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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.

Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities and, in all our dangers, defend us.

Lord, sometimes You seem so far away. We cry out to You and seem to only hear the echoes of our laments. As our lawmakers reach out to You night and day, enable them to connect to Your matchless power. May they find in You a sure refuge, a shelter from the storms.

Lord, strengthen the weakness of our faith, and give us trust for our trembling and hope for our fears. Give us patience, cheerful endurance, and serenity of mind.

Lord, place your healing hands upon John Bessler, Senator RAND PAUL, and others who need to feel Your touch.

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.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mrs. HYDE-SMITH). The Senator from Iowa.

Mr. GRASSLEY. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent to speak in morning business for 1 minute.

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

NATIONAL AG DAY

Mr. GRASSLEY. Madam President, every American is facing a very uncertain future that the new virus has brought to our country and to the

world. Our daily lives have become transformed for right now and maybe, to some extent, for a longer period of time.

Grocery stores have been open—in fact, one of the few businesses that need to stay open. While it may shock some living in large cities, food does not come from grocery stores; food comes from farms.

Today, we celebrate National Ag Day. Let me assure you, American farmers and ranchers are up to the challenge of producing food to fill the shelves of every grocery store and the fridges and cupboards of our households. Farmers are only 2 percent of the population, but they will provide for the other 98 percent. When you eat today, thank a farmer, as I will thank the 88,000 family farmers in Iowa.

I yield the floor.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority leader is recognized.

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. MCCONNELL. Madam President, for weeks now, the American people have been contending with the coronavirus pandemic that is spreading across our country and the massive, massive disruptions to daily life it is creating for all of us. They are grappling with small business closures, mass layoffs, and uncertainty for their families. But that isn't all. For the last several days now, in the midst of all that—in the midst of all that—they have also had to watch the Senate spin its wheels.

As we convene this morning, roughly 40 percent of our population is under stay-at-home orders from State leaders. Employers across America are wondering how they will keep the lights on. Doctors, nurses, and healthcare professionals are literally

crying out for support. We literally have Army field hospitals on the way to being set up in our major American cities.

In the space of just a few weeks, this has become, unfortunately, our new normal. This is a national crisis. It is the most serious threat to Americans' health in over a century and quite likely the greatest risk to Americans' jobs and prosperity that we have seen since the Great Depression.

Hundreds of thousands of Americans have already lost their jobs because so much of our commerce has been put on pause. Families are wondering how they are going to pay their rent or mortgage in 8 days. Rent is due on April 1. People don't know how they are going to pay bills or make their car payment.

Many other hard-working Americans are still employed for now but fall asleep every night wondering if it will be there when they wake up to that email or phone call tomorrow.

American seniors have seen decades of savings cut down in the space of days as the markets literally tumble.

Our national life has literally been transformed in less than a month. The urgency and the gravity of this moment cannot be lost on anyone. Every day, every hour the Congress delays in passing a significant relief package, we risk more American livelihoods and the safety of more healthcare professionals. That is why, right after I fast-tracked the Democratic House relief bill through the Senate, I immediately turned the Senate toward developing an even bigger and bolder relief package for the American people.

Nine days ago, I laid out the key objectives of our work. We had to send direct financial assistance to Americans—direct assistance to Americans. We had to help Main Street small businesses. We had to act to stabilize the foundations of our economy for workers. And, of course, we had to send more resources to medical professionals and our healthcare system.

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



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Five days ago, Senate Republicans released our initial framework for the CARES Act. We put forward bold policies like sending cash directly to Americans, pouring money into small businesses, lending to national industries to prevent mass layoffs, and surge resources for doctors, nurses, and patients. We knew we needed a proposal to address our Nation's pain at literally every level.

Now, in the past few days, some voices have tried to pit some Americans against other Americans and argue that directly helping workers and strengthening businesses are somehow conflicting priorities. That is utter nonsense. American workers need paychecks. They need jobs.

The working men and women of this country do need direct relief from government in this crisis, but for goodness' sake, they also need their paychecks. They need to be able to resume their lives and their jobs once this is over. The two things can't be separated. There is a term for when you separate employees from employers. There is a term for that. It is called unemployment. Let me say that again. There is a term for when you separate employees from employers. It is called unemployment. That is what we are trying to avoid.

This is no time to point fingers or stoke these culture wars. This is the time to unify. Perhaps now more than at any moment in living memory, all of us Americans are in this together. This pandemic is not the fault of the American workers who make this country run. It is not the fault of small business owners. It is not the fault of major national employers. Everyone needs help. We are all in this together. We need an "all of the above" approach, and that is what our framework put forward: help for workers and families and employers and healthcare providers.

