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Senate

The Senate met at 10:02 a.m. and was called to order by the Honorable TOM COTTON, a Senator from the State of Arkansas.

PRAYER

The Chaplain, Dr. Barry C. Black, offered the following prayer:

Let us pray.

God, Sovereign over us all, thank You for healing our hearts, minds, and bodies when we turn to You. Lord, we are grateful that You desire for us to prosper and be in physical health even as our souls prosper.

Guard and guide our lawmakers so that their work will enable us to live in peace and justice with one another. Lord, use them to bring order and calm to our vulnerable Nation and world. As they seek to do Your will, may our Senators bring beauty from ashes, clarity from confusion, and harmony from discord. Fill them with the power of Your Holy Spirit, that they may righteously represent You.

We pray in Your great Name. 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, June 6, 2018.

To the Senate:

Under the provisions of rule I, paragraph 3, of the Standing Rules of the Senate, I hereby

appoint the Honorable TOM COTTON, a Senator from the State of Arkansas, to perform the duties of the Chair.

ORRIN G. HATCH,
President pro tempore.

Mr. COTTON 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 Annemarie Carney Axon, of Alabama, to be United States District Judge for the Northern District of Alabama.

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

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

HEALTHCARE

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, yesterday the majority leader announced that the Senate would remain in session during much of the planned August recess. President Trump tweeted: "Great. Maybe the Democrats will finally get something done other than their acceptance of high crime and high taxes." As usual, the President's tweet makes little sense given that Republicans control both Houses of Con-

gress. But I agree with the President on one thing: Canceling the recess is a great opportunity to get something done. In fact, I have a suggestion for what Congress should do. How about this, Mr. President? Why don't we get something done on the issue that numerous polls say is the No. 1 priority of Americans—healthcare.

We Democrats—our entire caucus—believe this previously unscheduled session time could be put to good use to finally help Americans secure affordable healthcare that the President and congressional Republicans have thus far failed to deliver. Before being sworn in, President Trump promised to deliver healthcare that was "far less expensive and far better." Those are his words. But since he has taken office, President Trump has completely dropped the ball on healthcare. Instead of shoring up our healthcare system and driving down costs, President Trump and Republicans have sabotaged our healthcare system and driven up costs.

Yesterday, Maine and Pennsylvania joined a growing list of States that will see higher healthcare rates thanks to the policies of the Trump administration and congressional Republicans. In States such as Virginia, Maryland, New York, and Washington, rate increases are in double digits. One PPO plan in Maryland requested a rate increase of 91 percent. And when you ask these CEOs of companies why their rates are going up, many of them cite Trump administration policies and congressional Republican policies.

Again, the No. 1 issue affecting Americans is the high cost of healthcare. My Republican colleagues are busy touting tax breaks. If you are very wealthy, you got a big break. If you are a middle-class person, far too often, your increase in your premiums exceeds your tax break.

Let's do something to put more money—net more money—in the pockets of working class people. Let's spend

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



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August working on healthcare. Folks were already paying too much for healthcare in the form of premiums, out-of-pocket expenses, and the eye-popping costs of so many prescription drugs. Now all of those costs are going up because “the unified Republican government” has done little to bring down the high cost of healthcare, and what it has done has made the situation worse.

Again, President Trump has dropped the ball on healthcare, and the August recess is a time to recover and do something good. President Trump deliberately sowed uncertainty in the healthcare marketplace as a way to make a political point against ObamaCare, and then congressional Republicans repealed the coverage requirement in their tax bill. Health insurers from coast to coast cite the repeal of the coverage requirement as one of the major reasons they are increasing rates next year.

Just last night, a report issued by the Trump administration itself showed that Medicare is going insolvent faster than expected. What caused it? In part it is the Republican tax bill and “the repeal of the individual mandate, which increased the estimate of the number of uninsured, in turn leading to a large increase in uncompensated care payments.” Again, the tax bill led to Medicare being less solvent and running out of money sooner.

In short order, the Trump administration will make things worse. They will be offering junk insurance plans that will bring back the dark days when Americans with preexisting conditions faced higher premiums, denied care, and medical bankruptcy.

We now have a few extra weeks in August. What will be No. 1 on the American people’s list? It is not the things Leader MCCONNELL mentioned, falsely blaming Democrats when appropriations aren’t moving along well, and he brags about how many appointments he has made to the bench. No, the No. 1 thing Americans want is healthcare, and we Democrats will spend the August recess focusing on that issue and forcing our Republicans to either cast votes or deny votes on those important issues. It is a great opportunity not just for Democrats, not just for Republicans, but for America. We are going to do it. We already have an agenda ready to go, and we are going to push for votes on these measures in August.

