

NOAA, 2017 was the most expensive year on record for disasters in the United States. At some point, we have to acknowledge that the intensity of these storms is much greater than in past years and is a symptom of changing climate.

Climate change is real. It is being driven by human activity. It is happening right now. These are facts. They are not in dispute. Our scientists know it, our businesses know it, the world knows it, and the American people know it. But too many Senators on the other side of the aisle just put their heads in the sand. It costs us more and more and more. We are not going to leave these people high and dry, but if we would do more on climate change, we would have fewer of these hurricanes and other types of storms.

Everyone knows that, except a few. Why? Why don't they admit the truth? Maybe there are two words that explain it: oil industry.

Just this week the U.N. released a report on climate change, saying that the world has only a short time—maybe a little more than a decade—to get a handle on carbon emissions. So far, the current administration has done nothing but move the issue backward. It is amazing that we, the leading country that is supposed to be the moral force—the economic, political, and military leader—are the ones who pull out of the Paris climate accords, and then the administration has been repealing environmental protection after protection.

So while we are thinking about the people of Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina and everyone in Hurricane Michael's path, let's remember we are running out of time to do something about climate change. The kinds of storms we are seeing now will only increase if this body continues to keep its head in the sand ostrichlike and ignore the scientific realities.

HEALTHCARE

Mr. SCHUMER. Now, on another matter—healthcare—yesterday, 50 of my Republican colleagues voted against ensuring protections for people with preexisting conditions—people with asthma and cancer, people with diabetes and all kinds of gynecological problems. Republican Senators sided with the Trump administration to expand the ability of insurance companies to sell cutrate, junk insurance to Americans—to dupe Americans. These plans will destabilize the healthcare market and raise the cost of insurance for people with preexisting conditions who may end up being priced out of insurance altogether.

Let me say that again. Republicans yesterday voted to let insurance companies offer junk insurance plans that don't cover essential health benefits, allowing them to nickel-and-dime patients out of the medical care they deserve.

Our constituents—Democrats, Republicans, north, west, east, and south—say they want better healthcare at a lower cost, and what do Republicans do? They offer worse healthcare coverage at a higher cost, ultimately, to people, because the plans don't cover anything and then you have to pay out of your pocket.

What did they do it in the name of? Freedom. Freedom. This is like the 1890s. Who is going to have freedom? The insurance companies, the big shots. Who is going to have no freedom from illness and disease? Average folks. It is terrible thinking, once again siding with big, powerful special interests, not the average person.

The only people who want these junk insurance plans are two groups—the insurance companies and the rightwing ideologues who believe the government shouldn't be in healthcare at all. They want to cut Medicare. They want to cut Medicaid. They want to cut Social Security. That is who it is.

So let us remember that the junk insurance plans are hardly worth the paper they are printed on. They lure consumers in with low premiums, but the deductibles are so high, the copays are so high, and the coverage so skimpy that the plans hardly offer any benefit to the consumer at all.

While every Republican save one voted to hand the keys to the insurance companies, every single Democrat—every single Democrat—stood up to the sabotage from the Trump administration and voted to not allow the expansion of junk insurance across America.

I warn my colleagues that these are the kinds of issues that voters remember come election time. Healthcare is the No. 1 issue in America to the broad majority of voters. The American people will head to the polls in November and ask themselves: Which party will defend the people's right to quality healthcare? Which party will not?

The answer to that question could not be clearer. Democrats have spent the past 2 years offering several plans to reduce the cost of healthcare while maintaining or increasing the quality, while President Trump and Republicans in Congress have done nothing but drive costs up and quality down in obeisance to the big special interests—the insurance industry.

They have tried to repeal the healthcare law. They have tried to gut Medicaid, eliminate healthcare for millions of Americans, and put the insurers back in charge. They have eliminated the program to help low- and middle-income Americans afford insurance and, worst of all, Republican attorneys general—including two running for the Senate, one in Missouri and one in West Virginia—are suing, as we speak, to eliminate protections for Americans with preexisting conditions.

These actions are undergirded by a belief on the other side of the aisle that the American people just don't deserve help affording adequate healthcare. Re-

publicans have believed, continue to believe, and have acted on, unfortunately, that insurance companies should rule the roost, just as in the 1890s. The consequences are severe.

As a result of the Republican healthcare agenda, premiums are up by double digits in several States and quality is down. As a result of the Republican healthcare agenda, Americans are paying more and getting less.

