

back because we respected the blue slips when we were in the majority, and there were a lot of empty seats. Well, this one is the longest running judicial vacancy in the United States.

Why, you might ask, has the seat remained open for so long?

Republican Senators blocked two Obama nominees, both of whom were African-American women. Let me say that again. Republican Senators from North Carolina—they may not have been, but they were in the circuit—blocked two Obama nominees, both of whom were African-American women. Yet now we put this man in that place—all because Leader MCCONNELL and Chairman GRASSLEY changed the rules and eliminated the last bit of comity by eliminating the blue slip? Either of those women would have been the first African American ever—not just the first African American woman but the first African American ever—to serve in that judicial district, when the population of that district was 27 percent African American. Two women were knocked out by Republican Senators under the tradition of the blue slip—both African American—in a district that was 27 percent African American.

They are not on the bench, and we are nominating this man who has stood steadfastly against the right of people—in this case, Black people—to vote. That is despicable. Considering Farr's record on voting rights—on the disenfranchisement of African-American voters, in particular—his nomination to the Eastern District vacancy is not just a dash of salt in the wound, it is the whole shaker.

I plead with my Republican colleagues. After an election in which voting rights and voting suppression were major issues in States like Georgia and Florida and at a time when our President always says elections are fixed and that Americans should have faith in the wellspring of our democracy—the right to vote and to have votes counted and correctly tabulated in a fair way—what message does the Senate send if it approves Farr's nomination?

This is our democracy. For the first time in the history of America, nasty creatures are gnawing at its roots. The tree could fall down. I hope it will not. It is a strong tree, but it could fall down, and it will be aided and abetted by those who put people like Mr. Farr on the bench. I vociferously oppose his nomination, and I urge my colleagues to do the same.

ACTING ATTORNEY GENERAL

Mr. President, one other point on Whitaker, the Acting Attorney General.

It has been almost 3 weeks since President Trump tapped Mr. Matthew Whitaker to be the Acting Attorney General. Since that time, I, along with Democratic Leader PELOSI and the ranking members of key committees in the House and Senate, have sent a letter to the Department of Justice, ask-

ing for a formal update on whether Mr. Whitaker must recuse himself from the Russia investigation given that he has had a long history of criticizing. We have not yet received a response. It has been 3 weeks with no response. I have also sent a letter to the Department of Justice, asking its inspector general to look into whether Mr. Whitaker and the White House had any improper or unlawful conversations prior to his appointment—again, no response.

In the meantime, we have learned that before joining the Department of Justice, Mr. Whitaker served on the advisory board of a company that was accused of scamming and deceiving consumers. We learned he received thousands of dollars in campaign contributions 4 years after his campaign ended. They don't seem like campaign contributions, do they? They were something else. Far more evil was at stake, and he got them just before he became Attorney General Session's Chief of Staff. Amazingly, we have learned that he has received \$1.2 million in compensation for unspecified work for a shadowy, conservative, dark money organization that refuses to disclose its donors.

The more the public learns about Mr. Whitaker, the more troubling his appointment becomes. He is hardly the most honorable man given all of this. He is the Acting Attorney General without having had any review by anyone other than President Trump, who has shown that he wants the Justice Department to be his personal arm of attack, not the rule of law—to go after his enemies and lay off his friends.

Beyond the shady business dealings, the most important thing is, Mr. Whitaker will not recuse himself from the Russia probe despite his publicly expressing his bias against the investigation. Clearly, he has shown he is willing to meddle in the investigation. That, in all likelihood, is why President Trump appointed him.

What a sad place we are in. We need to come together in the Senate—Democrats and Republicans—to pass legislation to protect the special counsel's investigation. We already have the bill. It is bipartisan—two Republicans, two Democrats. It passed committee on a bipartisan vote. Chairman GRASSLEY, to his credit, voted for it, and now we have an urgent reason to consider it on the floor. If the majority leader refuses to give it the vote it deserves, the Democrats will push to include it on the must-pass spending bill that we must approve in the next few weeks.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority leader is recognized.

