

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. BOOKER. Mr. President, this past week, we have seen that the spread of COVID-19 has really become a crisis not just for our Nation but a crisis for every American. Today, millions of Americans are asking themselves how they will endure this crisis, how long will the crisis last, how will it affect their families, their communities, and their Nation as a whole.

We have many people who are now trying to do the dollars-and-cents of this crisis, literally sitting down to try to calculate how many weeks they can stretch the last 2 weeks of pay.

We see people who have been furloughed, had their hours reduced, been laid off.

We have seen that small businesses—from the mom-and-pop pizza joints, to small interior design shops, to barber shops—are all trying to determine how they can keep themselves afloat when their doors are closed and how they can deal with their fixed costs.

I have been on the phone with so many employers in my own State who have spoken to me about the challenges they have trying to continue to cover the health insurance of their employees even with the fact that no revenue is being brought in by their businesses.

Over and over again, restaurants, bars, coffee shops, our sports arenas, hotels—all of them have been emptied, and millions of workers have been let go and had their hours slashed.

On top of that, schools across this country, from colleges to kindergartens, have been closed, and millions of families are now scrambling to try to find childcare. College students are displaced and moving back in with families.

This is, on so many levels, a true crisis like none of us have ever faced before in our Nation. The emotions are running the gamut. People are angry. People are afraid. People are fearful for their own physical safety, as well as their economic well-being.

This is something that is challenging because we do not know how long it will last. The one thing we do know is that this crisis is a shared one, but many people face their own privately painful challenges. I will give one example.

There is a single mother in my State—a mother of two—who works at a nursing home and is also raising her granddaughter. At work, she cares for elderly patients, and because family members can no longer visit, she is rising to the challenge of not just being a professional there, but she also feels she is serving as a surrogate family member. Now, for weeks, the basic personal protective equipment she needs to keep herself safe is in short supply and is literally dwindling.

For all of this incredible work, this incredible dedication literally on the frontlines, she makes \$14 an hour. With schools now closing, her teenage children will be responsible for caring for

her granddaughter while she works because she can't afford childcare. She doesn't know what she would do if she got sick and actually had to miss work. She is living every day afraid of getting the coronavirus.

There are millions of families in a similar situation and millions of Americans who are getting up every day knowing that their going to work is essential for the well-being of others. Yet they still don't know how they will take care of their families.

The most recent bipartisan relief package that came out of Congress, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, is a very important step in helping those families and combating the spread of the virus and its effects. It will help to increase testing, ensure the availability of emergency paid family and sick leave for many workers, increase food assistance programs, and make emergency unemployment insurance available for more workers who really, really need it.

Now, as we turn to the next package of policies and funding to help Americans who are suffering now, we know this is a moment that demands bold, decisive action and doesn't leave anybody behind. We know we are a nation born out of crisis. We know that our founding ideals—you have to understand that this government was formed to protect people and to defend people. We, in our Declaration of Independence, talk about mutually pledging to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor. The spirit of this Nation is about being there for each other and coming together to be stronger despite the crisis, despite the challenge.

I am so grateful at this time that we are seeing bipartisan work on both sides of the aisle, as we are all seeing—from our personal lives to our States as a whole—we are all seeing the urgency.

I am worried now that the first proposal that we have seen, though, falls short of addressing the needs of our healthcare workers and first responders—those Americans who are really putting themselves out there. I am confident, though, that we are going to come together in the coming hours to try to create a package that rises above or rises to meet the moment we are in.

Right now, our Nation's first responders, our firefighters, and our healthcare professionals are being asked to respond to situations where they don't have the personal protective equipment they need to stay safe. In my own city, I talked to the head of public safety, who talked to me about the courage of these folks who, no matter what, are going to go to work, even without that protective gear. But, dear God, shouldn't we be doing everything we can, because if they get sick, if they can't show up, we will see a cascading crisis. It would be disgraceful. It would be dangerous.

It is not an exaggeration to say that if we don't move quickly to get personal protective equipment to our

frontline responders, we are going to be ill-equipped not just to fight COVID-19, but we could see widespread interruptions in the delivery of all lifesaving emergencies in America. Also, this bill we have seen now, which we must make better, must address not just this issue but also do more for healthcare workers and first responders to get them the equipment they need.

There are a lot of things that I feel strongly about that I know will be in these negotiations.

We should all be able to agree on supporting our veterans and VA facilities as they prepare to fight this virus. There are gaping holes in that in this bill.

