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Senate

The Senate met at 10 a.m. and was called to order by the Honorable BEN SASSE, a Senator from the State of Nebraska.

PRAYER

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Today's opening prayer will be offered by Rabbi Seth H. Frisch, senior rabbi of Historic Congregation Keshet Israel, from Philadelphia, PA.

The guest Chaplain offered the following prayer:

Dearest God, we look to You today, You who remembers all that we have forgotten and You who is the eternal source of blessing.

We stand before You on the eve of the Biblical Festival of Purim, a joyous time in which we read from the ancient and sacred scroll of the Book of Esther. It is in the scroll we read at first of a certain darkness, a darkness which would come to envelope the entire nation over which Esther would soon reign as Queen.

It was Queen Esther who became frightened when the plan revealing a plot to erase the sacred remnants of her people, along with the fundamental teachings of her faith, came to light; and yet it was Esther, who, when confronted by the impending darkness, was able to bring the plot to an end, allowing her people to emerge from the shadow of darkness—of this horror—and live freely, without fear, celebrating life itself in the light of their newfound freedom.

And now, standing here today, before You, on the eve of this festival, we, too, ask that You remember us for life, instilling within us a greater love of freedom, seeking both peace and prosperity for all the inhabitants of this great Nation.

And yet, Dear Lord, we would be remiss if we were not to remember those who have sacrificed much, suffered, and paid dearly with their lives, allowing all of us—to this day—a life of freedom

without fear, worshipping as we choose, and continuing to bask in that greater love which You shed and allow us to live within.

Teach us now and forever to celebrate our differences. Unify us to preserve and admire those differences among us—all of us—with respect and dignity for all the inhabitants of this Nation.

Lord, we ask You to bestow Your blessings today upon this assembly and upon the Nation which it serves. Bless all the inhabitants of this land with both prosperity and lasting joy, love, and freedom.

Yevarechecha Adonai,
V'Yishmerecha.

May God bless you and keep you. May God bless the United States of America, and may God bless us all. 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 senior assistant legislative clerk read the following letter:

U.S. SENATE,

PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE,

Washington, DC, February 27, 2018.

To the Senate:

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

ORRIN G. HATCH,

President pro tempore.

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

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Morning business is closed.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the Senate will proceed to executive session to resume consideration of the following nomination, which the clerk will report.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the nomination of Elizabeth L. Branch, of Georgia, to be United States Circuit Judge for the Eleventh Circuit.

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

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

GUN SAFETY

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, after Columbine, Sandy Hook, Charleston, Orlando, Las Vegas, and too many more to name, the Nation convulsed, and we talked about reforming our gun safety laws to prevent more names and places from being added to the list. Each time, we talked, but the Senate, the House—this government—did nothing.

Now, in the wake of the tragic shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School that took the lives of another 17 Americans, we must try again to pass meaningful changes to our laws to keep our children safe. That is our duty, and there are many things we could and should pursue.

Yesterday, I suggested that comprehensive background checks would

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



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be an excellent and necessary place to start. It doesn't make sense that we allow anyone, regardless of his criminal history—felons—or a history of mental illness, to walk into a gun show or to go online and buy a gun with no questions asked. There is no sense in that. When I wrote the Brady Law back in 1993, gun shows were not popular, and we didn't have internet sales to worry about at the time because there was no internet. These loopholes grew and grew and grew over time. Now, it is hard to know the exact number because we don't record the number of guns that are sold at gun shows or online, but about one-fifth of all gun sales happen without there being background checks.

It is likely that criminals and others who are up to no good have a higher percentage because they do not want to be detected and go through background checks. It is outrageous that so many guns are sold with there being no background checks whatsoever—whether you are a felon, one who is adjudicated mentally ill, or a spousal abuser. It is outrageous. We should close those loopholes and close them now. We should have comprehensive background checks, not just a little something here and a little something there. Comprehensive background checks are supported overwhelmingly by the American people.

Later this morning, just in about 15, 20 minutes, I will be meeting with several of the students—the brave, courageous students—from Stoneman Douglas High School. I want to hear what they have to say. These brave students, whether at the Florida statehouse or on national television, have spoken out with passion, with eloquence, with grace. I believe they are changing the way our country thinks about this issue. I hope—I pray—they compel us to do something significant because we cannot settle for half measures, not after what happened in Florida, not after so many tragedies.

