

SENATE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Mr. BLUNT. Madam President, we are quickly approaching the end of this year, and I think it is a good time to reflect on what has been done this year. Certainly, the Senate and the Trump administration have been able to do a number of things that are really going to have a significant impact on hard-working families.

Yesterday, we sent the most significant tax reform legislation in more than three decades to the President's desk, and we had a chance to hear the President and others respond to that. The President, at the end of that ceremony at the White House, turned to the Congress and said: "This is the work that you have done." I think the Members of Congress appreciated that. That showed a President who is constantly learning and constantly understanding how important relationships are here.

I thought it was interesting that we heard Chairman BRADY, the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, say that there are three important dates about to occur for America's economy and America's families. One is January 1, when the new tax bill goes into effect, and as to the wages people are earning, people are going to be allowed more of those wages to stay in their billfold rather than go to the government's billfold. It doesn't stay very long in the government's billfold; that is for sure. January 1 is important. As for February 1, by then, that is the time by which we hope all of the new information is out to employers, and people are going to see in their February check more money than they saw in that same-sized check this year going home with them. This is about who is a better person to spend your money—you or the government. It is also about a debate about whether the government is better off with higher taxes or more taxpayers and, of course, it is better off with more taxpayers.

Chairman BRADY said that the other date is April 15, because that is the last time in the foreseeable future that families are going to have to deal with a Tax Code that they don't understand, that they believe to be unfair, that they believe does not treat everybody equitably in how that Tax Code is applied. Many of the special provisions are going to be out of the Tax Code. Next April 15, probably 9 out of 10 taxpayers would have filled out an income tax form on a card about this big and, for 9 out of 10 taxpayers, they are going to look at double the personal exemption from this year—that is \$24,000, if you are a married couple, that you just subtract immediately from your income—and double the child tax credit, up to \$2,000. Somebody said to me just yesterday: You mean my son with his three children is going to be able to take \$6,000 off of whatever their tax bill would be at the bottom of that form, and the answer is yes. If they didn't have a tax bill, at the bottom of that form that totals \$6,000, those families

get a credit that allows them to take money for other taxes they have paid and take that home with them.

So this is after a decade of historically low growth, a decade that defies virtually the entire history of the country going back to 1789, where 3 percent growth has been the normal growth. Less than 2 percent growth has been the normal growth for 9 of the last 10 years. The 1 year that is going to be an exception is this year. It looks like we are going to get close to and maybe even exceed 3 percent and get back to where the economy should be growing. I think with the new tax bill, we may exceed that and most of people's concerns about a lot of the things in this bill will go away when the economy starts growing again.

Buying power is almost 3 percent lower this year than it was in the 1990s. Now, their wages may have gone up between now and the 1990s, but prices have gone up more, and it is time to get our economy growing again and let families have more of the money they have earned to spend on their family. If you are a family of four earning about \$73,000 this year and \$73,000 next year, next year, your tax is going to be \$2,000 less than it is this year. If you are a single parent with one child earning \$41,000, next year your tax will be \$1,300 less than it is this year.

Now, some will say—as a matter of fact, I have heard it on the floor of the Senate—a few hundred dollars a month will not matter. Well, now that is clearly somebody who doesn't know how much a few hundred dollars a month or a few hundred dollars a year does matter.

This bill will give us ways to compete that we don't have now. The bill also will provide Missouri families and other families more jobs and more opportunities because we are going to be more competitive. We will have moved our corporate tax rate. It will not be the lowest in the world, but it will no longer be the highest in the world. It will be in the very middle. Twenty-one percent is right in the middle of the countries we compete with. At the time that 35 percent was our rate in 1986, it was the middle, too, but every other country that we compete with has figured out that that gives you a competitive disadvantage, and they have all lowered their taxes as our corporate tax stayed the same. We are restoring our competitive position. We are hoping and actually going to go ahead and tax the money that is trapped overseas, whether it comes back or not. So I think it is safe to assume that somewhere in the neighborhood of \$2 trillion will come back into our economy.

There is more U.S. money overseas that would like to come home—but wasn't going to come home if we took 35 percent out of it—than at any time before. There is more U.S. capital in this country on the sidelines than at any time before. You put that money into the economy, and you put that 2

trillion or so dollars into the economy. You make us the best, safest, and most predictable place in the world to invest money. Foreign investment in our economy—not in their economy but in our economy—will increase, and it is time for that to happen.

This Tax Code will increase take-home pay immediately, and it will make us more competitive, and we will have jobs that pay more in the future.

