on the ObamaCare reconciliation bill, which was an essential element that ensured passage of the Affordable Care Act in the House.

We have heard our colleagues talk about the markup process in committee and the number of amendments that were filed and accepted. What we don't hear about is the fact that the bills reported by the Finance and HELP Committees were tossed aside so the healthcare bill could be rewritten behind closed doors in Senator Reid's office, who was then the majority leader. The final product was only made public a few days before the Senate voted on it.

The truth is this: Senate committees—including the Finance Committee—have had literally dozens of hearings wherein the failings of ObamaCare—both the structure of the law and its implementation—have been thoroughly examined. Between all the relevant committees, there have been at least 66 healthcare hearings in the Senate since ObamaCare became the healthcare law of the land. More than half of those were in the Finance Committee.

Committees have conducted countless oversight investigations and inquiries into these matters over the years. Few matters in the history of our country have received as much of the Senate's attention as ObamaCare has received. Very few laws have been examined as extensively as the so-

called Affordable Care Act, which is anything but affordable. ObamaCare is the very definition of well-covered territory.

The majority leader has made clear that Members will have an opportunity to examine the forthcoming healthcare bill, and I expect that to be the case. He has always made assurances that when the bill is debated on the floor, we will have a fair and open amendment process, as required under the rules. There is really no reason for anyone to expect otherwise.

Let's recall that when ObamaCare was passed, the Democratic Speaker of the House, with a plain face, stated that Congress had to pass the bill in order for people to see what was in it.

Let's also recall that a couple of years later, one of the chief architects of the so-called Affordable Care Act bragged about the lack of transparency that surrounded its passage and said it was necessary to, in his words, take advantage of the "stupidity of the American voter."

Any argument that the process that resulted in ObamaCare was a picture of transparency and deliberation is so off base that it would almost be humorous if the issue was something less important.

As I said in committee last week, I want to welcome my Democratic colleagues to the healthcare debate. Ever since ObamaCare was signed into law, Democrats have more or less assumed that the debate was over and that all they had to do was keep telling the American people that everything was just fine, as if repetition alone would make it come true.

Everyone is going to see the bill, and everyone is going to get their chance to say their piece about it.

For now, I simply hope my Democratic colleagues will spare us their lectures and maybe look in the mirror when they are ranting about the degradation of the process and traditions of the Senate.

I have been around healthcare for most of my 41 years in the Senate. A lot of the healthcare bills that work in this country have my name on them. This is one of the worst bills I have ever seen in all my time in the U.S. Senate. If I were a Democrat, I would not be claiming success because of that bill. It is a pathetic piece of legislation that is going to put this country down and make healthcare not available for everybody but make everybody have the worst healthcare system they could possibly have.

Now, it is one thing to cherry-pick a few things that the healthcare bill can help with, but it would be a totally stupid bill if it didn't have something in it that was good. If you look at the overall bill and you look at the overall cost to America and you look at what it is doing to America and you look at how the medical profession is starting to really wonder if they want to be in the profession anymore—you can't do all of this and look at all of these things

without asking, What in the heck have we done here? Are we so stupid that we believe the Federal Government is the last answer to everything?

Well, we will see, because I think some people are that stupid and, frankly—I don't want to name anybody, and I hope I am wrong, but I have been here 41 years and I have seen a lot of stupidity around this place and you have to really go a long way to find anything worse than the so-called "affordable" healthcare bill.

This is a pathetic piece of legislation that is going to wreck our country if we don't, as Democrats and Republicans, get together and reform it. This is an opportunity for my friends on the Democratic side as well as the Republican side to see what we can do about this and to get this thing straightened out.

This is the greatest country in the world. There is nobody in this country who should go without basic healthcare. When we have terrible cases like my distinguished friend and colleague from Connecticut has mentioned, yes, we want to make sure people who suffer like that are taken care of, and there are some on our side who could be a little more humane and compassionate, but there are some on the other side, too, who could be a little more humane and compassionate and maybe a little more honest when they talk about this bill.

We are a long way from solving the healthcare problems in this country, and if we go down this road any further, we will be an even longer way from solving these problems, and we may very well bankrupt the American economy, which will then really show us how bad we are with regard to healthcare in this country.

My friends on the other side never ask, Where is the money going to come from? Who is going to pay for this? Who is going to help us to get through this? We are just going to throw money at it, and we are \$100 trillion in unfunded liability in this country and \$20 trillion in national debt. It is astounding. Who is going to pay for it, especially when it doesn't work any better than that.

I spent some of my prior life in medical malpractice work defending doctors and hospitals and healthcare providers, and some of that was really astounding to me because some of those cases were brought just to get the defense costs, which were always pretty high because those cases were very expensive to defend. Most of them were not good cases, but once they got in court, if they had any kind of basis at all—but even if they were dismissed, it still cost a lot of money.

All I can say is, there is a lot wrong with our healthcare system in this country, but it is still the best healthcare system in the world, and it is about to go down if we don't get together as Republicans and Democrats and straighten this mess out. We can make our political points all we want

to. Both sides have been right in some cases and both sides have been wrong on some things, but we are wrong if we think that the current system is going to work, and we ought to be working together as Republicans and Democrats or Democrats and Republicans to straighten it out.

