

and efficient way or we can vote to return to the precedent of the 113th Congress. That is the choice. Either way, it is time to vote.

Thank you.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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 President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

RUSSIA INVESTIGATION

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, the magnitude of this moment should be apparent to all. A sitting U.S. President's campaign chief and his protege have been indicted for conspiring against the United States. Another campaign adviser has pleaded guilty for lying to the FBI about meetings with Russians. At those meetings, he illegally discussed obtaining dirt on the President's political opponent and emails that had been stolen.

Two points need to be underscored for the American people. First, these indictments and conviction are a sober, shattering moment in American history. Second, all of us on both sides of the aisle should come together to support the work of the special counsel and assure that he is able to follow the facts and the law and all of the evidence, wherever they may lead.

This moment will stand as a landmark in American history, just as many of the moments in Watergate did. This investigation has proceeded more quickly than Watergate did. John Mitchell was indicted in 1974 for conspiracy, perjury, and obstruction of justice. He was convicted a year later. That indictment took a year and a half of investigation. These indictments have occurred just 11 months after the election and barely 6 months after the beginning of the investigation.

We know that the President's campaign hired two alleged criminals and one admitted criminal. Two of them were foreign agents, and the campaign was run by a Russian agent, unregistered, now charged with conspiring against the United States. He was supported by another Russian foreign agent who was also charged with the same 12 criminal counts. These two individuals, Paul Manafort and Rick Gates, were significant people in the Trump campaign.

In the case of Gates, his influence continued through the early months of the new administration. Manafort ran Trump's campaign at its most critical point, and he organized and directed the 2016 Republican National Committee convention, including the critical delegate-corralling effort against a potential "Never Trump" insurrection, securing the Republican nomination for Donald Trump.

Under Manafort's leadership of the Trump campaign, the Republican

Party stripped language from their platform that would have called for arming Ukraine against Russian aggression. Ahead of the convention, Manafort also offered to brief a Russian billionaire on the state of the 2016 race. The convention he helped organize became a venue for a meeting between Attorney General Sessions and the Russian ambassador, after which the Attorney General misled Congress, implying—indeed stating—that it never took place.

The Trump campaign also worked extensively with George Papadopoulos, a foreign adviser whose actions constitute the most significant indication of possible collusion—so far the most significant—between the Trump campaign and Russian officials.

Papadopoulos was named a foreign policy adviser in March 2016 and began communicating with Russian nationals the next month. He met with a professor for breakfast in London. They discussed stolen emails from Hillary Clinton and subsequently shuttled messages to the Kremlin and back for the Trump campaign.

He worked with officials at the highest level of the Trump campaign. His direct boss, in fact, was Jeff Sessions, who was then the head of Trump's national security advisory committee, and he is now, of course, the Attorney General. He communicated extensively with the campaign manager and members of the national security team.

President Trump tweeted today that he was a "young, low level volunteer," but the President sang his praises at a meeting with the Washington Post editorial board in March 2016, calling him an "energy and oil consultant, excellent guy." These revelations are stunning.

Now the President is at a critical juncture. He can choose the course of cooperation or confrontation. He is literally teetering on the brink of a decision that could prove disastrous for himself and for America if he chooses a constitutional confrontation.

We are at a moment very much like the one that occurred in Watergate. It is still memorable to many of us in this Chamber, although we were not here at the time. Our Nation could be careening toward a constitutional crisis. Some of the actions the President has already taken, such as firing Jim Comey as FBI Director, may be evidence of obstruction of justice in the investigation by the special counsel. As part of our oversight responsibility, the Judiciary Committee must continue its work in investigating that firing and other actions that may constitute obstruction of justice.

Firing the special counsel himself is something only the President could try to do. It would be the ultimate act of contempt for the rule of law that is rightly seen as the actions of someone who has something to hide.

At stake is more than just this President or this special counsel. It is literally the rule of law. To this Presi-

dent, the rule of law may be meaningless, a facade or a fiction, but that is exactly why Congress must give the judicial branch specific, enforceable power to stop the President from firing the special counsel.

