

Against Women Act, and I hope our colleagues across the aisle will reconsider and come back to the negotiating table and work with us so that we can finally reauthorize this program.

UNITED STATES-MEXICO-CANADA TRADE
AGREEMENT

Mr. President, finally, another priority that I alluded to a moment ago that I hope we can get to soon is to pass the USMCA, the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, which will succeed NAFTA and guide our trading relationships with Mexico and Canada into the future.

NAFTA has been a boon for our economy—especially in my State, in Texas—but it is time to bring this more than quarter-century-old agreement into the 21st century. That is precisely what the USMCA will do. It modernizes trade with our northern and southern neighbors and lays the foundation for better economies, more jobs, and greater prosperity for each of our countries.

The process of getting that bill across the Senate floor has been more than a year in the making, but we are making some progress, as I indicated, starting yesterday in the Senate Finance Committee. It was reported out with a bipartisan vote of 25 for and 3 against.

I haven't been shy about expressing my concerns about how this process has played out, especially cutting the Senate out of its negotiating position under trade promotion authority, but I do believe, on net, that this agreement is beneficial and will support it.

So I look forward to getting an opportunity, presumably once Speaker PELOSI sends the Articles of Impeachment over here and it meets its expected fate. Nobody I know expects 67 Senators to vote to convict and to remove President Trump based on the thin gruel presented by the two Articles of Impeachment that were voted on by the House in an ultrapartisan manner.

Once we get past all of that, I hope we can continue along the series of wins for our country in 2020, and I, for one, am eager to work on that. I hope we will be able to chart a path forward on an impeachment trial in the near future so that we can begin focusing on this legislation that will help the American people over the next 12 months and not squander a minute more than absolutely necessary.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Illinois.

SENATE LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, I listened carefully to the comments by my colleague from Texas, Senator CORNYN, when he talked about impeachment purgatory and the fact that the Senate is unable to act on critical legislation—many bills that have already passed the House of Representatives—because of the impeachment proceedings.

Well, the impeachment proceedings have not started in the U.S. Senate. So

what is the excuse? Was it the impeachment proceeding that stopped us from considering one bill in the Senate this week? Was it the impeachment proceeding that stopped us from considering one bill in the Senate last week? No, it was the conscious decision of the Senate majority leader, Senator MCCONNELL, the Republican leader, with the Republican majority, not to call a single piece of legislation in the last 2 weeks.

There shouldn't be any surprise among the membership that we did nothing in the last 2 weeks other than a few garden-variety nominations. The fact is, we have done nothing for a long time under Senator MCCONNELL's leadership. Do you know, for the record, how many amendments were actually debated on the floor of the U.S. Senate last year in the entire calendar year? Twenty-two. Twenty-two amendments, six offered by the junior Senator from Kentucky. If I am not mistaken, all of them were defeated, but the point I am trying to make is, 22 amendments in 1 year and now the Republican majority is blaming Speaker PELOSI and the impeachment proceedings for the fact that we do nothing. It doesn't make sense, and it doesn't add up.

We are doing nothing because that is the strategy of Senator MCCONNELL. The House of Representatives has passed hundreds—not a dozen, hundreds—of bills for the Senate to consider, on every imaginable topic: issues relating to healthcare, which we heard about from the Senator from Texas; issues relating to immigration. The litany is long. Within that litany, you would think that Senator MCCONNELL could find one bill—just one—from the House of Representatives to debate on the floor of the U.S. Senate, but we don't do that in the Senate. We no longer debate under Senator MCCONNELL's leadership.

Some people look at this room and call it the Senate Chamber. That is true; it is the Senate Chamber. Now, sadly, it is more the Senate storage facility. We store on the floor of the Senate Chamber the desks of former Senators who actually legislated on the floor of the Senate. It is not a museum because there is still some active business underway, but it is a storage facility.

These desks, if they could only speak, would tell the stories of men and women who stood up on the floor and debated critical issues. I was here for some of it. Issues of war and peace—we don't take those up anymore. If a President wants to go to war in Iran, obviously, his party thinks that we shouldn't interfere with his thought process, though the Constitution states clearly we are supposed to interfere. Congress has the authority, under the Constitution, to declare war.