As soon as Republicans put out a draft proposal to treat every aspect of this crisis, I immediately called for bipartisan talks. That is not something you see often in Washington. As soon as I released our first draft, I immediately invited the other side, these folks over here, to make their suggestions. That is what you call urgency.

We set up bipartisan working groups. I asked negotiators to work together to turn our rough draft into something that could pass the Senate with overwhelming bipartisan support. Republicans and Democrats traded ideas. Democrats asked for many changes to the initial draft and received many. The updated text, released a few days ago, included proposals from the other side. And, of course, as our colleagues have dragged out the last several days, even further changes have been made at their request.

This majority has gone out of its way to make this process as bipartisan and as open as possible. The administration has bent over backward to work with Democrats and address their concerns.

Now, at last, I believe we are on the 5-yard line. It has taken a lot of noise and a lot of rhetoric to get us here. That, of course, sometimes happens in this town.

At different times, we received Democratic counteroffers that demanded things like new emission standards or tax credits for solar panels. We saw the Speaker of the House release an encyclopedia of unrelated demands as though it were a coronavirus proposal somehow. In spite of all that, we are very close. We are close to a bill that takes our bold Republican framework, integrates further ideas from both parties, and delivers huge progress on each of the four core priorities I laid out a week ago.

Today the Senate has a chance to get back on track. Today we can make all of the Washington drama fade away. If we act today, what Americans will remember and what history will record is that the Senate did the right thing, that we came together, that we took a lesson from the way Americans are uniting all across the country and working together, that we combined ideas from both sides and took a bold step to protect Americans and help our Nation through this crisis.

I am not sure how many ways to say it, but the clock has run out. The buzzer is sounding. The hour for bargaining as though this were business as usual has expired.

The American people need our Democratic friends to take yes for an answer. I hope that will happen today. Doctors and nurses need masks. Families need help. Small businesses need cash. Hospitals need funding. Their Senate majority is ready to deliver those things. We have been ready to deliver those things for a while. I hope today is the day this body will get it done.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Morning business is closed.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

MIDDLE CLASS HEALTH BENEFITS TAX REPEAL ACT OF 2019—MOTION TO PROCEED—Resumed

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will resume consideration of the motion to proceed to H.R. 748, which the clerk will report.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (H.R. 748) to amend the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to repeal the excise tax on

high cost employer-sponsored health coverage.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority whip.

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. THUNE. Madam President, at this very minute, across the country, families are wondering how they are going to survive financially now that mom or dad is out of a job. Hourly workers whose businesses have closed temporarily are praying that they will still have a job to go back to when this is all over. Small businesses are facing agonizing decisions about whether they will have to lay off employees or close their businesses altogether.

And Democrats? Well, Democrats have been focused on fuel emissions standards and early voting. That is right. In the midst of an unprecedented health and financial crisis, Democrats have been delaying a major relief bill in hopes that they can include a laundry list of their pet projects—projects that have absolutely nothing to do with providing financial relief to Americans or ensuring the medical professionals have the resources they need to fight this virus.

Republicans developed this legislation in conjunction with Democrats. It was teed up, being written up Saturday, Saturday evening, ready to vote Sunday morning, when Democrats voted to block even getting on the bill—even getting on the bill. They said: Well, we need to block it now because we may not be able to block it later—not, of course, acknowledging that there is yet another 60-vote hurdle that we would have to get over before we get to final consideration of the bill. But it has been teed up and ready to go now since Saturday night. We made a lot of changes since then to the legislation to address the Democrats' priorities.

I thought we were very close to agreement on a final bill. Of course, then the Democratic leadership of the House and Senate stepped in. They apparently decided this was a perfect opportunity to implement a bunch of Democratic pet projects that have nothing to do—nothing to do with fighting the coronavirus or helping the American families who are suffering financially at this very minute.

I know my Democrat colleagues have come to regard "bipartisanship" as a bad word in the past 3 years, but I had hoped—I really, sincerely had hoped—that in this hour of serious need, the Democrats would be able to put aside their prejudices and work with Republicans to pass this critical legislation. Apparently, that was too much to hope for from the Democrat leadership.

Neither my colleagues nor I have given up on reaching an agreement. We are still working, and I am still hoping we will arrive at a final bill sometime later today.

We should already have passed this legislation 3 days ago. The blame for not passing it lies squarely on the Democrats' shoulders. I really hope