

have no assurance that we know that full list.

She has also refused to recuse herself from matters involving her current firm, Jones Day, or its clients for more than 1 year. The Office of Government Ethics requires 1 year of recusal from the time she last represented that client, but no more than that length of time, and she has committed no more than the bare minimum requirement by law. In addition, her husband has represented IKEA in a major product liability suit involving furniture tipovers. She has refused to recuse herself from matters involving IKEA.

We are in a perilous time, when the norms concerning conflicts of interest have been reduced, almost eviscerated. We have an obligation to protect consumer interests at the Consumer Product Safety Commission. That responsibility is to make sure serious defects, dangerous products, problems, and hazards that will face consumers as a result of deadly or defective products are prevented from reaching the market. Consumers may have no knowledge of how they are deadly or dangerous. The Consumer Product Safety Commission has the mission to protect consumers.

For someone who has the ability, skills, and expertise to represent wrongdoers which threaten consumers is the responsibility of admirable and able law firms, like Jones Day, and those skills and experience enable lawyers who work there. It is not the job of a Commissioner of the Consumer Product Safety Commission.

So it is really not about her personal ability, it is about the mission of this agency and who is qualified to serve on it and whether they have told us everything we need to know to hold them accountable if they are confirmed.

On all those scores, this nominee is lacking. Therefore, I urge my colleagues to vote no today on her nomination.

I yield the floor.

THE PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. KENNEDY). The assistant majority leader.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE REPUBLICAN-LED CONGRESS

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, I am sure I am not unique in the fact that when I go home, my constituents ask: What in the heck is going on up there?

The truth is, amid the polarization, the misinformation, the arguments, the disagreements we naturally will have—because we represent different parties, different regions, and different points of view—it is really important to occasionally reflect on what it is we have actually done because, as I learned a long time ago as a journalism student, good news is not news.

What makes news is when there is conflict and disagreement. That is what people pay attention to. That is what reporters write about, that is what the cable TV channels run because they know people will watch it. They can sell advertising. That is sort of the way the system works.

Good news needs to be told and needs to be spread. So what I would like to do

is just reflect for a few minutes on the last 17 months and what has been accomplished during that year and a half by a Republican-led Congress and by the Trump administration working together.

I think, perhaps, the single biggest accomplishment that has benefited the most people broadly across this great land of ours is the new energized state of our economy. During the last administration, following the great recession of 2008, we had this ahistorical idea that slow economic growth was the new norm; that sub-2 percent economic growth each year—which isn't fast enough to create enough jobs to keep people employed—was something we were just going to have to live with. The fact is, since World War II, the economy has not grown at 2 percent or less; it has grown at about 3.2 percent.

What we are beginning to see is the slumbering giant of the American economy wake up and grow. People have confidence again and optimism in the future, which is a good thing. Unemployment fell to 3.9 percent recently, which is the lowest in 17 years, and 14 States hit record-low unemployment as well.

As I said, consumer confidence is high. As a matter of fact, it is at an 18-year high, and the tax reform package we passed last December has been the biggest, single game-changer. Although, I want to talk about regulations in a minute, the tax reform package got America back in the game. It made us more competitive globally as a place where people who want to invest money and create a business or grow their business—it is attractive, finally. We aren't chasing people off, having to move offshore in order to compete globally. They now see America as a favorable place to invest, and that benefits all of us.

Nearly 800,000 jobs have been created, 164,000 in April alone. To me, one of the most encouraging statistics is, in February, we saw more than 800,000 people rejoin the workforce. Unemployment statistics, as the Presiding Officer knows, can be a little bit misleading because sometimes when people quit looking for work, they are not reflected in the unemployment statistics, even though they are obviously unemployed.

The fact that 800,000-plus Americans decided to rejoin the workforce because they thought there was a real chance they could get a good-paying job ought to be enormously encouraging to all of us. It is to me.

In addition to the new jobs, in addition to more people joining the workforce, we have seen people who are working receive pay raises, more take-home pay. The retirement contribution their employers made to their 401(k) plan went up in hundreds of different cases.