We should all agree on funding for our transit systems—like Amtrak—that are going to make sure to keep our country connected, that those systems don't fail and fall, especially when we will need them switched on and running vibrantly when our economy gets going. We should all agree that this is a time to deal with some of the massive shortfalls that we have now more than ever.

While places like South Korea have universal broadband penetration, we should all agree that broadband access in devices for our students is critical if we are going to continue to educate our children for the months ahead.

We should all agree on providing tests for our troops that are still serving in high-risk areas like Afghanistan. We need to make sure these bills address these holes.

We should all agree on strengthening our community colleges and our minority-serving institutions so they, too, can continue to educate their students digitally. These are holes that must be filled.

We should all agree that we need to be providing funding and flexibility for our schools and food banks to continue to serve meals to children in our country so that, crisis or no crisis, the next generation can grow healthy and strong.

We should all agree that the utilities in our Nation should not be shut off during this crisis—we need to address that in this bill—so that families, regardless of income, who are already now struggling to make ends meet don't see themselves without light, power, and gas. These holes in this bill should be addressed.

We should all agree that everyone must have coverage for testing and access to healthcare services that keep them and their families safe, and that includes the people who are in our country, whether they are documented or not, because our health is directly interrelated with their health. And to make sure that the only people who can get treatment are citizens of the United States—ignoring the millions of people who are not—means that the citizens of the United States are at risk.

We should also think about those folks whom we don't think about

enough, like those who are incarcerated, as well as the correction officers and workers who deal with those who are incarcerated. We are not doing enough to address that pending crisis in our country. There are holes in this bill.

I want to take one moment, though, to address an aspect of this bill which there seems to be general consensus about but which can be made so much stronger, and that is the issue of cash payments.

Economic relief packages coming from this body should be about offering everyone relief, including those who, through no fault of their own, now find themselves on that financial brink.

It is why we must strengthen unemployment compensation that includes both increasing benefits across the board and expanding eligibility to include more workers, like gig economy workers and other independent workers. That is why I specifically want to address this cash payment part, because that is not enough. As for the idea of cash payments, I am so grateful to see a lot of my colleagues be supportive of that idea.

Earlier this week, Senators BENNET, BROWN, and I, along with several of our colleagues, proposed sending cash payments directly to American families, starting with \$2,000 sent immediately to every American, low- and middle-income, with additional payments if our economy remains in distress. Under our plan, in the worst case scenario, over an entire year, with three tranches of payments, if our economy remains in distress, a family of four would be eligible for \$18,000.

Critically, our plan would not require an income threshold to receive payments, which means that everyone under a certain income level would qualify.

The current proposal would exclude exactly the people and households who actually need it most. By creating an income requirement and phase-in, this plan currently proposed would be skipping over the most vulnerable people. That means a mom who quit her job to spend the last year caring for her sick child or a husband or a parent with Alzheimer's, whose full-time job has been caring for that spouse or loved one, would receive nothing under this plan.

It also means that a college student, forced to leave school, now no longer having the sources of support at college, trying to enter the job market but not able to, would receive nothing under this plan.

Some tipped workers, seasonal workers, and people coming out of the criminal justice system, who paid their debt to society, would receive nothing under this plan.

This is a moment where we have to understand that we should be thinking boldly and acting in a bipartisan way at a scale we have never seen before because we have never seen a crisis like this before. This is not a time to do

something that is anemic, that is inadequate, that leaves some of the most vulnerable people out in the cold, when we know those people—they are our family members; they are our neighbors—wouldn't qualify for the plan as it is right now.

I know those family members because they are people who live in my community. Someone who worked their entire life, who has a mother who is dying, just last year quit their job to try to support her. These are folks we know. They might even be in our own family. We shouldn't exclude them at this time. By the way, including them helps to further the impact of the stimulative effects of this plan. It literally puts more money in our economy and into the hands of people who will spend it, and that will have a multiplier effect.

We need to be injecting cash directly into our economy and giving people agency again in their lives at a time when so many people feel helpless amidst this health and economic crisis.

And, God, we need to be doing it quickly, getting payments to people as soon as possible. For seniors, these payments should simply be added to their next Social Security check. And I remind you that about 7 million of our seniors live at or below the poverty line because their Social Security checks don't go far enough. For veterans, they should receive theirs at the same time they get their VA benefits. We can do that quickly. For everyone else, the IRS should send checks or deposit funds directly into their bank account.

These are the kinds of actions we need to ensure that, once we get through this public health crisis, we have the tools in place we need to reactivate the world's greatest economy and enable it to recover.