When issues would come up before us—important issues—in the past, we would debate them at length, whether it was health insurance for Americans, whether we were talking about ques-

tions of the disabled in America being active participants in our society, a time when Senators from both sides of the aisle stood up in this Chamber and, in a lengthy debate, passed the Americans with Disabilities Act. One was Senator Bob Dole, a disabled veteran from World War II and Republican leader; another was Tom Harkin, a Democrat from Iowa. The two of them had a bipartisan measure and a real fulsome debate that doesn't happen on this floor of this Senate Chamber anymore.

For Senators to come here and blame NANCY PELOSI, the Speaker of the House, for our inactivity is laughable. We have failed to move forward because the leadership does not want to call the bill. Senator MCCONNELL has the authority to decide what we will debate on the floor of the U.S. Senate, and he has decided we will debate nothing—nothing.

What a wasted opportunity. If America was just picture-perfect from sea to shining sea, you would say: Well, there is no reason. We don't need a Senate or a House. We know better. There are important issues we should address, issues related to challenges facing families across America; issues of the mounting student debt across this country and what it has meant to hundreds of thousands of young people and their future; the issues involving gun violence in this country, where we still have mass killings yet can't even pass one bill to keep guns out of the hands of convicted felons and people who are mentally unstable; the issue of healthcare.

I certainly agree with the Senator from Texas when it comes to the cost of prescription drugs, the No. 1 concern of families across this country. All Senator SCHUMER has asked for is that we bring this measure to the floor and let Senator CORNYN's good idea be brought to the floor with Senator DURBIN's good idea—and perhaps other Senators' good ideas—and actually have a debate right here on the floor of the Senate. It would be amazing. People would be tuned in all across America saying: You can't imagine; the Senate is alive; it is actually considering measures.

Although, we don't. Twenty-two amendments in one calendar year—it is just amazing that we have reached that point.

POLITICAL PRISONERS

Mr. President, I come to the floor to address three specific issues. One of the first is a matter that I didn't know would actually be part of my responsibility as a Senator, but over the years my staff came to me and talked to me about political prisoners in far-flung nations around the world, men and women literally in jail because they are exercising their right to speak, to be journalists, to assemble, to run for political office.

My staff said: They are forgotten. Nobody knows they are there. They languish in prisons for months and

years and sometimes die there. Nobody even mentions their name. Would you consider coming to the floor of the Senate and saying something, perhaps writing a letter to the Embassy of the country where they are being held prisoner?

I was skeptical as to whether or not that would even be worth the effort, but I have learned over the years it is. I have come to the Senate floor to raise the cases of political prisoners around the world, typically journalists or activists who found themselves jailed for defending basic freedoms we take for granted.

In some cases, with the help of my colleagues on both sides of the aisle, we have seen the release of some of these prisoners. Others still languish.

I bring their pictures to the floor because mentioning their names is important, but seeing them tells a story too. Raif Badawi and Waleed Abulkhair, in Saudi Arabia, and interim Venezuelan President Guaido's chief of staff Roberto Marrero continue to languish unjustly in prison. We continue to press for their release.

I always thought that trying to secure the release of political prisoners was worthwhile because it spoke to our values as Americans. I have had a chance to meet some of them after they were released.

It is an amazing feeling after someone has spent years—literally years—in prison and comes to my office in the Capitol and breaks down in tears in gratitude. It reminds me that they shouldn't be forgotten, and neither should many others.

Unfortunately, this President is too comfortable with these autocratic leaders who imprison people around the world. I wish he weren't.

That brings me to the Philippines, one of our key democratic allies in Asia. Over the Christmas break, I thought my friends were joking with me when they came to me and said: Well, I guess you will not be going to the Philippines soon. I didn't know what they were talking about.

It turns out that in my home State, in Illinois, there are many Filipino Americans. It is one of the largest immigrant groups coming to our country. What an incredible population Filipino Americans are. As I have come to know them, they have strong family values and strong religious values, and they are hard-working folks. They open these little shops and sit in them for 16 hours or 18 hours a day because that is the way an immigrating Filipino sets the stage for their son and daughter to have a better life.

Over the holiday recess, the President of the Philippines, President Duterte, announced that he was banning Senator PATRICK LEAHY of Vermont, as well as myself and Senator ED MARKEY of Massachusetts, from ever visiting the Philippines. I was kind of shocked to see that. I didn't expect that.