The fix NICS bill is an idea that has wide support in this Chamber, but it is tiny. It is a grant program that addresses one specific issue. Now, we have a whole host of issues to address, not just one. Fix NICS was aimed by the Senator from Texas at a particular tragedy in Texas by which a member of the Air Force had a record that would have disqualified him from getting a gun, but the Air Force failed to send the statement to NICS. It is a good thing to make sure that doesn't happen, but we should not be aiming our gun legislation simply at one past tragedy. We must look to the future and what will prevent future tragedies. Comprehensive background checks will; the Fix NICS bill will not.

So let's not set our sights too narrow and squander this moment. Let's try for significant, bipartisan legislation that will make a real difference in keeping our children safe. Even as our caucus discusses what legislation is best—and in our leadership meeting,

we had an outstanding discussion this morning—I look forward to working with our Republican colleagues to see if we can get something real done.

NET NEUTRALITY

Mr. President, on another matter, today Senate Democrats will be introducing our legislation to reverse the FCC's repeal of net neutrality. It has the support of every single Democrat and one Senate Republican, Senator COLLINS from the State of Maine.

I say to all my Republican colleagues: This CRA is the best way to undo the terrible decision to repeal net neutrality. It is an important debate. At stake are two opposing visions of the future of the internet.

For its entire history, the internet has been free and open, accessible to all Americans. It has been a true public good, just as our highways have. Whether you are on Main Street or Wall Street, you have the same internet. Whether you are a consumer or big corporation, you have the same internet. Whether you are a teacher in a wealthy school or an underresourced school, you have the same internet. Equality of access has driven innovation and entrepreneurship and so much of what we value in the American spirit and the American economy. It is the American way.

Net neutrality rules were put in place to ensure that the internet remains that way—open and equal access to all, no matter who you are, how much money you have, how much power you have. But the repeal by the Republican-led FCC has opened us to an entirely new universe where internet service providers—the big boys—will have the authority to sell quality internet to the highest bidder. That means they could restrict customers' access to their favorite websites by forcing them to buy internet packages or pay more for premium services.

Big companies could pay to get faster internet service, while startups and small businesses and average Americans are left in the slow lane.

Everything from Netflix, to Amazon Prime, to Spotify, streaming television, sports, and movies could be slower if you don't pay up.

Public schools that don't pay for premium service could be put at a significant disadvantage.

Startups that are looking to get their businesses off the ground but aren't large enough to negotiate faster internet delivery with ISPs might never take off. Our startups in New York are scared to death of the elimination of net neutrality, and they have created hundreds of thousands of jobs in my city and millions throughout the country.

The internet without net neutrality is a tale of two internets, where the best internet goes to the highest bidder and everyone else loses.

We have an opportunity to save the internet with our CRA, which would reinstitute net neutrality rules that keep the internet just the way it is now.

Democrats believe that the future of the internet must be as free and open as in the past; that the startup founder living in her parents' basement should be able to compete with the world's largest corporations; that the young student in an underserved school district should be able to find all the information he needs online; that every American should be able to afford easily accessible internet. If we start grading the internet, it could dramatically hurt our economy and hurt equality in America—something we are all striving for.

Right now, unfortunately, only one Republican has signed up for the fair, open vision of an internet that we need and want to keep. All we need is one more. On this net neutrality day of action, I urge all Americans to contact their Senators and demand they sign up with us to save the internet.

REPUBLICAN TAX BILL

Mr. President, finally, a word on the Republican tax bill. When President Trump and congressional Republicans were trying to sell their tax bill, all we heard about was how it is going to be a boon to workers, stimulate investments in new factories, raise wages, and create jobs. It is a few months after the tax bill, and the promises have not been backed up by the evidence.

Now the evidence is flowing in that corporations are spending the lion's share of the benefits they reap on the tax bill not on workers but on goosing their own stock.

A headline from Monday's New York Times states "Trump's Tax Cuts in Hand, Companies Spend More on Themselves Than on Wages." The article goes on to document how the Republican tax bill has unleashed a wave of share buybacks and stock repurchasing programs, things which help out rich executives and shareholders but don't accomplish much for everyday American workers. If you are a CEO of a company, you are judged by whether your stock is going up. The quickest hit on that is to buy back your shares, reduce the number. It doesn't help your workers, it doesn't help American productivity, but it helps your bottom line, Mr. CEO.

That is so wrong, that we passed a huge tax bill and put ourselves in deep debt so that much of the money can go to corporate executives—not improving the actual performance of their companies but just raising the value of their stock by buybacks. That is so wrong.

The article in the New York Times documents how the Republican tax bill has unleashed this wave of share buybacks and stock repurchasing programs, which, as I said, helps out rich executives and shareholders but doesn't accomplish much for everyday workers.

Rather than investing in new equipment and research, raising wages, providing better benefits, and raising productivity, which we are so short of here