The great thing about designing something this way is that we could put it in place now, while we are all assembled here as a body. I said this to my caucus, and I didn't mean it to be in any way draconian. But there are 100 of us, and it is likely some of us could be sick. While we are all assembled here, let's put things in place so they are triggered. If the economy is still down, it triggers the next set of actions. Instead of having to come back here and negotiate more now, put things in place with automatic triggers so 3 months from now, if the economy is down, it triggers more action, like the next tranche of payments. At the end of the year, if the economy is still where it is, let's trigger another automatic payment. That is not just common sense; it is proactive. It means that people can begin to rely on those resources and do that kind of planning, by having predictable sources of income, and not having the challenges that I am starting to find now, just for a week or 2, which are the emotional challenges, the stress of families.

I talked to medical professionals this week who worry about this home isola-

tion, people stressed over bills, and people worried about their next paycheck. This is an emotional strain to our country and will have physical manifestations.

I want to say that I love my Nation for so many reasons, but one of the reasons is because it has often been my life experience that during the toughest times, I have witnessed the best of us.

I was a college student in 1989, when a horrible earthquake hit the Bay Area. In Stanford, we were closer to the epicenter than even San Francisco was. I remember the fear, as people were knocked out of their homes. But the other thing I saw was America. I saw the best of who we are—people pulling together, sheltering friends, sharing food. It was one of these experiences, as a young person coming of age, that I will never forget. I am not happy an earthquake happened, but, God, it so inspired me to see the best of who we are.

Later, as a young man and a city councilman in Newark, about 10 miles from the World Trade Center, 9/11 happened—horrible, horrible things. I lost my childhood best friend in one of those buildings.

God, in that crisis, what did we do in this country? God, I remember the lines—people lining up in front of hospitals to donate blood—how people pulled together, stood for each other, and sacrificed for each other. There was something so powerful and so patriotic—people remembering that patriotism is not a flag pin, and patriotism is love of country. You cannot love your country unless you love your fellow country men and women, and love is not sentimentality. It is sacrifice. It is service. It is being there for each other.

God, when Hurricane Sandy hit New Jersey and thousands of people lost their homes and power was shut off in our communities for days or over a week, again, I saw the best of who we are as a nation. In a crisis, in a challenge, we don't pull apart. We pull together. We stand up for each other. We serve each other. It may put us back individually, but the generosity I saw—people reaching into their bank accounts, buying blankets, buying food—was inspiring. They were putting people up in hotels who were out of their homes.

It hearkened me back to the stories I heard from my parents and my grandparents about what it was like in the Great Depression in poor communities in the South and how much people were there for each other. It reminded me of World War II. My grandmother, literally, until the day she died, an African-American woman, was bragging about her victory gardens, how eagerly and how it gave her pride that she was rationing—how this poor woman, who worked as a domestic at times, was buying war bonds. Everybody was pitching in. That is who we are. That is America.

Now the wealthiest Nation on planet Earth is facing one of its biggest trials. I pray it is one of the biggest trials in my lifetime, if not the biggest trial. The wealthiest country on the planet is showing what we are called to be. I have always felt, as the prophet Elijah says in the Bible, that we are the light onto other nations—about how we pull together, stand together, fight through a storm, and fight through a crisis. We are showing what we do for each other.

It is not just the men and women sitting in these seats. It is all of us. In the greatest crisis of our lifetime, what are you doing for other people?

I pray our legislation keeps that spirit in mind. When the most common faith talks about what are you doing for the widower, what are you doing for the orphan, what are you doing for those people in prison, I hope we keep that in mind.

It is not a time for half steps or half measures. It is time for the bold spirit of America, where we stand up for each other. We don't pull apart; we come together. We don't tear down; we rise up. That is where we are right now in American history. In this great global pandemic, we are a light unto each other, as well as to the world.

And for the Senate, right now, while there still are 100 of us here doing the work, let's do it nobly and boldly and with generosity of spirit. Let's extend civic grace because this crisis is not bigger than who we are.

We will endure. We shall overcome. May God bless America, and may God bless each and every one of us.

Thank you.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. HAWLEY). The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

CORONAVIRUS

Mrs. BLACKBURN. Mr. President, it has been so interesting talking to our Tennesseans as they have faced these issues we have with coronavirus and what is happening, our response to it, and how we are going to fight it. And yes, we are going to win this war, and we are going to defeat this, but we have to look at it as our health, food, and financial assistance.

