

used to say: “I’d rather see a sermon than hear one any day.” Think about that. “I’d rather see a sermon than hear one any day.”

Chris Slutman, your life was better than any sermon.

Chris demonstrated the absolute best of our country every day with his heroism and his service to others. The way he lived his life and the way he gave his life is a language that is clear to one and all.

It is with a heavy heart that I, along with the entire First State—that is the State of Delaware—and the people of this country, offer our sincere condolences to Chris’s wife, Shannon, and their three girls. Their dad is an American hero.

Our congressional delegation and our Governor promise that he will not soon be forgotten.

I know that his legacy lives on in his daughters and in his wife Shannon.

A friend of mine was married to a Navy SEAL a number of years ago. That marriage produced a daughter who is 18 years old and who will graduate from high school later this month. Her dad died of complications of PTSD. He served in Iraq and Afghanistan, as I recall. He later came down with ALS, Lou Gehrig’s disease. He succumbed to that about a year ago. Members of my staff in Delaware—constituent service staff—have worked for months trying to make sure that his 18-year-old daughter would be eligible for the benefits of her Navy SEAL dad, now deceased. We learned last month that she will be eligible.

One of the things our congressional delegation will work hard to do is to make sure that to the extent that Chris Slutman was eligible for the GI bill—and our guess is that he was—those benefits, under the law, if not used by the veteran, by the soldier, by the sailor, or by the airman, could be used by the spouse, and if not used by the spouse, could be used by a dependent child.

There are three dependent children here—three daughters who are beautiful girls, who anyone would be proud to claim as their own child, grandchild, or niece. We are going to work hard to make sure that those GI bill benefits—if there is any way to do this legally—accrue to Chris and Shannon and Shannon’s three daughters.

I, again, thank my friend Senator PORTMAN for his kindness in yielding tonight.

To Chris Slutman: God bless you, Chris.

Thank you.

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Ohio.

#### ECONOMIC GROWTH

Mr. PORTMAN. Mr. President, first, I say thanks to my colleague from Delaware for the touching tribute to Chris and his service in the U.S. Navy.

I am here to talk about our economy, what is going on out there, and how we can do a better job of bringing people

off the sidelines and into work. They are needed.

Right now we have an incredibly strong economy. We just learned in the first quarter of this year that the economy grew by 3.2 percent. That is strong and way above expectations. In fact, when you look at the expectations that were set by the Congressional Budget Office, which is a nonpartisan group that analyzes what is going to happen in the economy going forward, prior to the tax bill being signed into law—that is, the tax reform and tax cuts from the end of 2017—they said this first quarter growth would be 1.6 percent. It is interesting. It was exactly twice the economic growth than was projected before the tax bill.

By the way, before the tax bill, they also made a projection on jobs. Over the last year, we have produced just about exactly twice as many jobs—a little more than that—than was projected. The tax cuts and the tax reform have worked, along with regulatory relief, to give this economy a shot in the arm. That is so important.

I will say that when you look at what happened in the first quarter of this year, the 3.2 percent is great, but it would have been even better had we not shut down the government. I say that because we have some new numbers from the Congressional Budget Office that say that the level of GDP this first quarter would have been 0.2 percent more if we had not had the government shutdown late last year, which was the longest government shutdown in the history of our country. So it would have been 3.6 percent instead of 3.2 percent. Wow, that would be terrific. I guess I bring that up only because I think it is time for us, again, to prepare for the potential of our having another impasse year at the end of this fiscal year on September 30. I hope we will avoid going into another government shutdown. It just doesn’t make sense. It is shooting ourselves in the foot.

There is legislation called the End Government Shutdowns Act. Almost all of my colleagues on this side of the aisle have now sponsored that legislation. It just avoids our going into a shutdown but still allows us to continue to move forward on our spending and, over time, reduce that spending until we get our act together and do the appropriations bills here. Again, there is good news in terms of job growth in the first quarter.

The other thing I think is really important and may be the most important statistic of all is the fact that wages are going up for the first time in a decade. Really, in Ohio, for a decade and a half, we have had flat wages—higher expenses but flat wages. It is really frustrating to the families who are working hard and doing everything right but can’t get ahead. Over the last year now, we have seen wage increases. A 3.4-percent wage increase is the strongest we have seen since the great recession. I love the fact that this wage

growth is happening not just among higher paid individuals but, actually, primarily among what is called non-supervisory employees. That is how the Department of Labor terms it. These are blue-collar jobs. These are middle-class jobs. These are jobs of people who, again, have had a tough time making ends meet. I know in my State most people work paycheck to paycheck, and it is great to have that higher wage come in.

