

choice for the Supreme Court, Judge Brett Kavanaugh.

This week, even more of our colleagues have had an opportunity to meet with Judge Kavanaugh. I am sure they will agree that it is hard not to come away impressed—the academic achievement, the judicial credentials, the esteem of his peers and fellow legal professionals.

Of course, that hasn't stopped the far-left special interest groups from grasping at straws and trying to smear this nominee any way they can. They don't seem to care whether it is honest or not. They don't seem to care whether it is accurate or not.

The latest made-up controversy is an attempt this week to make hay out of comments Judge Kavanaugh made about the long ago expired independent counsel statute. But, once again, there is no "there" there, whatsoever.

Here are the facts. Judge Kavanaugh's apparent concerns about the independent counsel law appear in line with mainstream views that have been widely held on both sides of the political aisle—views that were, in fact, strongly held by many of my Democratic colleagues, at least until there was an opportunity to try to make political hay.

Congress chose to let the statute expire back in 1999, based in large part on constitutional concerns.

Let me say that again. The Congress, in 1999, on a bipartisan basis, decided to let the independent counsel statute expire.

My colleague, the senior Senator from Illinois, the assistant Democratic leader in the Senate right now, explained this well when he was fighting any attempt to renew the statute. Here is what he said in 1999 about the independent counsel: "Unchecked, unbridled, unrestrained, and unaccountable."

My friend from Illinois punctuated his enthusiasm for the demise of the independent counsel law by saying: "I would like to say to Judge Starr and all of the other counsels, your days are numbered."

I agreed with him about the independent counsel statute. A number of us, in both parties, saw it the very same way. So we happily allowed the law to expire.

This has nothing to do with special counsels. That is different from the independent counsel. The day the independent counsel statute expired, the day we actually finished with the impeachment trial of President Clinton in the Senate, Senator Chris Dodd from Connecticut and I went upstairs and had a press conference, stating that we agreed that the independent counsel statute ought to be allowed to expire, and it did. That has nothing to do with any special counsels or any tools that are currently in place for elected officials to be held accountable. This has nothing to do with any investigations that are in the headlines today.

What Judge Kavanaugh was talking about is a law that has not existed for

two decades and which the Supreme Court upheld with only a single dissenting vote. One of the dissenters in the case that upheld the independent counsel statute was Justice Scalia.

The irony or hypocrisy is that our Democratic colleagues are now criticizing Judge Kavanaugh because he may hold the same views on this subject that they did, at least until Judge Kavanaugh was nominated. It is a view that was shared and acted upon by Members of this body on both sides of the aisle, as I have explained.

So it is another day, another off-base attack.

Here is how Newsweek dismissed this tempest in a teapot: "Law experts told Newsweek that Kavanaugh's view on independent counsels has nothing to do with special counsels or Mueller's probe and, in fact, the two types of federal investigations are completely different."

Yet again, the far-left special interest groups that are desperate to deny Judge Kavanaugh fair treatment are hoping the media will buy their latest made-up charge.

Do you remember the outrage when it was learned that Judge Kavanaugh enjoys baseball? My goodness—shocking.

Well, I am proud the President has chosen a nominee who is as strong as Judge Kavanaugh. We should put aside these unfair attacks and misrepresentations and give his nomination the fair treatment it deserves.

ECONOMIC GROWTH

Mr. MCCONNELL. Madam President, on a final matter, this week I discussed a number of converging reports that highlight the strength of this economy for middle-class families and job creators.

U.S. retail sales just increased for the fifth consecutive month. Earlier this year, consumer confidence hit its highest level since 2000. More than a million new jobs have already been created in 2018. There are more job openings than job seekers for the first time in 15 years. Over 95 percent of U.S. manufacturers are reporting confidence in their companies' outlook—an all-time high.

Just this morning, there was this announcement from the Department of Labor: In the second week of July, new claims for unemployment benefits fell to their lowest level—listen to this—since 1969.

All of these favorable trends are interrelated. Jay Powell, Chairman of the Federal Reserve, testified before our colleagues on the Banking Committee this week that "robust job gains, rising after-tax incomes, and optimism among households have lifted consumer spending this month."

To put it even more simply, American employers are doing better. So American workers are doing better. So American families are doing better. So American businesses are doing better.

This is how a vibrant, growing economy works. This is what happens when Washington, DC, swallows up less of the American people's money in taxes, when it imposes fewer heavy-handed regulations that make it hard to do business, and when it gets the bureaucracy's foot off the brake of our economy.

