

stood outside the Capitol with thousands of coal miners and their families several years ago in seriously suffocating heat, as DC can heat up during the summer, to rally in support of those benefits. Miners have come to Washington in the snow and in the rain. Their camouflage shirts have stood out around the Capitol as they worked tirelessly to educate us about the critical need for action. You have probably seen them in the halls. No one should be surprised by their dedication and commitment because our West Virginian miners have answered the call throughout their careers. Their hard work provided the electricity and the steel that has powered our American economy.

The time has come to protect those retirement benefits these miners have earned. The Bipartisan American Miners Act will secure both pension and healthcare benefits for those hard-working men and women.

I want to thank the United Mine Workers of America and their president, Cecil Roberts, for his work and their work in advocating for our miners. More than 25,000 miners from all of West Virginia's 55 counties will have received payments from their pension benefits last year.

More than 5,600 West Virginians miners are at risk of losing their healthcare benefits if we fail to act. Almost \$200 million in pension benefits were paid from this fund to West Virginians last year. The loss of those funds would certainly have harmed the retirees themselves, no doubt, but also the local businesses they patronize across the State and their communities.

As one West Virginian wrote to me just last night, "My father is a retired miner from Marion County who will be turning 80 in January. This will give him and my mother some long overdue and well deserved peace of mind. They have been worrying unduly throughout the last several months."

Thousands of miners in West Virginia and elsewhere in coal country will have a merrier Christmas when this bill becomes law later this week. I ask my colleagues to join me in supporting this critical legislation.

There are a number of other reasons to support the appropriations bills we will be considering in the next several days. I wanted to highlight one that can have a significant impact on my State of West Virginia.

I was proud to ensure that in the transportation and infrastructure title of the appropriations bill, we fund the Appalachian Development Highway System at \$100 million. That will help us as we work to continue the last remaining enormous project in our State, Corridor H.

I have also advocated for action to address our structurally deficient bridges. In my State, we have a lot of hills and a lot of valleys, and we have a lot of bridges. Almost 20 percent of our West Virginia bridges are classified

as structurally deficient. I think it is a universal statistic in the country. This bill takes the absolutely necessary step to provide funding for over \$1.15 billion to fund highway bridge projects of which West Virginia is eligible for \$50 million.

Roads and bridges have a huge economic impact on our communities and our quality of life, everything we do every day. I am proud we have included these important investments.

As chairman of the Homeland Security Appropriations Subcommittee, I want to address items included in our subcommittee's funding bill as well. A little over a year ago, I stood here to talk about the increasing crisis at our southern border. When I spoke to you then, apprehensions at our southern border were 30 percent higher than they were the year before, and they were much higher than they are today, as I speak. The crisis was not limited to the realm of illegal immigrants because fentanyl seizures were up 115 percent, along with other illicit narcotics; heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine, marijuana. Thanks to the leadership of the President and also this Congress the situation has improved.

We should also recognize the improved coordination with Mexico and partnerships with other countries that have helped curb the flow of those entering our country illegally. Though the situation has improved, it is far from being solved. Frankly, we are one ruling away from an activist judge who could create the flows of those trending upward again.

As such, I am proud to say that the homeland security title in the package we are considering this week provides funds and resources to continue the good work we have been pursuing to stem the tide of illegal immigration. Twice I have seen firsthand on the border—the southwest border—the challenges we face—and, yes, the progress we have made.

This bill supports the work of the men and women of the Department at CBP, ICE, HSI, the Coast Guard, and many others who are daily standing watch on our borders, on our coasts, and on our computer networks.

This bill invests in personnel, particularly by creating a new position: Border Patrol processing coordinators. This was a particular interest of mine after talking to numerous people at the Department and while visiting the border, describing the frustration they felt as agents and officers. This funding provided for these processing coordinators will return 240 of our border agents to the frontlines to enforce our immigration laws, which is what they are trained to do.

