

were denied their blue-slip rights, which have traditionally been given to them in the Senate. That broke the precedent last week and continues this week. The Republican Senate leadership will break every rule, every precedent—whatever is necessary—to fill these vacancies. Without blue slips, the White House can ignore home State interests and pick extreme judges like the ones before us this week.

It pains me to watch my Republican colleagues systematically dismantling guardrail after guardrail in the judicial nomination process, all for the sake of stuffing the court with their ideologues. The nomination process in the Senate is breaking down before our eyes. Our ability to fulfill our constitutional responsibility to advise and consent is diminished under the Constitution we have all sworn to uphold and defend. That is a shameful chapter in the history of the Senate.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Oklahoma.

GOVERNMENT FUNDING

Mr. LANKFORD. Mr. President, the number 22 trillion should matter to us. That is our current debt in the United States. Not to be confused, we have debts, and we have deficits. You will hear those names get thrown around together. Deficit is the amount of overspending in a single year—1 year of overspending—and debt is the collection of all of those deficits.

As a nation, our current debt is \$22 trillion. To give some perspective on 22 trillion, if you were to take the total distance of 22 trillion miles, you would have to fly from Earth to Pluto and back 3,081 times to get to 22 trillion miles. This is heavy debt.

We are used to hearing about debts and deficits in relationship to things like home mortgages. Many of us think about taking 30 years to pay off our mortgage. Well, for us to pay off our national mortgage, this \$22 trillion—if we were to balance our budget, which is way out of balance right now, and then have a \$100 billion surplus—so let's say that by next year, we have a balanced budget and a \$100 billion surplus. That would be a very large surplus for us. How many years of \$100 billion surpluses in total revenue would it take to pay off \$22 trillion? The quick math on that is 220 years. That is approximately as long as we have been a republic. If we had a \$100 billion surplus every single year for the next 220 years, we could pay off our mortgage. Does anyone think that every single year over the next 220 years, we are going to both balance our budget and have a \$100 billion surplus?

The issue we face as a nation is that we have fumbled a lot in our past. We fumbled our spending. We fumbled our handling of Federal tax dollars. We have to work our way out of this. Climbing out of this is not going to be a 1-year deal. This is not a short-term fix; this is an intentionally long-term fix.

There are two things we have to have. We have to have economic growth. If our economy is stagnant, we never catch up. The reason for that is, when the economy is stagnant, more people in our Nation need assistance. They need housing support. They need food support. They need other things to help them in those scarce times. Unemployment benefits go up significantly during the time period that our economy is down because people can't find jobs and our safety net kicks in larger amounts.

When we have economic growth, fewer people need housing assistance, fewer people need food assistance, and fewer people receive unemployment benefits. The economy itself grows. As more people have jobs and make money, more people pay taxes. So economic growth is essential to the growth of our economy and to working our way out of debt. That is why the tax reform bill was so incredibly important to us—to get a growing economy again. Our economy had been stagnant for a decade. We would literally have never gotten out of it if we had stayed in a stagnant economy.

Folks called me and said: When the tax revenue changed, when the tax reform bill happened, it also blew a hole in the budget. I have had folks throw all kinds of numbers around and say this is the giant hole that is in the budget.

Interestingly enough, we are now a fiscal year through. Our revenue for fiscal year 2017—the year before the tax reform—was \$3.315 trillion. Our revenue after the tax cut and the tax reform, for fiscal year 2018, is \$3.329 trillion. If you are doing the math in your head, that is \$14 billion more in revenue after the tax cuts. That means our revenue went up the next year.

Contrary to all the myths that were out there early on saying we were going to have this giant hole in the budget, our revenue went up after the tax cuts went into place. Why? More people had more money to invest. More people invested. As they invested, as they engaged in the economy, as they had more money in their pockets, they bought more products, and that stimulated more profits. That meant people got paid more. In this past year of our economy, wages have gone up—especially wages for the lowest income Americans. Their wages have gone up. Unemployment has come down. More people have a job. There are more opportunities to get a different job.

All those things are great benefits, but that doesn't solve \$22 trillion in debt. We need to have economic growth, but economic growth by itself is never going to solve the issue. We also have to deal with our spending and our plans.

Each year for the last 4 years, my office has released something we call “Federal Fumbles.” It is ways we believe the Federal Government has dropped the ball. Each year, we take on different areas. Over the last 4 years,

we identified over \$800 billion in ways that we could save Federal tax dollars. For the specific problems we laid out, there is a solution. If we want to try to start attacking some of these things, here is a proposal. Our goal from our office is very simple: We believe all 100 offices should be looking for ways to save Federal tax dollars. We believe everyone should look for ways to be more efficient. What we are doing is not unique to our team; every team can do it. In fact, we believe that everyone wants to see the debt and deficit go down, but now there is the next step of actually identifying how to do it.