With that, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Michigan.

Mr. PETERS. Mr. President, I rise with the understanding that the Senate will be voting on a Republican healthcare bill next week, a bill that has been written entirely behind closed doors.

The bill has been hidden from the American people, the press, and, as far as I can tell, almost every Senator. I have not been allowed to see it and neither have any of my Democratic colleagues.

I was elected to the Senate in 2014 during the same election that Republicans regained the majority, and I remember a pledge by their leadership that the Senate would return to regular order. Well, regular order means public hearings on legislation. Regular order means committees have a chance to gather input from expert witnesses, consider a policy's potential impact, and amend bills before they come to the floor.

Prior to enacting ObamaCare, the Senate Finance and HELP Committees held nearly 100 hearings, roundtables, and walkthroughs on healthcare reform. In the House, where I served at the time, there were over 79 bipartisan hearings and markups that included an opportunity for our Republican colleagues to offer input and amendments in the bill. Dozens of Republican amendments were adopted during the House committee markups of the Affordable Care Act. That is an open process.

What we are seeing now is a bill drafted entirely in secrecy and hidden behind closed doors. But why? Is it because Republicans know that this bill is not a good deal for the American people? You could call the recent process a lot of things, but you can't call it open, and you can't call it regular order.

Supposedly, the bill has been assembled by a working group of 13 of my Republican colleagues, but just yesterday—just yesterday—one of these Members complained that he had not yet seen a draft. In fact, he went on to say—this is a Republican colleague of mine in this working group:

It has become increasingly apparent in the last few days that even though we thought we were going to be in charge of writing a bill within this working group, it's not being written by us. It's apparently being written by a small handful of staffers for members of the Republican leadership in the Senate.

This quote makes it clear that this working group is—well, it is not working.

When Senators in the majority party are unable to tell you who is writing

the bill, let alone what is in the bill, we have a problem. While we clearly have a problem with the secretive, rushed process, this process is a symptom, not the disease. The underlying disease is that this bill, which we reportedly will see tomorrow, is almost certainly terrible for the American people.

There are two explanations for keeping a product under wraps: Either you want to build excitement for it or you are worried about the weaknesses that would be exposed by the daylight. I don't believe for a moment that Republicans are trying to build excitement by hiding this bill. This bill is not next year's model of the Ford Mustang or Chevy Camaro waiting to be unveiled at the Detroit auto show to great fanfare. This bill is like a disaster that will negatively impact millions of Americans. This bill is the iceberg that sunk the *Titanic*, and Republican leadership has turned off the ship's radio and are furiously shoveling coal into the engines.

While the Senate moves full steam ahead to vote next week on a bill we haven't even seen yet, I am worried that my colleagues across the aisle, along with too many political commentators and pundits, are simply asking the wrong questions. They are asking: Will moderate Republicans vote for it? Will the tea party wing support it? Will it take sweetheart deals to get to 51 votes?

Well, folks, this is not a game. This is not about if and how the majority can count to 51 votes and solve their political problems with the far-right-wing base of their party. This is about people's lives.

There are serious policy questions we need to ask, and the American people deserve to have answers. There are questions like these: What are your policy goals here? How do you think this will help people afford quality insurance coverage? What will the bill do for tens of millions of Americans who have gained healthcare coverage in recent years? What will the bill do for patients with preexisting conditions? What will the bill do for the hundreds of thousands of Michiganders covered under the successful Healthy Michigan Program? What will the bill do for small business owners and employees? What will the bill do for seniors who need affordable, long-term care options? What will the bill do for individuals battling opioid addiction? These are questions I am asking, along with all of my Democratic colleagues.

I serve on the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, and just a few weeks ago we held a hearing on opioid abuse and how the epidemic is simply ravaging our Nation.

I had the opportunity to speak with a police chief from our southern border State of Ohio. He was very clear that if Medicaid expansion were to go away—as we saw in the House bill and expect to see in the Senate bill—it will make it much more difficult for local police departments to tackle this crisis because of dramatically scaled-back

availability of addiction treatment. I spoke with a coroner, a medical doctor, and an addiction expert on the panel as well.

These are professionals dealing with a public health crisis each and every day—not people with political agendas. They all agreed that Medicaid expansion is critical to combating addiction, improving public health, and helping individuals suffering from addiction have an opportunity to be productive citizens and have a second chance at life.

The bottom line is that this bill—this secretive, rushed bill that we will supposedly see tomorrow—will move us backward and rip healthcare away from millions of Americans. When you take health coverage away from people, people will die.

As a Member of the House, I voted for the Affordable Care Act because I knew that, at the end of the day, it would save people's lives. As elected officials and public servants, there are only a handful of votes we cast that are literally about life and death. Next week, we will see one of those votes.

I urge my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to read the bill, whenever we get it, and then talk to doctors, patients, families, clinics, and hospitals in their State. I also urge my colleagues to vote no next week and to start a truly bipartisan process that keeps what works, fixes what doesn't, but, most importantly, helps all Americans afford quality healthcare in their communities.