We passed tax reform because we believed it is the right thing to do for our economy, for employers, for investment, and we have seen that positive impact. I have had over two dozen townhall meetings and roundtable discussions in my State, talking to employers, usually smaller businesses, about what happened to them with regard to tax reform. Every single one of them said the same thing: We have reinvested in the business. We have invested in technology, in new equipment, and we have invested in our people. In some cases, that means better benefits. In two cases, small businesses acknowledged to me that they weren’t providing healthcare before the tax cuts, and now they are because of the savings from the tax cut. They have also invested in people’s 401(k)s and other benefits. That is what is happening out there in terms of the business side of the tax reform and tax cuts.

In addition to that, there are also a lot of Americans who now have more of their hard-earned money coming home. Their paychecks are better because of the middle-class tax cuts that are in the legislation. For Ohio, this amounted to \$2,000 per year, on average, for a median-income family. I know there has been a lot of discussion by others saying: Well, really, these tax cuts didn’t happen. Yes, they did. They did. That is a fact. Most people I represent have seen a tax cut, and a lot of those individuals saw their overall tax liability go down—not just that the monthly checks were better, but on April 15 they had better news. Let me give you some facts about that.

According to H&R Block, which is probably the firm that handles more middle-class tax returns than any other firm in the country, the average Ohioan saw a 23.3-percent decrease in their overall tax bill in 2018. This is from H&R Block. They also said that there is a 2.3-percent increase in the average refund in Ohio. I know there has been a lot of discussion about this back and forth, and early on people were concerned about their refunds. These are the numbers. These are the facts from H&R Block. Overall, about 90 percent of middle-class Americans received a tax cut in 2018, which means more money in their pockets to pay down student debt, to save for retirement, to take a long-awaited family vacation, and to be able to, again, achieve whatever their dream is in life.

The economy is growing, creating jobs, and wages are rising. That is all

good news. But with more jobs there is a problem that has developed, and that is a lack of workers. I can't go anywhere in Ohio—and I just had a bunch of meetings in Ohio, talking about this—where people don't tell me: We don't have enough qualified workers to fill the jobs that we have. Some people call it the skills gap, and that is true in Ohio. We have a mismatch between the skills that are out there—the skills that people who are looking for jobs have—and the jobs that are available. If you go on the OhioMeansJobs website right now, you will see about 145,000 jobs being offered. When you look at them, these are good jobs. A lot of them, though, require a certain level of skill. Some are information technology jobs, coding jobs. Some are skilled manufacturing jobs, like machining or welding. Some of the jobs are in bioscience, healthcare jobs, technicians. The problem is we don't have the people who have the skills to fill those jobs. That is a shame for those individuals who aren't achieving their hopes in life because they aren't getting those good jobs and certainly for our economy, which would be even stronger if we had more people to fill those jobs.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics at the Department of Labor, 7.3 million U.S. jobs are currently vacant, again, largely because of the shortage of qualified workers. The National Skills Coalition estimates that nearly half of all job openings between now and 2022 will be what they call middle-skill jobs. This means jobs that require education beyond high school, like a certificate program, but not a 4-year degree. The supply of skilled workers in this category—students pursuing post high school certifications—still falls way short of what the industry demand is.

This is why career and technical education is important. CTE is part of the answer to this. If you are in high school and looking for an opportunity, check out your career and technical academy. In many high schools, it is combined in one CTE program. It is a great opportunity. It will give you the knowledge and training necessary to succeed in your career.

I am the cofounder and the cochair of what is called the Senate CTE Caucus. We have been working to raise awareness of this issue, so many of my colleagues have now joined this caucus because they go home and see the same thing. How do we connect our hard-working Ohioans to good-paying jobs, and how do we strengthen these CTE programs to make them more affordable and more accessible?

One answer is legislation recently reintroduced by Senator TIM Kaine and me. It is called the JOBS Act. It is really very simple. It says we should be allowed to use Pell grants not just to pay for college but to pay for shorter term certificate programs. These have to be qualified programs, programs that provide real credentials to people.

Right now, with the Pell grant, if it is a program of less than 15 weeks, you can't use it. So low-income students all over the country are told: You can go to college. That is great. We are going to encourage you to do that, incentivize you to do that, but you can't get this short-term training program that can get you the job right away.

In Ohio, if those students graduate—and most don't—their average debt is \$27,000 compared, again, to the opportunity to go through the short-term training program, get the job, and begin to make money to buy the car, to be able to buy a small home or at least to rent an apartment and not be in your parents' basement, and to be able to move ahead with your life and your family. So career and technical education is a great opportunity, and the JOBS Act would make it much more likely that people would take that opportunity.

By the way, the community colleges around the country love the JOBS Act. I believe it is their top priority this year. Why? Because so many of them are now offering these certificate-based programs because they are responding to the needs of the community and what the businesses are telling them they need.