This is among the best—quite possibly the best—of economic moments for jobs and opportunity that Americans have seen in recent memory.

The policies of this united Republican government helped to bring it about, and they are helping to sustain it.

Earlier this week, the Wall Street Journal reported:

Tax cuts appear to be propelling robust consumer demand. Many households are experiencing less withholding from their paychecks thanks to the tax overhaul.

According to a recent survey, fewer than one in five American manufacturers now say an unfavorable climate due to things like taxes and regulations is a primary obstacle to their businesses. Back in 2013, during the Obama economy, more than two-thirds of the manufacturers said that. Two-thirds said it was a problem in 2013, and only one in five considers it a problem now.

All across the country, as job creators of all sizes have announced worker bonuses, pay raises, and business expansions, many say loud and clear that tax reform is what made it possible.

The American people voted. Republicans kept our promises. Now middle-class families are seeing the effects of the pro-growth policies they asked for in 2016, and the whole world has seen what the American people can accomplish when their government gets off their backs.

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. SCHUMER. Madam 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.

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

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

TRUMP-PUTIN SUMMIT

Mr. SCHUMER. Madam President, in the 3 days since the President returned from his humiliating display of obsequiousness in Helsinki, he has offered numerous explanations for his behavior.

First, he said the media was too focused on the negative and that his summit with Putin was a great success. Then, admitting there was, in fact, a problem, he attempted to walk

back some of his comments, but even he couldn't commit to that and ad-libbed that other people could also have been responsible for interfering in the 2016 elections. A mere 24 hours later, the President was back to claiming it was not his fault and that the media was biased.

Then, astoundingly—the President not having learned his lesson—when he was asked yesterday whether Russia was still attacking our election system, the President replied “no.” This was, of course, followed by yet another implausible clarification when—surprise—his Press Secretary told reporters that was not what the President meant. Although, when you actually look at the tape, it is clear as a bell it is what the President meant. He was saying Russia was not still attacking our election system—once again, disbelieving all of the fine men and women who have reported this, who labor quietly, diligently in our intelligence agencies.

The constantly shifting, insincere, and thoroughly unconvincing explanations for the President's performance reveal that the President and his team do not understand the depth of President Trump's blunders with Putin. Frankly, any post hoc clarification cannot substitute for or repair the President's failure to confront Putin face-to-face. All of his walk backs, which then get undone, are done in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Where is this man who prides himself on being strong but is then afraid to say these things to Putin and has to wait until he is 6,000 miles away to say them? It is unbelievable.

One of the most stunning things about the summit was the President's openness to a request by President Putin to question former U.S. Ambassador to Moscow Michael McFaul and other Americans. In Helsinki, the President described the request as part of an “incredible offer.” The President's spokeswoman was asked about it yesterday. She confirmed the President and his team would discuss it.

That President Trump would even consider handing over a former U.S. Ambassador to Putin and his cronies for interrogation is bewildering. No President should have the power to gift wrap American citizens, let alone former Ambassadors, to our known adversaries. How can President Trump and his team spend even a moment considering Putin's request? How can they equate the democracy and rule of law and system of open and fair prosecution we have in this country with what Putin does? It is just amazing.

Every day, this President demeans the United States. So many Americans are saying they are ashamed to have him as their leader when he behaves like this.

Certainly, if the President were to agree to such a request, Congress must do everything in its power to block it. There can be no room for debate, no room for discussion. We must be

clear—and clear quickly. This morning, Senator MENENDEZ, Senator SCHATZ, and I plan to offer a simple resolution that states: “It is the sense of Congress that the United States should refuse to make available any current or former diplomat, civil servant, political appointee, law enforcement official, or member of the Armed Forces of the United States for questioning by the government of Vladimir Putin.” This body must agree on the importance of protecting our Ambassadors. We should pass it today, not wait, not show any equivocation.

This incredible offer, as President Trump so casually and incorrectly called it, raises other serious questions. What else has President Trump agreed to behind closed doors? What else has he discussed with President Putin? President Trump and President Putin met for nearly 2 hours behind closed doors. No one else was present but a translator, and hardly anyone knows what was said.

Has Secretary Pompeo been briefed on that private, behind-closed-doors meeting? Nobody knows. He hasn't said so. Does our military know if President Trump made commitments about our nuclear arsenal? Nobody knows. Defense Secretary Mattis hasn't said whether he has been briefed. Do we know if President Trump made commitments about the security of Israel or Syria or North Korea or about any of the other issues the President said he discussed with Putin?