I stand here ready and willing to be a partner in a bipartisan process and to work with my Republican colleagues to improve our healthcare system. Show us and the American people you are serious about health reform. Let's have an open and honest process and pass a bill that is genuinely in the best interest of the American people.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. GARDNER). The clerk will call the roll. The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

CLIMATE CHANGE

Mr. WHITEHOUSE. Mr. President, I come weekly to the Senate whenever we are in session to give my "Time to Wake Up" speech, talking about climate change and, quite often, talking about the climate denial campaign that prevents us from taking action and, quite often, talking about the campaign finance problems in our country that make climate denial effective. Here, in Congress, it is not hard to connect the dots from campaign finance to climate denial.

The Supreme Court's Republican majority's disastrous Citizens United decision was requested by the fossil fuel industry, and the fossil fuel industry took instant advantage of it—almost

like they saw it coming. The industry and its front groups instantly used their new power conferred by Citizens United to come after politicians—Republicans in particular. Ask Bob Inglis, who backed responsible climate policies. Citizens United created new American dark-money emperors, and—no surprise—the new emperors love their new political power.

Their first payoff was that Republicans in Congress fled from any legislative action on climate change. Before Citizens United, there were multiple bipartisan climate bills. Year after year—when I was here in 2007, 2008, 2009—there were bipartisan climate bills to the left of you, bipartisan climate bills to the right of you, bipartisan climate bills cropping up all over. Today, we watch our Republican President trying to undo curbs on carbon emissions and, to the cheers of Republicans in Congress, withdrawing the United States from the historic Paris Agreement. We join Syria and Nicaragua as the only nations to reject this common cause. That, my friends, is the heavy hand of fossil fuel influence, driving us into isolation and abdication of American leadership.

Of course, right now, no Republican can safely sponsor any bill to limit carbon dioxide emissions, and so none do. Very different than before the Citizens United decision in January of 2010. That changed everything. When those five Republican justices opened up unlimited political spending to the big Republican special interests, that unlimited political spending was inevitably going to find dark-money channels. Dark-money channels hide the identity of the political donor, so that big special interests can pollute our politics with their money with seemingly clean hands.

The climate denial scheme of the fossil fuel cartel is powered politically by dark money. Whether through the lure of dark money coming in for you in a political race or the threat of dark money coming in against you in a political race, dark money powers climate denial. Well, we have just learned something new about dark money.

Chairman GRAHAM and I held hearings in our Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime and Terrorism to look at Russian interference in the recent 2016 election and what it portends for elections to come. Our witnesses warned us that Russia has strategically manipulated politics in Europe for decades. They started working in the former Soviet Union countries, and they expanded to where they are manipulating politics in France, Germany, Holland, England, and all over Europe. The witnesses warned us that we in America must be prepared for that. They jumped the Atlantic to manipulate the 2016 elections, and they are not going away.

One identified weakness of the United States against Russian influence was this dark money in our politics. Why is that? Well, it is obvious.

Once you allow dark money in, dark is dark. Cash from Vladimir Putin is no more traceable than cash from Charles and David Koch. One witness, a former Republican national security official, told us: "It is critical that we effectively enforce the campaign finance laws that would prevent this type of financial influence by foreign actors."

"It is critical that we effectively enforce the campaign finance laws" against foreign influence by foreign actors.

The two best studies of Russian influence in Western Europe in their elections and in their politics are "The Kremlin Playbook," by CSIS, or the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and "The Kremlin's Trojan Horses," by the Atlantic Council. Both of them report that Russia takes advantage of nontransparency in campaign financing to build its shadowy webs of influence and control. If you leave dark-money channels lying around, it is likely that Vladimir Putin and his oligarchs will find them.

The "Trojan Horses" report warns this: "The Kremlin's blatant attempts to influence and disrupt the U.S. presidential election should serve as an inspiration for a democratic push back." That is a lower case "d" for "democratic push back," and it points to one key way we need to push back.

I will quote them again.

Electoral rules should be amended, so that publically funded political groups, primarily political parties, should at the very least be required to report their sources of funding.

That is, end dark money.

Likewise, the "Kremlin Playbook" report warns:

Enhancing transparency and the effectiveness of the Western democratic tools, instruments, and institutions is critical to resilience against Russian influence.

Enhancing transparency means ending dark money.

Our hearing and these reports reveal another political influence tool used by the Kremlin: fake news. As we shore up our democracy to defend against Russia's fake news information warfare, we must remember this: Climate denial was the original fake news.

To give an example, here is a story that may sound familiar. An unknown hacker illegally breaks into and steals an organization's emails. The organization's emails are held until they can be released at a politically strategic moment. At the strategic moment, emails are leaked to a website with shady ties. The leaks are then amplified and spun by fake news, driven into the regular media, and have their desired political effect. Does any of that sound familiar? Of course, it is the methodology of the Russians' hack of the Democratic National Committee, right? Unknown hacker, stolen emails, strategic release, caching them until they can be used, shady website, fake news spin-up, regular media takes the bait, political damage.

If you step back and look at just the methodology, we have seen this pattern before—so-called climategate, the