We have also seen people see a reduction in their utility rates—the amount of money they pay for electricity—because the for-profit utilities saw a cut

in their taxable revenue, and because they are utilities they had to lower the rates in order to meet the requirements of the regulators. We have seen bonuses being paid by large companies, like AT&T in Texas, and commitments made to invest in more infrastructure. We have seen benefits across the board. The National Association of Manufacturers says that 77 percent of manufacturers in America intend to increase hiring, and 93 percent of them have a positive outlook for their companies. That is the kind of optimism I feel and hear when I travel back home.

In visits to Amarillo, College Station, Austin, and elsewhere, I have had the chance and taken the opportunity to sit down and talk to my constituents in those places and ask: How is it going? How are we doing? How are you doing? What I hear from small business owners regularly is the benefits they are seeing from the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act.

I have also had constituents write to my office, explaining how the boost in their monthly paychecks is making a big difference when it comes to making ends meet, buying groceries, paying their bills, or affording health insurance.

I alluded to this a moment ago, but one recent piece of news had the Southwestern Electric Power Company announce it had requested its utility rates be lower. Actually, it probably didn't request it be lowered, but they were lowered as a result of their lower overhead as a result of their tax bill going down.

Southwestern has more than 180,000 Texas customers and attributed the rate decreases directly to the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. I would say that is a good thing. When seniors and people on fixed incomes actually see their utility rates go down, it helps them make ends meet. Entergy Texas, another electric utility, has similar plans to return tax savings to customers and support continued investment. Those two companies are just the tip of the iceberg.

The economy is booming, so much so that employers tell me it is hard to find qualified workers. We need to double down on our commitment to make sure we provide people access to the education and training they need to qualify for the new, high-paying jobs that exist. But, simply, those jobs can't always be filled because there are not enough trained workers to perform them.

It is not just the economy that deserves our mention. One of the most significant things that the Trump administration has done is nominate and see the Senate confirm a record number of judges—judges who, by the way, are committed to faithfully interpreting the Constitution and not legislating from the bench because of their personal preferences.

If you want to pursue a personal agenda or political agenda, you ought to run for Congress, not seek the Federal bench. We expect and demand

something different out of judges, which is faithful adherence to the law, not imposing their personal policy preferences. That is what President Trump has prioritized in his nominees and the nominees we have confirmed.

Twenty-one circuit court judges have been confirmed so far. That is roughly one-eighth of the appeals court judges in the United States. These circuit courts hear appeals from Federal district courts, trial courts, and, as the Presiding Officer knows, set binding precedent on a wide range of issues. I like to say that for all practical purposes, the circuit courts are the Supreme Court because the Supreme Court of the United States hears roughly 80 cases a year. They obviously set the precedent, but there are a lot of cases that never reach the Supreme Court, and their final court of last resort is the circuit court. That means the men and women presiding over those courts—the way they approach their judicial decision making—is making a real difference.

As I said, with the help of the Senate, President Trump has secured confirmation for 21 circuit court nominees. It is worth pointing out that President Obama's 21st circuit court nominee was not confirmed until he was in office for 33 months. It is not just that we are confirming good judges; it is that we are doing so at a good clip, comparatively speaking.

These judges include people like Don Willett, former justice of the Texas Supreme Court; Jim Ho, the former Texas solicitor general; and soon, Andy Oldham, the general counsel to Governor Greg Abbott, who has been nominated to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals.

That is not to mention the very talented district court judges we have confirmed as well. Two of them, Karen Scholer and David Counts, are Texans, and both my State and the entire Federal judiciary are lucky to have them.

The third thing I want to mention in terms of the economy is regulations because of what we have been able to do, working with the President when it comes to the regulatory state—the bureaucracy, the nameless, faceless entities that make life either easier or more difficult for small businesses. We have had a big impact. Specifically, we have repealed burdensome Obama-era regulations through the Congressional Review Act. It has been said before—and I will say it again—that in all of Senate history, it had been used only one time before; that is, to repeal the ergonomics rule. We have used it 16 times to eliminate agency rules that had found their way into law during the waning hours of the previous administration.

This effort—the Congressional Review Act effort—has been spearheaded by people like the junior Senator from Pennsylvania, among others. It has eliminated rules like coal mining regulation that would have put more than 100,000 jobs at risk and another one en-

acted by the Department of Education that undermined local control of schools and directly violated a Federal statute at least 7 times.