In regard to physical barriers, we provide the enacted level of \$1.37 billion. The only thing similar to last year is the amount of money provided because the flexibility we provide the Department is a significant change and a significant improvement.

The bipartisan fiscal year 2017 appropriations bill required our Customs and

Border Protection to provide us with a comprehensive Border Security Improvement Plan. I was going to bring it with me today, but, to be honest with you, I left it in my office. The funds we provide this week will enable the Department to follow that plan.

While passage of our Senate bill would have been ideal, a continuing resolution would have had a devastating effect on homeland security. The bill we are going to pass will help us take another step forward in securing our border.

I am so very proud of the men and women who work at the Department of Homeland Security, and I was able to meet quite a few. The crisis they faced when I spoke here last year was a real one. Through their dedication and efforts, so much progress has been made, and I look forward to speaking to you a year from now about what we have been able to accomplish with the resources and tools we can provide them with this bill.

There are many other vital provisions across our appropriations bill, including a 3.1-percent pay increase for our troops and significant increases in funding for our veterans for the MISION Act, increasing funding for combating the opioid epidemic, expanding our rural broadband, and researching cures for diseases.

One of those diseases hit many of us and has hit me quite personally; that is, Alzheimer's. Research for Alzheimer's is, I think, absolutely essential, and we are increasing that.

I commend all my colleagues who worked to put together the bipartisan appropriations bills. I congratulate Senator SHELBY, in particular, and Senator LEAHY for working together, and I look forward to voting for these bills later in the week.

With that, I yield back.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority whip.

TAX CUTS AND JOBS ACT

Mr. THUNE. Madam President, December 22 will mark an anniversary, the second anniversary of the signing of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. Tax reform was a big priority for Republicans. We wanted to help American families by reducing their tax burden and spurring the kind of economic growth that would result in better jobs and better wages.

At the end of 2017, we passed the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. We cut tax rates for American families, doubled the child tax credit, and nearly doubled the standard deduction. We lowered tax rates across the board for owners of small and medium-sized businesses, farms and ranches. We expanded business owners' ability to recover the cost of investments made in their businesses, which frees up cash they can reinvest into operations and their workers, and we lowered our Nation's massive corporate tax rate, which up until January 1 of 2018 was the highest corporate tax rate in the developed world,

and we brought the U.S. international tax system into the 21st century so American businesses are not operating at a competitive disadvantage next to their foreign counterparts.

Over the last 2 years, tax reform has done exactly what we intended. It has allowed American families to keep more of their hard-earned money, and it has helped spur wage growth and increase the availability of good jobs for American workers.

For 2018, the average family of four with an income of \$75,000 saw a tax cut of more than \$2,000. On top of that, company after company responded to the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act by issuing bonuses, improving benefits, or increasing wages. At least 100 utility companies around the country announced plans to cut utility rates for consumers.

Then, of course, there is the economic growth that the law has spurred. A whopping 266,000 jobs were created in November, smashing expectations and bringing the average monthly job creation for 2019 to a strong 180,000 jobs per month. Job creation since President Trump was elected has exceeded the Congressional Budget Office's 2016 pre-election prediction by more than 5 million jobs. The unemployment rate is at a 50-year low and has been at or below 4 percent for an incredible 21 straight months. The year 2019 has also seen record-low unemployment rates for African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, Americans with a disability, Americans without a high school diploma, and veterans. For 20 straight months, there have been more jobs available than Americans looking for work.

Meanwhile, wages for American workers are growing steadily. Wage growth has been at or above 3 percent for 16 straight months. Before the start of this streak, the last time wage growth had reached 3 percent was more than a decade ago. Income inequality has declined. The poverty rate has fallen to a 17-year low. The list goes on.

Those are a lot of numbers and percentages, but they all boil down to one thing, and that is that American families are doing better. Thanks to Republican economic policies, fewer Americans are having to choose between a car repair and a doctor's bill. More Americans are able to put away money each month for their retirement or their children's education. There are more good jobs available for Americans looking for work.

