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Senate

The Senate met at 10 a.m. and was called to order by the President pro tempore (Mr. GRASSLEY).

PRAYER

The Chaplain, Dr. Barry C. Black, offered the following prayer:

Let us pray.

Eternal God, our help in ages past and hope for years to come, we honor Your Name. Bless our lawmakers with Your peace, freeing them from anxieties and fears as You give them wisdom to be strong and courageous. As they trust in the unfolding of Your powerful providence, direct their steps.

Lord, fill their darkness with light, their sorrow with joy, their mistakes with forgiveness, and their doubts with certainty. Hasten the day when justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

We pray in Your great Name. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The President pro tempore led the Pledge of Allegiance, as follows:

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mrs. HYDE-SMITH). Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Iowa.

PROTECTING OLDER WORKERS AGAINST DISCRIMINATION ACT

Mr. GRASSLEY. Madam President, today is the 10th anniversary of the Supreme Court decision in *Gross v. FBL Financial Services*.

The Court ruled that employees who face age discrimination have to meet a higher standard of proof than workers

who face discrimination based on any other factor. This case involving Iowan Jack Gross affected employment discrimination litigation across the entire country, and sent the message to employers that age discrimination is OK.

I hope the Senate acts on the Protecting Older Workers Against Discrimination Act to correct this injustice and restore fairness to our Nation's senior workforce. I happen to be the sponsor of that legislation.

I yield the floor.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority leader is recognized.

IRAN

Mr. MCCONNELL. Madam President, for years American administrations of both parties have properly labeled Iran as the world's most active state sponsor of terrorism. This assessment is based on the cold hard facts of Tehran's behavior.

Iran's support for terrorism knows few bounds, sectarian or geographic. Iran has provided support to Sunni, Shia, and secular terrorists. It has conducted or sponsored attacks around the world, including a plot right here in Washington, during the Obama administration, to blow up a local restaurant and kill the Saudi Ambassador to the United States.

We know that Tehran is responsible for the deaths of hundreds of American servicemembers in Iraq and Afghanistan—Americans murdered by Iran's proxies. So while it should be shocking that Iran is now conducting more attacks against civilian shipping vessels in international waters, unfortunately, it really isn't all that shocking. This is the kind of behavior we have witnessed over the years.

Until recently, the United States spent years failing to hold Iran suffi-

ciently accountable for its terrorism, proxies, and "gray zone" tactics. Tehran was emboldened to tread all over international law.

Now things are different, and Iran's corrupt, moribund economy is feeling the pressure of U.S. sanctions. So it is not surprising that the mullahs now resort to their favorite tool—violence.

The President has said he does not seek conflict with Iran, and neither does the Senate. Nevertheless, the risks of a conflict are real. But make no mistake. They are being driven by Tehran's decision to resort to violence, and that includes what the Secretary of State has described as a "blatant assault" on international shipping, threatening the freedom of navigation in international waters.

Tehran must not be rewarded for terror and intimidation. The United States and our partners need to stand firm and apply concerted, coordinated diplomatic and economic pressure until Tehran changes its behavior.

Acting Secretary Shanahan, at the request of his military commanders, has ordered additional forces to the Middle East for purposes of defense and deterrence. As he made clear when announcing this deployment, the United States does not seek conflict with Iran.

I support these prudent efforts to respond to Iranian intimidation. Defensive military deployments will help us to protect American interests in the region and deter Iranian aggression. I encourage the administration to continue working closely with our partners across the globe to encourage Iran's leaders to cease their aggression.

I hope Iran's leaders will listen to the demands of their people, who continue to protest against the stifling authoritarianism of the Islamic Republic for a better, more prosperous, more peaceful life.

I also appreciate the administration's efforts to keep Congress apprised of the latest intelligence, deployments, and

● This "bullet" symbol identifies statements or insertions which are not spoken by a Member of the Senate on the floor.



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diplomatic efforts. I understand committee staff received a classified briefing just yesterday. I look forward to hearing from the State Department's top career diplomat at the Republican lunch today. I hope my colleagues across the aisle rethink their decision to turn down his offer to brief them. I understand the administration will be sending up interagency teams this week to brief the oversight committees in a classified setting, as well.

For our part, the Senate will consider several measures in the coming days that will directly impact our presence and influence in this troubled region, including arms sales to key regional partners, as well as the NDAA. I urge every one of my colleagues to keep these deadly serious developments at the top of our minds as we attend to our business in the days ahead.

HONG KONG

Mr. McCONNELL. Madam President, last week I spoke about the people's uprising in Hong Kong. Over the past several days, millions of residents have taken to the streets to defend their autonomy and the rule of law from continued encroachment of the communist government of mainland China.

After days of tension, this past week-end brought some good news. In a sign that the people's demonstrations had sent a clear message, Hong Kong officials now said that the government will suspend consideration of the proposed "extradition" bill indefinitely.

