EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I move to proceed to executive session to consider Calendar No. 649.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is on agreeing to the motion.

The motion was agreed to.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the nomination.

The bill clerk read the nomination of Stephen Sidney Schwartz, of Virginia, to be a Judge of the United States Court of Federal Claims for a term of fifteen years.

CLOTURE MOTION

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I send a cloture motion to the desk.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The cloture motion having been presented under rule XXII, the Chair directs the clerk to read the motion.

The bill clerk read as follows:

CLOTURE MOTION

We, the undersigned Senators, in accordance with the provisions of rule XXII of the Standing Rules of the Senate, do hereby move to bring to a close debate on the nomination of Stephen Sidney Schwartz, of Virginia, to be a Judge of the United States Court of Federal Claims for a term of fifteen years.

Mitch McConnell, Joni Ernst, John Boozman, James E. Risch, Mike Rounds, Roger F. Wicker, Mike Crapo, Mitt Romney, John Barrasso, Shelley Moore Capito, Pat Roberts, Thom Tillis, Cindy Hyde-Smith, David Perdue, Lindsey Graham, Kevin Cramer, Tim Scott.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I move to proceed to legislative session.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is on agreeing to the motion.

The motion was agreed to.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I move to proceed to executive session to consider Calendar No. 911.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is on agreeing to the motion.

The motion was agreed to.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the nomination.

The bill clerk read the nomination of Nathan A. Simington, of Virginia, to be a Member of the Federal Communications Commission for a term of five years from July 1, 2019.

CLOTURE MOTION

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I send a cloture motion to the desk.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The cloture motion having been presented under rule XXII, the Chair directs the clerk to read the motion.

The bill clerk read as follows:

CLOTURE MOTION

We, the undersigned Senators, in accordance with the provisions of rule XXII of the Standing Rules of the Senate, do hereby move to bring to a close debate on the nomination of Nathan A. Simington, of Virginia, to be a Member of the Federal Communications Commission for a term of five years from July 1, 2019.

Mitch McConnell, Cindy Hyde-Smith, Joni Ernst, John Barrasso, Tim Scott, Lamar Alexander, Pat Roberts, Kevin Cramer, Shelley Moore Capito, Lindsey Graham, John Thune, Marco Rubio, Mike Crapo, Todd Young, Thom Tillis, Marsha Blackburn, Steve Daines.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I move to proceed to legislative session.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is on agreeing to the motion.

The motion was agreed to.

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, 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. 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 VACCINE

Mr. BLUNT. Mr. President, the Presiding Officer and I are here, and we have been meeting today in Washington at, really, a groundbreaking moment as we continue this battle for our health, for our economy, and against the virus. What makes this such a critical moment are the developments we have seen in the last 10 days regarding a vaccine.

Public health experts around the world have agreed, almost from day one, that the way to really find the end of this pandemic—the ultimate weapon—would be to develop a vaccine that worked. Less than a year ago, which was in January and February of this year, we were hearing that 2 years would set a record for developing a vaccine and that sometimes a vaccine that has been developed on a new disease like this has taken 3 and 5 and even 10 years or more. Yet here we are, less a year from the discovery of COVID–19, with not just one vaccine but two vaccines that have already applied for their use permits. Both vaccines have shown an effectiveness of more than 90 percent, and a third vaccine with a similar response is about to get to the place at which it, too, can apply for use.

These are incredible numbers. It wasn't that many months ago that healthcare experts were saying, if we get a vaccine that is effective 50 percent of the time or more, that the government should consider accepting that vaccine and making it available to people, and here we are with a 90 percent effective vaccine. I had the measles, and my kids had the measles shot, which seemed to pretty much eliminate the measles. It was 90 percent effective. This is the kind of vaccine that has been the most effective among the most effective vaccines we have ever had.

Pfizer and Moderna have both come forward and asked for their emergency use authorizations. The emergency use doesn't really mean they have cut any corners. The only thing we have failed to do is to watch the 30,000 or so people for another 2 or 3 years who were in both of these trials. That is why we can't say with certainty if this vaccine will last for a lifetime or if this vaccine will be a 3-year vaccine or even a 1-year vaccine. What we can say with certainty is that, about 95 percent of the time, it will prevent you from getting the disease. Of course, if people are prevented from getting the disease, they can't spread the disease, and that is why a 90 percent effective vaccine, like the measles vaccine, was basically 100 percent effective as long as people took it.