I say to the American people that in a few short weeks you will have a choice. You can vote for 2 more years of healthcare sabotage from a Republican Congress, more attempts at repealing the healthcare law, more premium increases and uncertainty, more actions that undermine protections for patients with preexisting conditions or the American people can vote to flip the script and support Democratic candidates who will not only protect the care that Americans have today but who will work every single day to make it better.

I yield the floor.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Morning business is closed.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

The PRESIDING OFFICER. 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 Jeffrey Bossert Clark, of Virginia, to be an Assistant Attorney General.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Missouri.

FAA/CONSUMER PROTECTIONS

Mr. BLUNT. Madam President, I think by any standard, as we conclude this Congress, the House and Senate, working together, have put more legislation on the President's desk that has long-term impact than at any time in a long time, whether it was the opioid legislation or healthcare research funding.

I want to talk a little bit today about the Federal Aviation Administration extension that, just last week, the Senate passed and the President signed. I believe the 5-year reauthorization is the longest reauthorization since the 1980s. So the traveling public, the FAA itself, the Department of Transportation, and the airline carriers of both people and freight have an understanding of what the next 5 years should look like.

One of the things that will happen during the time that begins right now—the Senate and the House listened and the President listened to the traveling public about their concerns about what happens on airplanes and in airports. This is a bill that I worked on in the Aviation Subcommittee, along with Senator CANTWELL, Senator THUNE, and Senator NELSON. We worked for almost 2 years to get this bill to where it was when the President signed it, to address the safety, security, and comfort of the traveling public.

In the wake of consumer complaints about the shrinking seat size on airplanes, the law directs the FAA to set minimum legroom standards and width and length requirements for airline seat size to ensure passenger comfort and safety. I think all of us have had some experience with seeing seats get smaller all the time. Like every other Member of the Senate, when I am flying back and forth every week, usually in one of those coach seats, somebody says: I thought you came back and forth on a private plane. Actually, only a few Members—maybe less than a handful—are able to do that. Most of us fly just like everybody else does, with no particular benefit. But you can sense those seats getting a little smaller and the legroom getting a little tighter. We have given new responsibility for the FAA to set standards, so the traveling public knows somebody is paying attention to them and how long they are going to be in that seat and what it is going to be like when they are there.

We also have a provision that you can't take somebody off an airplane once they have been allowed to board because you somehow oversold. If somebody is on that plane, they can't be taken off that plane unless they agree to be taken off that plane or the passenger acts in a way that the safety and security and the health of other passengers could be a problem. So there is no more involuntarily bumping of passengers who are on a plane.

The law prohibits placing live animals in overhead compartments. More and more people seem to travel with pets, and people have had bad experiences with that in the last few years. So overhead storage is not appropriate storage any longer for your pet if you are traveling with a pet.

It also sets minimum standards for service animals that are allowed on flights. We all see that more all the time, too—a pet not in a cage but important to the individual who has a service animal. Many veterans now have a service animal. There are now standards on what that animal can be and how it has to behave on a plane.

It bans in-flight cell calls. If you have ever sat by somebody before the plane takes off and learned way more about them than you want to know, you can imagine what it would be like if you had to learn way more about them based on every call they could

make all the time you were flying. So that is not going to happen. The next time you are on the ground and somebody continues to talk until they are told they can't do that any longer, just be grateful that can't continue once the plane gets in the air for the whole time of the flight, which would technically have been allowed with Wi-Fi or whatever allowed that phone to be connected. That is not going to be the case now.

Airline fees have changed. I don't like airline fees. Most people don't like airline fees. But if you pay a fee and you don't get the service—if you pay for a seat assignment that doesn't work out to be the kind of seat you paid for or early boarding, and that didn't happen or baggage that somehow wasn't handled the way your special fee was charged—the airlines now have to keep track of that and get you that money back as soon as they reasonably can or face a penalty.

The law requires air carriers to submit to the Department of Transportation a one-page summary of passengers' rights, including compensation for flight delays, cancellations, and mishandled bags. Every airline has to have that available for you to look at.

By the way, the Department of Transportation is going to have a Consumer Aviation Advocate. There will now be somebody at the Department of Transportation—it will be their job, their only job, to respond to you; they and their team will respond to you if you have had a problem on an airline and want to see what can be done about it.

Provisions are included to address disability issues on planes, whether restrooms are accessible, whether anything happens that would harm a disabled passenger or damage their wheelchair or the other aids they have.