In the last 4 years, we have identified \$800 billion in ways to save Federal tax dollars. That is a start. That is a beginning point of how to actually get us there. That would get us back to balancing our budget, but we still have a ways to go to get to a surplus and paying off our debt and deficit.

We just released our “Federal Fumbles” report. It is actually out today online. People from any office or anyplace can go to lankford.senate.gov and download the free report. This report is a little bit different for us. We want to identify the major problems we have not only in overspending and blowing our deficit, but we want to identify ways that we are actually being inefficient in how we operate. We begin by talking about government shutdowns, as I think we should begin with. We just experienced the longest government shutdown in American history. It is not the first by far. People have short memories when they forget the government shutdowns that happened during the Carter administration, the three times Tip O’Neill shut down the government on President Reagan in the 1980s, or the multiple shutdowns that occurred on almost every Presidency in the modern day. But that is not solving the problems we have.

Last year, eight Republicans and eight Democrats met almost the entire year and talked about how to reform the budget process. I am a firm believer that we will never solve the problem with our budgeting until we solve the problem with how we do budgeting. We don’t budget in a way that actually determines more efficient spending. We determine how to spend more but not how to spend less. That is an issue we have to solve.

The 1974 Budget Act has only worked four times since it was written in 1974. It is not gospel. It is not the Constitution. It needs to be redone. There are proposals we put into place specifically on how we can fix the budgeting process. Again, until we get a better budget process, we will never get a better budget product. We identified some simple things—how we can do a 2-year budgeting system; how we can avoid government shutdowns. There are simple solutions we put into place that I think would actually be effective.

We released a bipartisan bill in the last couple of days on ending government shutdowns that I hope we can actually get momentum toward and solve the issue of government shutdowns.

We deal with the issue of the President's budget—not just this President's but every President's budgets. It has been a problem. There has never been a time since the 1974 Budget Act that the President's budget has ever been implemented. It is an informational document. Let's turn it into what it should be.

Let's figure out how we can start reducing our deficit. We have 12 bills we put out every single year for spending. There is no mandatory bill for savings. As simple as this sounds, why don't we add a 13th bill to our appropriations process? There would be 12 bills that are designed for spending and 1 that is designed for savings. For every single Congress, there would have to be a savings bill. Now, that Congress can choose how much it wants to save, but every single Congress would have a mandatory savings bill to figure out what it is going to do to actually pull our deficits back. With our being \$22 trillion in debt, I don't anticipate anytime soon that we are not going to need that 13th bill.

We could do this. We could fix the way we actually make the law regarding the budget, which currently is not law but is a suggestion made by Congress that has been blown past every single year. There are all kinds of budget games that are out there that make the budget actually look better than it is. Some of them are great, cute names, like CHIMPS, or Changes in Mandatory Program Spending. They sound adorable, but what they actually do is to make the budget look like it is closer to balancing when it is actually even further from balancing but has a budget gimmick. We need to end some of those.

We lay out proposals on how to resolve the debt ceiling. Process reforms will make a big difference in our being able to get on top of the big issue. They may not be exciting and they may not be headline-grabbing, but until we fix these things as a body, they are never going to get better.

We deal with Senate rules on how we are actually going to work together to solve these issues. The Senate has stopped working together on a lot of these things. So we lay out some of the internal aspects as to how to solve them. We lay out some bills that are out there that we have proposed. One is called the Taxpayers Right-To-Know Act.

We don't have great transparency in our spending. If taxpayers wanted to find out how many government programs there were that were similar in function, they couldn't find out. The hard part is, as Congress, we can't find out either. The only way that we can get a programmatic list or get the details of different programs from different Agencies is to make the request

through an entity called the GAO. Usually, between 12 and 18 months later, it will give us back a report just to say what programs are out there and what those programs do.

I have met multiple times with the director of the GAO regarding a bill proposal called the Taxpayers Right-To-Know Act, a bill that passed unanimously in the House of Representatives during the last session. Then it came to the Senate and stalled. This bill does something very simple. It tells lawmakers and taxpayers what their government actually does. It is not trying to hide anything. It is trying to list every program that we have and how much we spend on that program. If it is evaluated, how is it evaluated? How many employees are dedicated to it? There is no gimmick to it. It is just that simple. It is transparency. The great gift to our democracy is transparency in how we spend dollars.

Just this basic bill would allow every single person in the country to ask questions of its government. Why do we have four programs that seem to do the same thing? Why do we have 18 programs in another area and 16 different entities that seem to do something similar? Why can't we combine that? Why can't we crowd-source ideas? The reason is that we don't put transparent information out. We could crowd-source the ideas of how to fix our government if only we allowed the taxpayers to see their government. The Taxpayers Right-To-Know Act allows us to do that.