So we need to step back, really, I think, and look at the unconventional way we got here. How did we get from 3 to 5 to, maybe, 10 years to less than a year of discovering a virus for the very first time to our having a vaccine?

The way that researchers have been able to move forward with this and the way that Congress and the Trump administration have responded to this pandemic has been extraordinary. In our country, Operation Warp Speed has accelerated the development of this new vaccine through a fast-track process that could be described, really, in one word—unprecedented. Normally, vaccines take years. Researchers have to go out and secure funding, get approvals, and study results step by step to get to where we are today. Only then would a vaccine be determined to be safe and effective, and only then would manufacturing begin.

Normally, with a vaccine, the day the vaccine is approved is the day you start manufacturing. We know that this is not what is happening here. In fact, in just a few minutes, I am going to mention that the head of distribution is saying, on the day the vaccine is approved, we will start shipping millions of copies of that vaccine all over the country.

This all really started with Congress's deciding, as we put these COVID relief packages together from the very first couple of packages, that when it came to a cure, we were not going to let funding stand in the way nor were we going to let it stand in the way of investing some money somewhere that just simply didn't work because, by investing money where it didn't work, it allowed us to invest money where it did work. Congress appropriated $18 billion for vaccines and testing. About $12.5 billion has gone into the vaccine side. Most of the rest has gone into testing, with some going into therapy. This is a decision Congress made. With this vaccine, we are going to become partners in developing how we fight back.

There was a risk that some of the vaccine candidates we supported wouldn't make it, but there was never a risk that the vaccine candidates that did make it wouldn't be as safe as any vaccine has ever been. In fact, many of these vaccines have had more people involved in the studies than ever before. Because of the virulence of the virus, the people in the studies, frankly, were more likely than not to be exposed to COVID, and a bunch of them were more likely than not to catch it. Of course, that is the moment when you decide if the group that caught the virus was the group that had the virus—the group that had the vaccine in these studies—or if it were the group that didn't have the vaccine. What we found out was, 95 percent of the time, it was the group that didn't have the vaccine, which is where you get that 95 percent number.

Congress provided that we would take some risk. We so often hear that failure is not an option. In this case, if you didn't fail, you were not trying hard enough. If all you wind up with are things that have gotten approved, then you probably have left some things on the table that you should have tried.

The Presiding Officer is a great businessman, and he knows, if you are in a business that is growing, you are going to have some failures. If you have never had failures in your business, you have not tried anything new, which means you probably haven't grown. So we would have failures not in a vaccine that we would give to people but by thinking: This would appear like it would have a good chance of being approved, so let's put it in the group of vaccines that we are working on.

President Trump and Operation Warp Speed stepped up and decided they were going to move at a faster pace than ever before but with more safety than we have had in most vaccine developments in the history of the country. So we decided to support several vaccines that, again, we thought had a better chance of being approved than not. Now, you take some risk in that because all of the vaccines won't be approved, but you take no risk if you are going to support a vaccine that is approved but that is not safe. Yet that is not what happened at all. You just put a lot of racehorses in the race.

The dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor University says, if you are racing to get a vaccine quickly, one way to do it is to put as many horses in the race as you can, and that is exactly what we have done. We have invested in several potential vaccines and, I think, three different paths to a vaccine, which means that all of the vaccines that are approved will not be exactly the same in how you have to store them, in how you have to transport them, and whether you have to have one shot or two to have the full vaccine.

And we have signed contracts with six leading candidates already. We have invested $2.5 billion to help develop and purchase 100 million doses of the vaccine being developed by Moderna. That was jointly developed by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and the company.

We have dedicated $2 billion in a different pattern to purchase 100 million doses of the Pfizer vaccine, and we have done that with that investment in a way that allows us to shorten the processing time, combining various study phases and clinical trials going on at the same time and moving forward in a way that also allowed us to be manufacturing vaccines while we were still studying and moving toward final approval by the FDA.

So we have two vaccines standing and ready now for final approval, another one to join them soon, and another one to join them quickly after that. But all of them are already in the stage of manufacturing.

