

which unduly limit access to abortion services, including laws that single out providers, close down clinics, and impose onerous restrictions that do nothing to further women's health or safety.

I will continue to work for access to comprehensive reproductive care and vote against proposals that threaten a woman's right to make her own health decisions.

TRIBUTE TO LIEUTENANT COLONEL ALBERT J. GOMEZ

Mr. CRAPO. Mr. President, my colleague Senator JIM RISCH joins me today in honoring LTC Albert J. Gomez on his outstanding career as he retires from serving as the West Point field force State coordinator.

Lieutenant Colonel Gomez—Al—has set a standard of excellence in Idaho leaving a lasting, positive impression in the lives of many. For nearly 20 years, he has been an invaluable asset to our offices. In 2000, the Idaho congressional delegation began to hold annual service academy days. Service academy days are an opportunity to provide information to Idaho's best and brightest young men and women who are interested in attending our Nation's service academies. Al has been instrumental in setting up service academy days from the beginning while juggling deployment and other commitments. He has assisted numerous Idaho students with obtaining an exceptional educational and service opportunities available at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. He is responsible for incorporating the principle method into the delegation's nomination process, which has made a significant difference in the number of Idaho appointees to West Point. In fact, he is considered the "secret weapon" in our delegation responsible for the high success rate of Idaho students receiving appointments to West Point. For Lieutenant Colonel Gomez, his remarkable work has always been about his love for West Point and our country. He is known for his extraordinary mentorship of youth, and candidates are frequently told to listen to Al if they want to be successful.

As a West Point alumni, Al has clear insight into what it takes to succeed at a service academy and what it means to serve our Nation. He earned his regular Army commission in 1979 and started his career in 1980 as a lance missile platoon leader serving in Germany. His assignments took him and his family to Fort Sill, OK, and Neckarsulm, Germany, which included command of a Pershing II missile nuclear capable firing battery. He served in deployments in support of Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. He was selected to represent the U.S. Army and provide testimony to the Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces in November 1992. Al continued his military education with a 1994 grad-

uation from the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, KS. He served as a State Inspector General for both the Idaho and Guam National Guard for nearly a decade before his retirement from the U.S. Army in 2006. As a civilian, he worked for the Idaho National Guard as a special security officer for the Supervisor Human Resource Office before his current position, as the State equal employment manager.

His strong work ethic and dedication have not only given him a reputation among the delegation of being a go-to-guy when something needs to be done right and quickly, but also have contributed to him being recognized with many honors for his service to our country. These include the Legion of Merit; Bronze Star Medal; Meritorious Service Medal, 4th Award; Army Commendation Medal, 3rd Award; Army Achievement Medal; National Defense Service Medal, 2nd Award; and many other recognitions.

Lieutenant Colonel Gomez has set an honorable example in how he cares for Idaho service academy candidates and how he has served our Nation. He has created a strong team of West Point liaison officers who will continue his mission of providing Idaho students a chance to obtain a world-class education. We congratulate LTC Albert Gomez on his exemplary career.

Your leadership and friendship will be greatly missed. Thank you for setting such a high standard of outstanding service to our Nation and Idahoans.

ADDITIONAL STATEMENTS

TRIBUTE TO MICHAEL WETHERBEE

• Mr. DAINES. Mr. President, this week I have the honor of recognizing Sheridan School Superintendent Micheal Wetherbee for his commitment to students' success. Mike was recently honored with the 2017 Montana Association of Agricultural Educators' Administrator of the Year award, as well as the 2017 Montana Association of Career and Technical Education's Administrator of the Year award.

Mike came out of retirement to serve as superintendent when he saw there was a need in the community. When STEM and STEAM learning were just getting a foothold in education, Mike wanted to be sure the school would be on the frontlines. With buy-in from the community, Sheridan Schools are becoming well known for putting kids on a path to success through hands-on learning and experiences. In fact, high school students are now teaching fourth graders how to code. In Mike's own words, "We've got it going on academically."

When asked about the awards, Mike is much more interested in talking about what the school is doing to build a great FFA program and thriving

business department. What excites him the most about these programs, which he has been recognized for, are the opportunities they provide students to leave Sheridan High School and become successful in other places. Mike, who grew up in Montana, understands what service to the community means, and he is doing it every day by building up the students in Sheridan schools.

Thanks, Mike, for your continued work to shape Montana kids into the bright leaders of Montana's future.●

STATE OF THE UNION ESSAY CONTEST WINNERS

• Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, since 2010, I have sponsored a State of the Union essay contest for Vermont high school students. This contest gives students in my State the opportunity to articulate what issues they would prioritize if they were President of the United States.