We deal with our grant reforms. It is one of the areas in which we have pushed pretty hard in the last several "Federal Fumbles" books, but we lay out a set of ideas. There is a bill called the GREAT Act, which passed in the last House of Representatives overwhelmingly. By the way, the House of Representatives in this session, led by the Democrats, has also passed the GREAT Act and has sent it over to us in order to reform the grant process and how that information gets out. Now, it is a first step in getting information. I think there are more, but it is a great first step for that.

Grants always seem to be our issue. Some \$600 billion a year is spent by the Federal Government just on grants. There is a great need for greater transparency in that. Some grants are very large, and some of them are small. We can't figure out why we do some of them at all as Federal taxpayers. For instance, last year, the National Endowment for the Humanities gave a grant to a California professor to use Federal tax dollars to study Soviet winemaking—not current Russian winemaking with Federal grant dollars but historic Soviet winemaking.

Now, I can kind of understand why California winemakers may want to do a study of Soviet winemaking for some reason, but why are Federal taxpayers being asked to pay for a study on Soviet winemaking? Yet we did.

Since 2001, we have given a Federal grant for a mariachi program in Cali-

fornia. Now, I kind of understand how a successful mariachi program that works with children and youths may be something we would do for a couple of years to get it started as a community program. That makes total sense. Yet we have done it every year since 2001. At some point, shouldn't the local entities pick that up? Why is that a Federal program that has to be done year after year after year?

The grant issues don't have a lot of transparency, and there is a reason for that. It is that people don't want to be seen. They don't want anyone to know that the program is out there. We want just to ask a simple question. Let's do the grants, but let's make sure they line up with Federal priorities. Let's make sure they actually line up with strategic things that actually help our economy and help expand our Nation and protect our national security.

There are basic things that we can do, and we lay some of those things out. We lay out some questions that we think are practical questions on renewable fuel and, in particular, on ethanol. The ethanol program was designed to reduce emissions, but when it was designed to reduce emissions, it also grandfathered in all of the entities at that time that had produced ethanol, and none of those were required to reduce emissions—only new ones.

What has happened? Practically no new ones have come on board because it is a lot more expensive to limit emissions than it is to be an old facility that doesn't limit emissions. You can't be competitive in limiting emissions. So really what the ethanol mandate does is to protect the old ethanol companies to make sure they never get competition. As a Congress, why aren't we looking at that?

If you are not in the Midwest, you pay more at the gas pump every time you fill up because of the ethanol. If you are in the Midwest, it may be a little cheaper for you, but if you are on the east or the west coast, your gas prices are higher because of the ethanol mandate. Are you happy with that? As a government, we need to look at that. We think it is a legitimate question to ask about not only our debt and deficit but just about basic consumer spending for our GDP and the growth of our economy.

We deal with a lot of issues with regard to the Federal workforce. We deal with regulatory reform. We walk through some of the hardest issues about how we are taking care of our veterans and what is happening with regard to taking care of things like healthcare and transitioning them into vocational work. We feel it is important.

We have dug into small programs—for instance, an IT development program for veterans in Muskogee, OK—because if you are in the veterans service center in Muskogee, which is one of the largest veteran service centers in the country, you handle a lot of different documents. As you go through

that process for those great employees who are there—and there are really some solid people who are there—they have to log in multiple times and use a whole list of workarounds in their system, which gets bogged down. Each employee there spends 45 minutes a day just going through the logistics of logging in and changing around the system to make it work. There are 45 minutes a day of lost productivity for every single person there.

The good news is that Congress allocated \$30 million to fix the IT problems there. The bad news is that the problems are still there. So we are asking the simple question: Where did that money go? How come the problem wasn't fixed?

We can go on and on with regard to these issues. In page after page, we have tried to lay out sets of solutions—things that we see as problems and inefficiencies in the way our government is working and in the way our Congress is working—and establish what can be done. Our goal is simple. Laying out “Federal Fumbles” is a to-do list for us. This is what we are working on right now along with a lot of other issues.

We encourage every office to glance through it. Ask your staff members to glance through and see the things that they are working on in their offices, and see if we are not laying out some ideas. Let's find ways to work together. Of all of the things to agree on, we should be able to agree that our \$22 trillion of debt needs to be addressed. Let's strategize as to how we are going to solve it. Let's find ways that our government is inefficient and find ways to fix it.

Let me give you one more number.

We met in a bipartisan group last year—eight Republicans and eight Democrats—and tried to solve this issue on budgeting. Unfortunately, it was unsuccessful. Those with the Congressional Budget Office visited with us, and we asked them a very specific question as to our current level of debt. If we were to just try to stay at our current level of debt—not grow any more, not get any worse—how much would we have to tax or cut? Their response was \$400 billion a year, every year, for the next 30 years. To just not make the problem worse, we have to either tax more or cut \$400 billion a year, every year, for the next 30 years to keep it from getting worse. That is because, as the CBO stated, Federal outlays, which is how we are spending, are projected to climb from 20.8 percent of the GDP in 2019 to 23 percent by 2029.