That is the purpose of legislation I have introduced, along with colleagues. I am here to call upon this body to support and pass the Special Counsel Independence Protection Act.

I called for the special counsel to be established in February of this year and was joined by 10 of my colleagues in that call. It was based on credible allegations that the Trump team had colluded with the Russian Government. The Special Counsel Independence Protection Act, which I have cosponsored along with colleagues, seeks to forestall the kind of potential constitutional crisis raised by the President's threats not so long ago and his labeling the investigation a hoax and a witch hunt.

The Washington Post reported today that advisers close to the President are urging that, in fact, he take more aggressive action against the special counsel. The specter of Presidential action against Robert Mueller, designed to stop or stymie a virtually unavoidable and necessary criminal investigation of the President himself, makes safeguarding the special counsel more urgent and necessary now than ever before.

Rather than encouraging Presidential abuse of power by inaction, the Congress must move forward right away to check potential malfeasance and abuse before it occurs. Even the threat of such political interference constituting potential obstruction of justice undermines the special counsel's investigation. It makes witnesses less likely to cooperate. It discourages the agents and investigators working for the special counsel. It creates unnecessary confusion in the American public. Only judicial review can provide the check against such abuse and ensure confidence that the special counsel will proceed methodically and systematically to uphold the rule of law and follow the facts in evidence, wherever they may lead. That is what the American people want him to do. That is what we should guarantee that he will do. Make no mistake, this investigation will continue and conclude fairly and fully. The only question is how much turmoil and how much damage is done in the course of that investigation.

Clearly, like any investigation and prosecution, this one is a mosaic, consisting of many different diverse pieces and already it is coming together on the Trump campaign's contacts with Russian officials. They include, for example, campaign adviser Papadopoulos's contacts with a Russian agent who claimed he had "dirt" on Hillary Clinton; Donald Trump, Jr., and the campaign aides' Trump Tower meeting with Russian agents to obtain information on Clinton; Jared

Kushner's meetings with sanctioned VEB Russian bank CEO Sergey Gorkov; Sessions' meetings with the Russian Ambassador; the Cambridge Analytica CEO's outreach to WikiLeaks to obtain Hillary Clinton's missing emails; and former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn's dining with President Putin in Moscow. Those pieces of the mosaic are only the beginning. We are at a critical stage—the end of the beginning, not the beginning of the end.

As a former prosecutor, I know investigations take time. The best investigations are done without deadlines. In an important case like this one, and in a complex and challenging one, we must allow all the time necessary to assemble that full mosaic and put together the pieces of this puzzle.

The Watergate scandal took 2 years to unravel, from Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's first piece in the Washington Post in June of 1972 to Nixon's resignation in August of 1974. We are less than a year into the Trump Presidency and fewer than 10 months into this investigation.

The first individuals to be indicted in the Watergate scandal were considered to be generally outside the President's inner circle. They were E. Howard Hunt, G. Gordon Liddy, and the Watergate burglars in September of 1972. No one knew—and many denied—the conspiracy that involved the President and his top lieutenants at the time of those first indictments. In these cases, too—in these first indictments and conviction—a lot more is to come.

We cannot wait until the President potentially shuts down his special counsel to come to his defense. Already, the rule of law is under threat. On Sunday—the day before the indictments were handed down—the President tweeted: “DO SOMETHING!” with regard to the Russia investigation. Although his reference was unclear exactly what he meant and whom the message was targeting, it certainly was an indication that some kind of action might be taken to thwart the investigation.

Any interference in this investigation will be a red line for me and for others in this Chamber. Let the President hear that message loud and clear. There is a red line that cannot be crossed. It is political interference or intrusion in the special counsel's investigation, and it will be met with a firestorm, I hope, on both sides of the aisle. My conversations with our colleagues on the other side of the aisle indicate they would share our outrage and outcry if there is an effort to stop and stymie this investigation or if there is any other kind of political interference in it.