What precipitated this reaction? He also, incidentally, threatened to re-

strict the travel of all Americans to the Philippines. For some time, several of us, including Senator LEAHY and Senator MARKEY, have been advocating for the release of Filipina Senator Leila de Lima. Senator de Lima was a former head of the National Human Rights Commission of the Philippines and an internationally recognized human rights champion critical of President Duterte's extrajudicial killings.

What did that lead to? Her arrest and her being sentenced and imprisoned for up to 3 years in jail for speaking out against the current President of the Philippines.

Here is a photo of her being taken to court after she was arrested a little over 3 years ago.

Who is behind her release? Not just Senators LEAHY, DURBIN, and MARKEY and many of our colleagues, but also Amnesty International, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, and the Raoul Wallenberg Center.

Let me read an excerpt from the letter she sent me.

As you can imagine, I may be the one currently in detention, but I am not the only victim suffering in this situation . . . so are the victims of extrajudicial killings and their families, so are all defenders of human rights . . . and ultimately, so are all of us all over the world who defend democracy and rule of law.

Senator MARKEY has a resolution calling for Senator de Lima's release and an end to the harassment of Filipina journalist Maria Ressa, which I am proud to cosponsor and hope will pass the Senate soon.

Last year, Senator LEAHY joined me in an amendment to the State and Foreign Operations bill, denying U.S. visas to those involved in Senator de Lima's politically motivated incarceration. It was our little measure in that appropriations bill that led President Duterte to ban us from ever traveling to the Philippines. There is an easy and honorable way forward. The Duterte regime should stop threatening the travel of Filipino Americans and so many others who travel between our nations and, instead, ensure a quick and credible trial for Senator de Lima or simply do the right thing and release her.

In the end, her freedom and the end of government harassment of journalists like Maria Ressa will be important tests of whether the cherished democratic norms we share with our long-standing Filipino allies will be respected by President Duterte.

UNITED STATES-MEXICO-CANADA TRADE AGREEMENT

Mr. President, trade agreements are controversial. They come before the Senate and the House infrequently and are usually very hard to pass. It takes months and months of work. One of those trade agreements, which is known as the USMCA, or the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, or NAFTA 2.0, is one that I have watched carefully. I voted for the original

NAFTA agreement when I was a Member of the House of Representatives. It was not a popular vote among many people in Illinois, but I felt that it was the right thing to do. I felt that moving the Mexican economy forward, watching it mature, with the creation of a middle class, would mean that it would be a more stable nation and a nation that would consume many goods produced in the United States.

That happened, but it happened at an expense, too, to be very honest. Many companies in the United States saw the low wage rates in Mexico, closed their plants in places like Galesburg, IL, and moved operations to Mexico. Some moved to China and other places.

That displacement of jobs was painful. It was hard to explain to families that this was a transition that ultimately was for the good of all nations involved. If it was your family, you didn't care about the good of a nation. You wanted to know if dad had a job.

The pain we went through over the last 25 years led me into this conversation about the USMCA with some skepticism. I didn't want to be behind any effort that would ultimately result in more American jobs being lost unnecessarily. I am proud to say that this negotiation, unlike many things in this town, turned out to be a bipartisan success.

President Trump presented us with an original version of the USMCA, and many of us took exception to some of its contents. I was particularly worried about one provision in there relating to the price of prescription drugs and some other provisions in the original measure. Then, a fulsome negotiation took place. Democrats and Republicans sat down. The net result was a positive thing. Just this last week, the Senate Finance Committee reported this USMCA by a vote of 25 to 3. I believe this bill—this new measure, this new NAFTA—enjoys broad bipartisan support.

This morning, I went on a conference call with the agriculture leaders of Illinois. I am proud to say we have one of the strongest agricultural States in the Nation and some of the best women and men who farm our land and produce food and fiber for people to consume all across America and around the world. They have gone through some very tough times. The President's trade problems with China have hurt us especially. Our soybean producers have seen a 93-percent decline in their exports of soybeans and soybean products from the State of Illinois. They have paid heavily for the decision in this administration to cut back on renewable fuels and to issue waivers to oil companies so they don't have to blend them in the fuel they sell us at gas stations.

They have seen the decline in the net foreign income, an increase in foreign debt, and we have sent aid payments to them, which they reluctantly accept as just the only lifeline they have to keep their farms in the family.