One, we want to expand access to Medicare. Many of us Democrats in this caucus believe 55 should be the age when you can buy in. Loads of Americans support that.

Two, we want to increase tax breaks to help families afford the cost of healthcare.

Three, we want to create a national reinsurance program to lower premiums.

Four, we want to ensure that people with preexisting conditions don’t get denied and priced out of insurance due to an expansion of junk insurance.

Five, we want to lower the skyrocketing costs of drugs.

President Trump should stay in Washington.

No Mar-a-Lago, Mr. President, no golf all the time. You have taken so many vacations, while you criticize others.

It is typical—the double standard that he seems to exhibit every 10 minutes. President Trump should stay in Washington with us, roll up his sleeves, and get to work on making healthcare great again.

TRADE WITH CHINA

Now, Mr. President, on another matter, one that I talked to the Acting President pro tempore about this morning—our trade negotiations with China—as I said many times before, I am closer to President Trump on trade with China than I was to either President Obama or President Bush. I want our President to succeed in winning real concessions from the Chinese on longstanding issues, like intellectual property theft and market access. I believe that unlike previous Presidents, President Trump was serious about being tough on China to achieve our goals. But week after week, I keep reading reports that President Trump and his team are not being tough with China. They are conciliatory or accommodating, whether it is our national security or our economic security, where China is now eating our lunch.

Yesterday it was reported that the Trump administration would agree to relax penalties on the Chinese telecom giant ZTE. If the reports are true about a sweetheart deal for ZTE, President Trump has put China first, not America first. If these reports are true, once again, President Xi has outfoxed President Trump, the so-called deal maker.

ZTE has repeatedly violated U.S. sanctions and lied to U.S. officials about their efforts to rectify those violations. Their technology has been deemed a national security threat by the FCC, the FBI, and the Pentagon. Again, let me repeat that. Their technology is a national security threat, according to our defense and law enforcement authorities. Why on Earth is the Trump administration considering relaxing penalties on such a bad actor?

Some reports suggest that the Trump administration is forgiving ZTE to set up an exchange for a short-term, limited purchase of U.S. goods from China. If that is the case, what a terrible deal that is for America. Our No. 1 priority should be reducing the threat of intellectual property theft. Intellectual property theft not only threatens our short-term economic outlook, but it threatens our long-term leadership in high-tech industries, middle-class jobs of the future, and the security of our country.

To relax penalties on ZTE, a proven threat to American intellectual property, in a possible exchange for something as small as a one-time purchase of goods is like trading away your star

player for a last-round draft pick. By backing off and letting ZTE off the hook, China wins. If the reports are true, Congress should move in a bipartisan fashion to block this deal right away.

On top of the ZTE matter, there is no apparent path forward with the ongoing trade negotiations—nothing concerning intellectual property theft, nothing concerning market access, not even a framework. The two recent negotiations with China, led by Secretary Mnuchin and then by Secretary Ross, have failed to produce anything that is concrete, real, lasting, and important to America.

The administration keeps sending different officials with different priorities to lead discussions with China. Some are tough on China, and others are soft. Some have the President’s instincts in mind, and others do not. Secretary Mnuchin and Ambassador Lighthizer are in totally different camps. I am in the Lighthizer camp, but dissension is causing tremendous confusion and making our bargaining position so much weaker.

President Trump ought to direct our negotiators—all of our negotiators—to be tough with China and to stick with it.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

VA MISSION ACT

Mr. DAINES. Mr. President, I am proud that today President Trump will sign into law a piece of legislation that I fought for called the VA MISSION Act.

This important legislation will help fix many of the problems plaguing the VA Choice Program and will work to ensure that our Nation keeps the promises it has made to our veterans.

This bill is badly needed.

Take Hank, for example, a Montana veteran. Last year it took him more than 3 months to get an appointment and then another month to get the glasses he needed. It was clear to him that the Choice Program representatives were completely unaware of the distance issues that Montana veterans have to deal with.

And it is not just Hank. All across Montana, we have heard about how the VA Choice Program has consistently fallen short. It has missed the mark. Payment delays take up to 8 months. In fact, sometimes we have bill collectors coming after our veterans for something they should not be responsible for.

Veterans suffer hours-long waits to talk with representatives about claims, and veterans get the runaround on receiving the most basic services. This is unacceptable.