Senators GRAHAM, BOOKER, WHITEHOUSE, COONS, and I have cosponsored measures that will help protect the special counsel. There are two measures now, but they are so closely similar that they should be brought together, and conversations are under-

way to do so. I expect we will have a single bill in the very near future.

We should stand with one voice against obstruction of this investigation. I ask that my colleagues go on the record now to state that they will absolutely resist and oppose any interference by the executive branch into this investigation or investigations that are underway by our congressional committees—on the House side, the Intelligence Committee and, in the Senate, the Judiciary Committee along with our Intelligence Committee. The congressional committees have separate purposes. In the Judiciary Committee, we have the unique responsibility of oversight over the Department of Justice and the FBI. We have the unique responsibility to prevent the obstruction of justice and to uncover it, as is indicated by the firing of Jim Comey. My hope is that investigation will proceed and that it will be bipartisan, so we will have hearings and subpoena witnesses with public testimony under oath and eventually some report to the American people. That is my hope, and that will be our decision here.

The decision we cannot and should not make is what the outcome will be of the special counsel investigation. We must guarantee—and we have this responsibility in the Congress—that there is adequate funding and authority for the special counsel, that there is no effort to either cut resources or limit the purview of the special counsel or place constraints on the time it may take for this probe to conclude. There should be no firing and no pardons, and we should speak out and stand up to assure that message reaches the White House loud and clear.

This moment is one of historic magnitude. I cannot emphasize how strongly I feel but also how deeply my colleagues have expressed to me their own feelings about our responsibility in this moment.

The grand jury that is bringing these indictments is an arm of the courts, which should be independent of both the executive and legislative branches. That independence gives the special counsel some new measure of permanence and protection, but the President can still try to fire the special counsel. He cannot fire the grand jury or the U.S. District Court judge who impaneled the grand jury. Judicial review of any firing of the special counsel, which is the core principle of our measure—the Special Counsel Independence Protection Act—would add a highly significant protection to not just deter misguided and deeply mistaken actions, throwing our Nation into turmoil, but also assuring that confidence and trust remains with the special counsel, and he can follow facts and the law with the full support of the American people. The American people can put their trust and faith in him and in our courts. We should assure that we uphold that faith and trust.

Thank you.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Washington.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. SULLIVAN). Without objection, it is so ordered.

HEALTHCARE

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, since day one, the President of the United States has made it clear that his top priority, when it comes to healthcare in our country, is to score political points by attacking ObamaCare. He has even said repeatedly that healthcare in our country will “implode,” but this was not just a prediction that President Trump made, it was his goal, and he has tried virtually everything he can do to make that implosion a reality.

In January, he abruptly pulled funding for outreach days before the end of the 2017 open enrollment period without any analysis of how that might affect patients and families, and he signed executive orders specifically designed to inject uncertainty and increased costs into the healthcare system.

President Trump then dedicated the spring and summer to attempting to jam partisan, extraordinarily destructive legislation through the House and Senate to repeal the Affordable Care Act, despite one independent analysis after another showing that each version of TrumpCare would cause premiums to spike, take coverage away from millions of people, rip protections away from patients with preexisting conditions, and gut Medicaid.

This fall—after TrumpCare failed another time in the Senate—he slashed by 90 percent the investments that help inform families about their coverage options and followed through on his year-long threat to discontinue payments designed to lower out-of-pocket costs for low-income enrollees.

This is a scenario that healthcare experts said would cause mass consumer confusion and anxiety, one that insurance companies planned for by shifting that burden of uncertainty to patients and taxpayers in the form of higher premiums and fewer options in State marketplaces.

Now, this is by no means the full list of ways President Trump has attempted his healthcare sabotage, but it does explain why we are here now. Today is the first day of the open enrollment period for 2018, and as a direct result of this President's actions, families are going to see higher premiums, more out-of-pocket costs, and fewer coverage options. Many families will have to change their coverage if they want to avoid paying hundreds of dollars more in premiums.

At a time when we need to continue to do more to bend the healthcare cost curve in the right direction, taxpayers are being burdened with higher