

budget negotiations. That is how it ought to stay. That is what brought us to good agreements. That is what averted shutdowns. Unfortunately, it appears that the Freedom Caucus in the House, which doesn't represent the mainstream of America or even the mainstream of Republicans, is trying to derail another successful parity agreement. Unfortunately, Speaker RYAN, as he is doing far too often, to the detriment of the country and his party, is just following its lead.

Last night, the House posted what is called a CROMnibus—a very short-term extension of funding for jobs and economic development that will lead to cuts in those areas but a long-term extension and a large increase of funding for defense. This is merely a ruse that is designed to slash funding for education, healthcare, infrastructure, and scientific research—all things the Freedom Caucus doesn't want the government to fund—against the will of the overwhelming majority of Americans.

At this late hour, it is also an unfortunate waste of precious time. Earlier this week, 44 Senate Democrats sent a letter to our Republican colleagues that explicitly warned them that Democrats could not support such an approach. Because 60 votes are needed to advance a spending bill here in the Senate, House Republicans should have known not to waste everyone's time with a partisan spending bill that could never pass in the Senate.

The CROMnibus is nothing but a spectacle—a charade, a sop—to some militant, hard-right people who don't want the government to spend money on almost anything. It is a perilous waste of time as the clock ticks closer and closer to the end of the year.

It is time for our Republican colleagues—especially in the House, where the Freedom Caucus is like the tail wagging the dog—to get serious about working with Democrats toward a real parity agreement. Every hour that the House spends on the CROMnibus is an hour that could be spent on our working on a deal to avert a shutdown and solve the many pressing issues that Congress must grapple with before the end of the year.

If Speaker RYAN decides to press forward with a CROMnibus, it will quickly fail in the Senate, and we can get back to negotiating a real bipartisan agreement that will provide certainty and full funding to both our national defense and the middle class. Speaker RYAN has gone along with this approach three times in a row—or the House Republicans have. I think RYAN was the Speaker for two of those three and was the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee for the third. Right now, Speaker RYAN is pursuing a dead-end strategy. Instead, we urge him to continue working with Democrats on a bipartisan, long-term agreement that will keep the government open and fund our major priorities—defense, with jobs and the economy on the other side.

By the way, even on the other side of the ledger, the things that affect our security, like the border and the FBI, are funded on the nondefense side, and you have to have security in every way in this terrorism-ridden world in which we live.

REPUBLICAN TAX BILL

Mr. President, a word on the Republican tax bill. On both process and substance, it appears that the Republicans' conference committee is making all the mistakes that the Republicans made when they passed their bill in the first place. Even though there is still not a final agreement on the text of the tax bill, Republican leaders promise a vote on the committee report as early as Monday of next week. I am not sure that my colleagues will have had enough time to have read and digested the bill that passed this Chamber a few weeks ago, let alone an entirely new conference report that will include many changes. It is the same rushed, awful process as before, and it can only result in mistakes and unintended consequences that could wreak havoc on the economy. Why are our Republican colleagues rushing this bill through? I think that they are ashamed of it.

Every day, the more people know about the bill, the more they don't like it. Just in the polling data today, it shows that the popularity of the bill continues to plummet, and a poll out today said it is not just that the people do not like the bill but that those who vote for it will be affected at election time. The poll today asked people if they were more or less likely to vote for a Congressman who would vote for this bill or to vote for a Senator who would vote for this bill. Many in the public said that they were less likely to vote for a Congressman who would vote for this awful bill. The public knows that it is awful. Why? They know that Republicans are doubling down in this new proposal on the core mistake of their bill by tilting it even further in favor of the wealthy.

I saw on TV this morning a guy from the Club for Growth and a guy from—I forgot the name—another group. These are narrow, narrow groups that have very little support and that are funded by the hard-right group of billionaires who want to see their taxes cut. They don't even talk about what is in the bill. They try to talk about its being a job creator, but they dare don't say, like so many of my Republican colleagues, how disproportionately it goes to those in the upper incomes and not to the middle class.