So what is the worst thing that could have happened to taxpayers? We invest in a vaccine that turns out not to work, and, at that point we step in, meet our commitment—in essence, buy the vaccine that didn't work—be sure that it is effectively destroyed, and realize that that was a chance that we took that didn't produce a result. But the other vaccines that did work had a result and had vaccine available as soon as they were approved.

In fact, General Perna, Operation Warp Speed's chief operating officer, said the government would begin vaccinations within 24 hours after a vaccine secures FDA approval. In the past, I would say you would be closer to saying it will be 12 or 24 months after approval before the first vaccine is ready to go to the first person, but now we are saying 24 hours, and we are on the edge of that 24 hours.

I talked today with the Governor of my State, the Governor of Missouri, Mike Parson, and the head of the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services, Dr. Randall Williams, about what they were doing. They submitted a plan early. I was with the Governor—I think it was in mid-August—when the Centers for Disease Control told all the Governors: We want to have a plan by the end of October of how you are going to distribute this vaccine when you get it.

I said at about that same time that if we failed in our effort to get the vaccine effectively distributed after the effort we made to get it, it would be one of the great government failures of all time.

But Governor Parson, Dr. Williams, and others who have worked hard on this in our State put a plan in and put it in pretty early and now are ready to execute that plan as soon as they have the vaccine available to them.

About 2 percent of the population of the country lives in Missouri, and so about 2 percent of every distribution will go to Missouri as vaccines are ready.

Pfizer will have about 25 million vaccines to distribute almost immediately. Moderna will have about 20 million to distribute almost immediately. And we know that others are standing right behind them.

Another thing that Congress asked the Centers for Disease Control to do was to come up with a recommendation on who the vaccine should be given to. And just this week the CDC advisory committee made their recommendation to the Centers for Disease Control. Either today or sometime soon after today, the CDC, in all likelihood, will adopt those recommendations as they have in this past.

The recommendations go something like this: First, you want to prioritize healthcare workers and people most likely to have the worst result if they catch the virus. So if you take all the healthcare workers in America and all the people in a senior living kind of condition in America, you are talking about around 15 percent of the population.

Somewhere in there, either in that group or the next group, you include all the first responders and police officers in the country, who come into situations so often that they have no control over, and then you go to the other essential employees in America—the childcare center worker, the schoolteacher, the busdriver, the grocery store clerk, the food processing person who is out there making this happen.

I think there has been some decision made on the healthcare workers that we should include clergy in the healthcare workers because they are so often present in hospitals and with people in circumstances where they would like to see someone from their faith present, but that person also is a healthcare provider in the healthcare network and, just like others working in the hospital, will be able to get that early vaccination.

But let's go back to the essential workforce. The essential workforce of the groups we have talked about and others who come into lots of contact with people are often least able to make arrangements in their own time to even get a vaccine if it is for free. They are going to be a big priority.

When I go to the grocery store and I ask someone for help, which I often need to do to find the one thing on my list I don't know how to find, or when I go by to check out with the grocery store clerk, if the grocery store clerk, no matter how big the shield is between them and me, if they couldn't possibly get it from the person who checked out 2 days earlier or early that day, they can't possibly give it to me.

So every step of the way, the whole country becomes safer until, hopefully, by the end of April or so, we are at a place where everybody has access to the vaccine.

By the way, by the time you do the 15 percent of the population that is most likely to have a bad result if they get the virus and healthcare workers and

add that to the 35 percent of the population that is the essential workforce, that is 50 percent of the population that could have the vaccine if they chose to have it.

I think most people think that we are there, in our State and other places, by sometime in April. In fact, Dr. Fauci said that Americans determined to be at the highest risk—healthcare workers, frontline workers, seniors, those with underlying conditions—could be vaccinated by the end of the year.

Certainly, if there is a second shot, it might be by the end of January, and you have 15 percent of the whole population vaccinated by the end of January or sometime in January, and another 35 percent would have the vaccine available to them by sometime in April.

Then we look at the rest of the population. But in each step of the way—let me say again—every time you take somebody off the playing field of where contact with the virus could successfully occur, everybody else gets safer too.

If a person who has been vaccinated is where the germs happen to land instead of the person standing beside them who wasn't vaccinated, the life of that particular germ is gone, and eventually that is how you emerge from a pandemic. There just aren't enough people left for this to land on that either haven't had it or haven't had the vaccine to prevent it.

It is a critical time. It is an important time. I think we have written two new chapters in pandemic response, both in testing and in vaccines.