It is going to be different in every community, by the way, and that is good. There is no "one size fits all." In some communities in Ohio, because we are a big manufacturing State, it is welding, and it is machining. In other places around the country, it might be something else. It might be for the fishing industry, the oil and gas industry, or bioscience. All across Ohio I have seen how these programs are working and could work even better if we had the JOBS Act.

Last week I toured Venture Products. It is a family-owned company that designs and makes tractors. They make an incredible product called the Ventrac. They have a really impressive facility, and it was great to see them and their success. The company has benefited from tax reform and has made additional investments in its business and its workers with their tax savings, just like all of these companies that I have gone to visit all over our State.

After the tour of the company, we had a roundtable discussion. It was with educators—people from the local community college and career and technical education folks who came in—also business people and people from the area who were involved in economic development because they are very concerned that without the workforce they can't expand the businesses in this community in Ohio. We talked about the need to strengthen CTE programs, and we talked about the JOBS Act. All of them agreed that this would be really helpful and helpful right now.

I also had a visit at the Central Ohio Technical College. The investiture

ceremony took place last Thursday, and I had the chance to meet the new president, Dr. John Berry. There are a lot of exciting things happening at this career and technical college.

They work pretty closely with Ohio State, which is terrific. So you have Ohio State, a 4-year college, and a great series of graduate programs, working directly with these community colleges that focus on skills training. They are expanding their programming, which will help to meet the needs of today's workforce. The JOBS Act, according to them, will greatly benefit the students who are using these shorter term programs to put them on a path to a good-paying job.

In Walnut Creek, OH, I spoke at the Eastern Ohio Development Alliance's annual meeting in Hockley County. This meeting represented counties from all over eastern and southeastern Ohio. We talked about a lot of things, including the shortage of skilled workers, because it comes up again and again. In this case, Ohio has this wonderful opportunity with the Marcellus and the Utica Shale finds to develop our natural gas and our wet gas and our oil industry, but they need workers. We don't want to have workers coming in from out of State, frankly. We want to develop our own Ohio workforce, and we can only do that with skills training because a lot of these jobs require skills that are not available in Ohio today.

In Columbus, last week I spoke at a reentry conference. This is an annual conference talking about how to get people going from prison into our communities with the job skills they need and the mental health and drug treatment they need to be successful. Again, it all came down to this issue of workforce training being so important, both because it helps people to get a job and not go back into the prison system and also because getting a job is an essential part of so many successful recovery programs for people who have drug and alcohol addiction and want to be able to participate in our economy. This gives them meaning and purpose in life and helps with their recovery.

I was in Knox County at a roundtable discussion. Again, in this case, it was with first responders, local elected officials, and the leadership of their mental health and recovery organization there. Their board there is focused on dealing with the crystal meth problem. It has almost pushed the opioid problem to the second most troubling drug problem in the community. They still have overdoses from opioids. They are still concerned about that. Crystal meth has now come in with a vengeance—pure crystal meth from Mexico. Their big issue is how to get people in recovery and successful recovery. Again, the issue of job training came up. How do you give people the skills they need to get a job, and how do you incorporate job skills in a recovery program, again, so people have a reason to turn their life around to get

back with their family. That purpose and meaning come from a job, so often.

So it was an opportunity to talk about the need for us to develop the workforce to meet the needs of our communities and the opportunity to talk about the need for the JOBS Act. I am really pleased that the JOBS Act is in the President's budget this year. I thank President Trump and his administration for including that. It makes all the sense in the world. The higher education bill will be reauthorized this year, we all hope. That is certainly the plan. If that happens, it is the perfect place for having the JOBS Act included.

Senator Kaine of Virginia and I are the coauthors of this legislation. We are hopeful that our colleagues on both sides of the aisle will join us in this legislation and help us to get it in the Higher Education Act. I know that it is a priority of many members of that committee, and Chairman Alexander, in particular, has a passion for ensuring that we have the training we need out there to get people the jobs to let them achieve their dreams in life.

Passing the JOBS Act will give us an opportunity to help so many Americans have better opportunities, and, just as importantly, it would enable us to help our economy right now because the biggest concern I hear is no longer the taxes. People love the tax cuts and tax reform, and they love the regulatory relief, but they are looking for skilled workers. This is an opportunity. Let's seize it. Let's keep growing our economy and help Americans fulfill their God-given potential.

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Nebraska.

HONORING OUR ARMED FORCES  
SPECIALIST BLAKE KELLY

Mrs. FISCHER. Mr. President, I rise today to continue my tribute to Nebraska heroes—the men and women who have given their lives defending our freedom in Iraq and Afghanistan. Each of these Nebraskans has a powerful story to tell.