It is utterly amazing that no one knows what was said. This is a democracy. If our President makes agreements with one of our leading—if not our leading—adversaries, his Cabinet has to know about it and so do the American people. These questions and more need a full and complete accounting before Congress, in an open setting, as soon as possible.

That is why I have called on the Republican leadership to demand that Secretary of State Pompeo, Ambassador Huntsman, and, crucially, the translator who was present at the closed-door session be made to testify before the Senate. They should come immediately—now. What are our Republican friends waiting for?

The events of this week raise serious questions about the President's ability to responsibly and safely conduct this Nation's foreign policy, about his ability and willingness to defend the United States and her citizens, about his very ability to govern in so many areas.

Confronted with these grave questions, I believe the Senate must act to show our country's resolve to punish Putin for his interference and never allow such a thing to happen again and to ensure the President is doing what is necessary to stand up for American interests.

So I have proposed—and many of my colleagues on this side of the aisle have proposed—a bunch of things we can do right now to take action in the wake of

President Trump's indefensible summit with President Putin. Democrats are not in the majority. We don't control the floor. We need our Republican colleagues, who control the Senate floor, to join us on these measures. The lack of action—action, not just words—by our Republican colleagues is stunning and deeply disappointing not just to Democrats but to all of the American people.

Since Monday, sadly, we haven't seen movement from our colleagues in the majority, just more slow-walking. I understand my friends, Senators Coons and Flake, are working on introducing a resolution to support the consensus of our intelligence agencies and to request congressional oversight. We are all for it. I hope it passes with the unanimous consent it deserves. My Republican friends can and must do more—actions, not just resolutions and statements of disapproval. We shouldn't need this resolution. The things asked for in this resolution should have been happening already.

The burden of patriotism and of protecting America's security is on Leader MCCONNELL's shoulders. I know he has a difficult situation. I know he has a President who can sometimes be vindictive. The bottom line is, our country's security, our country's direction, our country's honor demand it.

We need to bring Secretary of State Pompeo, Ambassador Huntsman, and the rest of President Trump's national security team from Helsinki, including the translator who was present in the one-on-one meeting with Putin, right here before the Congress, in open session, so we all will know what happened.

We need to pass legislation to protect Special Counsel Mueller. There is bipartisan legislation already that was passed out of the Judiciary Committee under Senator GRASSLEY's leadership and support. It is on the floor. What is our Republican leader waiting for?

We need to see the President's tax returns, which has been the common practice of all Presidents in recent memory, but it is needed far more now because one of the most logical explanations of the President's obsequious and almost inexplicable actions toward President Putin is that Putin has something on him. Maybe it would be revealed in the tax returns, and if there is nothing there, the President should have no problem with releasing them.

We need to implement sanctions against Russia, not weaken them. We need to demand that Putin hand over the 12 Russians who have been indicted for election interference. We also need to harden our election infrastructure so that what happened in 2016 never happens again.

These are all commonsense measures, and most of them have bipartisan support already. They will accomplish for America what the President has been unwilling or unable to do. If my Republican colleagues refuse to pursue any—if not all—of these items, they are de

facto consenting to the President's capitulation in Helsinki. They cannot stand by. The American people will not allow it.

HEALTHCARE

Mr. SCHUMER. Madam President, finally, on healthcare, ever since Republicans have been handed the keys to both Houses of Congress and the White House after the 2016 election, they have engaged in a protracted campaign of sabotage against our healthcare system. Premiums are going up, coverage is going down, and it is all falling in the laps of our Republican colleagues in the House and Senate.

President Trump and congressional Republicans proposed legislation that would have gutted Medicaid and allowed insurers to charge more and deny coverage just because a person had gotten sick. The legislation would have excluded critical benefits and imposed lifetime or annual limits on care.

Under cover of night, the Republicans dismantled the healthcare law's coverage requirement without putting anything in its place.

The Trump administration canceled the Federal program that helped low-income customers afford insurance and expanded the availability of junk insurance plans that sucker Americans in with low premiums but that hardly cover anything. When people have these plans, they ask: Why did I even buy insurance? They were duped.

Now, worse yet, the administration has directed the Justice Department to stop defending the constitutionality of protections for Americans with preexisting medical conditions—turning its back on the most popular and humane advancement in our healthcare system over the last decade.

I would say to my Republican friends: Go to your constituents. Ask if people have someone who is sick in their families. You will get a lot of hands. Then ask them if they should be excluded from gaining health insurance to help that sick member and see how many support these ideas.

If they try to do this in the dark of night, it is not going to work. In August, we Democrats are going to be talking about this over and over again. Believe me—this will probably be the most important factor in the 2018 election as the American people will rebel from the taking away of healthcare.