The rolling back of redtape is one of the reasons that the economy in our country is already growing faster than it has in a decade. People saw the regulatory overreach. Most importantly, President Trump saw the regulatory overreach. The House and the Senate saw the regulatory overreach. We were able to block 15 regulations before they went into effect. Other regulations, like the totally ridiculous power rule that was proposed, which in my State would have doubled the utility bill in less than 12 years, is not going to happen now. The waters of the United States, which would have suddenly put the EPA in charge of anything involving water, is not going to happen now. The \$52 million increase in just the cost of getting something where you could start, which was the anticipated cost of the waters of the United States, is not going to happen now.

Chairman ISAKSON of the Veterans' Affairs Committee was on the floor earlier, talking about what we have done with his leadership for veterans, and that list is long. The Veterans Choice Act continues to give veterans more opportunity to get the care where they want it rather than to be stuck in a system that didn't seem to always care that much whether veterans got care or not. It was more about the Veterans' Administration than the veterans, and competition and choice is in the process of ending that with good leadership at the VA administration and being sure that happens.

We were able to pass a bill that I sponsored, the HIRE Vets Act. It is being implemented right now to recognize companies that hire vets, that promote vets, and that give vets credit for the skills they learned in the military. The Department of Labor has worked hard to put that on fast-forward and get it done.

In the military, the Military Family Stability Act means that families, for the first time, have the opportunity that they have always hoped to have for the family to move a little earlier or stay a little longer, if that works for education purposes or the spouse's education or career purposes. This is a dramatic step, appreciating the fact that the strength of the military is in military families. We recruit, generally in the military, single adults, and we retire from the military adults with spouses and children, and this looks at that.

There is a lot to talk about as we end this session. It is never perfect, but that is why we come back for the next session. There are going to be things

that could have been done better, but so many things have happened that haven't happened in a generation. I know that I am eager to go home and talk about those, as I was on the radio this morning and yesterday morning doing that already. I know that my colleagues are too.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from West Virginia.

Mrs. CAPITO. Madam President, I wish to thank my colleague from Missouri for highlighting a lot of the good work of this past year in the Senate and touching on some highlights, particularly in the veterans area, that have great impact across the country. It is something on which we all joined together compassionately, wanting to help our veterans and wanting to make sure they get the best care in the best way as quickly as possible, and I appreciate his highlighting that.

I wish to highlight the positive change that this Republican majority has brought to the American people in the first year of President Trump's administration. I am going to talk about a few different things than my colleague from Missouri, and I think you would expect that. I come from the State of West Virginia. Certain policies impact us differently, and so that is what having the time to talk about our accomplishments over the past year gives us the ability to do.

I can't begin without talking about one of the biggest and boldest actions that we have taken this week, and that is our pro-growth tax reform bill. Throughout the process, I traveled across the State and heard from many constituents—friends and many strangers—all about this effort. Not only at the beginning did they realize what a difference this will make in their lives, but, as my colleague from Missouri said, as we move through this year, when you start to see your paychecks change and you bring home more of your own money because your rate went down or when you begin to file in April, realizing that this is the last time you have to file this complicated thing—I am going to be able to make it easier on myself—families, workers, and small businesses across our State are really counting on relief, and this week we delivered on that.

In West Virginia, particularly when asked "How is this really going to help the bulk of the people in the middle-wage earning families?" I like to highlight the fact that in my State in particular, 83 percent of our tax filers don't take itemizations. They file with the standard deduction. That has now been doubled.

The child tax credit has been doubled, as the gentleman from Wyoming said. It gives that child tax credit, and that goes right to the heart of the middle-wage earning family trying to make ends meet at the end of the day.

They are predictions, but we feel certain that with the doubling of these deductions and this credit, more people

will file on the smaller form and also push that number to maybe over 90 percent.

This year, we also delivered on significant regulatory reforms, especially in the energy realm, which is absolutely impactful in my area of the country. Under the Congressional Review Act, the Senate has repealed 14 of President Obama's very onerous regulations.

I led the effort to enact a CRA to fix the burdensome stream protection rule. This rule really threatened what was left of the coal industry in our region. The Obama-era rule would have prohibited many forms of coal mining in Appalachia. I kept saying: Let's balance this.

Under Scott Pruitt's leadership, the EPA repealed the Clean Power Plan—another onerous regulation with minimal benefit. We can do it better, and I believe, in this EPA, we will.

For years, I asked the Obama administration—Madam President, we serve on the same committee—I asked the EPA to come to my State and see what the impacts are of the rules and the regulations that they are putting forward. They never came. This year, the EPA finally answered my calls and came to the State of West Virginia—the State capital, Charleston, WV—to listen to both sides of those who will be impacted by any regulations that the EPA puts forward.