Of course, there is still more work to be done. Our farm economy, for example, is not doing as well as the economy as a whole. Passing policies that will bring relief to our farmers and ranchers and expand markets for their products is a priority of mine.

But 2 years on from the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, we can celebrate the fact that millions of American families are bringing home more money in their paychecks and have access to better jobs and better opportunities. Preserving and building on those accomplishments is a Republican priority.

Unfortunately, our Democratic colleagues are more likely to suggest tax hikes than preserving the tax cuts that have brought so much economic progress over the past couple of years. Democrats opposed the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, despite the fact that many of the ideas included were the product of both Republican and Democratic proposals. They objected to it, and they fought it because they were determined not to work with this President.

Two years on, Democrats would still like to pretend the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act didn't help American families, despite the reams of statistics on the economic progress we have made and the fact that an estimated 90 percent of middle-class families received a tax cut. After all, if Democrats acknowledged that tax cuts have made life better for families, it would be even harder for them to defend the massive middle-class hikes that would be needed to fund their socialist proposals like Medicare for All and the Green New Deal. It is unfortunate the Democrats are so opposed to policies that have made life better for millions of Americans.

I am proud of all we have achieved for American families with the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. I will continue to work with my colleagues to keep our economy growing and to expand opportunities for Americans even further.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill 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.

SIGNING AUTHORITY

Mr. THUNE. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the senior Senator from South Dakota and junior Senator from Tennessee be authorized to sign duly enrolled bills or joint resolutions during today's session of the Senate.

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

Mr. THUNE. I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

GOVERNMENT FUNDING

Mr. BLUNT. Madam President, I am glad to finally be here today, talking about the final conclusions we have reached on the appropriations bill generally but, specifically, the Labor and Health and Human Services and Education appropriations bill.

We are now a bipartisan Congress, with Democrats in control on one side,

Republicans on another. On this side, of course, we always have to have 60 people to go forward on these bills. We generally have had to have a bill here that would appeal to enough Democrats or enough Republicans to make this happen, but we have come to the conclusion of what is normally the hardest bill to negotiate. It is about 30 percent of all the spending after you take defense off the table. Defense is half of the discretionary spending; then you have 11 other bills that have the other half of that spending.

This bill has 30 percent of that half. It has lots of things that you could argue about and, frankly, lots of things that you would just say "If we can't all be happy about this, we won't move forward," which would mean you wouldn't move forward.

This is a bill where Senator MURRAY and I and Congressman COLE and Chairman DELAURO on the other side had to decide if we were going to have a bill or not, and we decided we were going to have a bill. We decided at the end of the process, with some help from others, that we wouldn't have things in the bill that hadn't traditionally been there.

This is the place where much of the language that we debate in the appropriations bills occurs—what can happen and what can't happen. Things like the Hyde amendment have been in the appropriations bill for a long time, and it is in this one.

Other things that have not been there in the past are not there, and that was one of the things that allowed us to move forward.

Again, we had one body controlled by a different party, and we had to come to a bipartisan consensus, and I think we have.

There were lots and lots of competing programs, some of which we are all for, but maybe our priorities are different. In fact, it could be that we just have more priorities on one side than on the other. But these programs range from workforce training to early childhood education to infectious disease control. That is a pretty big span of things to try to come to a conclusion on.

Then, from our colleagues, we had 7,800 different requests—not necessarily requests that would be considered "I want you to spend this money in my State" but 7,800 requests that said "We think this program should be increased" or "This program should be decreased."

So with all of those requests and that broad span, we came together with a bill that I am going to vote for tomorrow and look forward to voting for tomorrow. It is not exactly the bill I would have done if I had been doing it by myself, but by the very definition of both democracy and the Congress, you don't get to do these by yourself.

The bill, which will reflect the priorities of both sides of the aisle and both