Amazingly enough, behind closed doors, they have made a bad bill even worse. One of the most significant changes that have been made by the conference committee will be to lower the top tax rate 2 percentage points more than in the original bill. Let's help those millionaires get an even lower tax rate than they have now, for they are doing so poorly. This is crazy. There are a lot of wealthy people in

America. God bless them. I don't resent their wealth, but they don't need a tax break. On the other hand, there are hundreds of millions of struggling middle-class people, and they could use that kind of money. Yet millions of people in this bill who are middle class, upper middle class, and who are struggling to be middle class get a tax increase. Instead of lowering the rate on the highest income people, why not use the money to help those in the middle?

Despite all of the concerns about raising middle-class taxes, which makes the bill as unpopular as I just mentioned, the one big thing that Republicans go back and change is the rate paid by the wealthiest of Americans. They lower it. When it comes down to a choice between the middle class and the wealthy and the middle class and big corporations, the Republicans just instinctively, atavistically—in a knee-jerk way—choose the wealthy and the powerful over the middle class. That is why they are struggling.

I believe that is why President Trump's numbers are as low as they have ever been. People are getting a feel—a smell—in that President Trump talks about the middle class, but when he acts, like in this tax bill, it is to help the wealthiest and the most powerful. That happens with issue after issue.

I see that my colleague DICK BLUMENTHAL, the Senator from Connecticut, has come to the floor. He is going to talk about net neutrality, I believe. Again, help the big cable companies and the corporations, and make it harder for the middle class when it comes to cable service and the cost of cable.

Republicans claim that lowering the top rate is an attempt to address tax hikes that would result from their plan to gut the State and local deduction, but reducing the top rate only helps the very wealthy—couples who make over \$1 million in the last draft that we heard about—but they are already the prime beneficiaries of this tax plan.

I have a feeling that President Trump was hearing from his handful of wealthy friends who pay a lot in State and local taxes, many from my home State of New York. He decided, well, I will lower their taxes even more. But 99 percent of State and local deductions are taken by Americans with incomes under \$1 million. More than half of the taxpayers who take the SALT deduction make less than \$100,000. Reducing the top rate does nothing to help the 99 percent of taxpayers who take SALT. It only helps the top 1 percent, who make over \$1 million. But this is what, it seems, the President and our Republican colleagues in the House and the Senate keep doing.

As I have said from the start, eliminating or cutting the State and local deduction would hurt the middle class across the country. It would raise taxes on millions, lower home values for millions more, and gut our State and local

programs—education, law enforcement, infrastructure. None of those programs were addressed in the conference. Instead, the richest Americans will likely get an even bigger tax break.

There is no reason to rush the bill through the Senate.

Tuesday night, as our Presiding Officer knows, we had an election in Alabama. This Chamber is waiting for the seating of a new Senator. Shouldn't the people of Alabama have their voices in the Senate present for a vote on the tax bill?

Again I would say to my friend the majority leader, slow down and wait for Senator-Elect Jones to arrive before taking any more votes on the tax bill. Democrats waited for Republican Senator Scott Brown in 2010, but now that the shoe is on the other foot, Republicans don't seem to want to do the same. It is the right thing to do, and it will give every Senator and the American people more time to consider the legislation.

NET NEUTRALITY

Finally, Mr. President, a word on the FCC's vote today on net neutrality. We depend on a free and open internet to spur innovation and job creation. Our economy works best when innovators and entrepreneurs and businesses of all sizes compete on a level playing field. Net neutrality, very simply, says that everyone deserves the same, fair access to the internet. Consumers, small businesses, students, everyone from the elderly couple using Skype to talk to their grandchildren who are half a country away, to the startup company operating out of its founder's basement—everyone deserves the same access to and quality of internet as the big corporations.

When I was growing up in Brooklyn, my father owned a small exterminating business. If his competitor down the street had received a preferred electricity rate, he would have rightly been outraged, and the law would have protected him from unfair treatment. We don't reserve certain highways for a single trucking company, and we don't limit phone service to handpicked stores. We shouldn't reserve high-speed internet for a favored few corporations either. Yet now President Trump's appointed Chairman of the FCC, Ajit Pai, is on the verge of eliminating net neutrality, which will bring to an end the free and open internet that has enabled so many successful companies and has created so many jobs.