We have a 3-year reauthorization of the Transportation Security Administration. There are some real needs there in both TSA Precheck and TSA generally that are met with this. One of those needs is more access to dogs. We all see dogs in airports, but every study since 9/11—and there have been a lot of them—indicates that nothing is more effective than a dog for finding most of the things you are looking for. Some of us have gone through security lines lately where the line moves pretty fast, but a dog checks everybody in that line. We will see what happens there, but dogs generally are doing the kinds of things that need to be done.

So whether it is the FAA Reauthorization Act or America's Water Infrastructure Act, which we passed yesterday—I think the vote on that was 99 to 1, but that doesn't mean it was easy to get it to the floor, and it doesn't mean it normally gets done by a Congress. But that has happened as well.

The insurance policies that Democrats voted to take away yesterday have been mentioned here this morning. Those short-term health policies

were available until the very last days of the Obama administration. I don't know the reason the administration had to suddenly decide that it didn't want that ability that several hundred thousand—maybe a couple of million—people had to get short-term coverage at a rate they could afford. For people in a job transition or something else, those were available that entire time.

The Urban Institute says that 1.5 million people who otherwise would have no insurance will be able to have insurance under those short-term policies. The policies under the Affordable Care Act are still available; they are still subsidized; they still do everything that is the maximum of ObamaCare. If that is what you want to have, particularly if you are subsidized in that marketplace, that is probably where you should be. But a lot of people aren't, and a lot of people don't have immediate access, and a lot of people are in transition.

The Urban Institute is not normally seen as a conservative watchdog, but they said that 1.5 million people will have insurance with these policies, which will continue to be available for people who wouldn't have insurance if they hadn't have been. So you can say anything you want to say. You are entitled to your own opinion, but you are not entitled to your own facts, and I think the facts on the vote we took this week on those short-term policies are pretty clear.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Georgia.

Mr. ISAKSON. Madam President, I want to acknowledge what Senator BLUNT just said about the success of this Congress over the last 2 years. It has been remarkable. What they did on FAA is tremendous. I enjoyed working with them on that. But I want to rise and talk about our veterans and what we have done for our veterans and what we need to do for our veterans.

Before I do, my State of Georgia had a tough day and a tough night last night. The hurricane hit about 10 o'clock last night. Unfortunately, we lost one 11-year-old with a tree crashing through the roof. The Governor has declared a state of emergency for 108 of our 159 counties. We have 1,500 National Guard troops activated and ready to deploy if needed to help law enforcement, emergency medical, and hospitals to see to it that we meet the needs of the people in our State. There is a lot of search and rescue going on. We are blessed that a lot of things didn't happen, but we were certainly hurt by those that did.

For families who have lost property and families who need help, our sympathy is with them, and we are taking action. GEMA and FEMA are working hard. Governor Deal is working extremely hard. We have recovered a couple of times already in the last 5 years from hurricanes, and we will do it again. But on behalf of myself, Senator PERDUE, and the United States Senate,

I send our best wishes to our people back in Georgia and also to our people in South Carolina, North Carolina, and Florida. Florida was hit worse last night. But now the storm has passed Atlanta and is going over South Carolina, and then North Carolina, which just came back from almost the worst storm in history, in which we had 48 inches of rainfall in one county. I couldn't believe that much water fell in one day, but it did. They are recovering and doing it nicely. They have done a good job. But all of us know these acts of nature and acts of God we have gone through affect our citizens, and we need to keep them safe. I urge all of our citizens in Georgia and in every State in the Union to play close attention to what their Federal emergency management people say. If they tell them to evacuate, they should. If they tell them to hunker down, they should. They should do whatever they can to follow the rules the best they can. Everybody we have to rescue takes a law enforcement officer and a medical person out of play to help somebody else.

VETERANS

Madam President, as chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, I have the honor of representing the U.S. Senate to our veterans and responding, along with the House committee chaired by Chairman ROE of Tennessee, on veterans' issues. All of us are for veterans. There is one place you never have an argument on appropriations, and that is for veterans. We don't have partisan arguments about veterans either. On the battlefield, you don't see Democratic veterans or Republican veterans; you see American veterans. We are all for the veterans.

We have had some great successes with our veterans, but we have had some failures over the last decades. Sometimes they are on the front page of the newspaper, most recently last week when the hospital ratings came out. Two of the three hospitals servicing my State fell from three stars to one star, which meant they failed in their performance for our veterans, and we want to work to see that improve.

But we also want everybody to understand how big the problem is, what we have done the last 2 years to address the problem, and what is coming soon for all of us, which I think is good news for everybody.