The fate of Hong Kong and its special status is a subject I have watched carefully for decades. Early on in my Senate tenure, I introduced the legislation that still governs our relationship with Hong Kong, the U.S.-Hong Kong Policy Act of 1992, which President Bush 41 signed into law. On the day I introduced that legislation, I said it was heartening to see that "democracy is finally gaining a tenuous foot hold in Hong Kong."

Well, the nearly 30 years since then have shown us all just what the people of Hong Kong can do when the terms of their independence and freedom are respected. We have seen Hong Kong thrive, in large measure due to the political and economic freedoms and stable rule of law that Hong Kong's special status has enabled, but we have also seen clearly in recent days that freedom's foothold in the shadow of mainland China is not a given. It remains tenuous even now.

I wanted to again express my admiration for the people of Hong Kong and their strong but peaceful response to this proposed encroachment. I am glad to see their leaders respect their willingness to stand their ground, and I hope the city's authorities will continue to respect the clear will of the people on these issues moving forward.

JOHN S. MCCAIN NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT

Mr. McCONNELL. Madam President, on a related subject, all of these events I have discussed, from Iran's misbehavior to China's aggressiveness, underscore one thing very clearly: The United States needs to remain engaged, prepared, and powerful.

We need to leave zero doubt among our friends and allies, our most violent foes, and everybody in between that while the United States does not seek conflict, we must be prepared to decisively defeat our adversaries if conflict is forced upon us. That is called deterrence.

The growing global unrest should be a lesson to us as the Senate gets ready to turn to the National Defense Authorization Act later this week. I know my colleagues on both sides share my hope that this year's NDAA can build on the successes of the past 2 years.

Our first obligation to the American people is to ensure for their defense. It is essential that we continue rebuilding our military by authorizing sufficient support to modernize and sustain the advantages that America's all-voluntary Armed Forces have over our adversaries.

Working with the Trump administration in recent years, we have been able to end a chapter of harmful spending cuts that have left military leaders less able to address emerging challenges. As a result, last year's legislation—named for our dear colleague, the late John McCain—authorized the largest year-on-year increase in defense spending in 15 years.

The bill introduced last week is a step further toward implementing our important new national defense strategy, toward renewing the readiness and lethality of our forces, and toward making sure that we never ask brave American men and women to step into harm's way without all possible tools and training to help them succeed. This crucial legislation has a chance to be a major bipartisan success story of this Congress. It is already off to an encouraging start, having been voted out of the Armed Services Committee by an overwhelming bipartisan margin.

And it is easy to see why. As great-power competitors like Russia and China continue to challenge U.S. interests, this NDAA will help to maintain and expand our alliances and partnerships, along with our ability to stand firm.

The bill puts readiness front and center. In recent decades, our most formidable competitors have taken every opportunity to deploy new technological threats. Keeping American and allied servicemembers out of harm's way means keeping up with these developments and outpacing them.

The bill takes steps to expand oversight and increase efficiency at the Pentagon. It honors the tremendous sacrifices made by servicemembers and their families by securing the largest pay raise in a decade, along with several other important reforms.

TAXPAYER FIRST ACT

Mr. McCONNELL. Madam President, on one final matter. I want to celebrate another legislative accomplishment the Senate notched last week.

On Thursday, the Senate passed the Taxpayer First Act and sent it to President Trump's desk to become law. This legislation is the most thorough package of reforms to the Internal Revenue Service in 20 years.

Let me say that again. The Senate just passed the most significant reforms to the IRS in two decades. It will create a new, independent process for appeals to ensure taxpayers receive fair treatment. During dispute resolutions, taxpayers will now get access to the same information the IRS has.

There will be more accountability within the IRS when it comes to cyber security, careful management of technology, and overall efficiency. There will be a new streamlined system for addressing identity theft. There will be better procedures for advance notification in the event of an audit or an asset seizure, and there will be new steps to make it easier to file your taxes and supporting documents online.

So this is a significant accomplishment. These reforms will make one of the least appealing annual tasks for hard-working Americans a little bit less painful.

A year and a half ago, the Republican Members of this body joined with House Republicans and President Trump to deliver historic tax cuts and tax reform to the American people. Middle-class families, parents, small business owners, farmers, and job creators across the Nation are keeping more of what they earn and sending less to the IRS.

Now, thanks to this latest achievement, the IRS will be just a little bit easier to deal with as well.

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

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

AGRICULTURE

Mr. THUNE. Madam President, our economy is thriving. Republican economic policies, particularly the historic tax reform legislation that we passed at the end of 2017, have helped to produce economic growth, higher wages, and better opportunities for workers.

Unfortunately, our Nation's agriculture economy is trailing behind the economy as a whole. A combination of natural disasters, low commodity prices, and protracted trade disputes have left farmers and ranchers and rural businesses struggling. Although