I would like to congratulate the almost 600 students who participated this year. It is truly heartening to see so many young people engaged in finding solutions for the problems that face our country. To my mind, this is what democracy is all about.

A volunteer panel of Vermont teachers reviewed the essays and chose Marjorie "Maggie" Parker as this year's winner. Maggie, a sophomore at Woodstock Union High School, focused on the need to prevent hate crimes, particularly against members of the LGBT community.

Alaura Rich, a senior at St. Johnsbury Academy, was the second place winner. Alaura wrote about the prohibitive cost of a college education at a time when the United States needs to have the best educated workforce in the world.

Oliver Minshall, a junior at Hanover High School, was the third place winner, having written about addressing income inequality and creating a more equitable and sustainable economy.

I am very proud to ask to have printed in the RECORD the essays submitted by Maggie, Alaura, and Oliver. The material follows:

MARJORIE PARKER, WOODSTOCK HIGH SCHOOL
SOPHOMORE, WINNER

In our current day and age, I believe that one major challenge that faces our country is the prevention of hate crimes against minorities. One group I believe needs specific protection, especially with the new administration, are members of the LGBT community. With the recent military ban on transgender Americans, the LGBT community is feeling singled out and at risk. One way to bring a greater feeling of peace to these fellow Americans is by increasing protections instead of taking them away. I believe two major steps forward to help these people would be a law against employment discrimination for LGBT people, and also a repeal of "bathroom bills" which put transgender people at a greater risk of being harassed for their identity.

Firstly, on the topic of employment discrimination, many LGBT Americans face discrimination in the workplace simply for being open about their identities. In 2011, the

Williams Institute on Sexual Orientation Law and Public Policy conducted a series of surveys and found that 43 percent of LGBT Americans said they had faced discrimination in the workplace, and also found that straight coworkers say they had witnessed discrimination based on sexual orientation. One way to solve these struggles would be to put in place a law that prohibits employers discriminating against current and prospective employees on the basis of gender identity or sexual orientation. A law such as this could help reduce workplace discrimination and make it easier for LGBT people to find a hold a job.

Second, on the topic of so-called “bathroom bills”, all people should have a safe place to use the restroom, regardless of gender identity. During the Obama presidency, an order was put into place that allowed students in all public schools to use the bathroom that best matched their gender identity. While there was much push-back, this was generally a step forward for young transgender people. However, early in 2017, President Trump reversed this order, effectively taking away much protection for transgender youth. It is important for this order not only to go back into place for schools but also in all places. It is unfair and uncomfortable for transgender Americans, who are living their lives as their true identity, to be forced to use a restroom that does not correspond to that identity. This is not only an embarrassment for them, but can also put them at greater risk of violence in said bathroom.

All in all, I believe that protection for LGBT Americans is one major challenge facing our country. If we truly want to be an example of an accepting country, with protections for minorities, we have to be able to step up and protect our fellow citizens. Through the changes I have outlined above, as well as others, I truly believe that our country can start to be a leader in the civil rights movement across the world.

ALaura RICH, ST. JOHNSBURY ACADEMY SENIOR,
SECOND PLACE

As the country that leads the global economy, the United States needs the best-educated workforce in the world. Our Nation cannot afford to be left behind due to a lack of fair and just educational opportunities. Yet, the educational system in America is failing to provide some of the brightest and most capable young people across the Nation with equal educational opportunities: ones that are affordable for minorities who are of low socioeconomic status or are the first in their family to attend college.

As a member of Upward Bound, one of the federally-funded TRIO programs that supports first-generation, low-income students, I have known for years that the cost of college was going to be a considerable barrier for me. However, it was my understanding that if I worked hard enough, I would find the means to pay for my college education without going deeply into debt. This assurance diminished after receiving my first award letter from a public, in-state university with notice that I would need to borrow \$40,000 over a four year period—\$10,000 above the national borrowing average—just to attend a public school within my own State. Many students like myself across the Nation face these same financial barriers.

Although there are many major issues that our country is struggling to solve, our fractured, inequitable educational system does not fall short of making this list. The appeal of a college education has shifted dramatically from what it began as: rather than a means of developing equal opportunities for young people in pursuit of work-related skills and knowledge, it has become a soci-

etal expectation with a large price tag that can only be easily achieved by those of upper-middle-class status. First-generation, low-income students are left at a significant disadvantage. These students often lack parental support, knowledge of the process, and critical resources. Furthermore, their country is failing to provide them with the financial aid system that they desperately need in order to afford a college education.