Imagine going back to the days when a mother with a child who has cancer can no longer find affordable healthcare for her daughter. When hard-working Americans who fall on hard times are made to suffer by being denied healthcare coverage precisely because they need it, how wrong, how backward, how immoral. That is where President Trump wants to take us, and that is where all of our Republican colleagues seem to be following.

Later this morning—actually, right now—a group of Democrats is announcing how we plan to fight back against

this lawsuit and preserve the protections for up to 130 million nonelderly Americans who have preexisting conditions. The elderly, fortunately, are protected since we still have Medicare, despite some efforts by some on the other side to cut it back.

As millions of Americans watch their healthcare costs go up, as they read the news about the latest Republican effort to undo healthcare protections, they fear for the future and wonder who in Washington will be fighting for them. In November, they will have the chance to vote for a party that will check the President's dangerous healthcare sabotage, that will work to bring down costs and improve quality, that will never undermine the protections of Americans with preexisting conditions.

I look forward to the response to my colleagues' announcement.

I yield the floor.

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 Ryan Wesley Bounds, of Oregon, to be United States Circuit Judge for the Ninth Circuit.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. SULLIVAN). The Senator from Arkansas.

IMMIGRATION AND CUSTOMS ENFORCEMENT

Mr. COTTON. Mr. President, I wish to take this opportunity to express my support for the 20,000 men and women of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. They work hard every day to keep drugs off our streets, to stop human trafficking, to protect our communities from gang violence, and, yes, to enforce our immigration laws. Theirs can be a thankless job, but they do it with courage, dedication, and professionalism. So I, for one, want to say thank you.

I wish to point out the overwhelming support that House Republicans showed for ICE yesterday, which stands in stark contrast to the contemptible display put on by House Democrats. On a simple resolution merely expressing support for the men and women of ICE, only 18 Democrats voted yes, 8 skipped the vote, 34 voted no, and 133 Democrats voted present, which is the same thing as no. That is a pretty sad state of affairs. Thirty-four Democrats condemned the men and women of ICE, and 141 Democrats don't even have the courage of their conviction—they don't

even have the guts to vote yes or no—because we all know that Democrats, in their heart of hearts, want to abolish ICE. The way they tell it, ICE is a rogue agency driven by hatred and spite to tear apart communities.

Congressman POCAN of Wisconsin said that ICE is "ripping at the moral fabric of our nation."

Congresswoman JAYAPAL of Washington said that "ICE is out of control."

Congressman BLUMENAUER of Oregon calls ICE "toxic."

The senior Senator from Massachusetts said that we should replace ICE "with something that reflects our values," which I suppose means that the 20,000 men and women of ICE don't measure up to the professor's definition of our values. I have to ask, isn't the rule of law one of those values? Because ICE's job is simply to enforce the law and to protect our citizens from crime.

In the last year alone, ICE arrested more than 125,000 illegal aliens with criminal records. Those illegal aliens were responsible for more than 80,000 DUIs, 76,000 dangerous drug offenses, 48,000 assaults, 11,000 weapon offenses, 5,000 sexual assaults, 2,000 kidnappings, and 1,800 homicides. Yes, that is right, almost 2,000 souls would still be on this Earth but for those illegal alien criminals. ICE's investigative arm seized more than 980,000 pounds of narcotics last year. These men and women are on the frontlines of the war on drugs and the opioid crisis in particular. Do the Democrats really believe we should put all these efforts on hold?

This call to abolish ICE is so irresponsible that even some Democrats—those not running for President or beholden to the radical left—are speaking out against this.

Jeh Johnson, President Obama's former Secretary of Homeland Security, said that it "is not a serious policy proposal" and "would compromise public safety." He pointed out that even those who opposed the Vietnam war wouldn't have demanded that we abolish the Department of Defense.

Eric Holder, President Obama's former Attorney General, said, "I don't think that substantively or politically that makes a great deal of sense," calling it "a gift to Republicans."

Sarah Saldana, who ran ICE under President Obama, has called it "nonsensical."

Perhaps the most insightful comment came from former Senator Joe Lieberman of Connecticut. He said, "This makes no sense unless you no longer want any rules on immigration or customs to be enforced." And that, I would contend, is the whole point.

Those who want to abolish ICE just want open borders. The very bill House Democrats have introduced to abolish ICE doesn't even say which Federal agency should assume its critical law enforcement duties. They leave it up to a commission. The reason, I submit, is that they don't really care. Their obsession with open borders is so great