We also reformed the waters of the United States—or WOTUS—rule, which has severe impacts not only in the mining community but particularly in the agriculture community and other industries in and around the country.

Many parts of West Virginia continue to feel the impact of the devastating floods that we suffered a year ago June. So with my service on the Appropriations Committee, I worked diligently with others to ensure that our community needs are met.

That is the great thing about this country. I know Texas certainly and Florida, Puerto Rico, and other areas are weaving through these devastating weather-related and natural disasters. With all the sadness that is occurring and all the destruction that we see, the one thing we appreciate as Americans is our ability to come together and help one another. The first person I met when I was going to see the floods had traveled 51½ hours with their church to come and help those who had been flooded out of their homes. On the Appropriations Committee, we were able to get more funding for damage to roads and other property and individuals so that West Virginians could get back to work and provide for their families.

I also focused my efforts on ensuring that our State had the resources it needs to fight back against the continued devastation wrought by the drug epidemic.

Just yesterday or today, the CDC came out with a report that had lines on a graph that showed the different

age groups and the number of deaths that occurred because of opioids, and every line was going up.

The State of West Virginia has been particularly hard hit with this. We have the highest rate of opioid drug overdose deaths per 100,000 of any State in the Union.

I worked with the new CMS to try to help secure a Medicaid waiver that would allow West Virginians to expand substance abuse treatment and also services for Medicaid members and expand the ability for treatment to be offered to folks who have Medicaid. I partnered with officials from the Office of National Drug Control Policy to hear directly from West Virginians at a roundtable. The Chief of Staff of the White House office also participated in roundtables at the White House.

In honor of West Virginian Jessie Grubb, Senator MANCHIN and I saw the passage of Jessie's Law. This law bolsters our fight by requiring HHS to develop standards for hospitals and health professionals on a patient's history with addiction. Jessie Grubb admitted she was addicted when she was in the hospital. She wasn't in the hospital for addiction issues; she admitted she had an addiction problem. She left with opioids. She didn't live another 24 hours. In her honor, Senator MANCHIN and I have worked hard to see that this doesn't happen to another family.

As West Virginia continues to be ground zero for this epidemic, I won't stop my work for those who are suffering, including looking at innovative solutions like those we have at Lily's Place in Huntington for the babies who are born drug-exposed—again, innocent victims of those rising lines I saw in the charts the CDC put forward.

We have been working with law enforcement to ensure that they have the tools they need to administer emergency assistance, such as naloxone, to those who may be overdosing, or build on telehealth projects, demonstration projects that can help with substance abuse treatment.

I have always said that we need a spectrum of solutions. As we look back, we have done a lot. As we look forward, we have to do more because the problem is getting worse.

I think we also have had tremendous success and impact in our quest to connect West Virginia. I created a program called Capito Connect that would move high-speed internet connectivity into the rural parts of our country, in places like West Virginia that are underserved. Through Capito Connect and my GO Act, we have seen accelerated broadband access in West Virginia certainly but also in rural America. I was able to work with the USDA to get our local communities a consortium to secure a USDA loan to be able to move broadband to 9,000 more West Virginians.

So working with other agencies, EDA and others, on not just moving on broadband but economic development projects, we have seen impacts in 45 of

the 55 counties that I represent but also being able to create an associated 1,400 jobs.

Federal grants like these help not only our communities but our universities, such as Marshall and West Virginia Universities, which provide great benefits to our communities.

These are tangible achievements over the last year—both more global, such as the tax reform, and more local, as in broadband deployment.

The Senate also plays an important role by giving advice and consent on President Trump's nominations and confirming them. This year, Republicans made significant progress in shaping the judiciary, most certainly starting with the confirmation of our Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch. His strong record and straightforward approach are just what we expect from a Supreme Court Justice. I was proud to vote for his confirmation this year. We have also confirmed 12 circuit judges—the highest number during a President's first year since 1891.

I am pleased to say that as of yesterday, we had confirmed both of our U.S. attorneys in the State of West Virginia. I am very grateful for that because this fight against opioids has to have the U.S. attorney's help. It has to have the U.S. attorney aggression—not just with law enforcement but also helping with treatment.

So this year, I am proud that we addressed a lot of America's concerns. We have tackled challenges head-on and delivered real results. I am proud that President Trump and his administration are listening to the needs of small States like mine, West Virginia, and working with me to deliver that relief.

It has been an honor for me to host some Cabinet members in the State of West Virginia—I didn't see that over the last 8 years—Secretary Perry, Secretary of Energy; Secretary Mnuchin, Secretary of Treasury; and also the Secretary of Labor. We went on a coal mine tour with Secretary Acosta. This helps them see the kinds of ups and downs of life in rural and central United States—in Appalachia in particular.