It's time to enact change within the American higher education system. We must make public colleges and universities tuition-free, end the Federal Government's ability to make a profit off student loans, substantially cut student loan interest rates, and allow low-income students to use need-based financial aid and work-study programs to make their college debt-free by covering room and board, books, and living expenses. By taking these steps, the opportunity gap in America would see a significant decrease. Minority students would see the same basic right to higher education as their more advantaged peers, and the future economic state of our Nation would be in the hands of the promising young individuals who are currently being underrepresented in colleges nationwide due to a lack of support. The Declaration of Independence birthed the underlying fundamental foundation of our Nation's belief in both opportunity and upward mobility, and it is the responsibility of the United States government to ensure equal educational opportunities for all.

OLIVER MINSHALL, HANOVER HIGH SCHOOL
JUNIOR, THIRD PLACE

Income inequality is our greatest challenge, our most present danger and an existential threat to America. Our society is among the most unequal societies in the world, consistently ranking behind other industrialized nations, like France and Denmark according to the CIA. Leaders are taking notice of this issue, in 2013 President Obama declared that making the economy work for everyone was “the defining challenge of our time.” To improve the state of this great country, we must find a solution to the pernicious scourge of income inequality and create a more just, equitable and sustainable path for our economy.

An analysis by economist Edward Wolf confirmed that the top one percent of income earners own 40 percent of the country's wealth, the highest share in 50 years. At a time when we are among the most prosperous nations in the world, the bottom ninety percent has less wealth than the top one percent. Robert Reich has observed closely as the very building blocks of capitalism have been strategically manipulated by the wealthiest one percent and large corporations for their own benefit. Thomas Piketty discovered that modern markets tend to produce increasing inequality in the long run due to the tendency of capital investments to increase in value at a faster rate than the economy at large. Median income rose to its highest level ever in 2017 according to Business Insider but when adjusted for inflation the real purchasing power for many poor and middle class people is stagnant. While the sources of this inequality are far from certain, the deleterious effect on society is indubitable.

This is not just a moral problem but a threat to the future of American democracy. The political scientist Martin Glens contends that while America enjoys many of the features of political democracy, citizens have so little economic power, and therefore influence, their views do not have any practical effect on policymaking. That is an attack on popular sovereignty, a core principle of our democratic system. Piketty too points out this trend, asserting that while some in-

equality is necessary for the function of efficient markets, excess inequality is detrimental to the long term function of our democratic institutions. Furthermore unequal societies undermine the very markets they are based upon. Inequality causes political and economic turmoil that harms society.

The solution to this issue is a comprehensive strategy to deal with inequality. We need to raise taxes on the top one percent, implement the Harkin-Defazio financial transactions tax, remove the arbitrary and regressive cap on taxable income for Social Security payroll taxes, tax capital gains as earned income and use the revenue to fund new programs like free tuition, a public option in healthcare, and new infrastructure. If we embrace these policies and the shared ideals of economic justice, and political democracy we can transform America into a vibrant and equitable society worthy of the American dream and those who strive every day to realize it.●

PRESIDENTIAL MESSAGE

REPORT ON THE STATE OF THE UNION DELIVERED TO A JOINT SESSION OF CONGRESS ON JANUARY 30, 2018—PM 25

The PRESIDING OFFICER laid before the Senate the following message from the President of the United States which was ordered to lie on the table:

To the Congress of the United States:

Mr. Speaker, Mr. Vice President, Members of Congress, the First Lady of the United States, and my fellow Americans:

Less than 1 year has passed since I first stood at this podium, in this majestic chamber, to speak on behalf of the American People—and to address their concerns, their hopes, and their dreams. That night, our new Administration had already taken swift action. A new tide of optimism was already sweeping across our land.

Each day since, we have gone forward with a clear vision and a righteous mission—to make America great again for all Americans.

Over the last year, we have made incredible progress and achieved extraordinary success. We have faced challenges we expected, and others we could never have imagined. We have shared in the heights of victory and the pains of hardship. We endured floods and fires and storms. But through it all, we have seen the beauty of America's soul, and the steel in America's spine.

Each test has forged new American heroes to remind us who we are, and show us what we can be.

We saw the volunteers of the “Cajun Navy,” racing to the rescue with their fishing boats to save people in the aftermath of a devastating hurricane.

We saw strangers shielding strangers from a hail of gunfire on the Las Vegas strip.

We heard tales of Americans like Coast Guard Petty Officer Ashlee Leppert, who is here tonight in the gallery with Melania. Ashlee was aboard