Last night, a couple of my Tennesseans and I were discussing this—what their thoughts and their questions to me were about the relationship we have with China and how can we trust that we know what China knew, that we know when they knew it, and their lack of transparency around what happened with COVID-19.

As we have gotten a couple of months past the start of this, these questions are unanswered. As I was telling our Tennesseans on the phone last night,

even as this virus that came out of Wuhan, China—they had it in December. It has now touched six continents, and we know people are dealing with containment. They are dealing with mitigation. They are dealing with going through the process of getting the anti-virals, getting the vaccines that are necessary to deal with COVID-19.

The questions that people have around this are compounded by the growing realization of how China has chosen not to be honest and not to be transparent in their dealings with the rest of the world. The way Beijing handled its initial response to the coronavirus was nothing new. In fact, deflection and lies meant to protect the Communist Party is part of their standard operating procedure. They have defied norms governing the protection of human rights. They embrace innovation by incursion, defy property rights, and steal intellectual property as a matter of course.

We have U.S. companies that have suffered for decades from what China has done to steal their intellectual property, to infringe on their intellectual property. They defy the sovereignty of other nations and territories, and they defy what should be their role as a leader in the global economy. Certainly, they want to be a market economy or so they say, but look at their behavior. It is this act of defiance that makes them incredibly dangerous.

I have to tell you, this has been something that has been going on for quite a while, but we only need to go back a decade to place a flag marking our awareness of what has become a very familiar story. Over the decades, as China started to manufacture and started to pull U.S. manufacturers there and then started to mistreat their intellectual property rights, people became aware of what was going on. It was right at 10 years ago, when I was a Member in the House, that we were doing much of the same work that we are doing right now in the U.S. Senate; we were preparing a defense authorization bill. Even then we realized the threat that China and Chinese state-owned companies posed to our national security. We drafted amendments to that year's NDAA, blocking the purchase of Huawei-supplied equipment. Indeed, we are still hearing about the need to block the purchase of Huawei equipment not only for us but for our allies.

That action was 10 years ago, but China's influence has continued to grow. What we have done is pretty much our part in the Senate to expose those bad actions, even as the rest of the world has allowed Beijing to co-opt the trappings of capitalism to perpetuate totalitarianism.

Last year, we saw the people of Hong Kong rise up on behalf of democracy and self-determination. Indeed, to this day, that fight goes on even though the threats and fears of COVID-19 have

caused those protesters to have to protest in a different way.

I cosponsored the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act and sponsored legislation prohibiting the commercial export of covered munition items to the Hong Kong police force. But the world moves on, even as that standoff in Hong Kong continues.

The Senate was forced to pen a resolution asking the International Olympic Committee to rebid the 2022 Winter Games to a country that respects human rights. That was really quite a bold move. It leaves me to wonder, why was China given this honor in the first place? I have to tell you, nobody seems to really know the answer to that question. The aggression they display toward Taiwan and Tibet and the outright repression of the Uighurs—this is something that has gone unchecked many times due to fear of economic retaliation.

I have addressed this body several times on the subject of Huawei and China's leveraging of the impending 5G rollout to create national security vulnerabilities in our network. Their efforts to undermine our sovereignty are not limited to high-tech espionage. Indeed, their goal is to place their equipment everywhere. That is why it is so incredibly affordable to so many countries and so many of our allies. In placing this equipment, they are seeking to establish their own high-tech cyber spy network. We know what they are up to.

This month, I introduced a bill to temper the influence of China-backed Confucius Institutes on American college campuses. We all have read the stories lately of how they have infiltrated some of our institutions of higher learning and how they have co-opted some of the staff or professors.

This is something that needs our attention. It is followed on the heels of the Stop Higher Education Espionage and Theft Act—another effort to prevent Beijing from increasing its hold on the minds of our younger generations. Time and again, we have called Chinese tech companies like Tik Tok onto the carpet for their censorship, their data collection, and their privacy practices—or lack of privacy, we should say. Yet content from their popular apps still dominates social media headlines. China's hold on the global economy has never been more apparent.

Now there are reports that Beijing used the media and keyword censorship to suppress information about the coronavirus. Yet Beijing remains defiant, attacking President Trump in tweets and accusing everyday Americans of racism for daring to suggest that COVID-19 originated in Wuhan, China. They are, as many younger people like to say, gaslighting us, and it is madness.

It brings us to ask, when will enough be enough? We must not let our present concerns about the response to coronavirus deter us from thinking long term. This pandemic will change