Our use of the Congressional Review Act has been referred to as a “regulatory wrecking ball” and the “most ambitious regulatory rollback since [President Ronald] Reagan.”

I don't agree it has been a wrecking ball. I think it has been more of a surgical operation. It has provided a signal to businesses, as well as real regulatory relief in those 16 specific cases. I think that is another reason for optimism in the sense that the Federal Government is no longer tying one hand behind the backs of our job creators.

Another important development has been finally rolling back some of the overregulation of Dodd-Frank. You will recall this was legislation that passed following the great meltdown recession of 2008. Like most things that happen in Washington, DC, the pendulum swung way too far.

I tell my community bankers and the credit unions in Texas: You weren't the target, but you were the collateral damage. They didn't cause the great recession of 2008, the subprime mortgage lending crisis; that was the big boys on Wall Street.

Thanks to Senator CRAPO and the Banking Committee and a bipartisan effort in the Senate, we finally pulled back some of the overregulation. If small community banks were going to be able to stay in business, they were required to hire people just to fill out the paperwork—not to make more loans but to fill out the paperwork. Many of them couldn't survive at all, so they had to merge or just go away. The people who got hurt the most were the people who needed access to credit—again, our small businesses.

Thankfully, this bill is now expected to pass the House this week, and it will be a big win for smaller financial institutions and make it easier for them to serve their communities by providing mortgages, providing credit, and lending to small businesses.

That is the past. Let's take a peek forward to this next week. This week, we will keep our commitment to our veterans—people who have worn the uniform of the U.S. military and who have served us so well and to whom we have a moral obligation, I believe, to keep our commitments to them—the promises we made to them when they were on Active Duty that when they left Active Duty, we would keep our commitments. We will do that when we vote on the VA MISSION Act this week.

This is a bipartisan, bicameral bill that will make significant reforms to the Department of Veterans Affairs. It will strengthen the healthcare and community care options that are available to America's veterans. It will provide \$5.2 billion to the much needed Choice funding program to prevent interruption of access to needed care for veterans.

In other words, we have said: If you are a veteran and can't get to a designated VA healthcare facility—a hospital or clinic—you can get treated in your community by a hospital or other healthcare provider, and we will pay the fee. If you have to wait too long in line, if you have to drive too far, you will have healthcare options. That is why funding the \$5.2 billion for the Choice Program is so important.

This bill will also provide caregiver assistance and consolidates the VA's seven community care programs into one streamlined program and will allow veterans, as I said, to seek care when and where it makes the most sense for them.

On the caregiver program, I can't help but remember when I visited Walter Reed, visiting some of our warriors injured in the line of duty in places like Afghanistan and Iraq. Frequently, the spouse of a wounded warrior has to quit his or her job to care for their loved one. It is an important aspect of the continuum of care necessary for them to recover and get back on their feet. We are going to provide greater access to caregiver assistance so that spouses and family members can do exactly that. It is the right thing for us to do.

Our VA MISSION bill also authorizes access to walk-in community clinics, removes bureaucratic redtape by authorizing local provider agreements, and eliminates barriers for VA healthcare professionals to practice telemedicine. In this new technological age, it makes no sense to have restrictions on the ability of people to get access to care through telemedicine, when and where appropriate.

I want to conclude by saying that I appreciate Chairman ISAKSON, Senator MORAN, and others working with the President and Acting Director Wilkie to get this done before funding runs out. I appreciate all of our colleagues who have worked on this on a bipartisan basis.

Last week, the House passed the bill, so now it is our turn. What a great sign of appreciation to our veterans it will be to get this bill passed and to the President's desk and have it signed before Memorial Day.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Alabama.

HEALTHCARE

Mr. JONES. Mr. President, I come to the floor today and rise to speak on a challenge that our rural health communities face both in Alabama and across the country. People living in rural areas often face difficulty in finding healthcare providers. The challenges of consistent, quality healthcare for rural America are exponentially more difficult than in any other area in the country. These persistent gaps in healthcare inevitably lead to poor health outcomes.

As a result, life expectancy for rural Alabamians is approximately 6 months lower than for those who reside in