BUSINESS BEFORE THE SENATE

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, with the Thanksgiving holiday behind us, we are reminded that this year and this Congress will soon come to a close. The past few years have been a time of historic accomplishments on behalf of the American people: historic tax and regulatory reform, landmark legislation to combat the opioid epidemic, a return to regular order appropriations, much needed reforms and resources for our men and women who wear the uniform today and for our veterans. The list goes on and on.

As the 115th Congress comes to a close, my colleagues will have much—much, indeed—to be proud of. But we aren't finished yet. The Senate still has a full plate of important business that we must complete before the end of the year.

At the top of the list are more nominations—well-qualified individuals that the President has chosen for executive and judicial service. Since the beginning of this Congress, the majority has taken the Senate's role in the personnel business very seriously. We have taken the opportunity to process nominations efficiently and fulfill our responsibility to advise and consent.

Of course, thanks to a concerted delaying effort from our colleagues across the aisle, a number of important offices remain unfilled. Accomplished nominees have waited patiently on the Senate calendar. Important posts have remained vacant while my colleagues on the other side of the aisle slow-walk nominations and force a record-breaking number of cloture votes.

We are 2 years into this administration. The President deserves his team, and our constituents deserve the government they voted for. So, as we have this entire Congress, we will continue to make nominations a top priority for as long as need be.

The nominees we will consider this week are highly regarded and well equipped for public service. We will begin with Stephen Vaden, who has been nominated to serve as General Counsel at the Department of Agriculture. Mr. Vaden is a graduate of Vanderbilt and Yale Law School. He brings experience from multiple Federal court clerkships and from years in practice in administrative law and appellate litigation.

This nominee was voted out of the Agriculture Committee with bipartisan support, including that of the ranking member. So I urge each of my colleagues to join me in voting to advance Mr. Vaden's nomination this afternoon and to confirm him this week.

Then we will turn to more nominations for the Department of Commerce, for the Federal judiciary, and for the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. I look forward to confirming each of them without undue delay.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mrs. ERNST). The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

FAREWELL TO THE SENATE

Mr. NELSON. Madam President, I intend to be giving a number of speeches over the course of the next couple of weeks to comment on various matters on which I have had the privilege of working.

I want to say, with regard to the election, that things turned out a little differently than Grace and I had expected, but let me say that I have been very, very blessed. That is because I have had the privilege of serving the people of Florida and our country for most of my life, and I don't think anyone could have been more honored by having a lifetime of public service. I was not victorious in this race, but I still wish to strongly reaffirm the cause for which we fought: A public office is a public trust.

First, I want to say thanks to all who have rallied to our cause, both here in the Senate and in Florida. You knocked on the doors, you walked the precincts, you made the phone calls, and you contributed your time and your resources. With an optimistic heart, I wish to say something else: We may have been heavily outspent, but we were never outworked.

To all Floridians, I say to you this, whether you voted for me or for my opponent or you didn't vote at all: I ask that you never give up this fight. A public office is a public trust, and there are a lot of other things that fall under that category of public trust.

You must fight to protect the fundamental right to healthcare and against any attempt to roll back our progress on things like preexisting conditions. Most everybody has a preexisting condition. If it is not required that an insurance company cover you, then either your rate is prohibitively high or else you don't get coverage at all. Out of the 20 million people in the State of Florida, 8 million people have a preexisting condition.

You must continue the fight to preserve the natural wonders of our State, from the Everglades to the pine forests and to the beaches and the offshore waters. Say no to drilling off our coast—not one rig off of our coastline—not only for the sake of our environment but for the sake of our tourism economy and for the sake of the largest military testing and training area for the U.S. military in the world right off of our coast.

As a country, we need to continue to launch rockets and to explore the heavens. I have seen the blue brilliance of the Earth from the edge of the heavens, and I will fight on to save this planet, our homes, and our cities from the spreading plague of greenhouse gases

that infect our atmosphere, play havoc with our weather, and risk the planet our children and grandchildren will inherit.