First of all, starting 2 years ago, Senator TESTER, the ranking member on the committee, and I sat down and made a pledge that we were going to work together from the beginning to address the tough issues that had been put behind the backdoor for a long time and hadn't been dealt with. We have done that. In fact, we have tackled every single one of them, except one that we are going to tackle in a couple of weeks. In so doing, we have helped our veterans.

We had the help of the President as well. President Trump embraced our committee's work from the beginning.

We had to find a new Secretary because the old Secretary resigned, and we worked hard to do that. We had a few bumps in the road. The President gave us his full support. Robert Wilkie, who is the new Secretary of the VA, is a terrific guy. He has a family history in the military. He loves the VA and worked for DOD, or the Department of Defense, which is the precursor in working for the VA if you are a veteran, because you have to be in DOD first to be a veteran, second. In fact, Robert Wilkie is a godsend for us. In a few short weeks, he has already proven to be a big help for our veterans. He is not unwilling to tackle the hard problems. In fact, he is willing to tackle them.

Interoperative software for medical information has been a problem at the VA for years. The DOD and VA software didn't talk to each other.

We have a guy who left the battlefield in Afghanistan, came back to Georgia, and went to Fort Benning. He decided to leave the military and retire and go into veteran status, and we couldn't get his records transferred from Active Duty to veteran status because we didn't have interoperable software. We didn't have a way to do it.

This committee worked hard. We developed the largest contract in history with Cerner, a great software company. Cerner has a tremendous medical outreach product, and they are now installing that. Hopefully, over the next 15 years, we will have an interoperative system around the world that services our veterans who need medical service and have their records available instantaneously and immediately.

We have a 20th century soldier in the battlefield, but we have a 15th century VA when it comes to information technology. We have invested the money now with Cerner to put in the system, and we are going to get it done. I will stay on their back every day to see to it they do it.

I appreciate the cooperation of the employees of the VA. I tell them, as I make these remarks, that we are going to see to it they have every bit of backing they can get from us. We had too many vacant spaces in the VA. We had too many "acting this" and "acting that." I hate it when we appoint acting directors and acting bankers and acting soldiers. We don't need them to act. We need them to take action. We will start to do that as soon as we fund the places that go vacant, where it hurts our veterans.

I thank President Trump and Secretary Wilkie for their work and their support. It has been complete and seamless. We signed the VA MISSION Act in the Rose Garden a couple of weeks ago. The President came out and talked about his pride in the VA and what the veterans did for all of us and what he was going to do as President, as long as he was there, to see to it that he gave them at least the best of all of us like they have given us the best as veterans.

President Trump has been a great leader for our VA, and he understands the problems and has been supportive of our trying to make the changes we want to make.

Senator TESTER has been a great ranking member and a great partner with me on those things, and we made sure everything we did was bipartisan. To be honest with you, we passed 22 pieces of legislation and made 14 appointments. We had one "no" vote on one bill. We had complete unanimity on the committee—Republicans and Democrats—all the way through because we worked together, we set our goals, and we decided to make this work as seamlessly as our military works for us.

Let me talk about a few of those things we have done because I think they are impressive when you look at them. We passed 22 pieces of legislation, which include the VA MISSION Act, most recently passed a month ago. We redefined the mission and the actions of the VA to see that it does everything it needs to do to be a 20th century benefit program, like the new modern-day GI bill, which is a part of that.

The new GI bill says the old rule in the VA that you have to use your VA benefits within 15 years or you lose them on education is gone. We all know people's skills are changing about every 5 years or 6 years. If a person doesn't keep up with their continuing education, they are going to lose their job. They would lose their benefits because they have been in the VA 15 years. That is ridiculous. We removed that cap. Now they can take new courses and new training with their GI benefits for 25 years if they want to, if they are still eligible. We are not putting any time limit on it. There is no time limit on education. Education is the necessary product we have to use to produce the military of the 21st century.

It used to be that we drafted our soldiers. We can't draft the soldiers anymore. The average draftee can't operate the type of equipment our men and women operate in the battlefield. You have to have people who understand technology, understand the STEM subjects, and are good with games. Video games is one of the biggest qualifications now for pilots because all of our airplanes are like video games. It looks like Pac-Man when you get in the cockpit. It is because of high technology, and they are training for that. We have to have an attractive job for them and attractive VA benefits for them if they want to come to work for the United States of America and stay with us, or else we will never be able to keep the military we have today as strong and powerful as it is.

We also put a new law in on accountability. I served in the National Guard, and I understand accountability. In the military, you really understand accountability. You don't ask questions in the military. You give answers. If