The aging of the population and the rising healthcare costs contribute significantly to the growth of spending for the major benefit programs, such as Social Security and Medicare, and the rising debt and higher interest rates drive up the Federal Government's net interest cost.

We have reached a tipping point in interest. Last year, our interest payments were \$325 billion just in the in-

terest on our debt. The CBO estimates that within 10 years our interest payments alone will be \$928 billion. We have crossed over that tipping point we talked about before. Now, just to stay at the status quo, because of the rising interest rates and interest payments, we have to find \$400 billion a year, every year, in new taxes or new cuts.

We are fumbling on the biggest issue that Americans have handed us. It affects our national security. It affects the future of our children. It affects how we take care of those who are in poverty. It affects those who are in the most vulnerable moments of life. It affects those with disabilities, and it affects our transportation.

We have to have a real dialogue about this. We are doing our part. We are trying to get the word out. Let's have a dialogue and together figure out what we can do next in order to solve this because none of us have plans for a \$400 billion cut next year. That means that next year it will again get worse, and it will keep getting worse until we solve it.

I yield the floor.

THE PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Connecticut.

MR. MURPHY. Mr. President, I appreciate the remarks of my good friend, the Senator from Oklahoma. I look forward to working with him on ways that we can try to come together and solve some of these big problems.

In a minute, I am going to talk about the Affordable Care Act, which is probably the signature accomplishment of a Democratic Senate and Congress. It is notable that the Affordable Care Act, for all of its controversy, reduced the deficit. It did not increase the deficit. It is also notable that the signature accomplishment of the Republican Congress and the Republican Senate was a tax reduction bill that has dramatically spiraled the deficit out of control. There is \$2 trillion of additional deficits in that provision.

I share the concerns about the deficit, and I find it curious that this Congress, under Republican control, has chosen to dramatically increase deficits, making us on pace for having the biggest deficits in our legislative history—with enormous additional new elements of debt as well.

NOMINATION OF CHAD A. READLER

Mr. President, I am here, though, to talk about the Affordable Care Act.

One of the things we talk a lot about here on the Senate floor is of our mutual concern for people with preexisting conditions. These are the 130 million Americans who are sick or who have histories of sickness. If you were to listen to both sides of the aisle, you would believe that everyone is on board with the idea that we should provide protections to individuals who are sick or who have ever been sick.

Yet actions do not meet words when it comes down to it in the U.S. Senate.

Over the last 2 years, my Republican colleagues have spared no expense or effort to try to strip away protections

for those individuals with preexisting conditions that were in the Affordable Care Act. The repeal of the Affordable Care Act is the most obvious example of that.

This week, we will have a rare opportunity to take an up-or-down vote on this issue of whether we support keeping protections for people with preexisting conditions in this country. The reason for that is, we are going to vote on a nominee to the Sixth Circuit Court who orchestrated—who directed—the Department of Justice's attempts to take away protections for people with preexisting conditions through the court process.

Chad Readler filed a brief in a case brought by State attorneys general—all of them Republicans—to strike from the Affordable Care Act the protection for people with preexisting conditions.

Normally, when State attorneys general come after the constitutionality of a statute, whether those are Republican or Democratic attorneys general, the administration, whether it be a Republican or Democratic administration, defends the constitutionality of the statute.

This was an exceptional case in which these Republican attorneys general were trying to take away protections for people with preexisting conditions, saying the ACA was unconstitutional, and an Assistant Attorney General by the name of Chad Readler stood up and volunteered to file a brief alleging that, in fact, the attorneys general were right—a rare, almost completely unprecedented example of the Department of Justice arguing against the constitutionality of a statute that had been passed by the Congress and signed by the President.

Interestingly, before Chad Readler decided to file that brief, others at the Department of Justice refused. In fact, one lawyer left the Department of Justice because he wouldn't put his name on something so absurd as the brief Chad Readler filed.

I am not the only person who thinks the arguments in his brief trying to strike down those protections for people with preexisting conditions was absurd. In fact, Senator ALEXANDER read Readler's brief and said the arguments in it were “as far-fetched as any I have ever heard.” That is a Republican Senator.

Now, the consequences of the judge following the recommendations of Chad Readler were catastrophic. In fact, the judge struck down the Affordable Care Act. That order has been held in abeyance temporarily, but the consequences of the Readler brief would be that 133 million Americans would lose their protections from higher rates because they were sick or had been sick. The 20 million people who had insurance would lose it virtually overnight.

Admittedly, the Readler brief didn't agree with every single element of the lawsuit of the attorneys general but enough of it such that it was very clear