Our internet is the envy of the world. Why are we changing it in a way that could harm it? If net neutrality is eliminated, the internet may resemble a toll road, with the highest bidders cruising along private fast lanes while the rest of us inch along on a single, traffic-choked public lane. We could be forced to purchase internet packages, much like cable packages, and pay for more popular sites. It is hard to imagine an entrepreneur building the world's next revolutionary, billion-dollar company while she sits in bumper-

to-bumper traffic online. It is hard to imagine that average consumers are going to get a good deal if internet service providers are unshackled and offer premium service to premium customers.

Again, President Trump talks one way and acts another. He talks like he is helping the middle class. He is fully supportive of the FCC and his hand-picked Chairman while he hurts the middle class and helps the big interests when it comes to the internet.

By ending net neutrality, Chairman Pai and the Trump administration are once again siding with corporate interests against consumers and small business. Once again, the Trump administration is picking CEOs over citizens—just as in the tax bill and now on net neutrality—and thwarting the comments of millions of Americans who have sent comments to the FCC asking them to save net neutrality and to keep the internet free and open to everyone.

The American people have spoken. I hope Chairman Pai and President Trump are listening.

Before I yield the floor, I want to thank my friend, the senior Senator from Connecticut, for his valiant and strong struggle to keep the internet free, open, and available to the little guy and gal equally as it is to the big shots.

I yield the floor.

THE PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Connecticut.

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, I wish to thank the senior Senator from New York, our minority leader, for his very powerful and eloquent remarks on net neutrality. He has been a leader in protecting consumers in so many areas, and this one is preeminently important.

We are here on a day when the FCC may well repeal the net neutrality order. I spoke at length about it yesterday, and I am struck by the mockery that the FCC will make of consumer protection if it proceeds with this very misguided and mistaken course. It is a course that will be reversed, I believe, in the courts if it is followed, and it should be reversed in this body as well. It is profoundly important to the future of the internet to have access and affordability to innovation, to our economy, and to job creation. The open and accessible internet is part of our lifeblood economically and culturally in this country. Part of what makes America great is the freedom of access and innovation.

FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE SANDY HOOK MASS SHOOTING

Mr. President, I want to talk today on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the Sandy Hook massacre in my State of Connecticut. It was one of the saddest days of my life and one of the worst days of my public career when I went to the elementary school in Newtown, CT, along with a number of my colleagues who will be speaking today as well, Congresswoman ESTY and Senator MURPHY.

In the Judiciary Committee, just moments ago, Senator FEINSTEIN circulated a framed copy of the front page of the Daily News of Wednesday, December 15, 2012—5 years ago, almost to the day. That front page has photographs of the 20 beautiful children who were lost in that unspeakable act of terror and horror. They are 20 wonderful human beings who would be 11 years old today. Their great teachers were killed as well.

Having valued and known their parents as friends and fellow advocates in the effort to achieve commonsense legislation against gun violence, I know how deeply that pain is still felt. The healing is far from over. The grief never ends. The prayers and thoughts of mine go every day to the loved ones who lost those children and educators.

Prayers and thoughts are not enough. It never has been after any of these massacres, and it never will be after the mass killings or for the one-by-one deaths in our communities—90 every day in this great country. Gun violence kills 90 people every day, and 150,000 have perished since Sandy Hook.

So as we commemorate this awful day, 5 years ago, let us rededicate ourselves to act to honor those victims with action, to honor all those with action. It is never too soon to honor the victims with action.

On that front page of the Daily News, there is a line that says "New York's Hometown Newspaper." New York wasn't the hometown to those Sandy Hook victims, but America felt that Sandy Hook was every town in America, and it is indeed quintessentially an American town, filled with wonderful people who hugged and grieved together that day.

That night, in the St. Rose of Lima Church, and in the days following, when there were calling hours and funerals, one after the other, it seemed like they would never end. In some ways they have never ended, because those families' losses are still real and urgent. For us the task of honoring those 20 beautiful children and the 6 educators ought to be real and urgent, even more so today than it was then.

That day we prayed in the St. Rose of Lima Church. I said to the congregation that the whole world is watching. The whole world was watching. The world is watching America to see whether we will act.

We are not the only country with mental health problems. Our rate of mental illness is no greater than any other developed industrial country, but our rate of gun violence is off the charts compared to other countries. There is no excuse for it. There is no rational explanation for it.

As we prayed and grieved then, in the wake of that senseless, horrific tragedy, Congress turned its back. It turned its back on those courageous and strong families who came here in