Every single one of us needs to keep fighting to strengthen Social Security and Medicare for the generations that are yet to come. It is your Medicare. It is your Social Security. You pay into these programs. They belong to you and not to the politicians who are plotting to rob you of your retirement.

I will continue to fight on and on for the inalienable human rights that are the soul and glory of the American experiment: civil rights, women's rights, LGBT rights, and the sacred right to vote. We must end all forms of voter suppression, make it easier for Americans to vote, and honor the ideal that we are governed by the majority and not by minority rule.

There are great decisions ahead that will shape the course and character of America in the 21st century. Yes, I will continue to fight—and to fight hard—for what is right. I will also encourage others to seek common ground with their colleagues and the other side of the aisle. Inevitably, at times that effort will fall short, but we have to try. We have to move beyond a politics that aims not just to defeat but to destroy, where truth is treated as disposable, where falsehoods abound and the free press is assaulted as the enemy of the people.

Whether an institution such as this Congress will be effective in the future depends on whether the people who make up this institution can get along, where we retreat from the tribalism that has captured American politics and where men and women of good will can come together. As the Good Book says, “come now, and let us reason together.”

There has been a gathering darkness in our politics in recent years. My hope today can be found in the words of John F. Kennedy, who said civility “can guide us through that darkness to a safe and sane future.”

Thank you all for the privilege of a lifetime of public service. God bless you, and God bless our country.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Georgia.

Mr. ISAKSON. Madam President, I wish to address the Senator before he leaves.

I represent the great State of Georgia, which is north of the great State of Florida. I have had the pleasure of serving with this Senator for a long time in a lot of capacities. He has made a huge contribution to his State and to his country. We worked together on a lot of other interests, like the Prayer Breakfast in the Senate and many other things like that.

I want to commend the Senator for his speech, commend him for his remarks, and commend him for his lovely wife, amazing Grace, whom I love very much. I thank the Senator very much for his service to the people of the

State of Florida and the United States of America. May God bless him.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Tennessee.

NOMINATION OF STEPHEN ALEXANDER VADEN

Mr. CORKER. Madam President, I rise today to speak in support of Stephen Vaden to be the next General Counsel of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. I know this is a position that you care about deeply as the Presiding Officer. Having been brought up and worked on a family farm that has operated for generations in West Tennessee, Stephen has critical insights into the issues facing the agriculture community. His experience in law and understanding the needs of farmers will be an important asset at the USDA and in Congress's work to help rural America prosper and grow.

Under Stephen's tenure as Acting General Counsel since March of last year, the Office of General Counsel has promoted Department accountability and improved its responsiveness to civil rights issues, and it is my belief that Stephen will continue to do so once confirmed.

I am pleased to see that the Senate is acting on Stephen's nomination, and I urge my colleagues to support his confirmation.

With that, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Tennessee.

Mr. ALEXANDER. Madam President, within a few minutes, the Senate will vote on ending debate on the nomination of Stephen Vaden to be the General Counsel of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. I am glad to see that. I am here to strongly support Mr. Vaden and urge my colleagues to support him.

Stephen Vaden grew up on a family farm in Union City, TN, way out in the west end of our State, and he has some academic credentials for this job which are also very strong. He attended Vanderbilt University and Yale Law School. He has had two strong mentors—Judge Julia Gibbons of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, who was once my counsel when I was Governor of Tennessee, and Judge Hardy Mays of the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Tennessee. He practiced with two distinguished law firms in Washington, DC. He has hands-on academic credentials. He has hands-on farming credentials. He has a strong background in legal training.

Mr. Vaden has the strong support of his Congressman, Mr. DAVID KUSTOFF from West Tennessee. This is Davy Crockett's old congressional district in Tennessee.

Tennessee Farm Bureau President Jeff Aiken said that Mr. Vaden “has a passion for agriculture that can't be taught but is necessary” for the job of General Counsel.

Secretary Perdue, Agriculture Secretary, said that Mr. Vaden “has a firm grasp of the legal issues facing American agriculture, and very importantly, understands the breadth and complexity of the regulatory burdens