Operation Warp Speed has done in months what typically can take 10 to 15 years and, even in an expedited way, can take 2 to 3 to 5 years.

Given the urgent need to beat this virus, I think Operation Warp Speed, with the great scientific community—a lot of this is built on research that was funded by NIH. One of the priorities of the Congress for the last 5 years has been to increase NIH funding, at a time when we know more about genetics.

Two of these vaccines are basically based on the molecular code that is sort of the software for genetics. It is a different way than vaccines have been developed before and would not have been developed without government-encouraged research.

Having a diverse selection of vaccines means there are different people producing vaccines at the same time in different places, and we will have, more likely, a quick and fair distribution of any FDA-authorized vaccines.

Certainly, I have been frustrated, as many of us have, to think that we have not been able to reach an agreement on what money we might need to finish this vaccine effort, the distribution effort.

Hopefully, we can come to the next round of COVID relief sooner rather than later.

As I said earlier this week, a targeted funding package now will have a lot more impact than a much bigger package would have 4 or 5 months from now. There is no reason we shouldn't be able to find common ground. This is a time when we can make that effort to finish the job. The pandemic is affecting Americans every day. I have talked to a lot of people who have seen greater numbers of drug dependency and huge declines in mental health because that support network is gone and isolation has taken over, and worry about family, finances, and health has become a big part of that.

Let's show the people we work for that we are going to be able to continue this job, and let's praise the great researchers in our country and others who stepped forward in incredible ways to do things that just 9 months ago nobody thought could possibly be established in the timeframe we are working on right now.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Missouri.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. BLUNT. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to executive session for the consideration of the following nomination: Executive Calendar No. 568.

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

The clerk will report the nomination.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the nomination of Lanny Erdos, of Ohio, to be Director of the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement.

There being no objection, the Senate proceeded to consider the nomination.

Mr. BLUNT. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate vote on the nomination with no intervening action or debate; that, if confirmed, the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table and the President be immediately notified of the Senate's action.

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

The question is, Will the Senate advise and consent to the Erdos nomination?

The nomination was confirmed.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. BLUNT. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to legislative session and be in a period of morning business with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

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

REMEBERING CHARLES CARROLL SMITH

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, I would like to take a few moments to say farewell to a friend and a public servant who served my State of Illinois and our Nation well. His name was Charles Carroll Smith, but his friends called him Charlie. He died on the day after Thanksgiving. Our paths crossed often over the years.

Charlie served as Illinois' deputy secretary of state under then-Secretary of State Alan Dixon. When Alan Dixon was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1980, Charlie came to Washington with him. He was a key member of the Dixon staff, serving as both legislative director and senior national security adviser. When Alan Dixon left the Senate, Charlie joined the staff of Kentucky Senator Wendell Ford, then the Senate's Democratic whip. Charlie was Senator Ford's legislative staff director and a trusted adviser to Senator Ford on matters involving national security and foreign relations.

He helped craft and pass many important pieces of legislation, including the 1990 law establishing the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission in 1990. He went on to serve as executive director of the 1995 Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission—a massive task to try to realign America's military bases with the realities of the post-Cold War world.

The work of the Base Closure Commission was necessary, complex, and historic, and Charlie's intricate understanding of both the Defense Department and the security needs of America and our allies was critical to the commission's success. Despite the gargantuan task, Charlie was never too busy to listen. I and all of the Members of the Illinois congressional delegation appreciated his willingness to always consider fairly our explanations about the national security importance of the military bases in our State. He never put his thumb on the scale for Illinois, but he made sure that we received a fair hearing. The day the commission announced its recommendations in 2005, Charlie called me to explain in layman's language just what the recommendations meant for Illinois and for America. I have never met anyone with a greater understanding of the workings of the Defense Department and the ability to translate that knowledge into plain English. He was a rare one.

Charlie came by his political and legislative skills the old-fashioned way. He inherited them. He grew up in an Irish Catholic Democratic family on the North Side of Chicago. His father was in politics; his mother was a professor. Charlie was the first-born and only son in the family of three children.

The Smith family took politics and democracy seriously. Charlie and his father were both named Charles Carroll Smith, senior and junior. Family legend has it that they were descended from Charles Carroll, one of the signers of America's Declaration of Independence and a member of the Continental Congress. Whether it was true or not—