Today I will reflect upon the life of Nebraska Army National Guard SPC Blake Kelly. Blake was a typical smalltown Nebraska boy. Born and raised in Shelby, NE, which has a population of just over 700, Blake lived next to the city park. His parents, Randy and Patty, have lived in the same house for 44 years.

Blake's early life was filled with football, track, lifeguarding at the local swimming pool in the summer, band major duties, and playing the drums. In fact, he met his future wife, Christina, at band practice in 1997. He loved to play the drums, and the neighborhood, well, always knew when he was practicing.

When he was old enough to cruise around Shelby, his dad, Randy, bought him a 1976 Dodge Charger. Every smalltown Nebraska boy needs a car. Blake knew everyone around town and everyone knew him. He was always

happy and eager to help someone solve a problem.

In high school, one of his teachers encouraged him to join the National Guard. For Blake, this was an opportunity to spread his wings and go to college using the Guard's tuition assistance program.

In 2000, between his junior and senior years in high school, he went through Army basic training at Fort Jackson, SC. Before graduation in 2001, he asked Christina to marry him. After becoming engaged and graduating from high school, Blake attended advanced training at Fort Knox, in Kentucky, that included Ranger training. He returned home in September 2001 just as life in the United States was changing forever following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Shortly after, Blake enrolled at Southeast Community College in Beatrice to study animal science. There he became interested in rodeo and joined the school's rodeo team. The year 2002 was a busy one for Blake, filled with school, National Guard training with the 1st Squadron, 167th Cavalry, known as the Cav, and wedding planning. He and Christina tied the knot on September 7, 2002, just as the Cav was preparing to deploy to Bosnia.

At that time, early Active-Duty Army resources were devoted to fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq, but the United States still had significant commitments to peacekeeping operations in the Balkans. The Cav's mission was an ideal one for the National Guard and a critical element in our national security.

The Cav arrived in Bosnia in January 2003, and just before Blake left Nebraska with the unit, Christina learned that she was pregnant. In Bosnia, Blake delved into the mission at hand. He was always ready and eager to serve, and he connected well with the local population. Unit chaplains needed help, and so he embraced his Catholic faith even more deeply by becoming a Eucharistic minister and actively supporting chapel programs.

On July 29, 2003, Blake was killed in an accident involving his convoy and a local vehicle. The loss of Blake was the first casualty of a deployed Nebraska Army National Guard member in over a decade. His community and the entire State were shocked.

He was buried at St. Mary's Catholic Church in rural Nebraska on August 6, 2003. The entire town turned out for the funeral, as did freedom riders from throughout Nebraska. Blake's son Simon was born in September 2003, the month the Cav returned home from their deployment.

Today, Simon is a freshman in high school, and Christina maintains a tight relationship with Blake's family. Randy and Patty, his parents, still live in the same house in Shelby.

In 2014, the town of Shelby dedicated a veterans' memorial, and Blake's family played a prominent role in the dedication ceremony. Blake's spirit lives on, and he is remembered in so many ways.

SPC Blake Kelly embodied the pride of his small town and his State. He served his country with distinction, and he loved his family. I am honored to tell his story.

I yield the floor.

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.

Ms. STABENOW. Mr. 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.

#### YEMEN

Ms. STABENOW. Mr. President, I rise today to speak about a true humanitarian crisis. This is a crisis that is close to my heart, and that is because it is close to the hearts of so many wonderful people in the State of Michigan.

Michigan is home to a large and welcoming Yemeni American community—one of the Nation's largest—and we are so proud and happy that they are part of our community. Right now these Michigan residents are horrified to watch what is happening to a country where many of them have family members and friends.

More than 4 years ago, war broke out in Yemen. Imagine 4 years of going to bed every night, wondering if this will be the night that a bomb or rocket will hit your home and destroy everything you have, including your family; 4 years of being unable to send your children to school because it is simply not safe for them to be outside; 4 years of deadly disease outbreaks with little access to medical care or even safe drinking water; perhaps worst of all, 4 years of sending your children to bed hungry every night because there is simply not enough food.

It is bad enough to think about being a parent under those circumstances. Imagine what it is like to be a child. You are 4 years old. You don't understand what is going on. You just know that you can't go outside, you can't sleep at night, and you are hungry all the time. There are 4-year-olds in Yemen today who have never lived in a country that wasn't at war.

Sadly, there are 4-year-olds in Yemen today who will never see their fifth birthday. About 1.2 million children are living in active conflict zones, meaning that a stray bullet or rocket could end their life at any moment. It is estimated that a child in Yemen dies every 10 minutes—the length of my speaking today on the floor, every 10 minutes—from a lack of food or diseases that can be prevented with adequate medical care, including vaccinations.

Overall, the United Nations estimates that no matter what we do at this moment—no matter what we do—250,000 Yemeni people will die within the next year due to malnutrition, dehydration, and by diseases like cholera.