We have a lot we have to do. We have a lot on our plate. I think it is always this time of year that, in my personal life, I like to look back at some of the great things that we have accomplished as a family or for those whom I love or some of the things that happened to us that maybe haven't been quite as good as we would have hoped. I also take this time to be a grateful person, to be a grateful American, to be a grateful West Virginian because we are so blessed with where we live and how we live and the bounty of our friendships. But I also take the time to look forward to what we are going to be able to do. So when I see tax reform kicking in next year, in 2018, that is what I am going to be looking forward to for so many hard-working West Virginians, so many hard-working small business owners, and so many people

who have been waiting for years—decades, in some cases—for the kind of reform that we put forward.

With that, I would like to yield back my time, but first I would just like to say that I am grateful to be serving with the three Members who are in here with me today. I wish everybody here and everybody listening in this country a very wonderful holiday season.

Thank you.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Oklahoma.

Mr. INHOFE. Madam President, let me make a comment to the Senator from West Virginia. One of the problems we have right now is that during the last administration, there was a war on fossil fuel—which includes coal and nuclear also—and some of the damage has already been done. Unfortunately, we can't come in with a ready fix now and assume—because a lot of the generators out there had done field switching out of coal, so you can't switch it back. So I will say it was help coming not quite on time, but nonetheless it is here now.

VA ACCOUNTABILITY AND VETERANS HEALTHCARE

Mr. INHOFE. Madam President, let me mention something that is very significant to me personally. I remember it was 2 years ago today that I picked up USA TODAY, and in a USA TODAY article, they singled out my State of Oklahoma and said that we are not treating our veterans right. We were in shock at that time. In fact, the article detailed some really appalling things that were going on and were not going on in my State of Oklahoma. There were things the inspector general reported during the Obama administration that we had no way of knowing about.

We seem to have more veterans per capita in Oklahoma. One of the reasons is we have five major military establishments, and Oklahoma is a great place to live, so a lot of them retire there. They were not getting the help they need, and they were not getting the treatment to the highest standards that were available.

This isn't how we take care of veterans in Oklahoma. Senator LANKFORD and I and two of the House Members worked on this and talked to regional Veterans' Administration leadership. We talked to the veterans. We talked to whistleblowers. And we identified three key problems that we needed to fix. This is interesting because these are three problems in my State of Oklahoma, but they would be the same thing in Nebraska or any other State because it is not just in our State of Oklahoma.

The first one was that the VA couldn't fire bad employees.

This is always a problem. You go into an organization and you find that things are not going very well because there are one or two bad employees.

Yet it takes you a year before you are able to get rid of these people. Despite having been identified, it takes forever to terminate an employee.

Well, we fixed that this past summer when President Trump signed the VA Accountability Act that included our language to allow the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to immediately fire employees for misconduct or poor performance. That was successful. We did it. That is history.

I have to say that during President Trump's administration so far, he has used this firing authority on over 500 bad actors from the VA, and we are finally creating a culture of accountability in the VA, which is having positive results. That is the first reform.

The second one: Too many veterans were forced to receive care from VA facilities that were hours away or didn't provide specialized care.

This is a problem. A lot of these veterans don't have the capability to move around and get the care they need, and they didn't have the choices. So we actually had to make a change, and we did. We worked with the President and reauthorized the bipartisan VA Choice Program.

The VA Choice Program is great because it allowed our veterans to actually, in those hard-to-reach areas, get high-quality healthcare, regardless of where they had to travel to get it done. That was a success.

Finally, after the USA TODAY article, we requested an accredited third-party look at the problem at our VA facilities because previous reports from the Obama Veterans Affairs inspector general failed to identify and correct these problems. Well, my request was denied. It is just like any bureaucracy. They don't want someone looking over their shoulder, so they said: No, we are not going to allow you to have a third party accompany the VA to look into the problem that you have.

Some are not aware of this, but in the Senate, when someone is nominated, we can put a hold on them and not allow them to go through confirmation—at least for a long period of time. At that time, the President—our current President—had nominated a person to be the inspector general of the Veterans' Administration. We put a hold on him until they allowed someone to come in and monitor the evaluation that the VA was doing of their own bureaucracy in Oklahoma. That worked, except the problem with that is it was a one-time authorization. We needed to make that a permanent part of our structure. I am pleased to say we did that.

When we signed the Enhancing Veteran Care Act, it permanently granted the VISN directors—that is one of the director levels of the VA—and gave the medical center directors the authority to request, at their request, an outside oversight in order to evaluate what they had done. It has been very successful.

It is important for the regional directors to have the authority because