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Senate

The Senate met at 3 p.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.

Great Redeemer, guide our law-makers along the best path to fulfill Your purposes on Earth. May they submit to Your wisdom and providential leading, believing that You will supply all of their needs. Remind them that Your unfailing love accompanies those who put their trust in You.

Lord, give our Senators an attitude of reverential awe that will keep them from evil and inspire them to rejoice and be glad as they strive to live lives of purity and obedience.

And, Lord, as we remember Pearl Harbor on this December 7, thank You for Your loving and prevailing providence. May we show our gratitude by facing the future without fear.

We pray in Your majestic 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 (Mr. HAWLEY). The Senator from Iowa.

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

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

RECOGNIZING IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY FOOTBALL

Mr. GRASSLEY. Mr. President, I want to visit with my colleagues about something that hasn't happened in

Iowa for over 100 years. Over the week-end, the Iowa State football team completed their regular season play. The Cyclones are having a noteworthy season. They secured the first place rank in the Big 12 Conference's regular season after winning five consecutive conference games and eight overall conference wins this season.

The good news doesn't stop there for the Iowa State football program. The Cyclones finished first place in league play, for the first time since 1912, when they won the Missouri Valley Conference. This has earned the Cyclones their well-deserved spot in the Big 12 title game on December 19, the first ever Big 12 championship appearance in Iowa State University's history.

I want to applaud the Cyclones for their historic season. So many fans, including me, will be rooting them on for the Big 12 championship game.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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 President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

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.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will pro-

ceed to executive session to resume consideration of the following nomination, which the clerk will report.

The legislative 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.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Vermont.

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, speaking both as a Senator from Vermont and as vice chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, I am speaking with concern about what has been happening in the Senate.

It has been 321 days since the first COVID-19 case was reported in the United States—321 days. It has been 282 days since the first COVID-19 death was reported in the United States.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the unemployment rate in November was 6.7 percent, nearly double the rate in November of last year. Hundreds of thousands of small businesses across the country have closed permanently, all due to COVID.

As of today, there are more than 14,800,000 reported cases of COVID-19 in the United States. To put that in perspective, that is 1 million more than just a week ago. More than 282,000 Americans have died, and it has been 256 days since the Senate passed the CARES Act—256 days since the Senate acted in a comprehensive, meaningful way to address the real and mounting concerns and needs of our constituents.

My State of Vermont is like everywhere else. Healthcare workers, caregivers, business owners, employees, teachers, and students are all in need of support during these difficult and uncertain times.

We have families wrestling with heightened food insecurity. People for the first time in their lives cannot feed their children and they cannot feed themselves. They have the threat of eviction from their homes hanging over them.

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



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We have States that are strapped by budget shortfalls and are forced to lay off thousands of employees, people who have worked so hard for the people of their State.

It has been 205 days since the House first passed the Heroes Act, and it has been 65 days since they stepped forward to offer a substantial compromise on the Heroes Act and passed it again. And where does it sit? It sits on my friend the Republican leader's desk. It is collecting dust. It is the largest and most significant bill in the McConnell legislative graveyard.

Why aren't we voting? Look what happens. We can't even bring ourselves to actually vote on something to help Americans, to help the people of our own States. They are being thrown out of their houses, their apartments, and out of their jobs, and we come in for a few days and then get on an airplane and fly back home, and the taxpayers pay for it, taxpayers paying our salaries and all and nothing happens.

Now, like millions of Americans, I am encouraged by the news of recent weeks that pharmaceutical companies are making significant progress on vaccine development. I am encouraged that some of these vaccines may be available as early as later this month.

Let's not forget why we were able to develop vaccines so quickly. It is because of longstanding Federal investment in cutting-edge research at the National Institutes of Health—research that has been backed by so many of us in both parties for years in this body. NIH funded research in genetic and genomic sequencing and enabled the research of COVID-19 that led to the vaccine. This is the power of Federal dollars when it is targeted to solve a national—a national—problem. We need more of that today.

The development of several promised vaccines is great news, but if you don't have a comprehensive plan in place and resources implemented, how can we be sure the vaccination is safe, effective, widely available, and free?

Can anybody stand up and say that every part of their State will have vaccination? No, the money is not there yet, and we haven't done anything on that. It is a complete abdication of our responsibility as elected Representatives that we have simply failed to act.

Now, I know that my friends across the aisle will probably rush to the floor, and they will blame Democrats for stalling on their inadequate, face-saving proposal that they went through the motions to bring before the elections. Remember what it was. It was a give-away to insurance companies, and they didn't even have the courage to allow amendments for people to actually have to vote up or down. It is easier to make a face-saving gesture knowing it would not go anywhere.

Sure, it made some investments in small businesses. It provided some employment relief, albeit at a significantly reduced level. But it also tied educational relief to forcing kids back

into the classroom, even if it is an area where it was not safe to accommodate those children.

It failed to deliver on relief to State and local governments, which are continuing to try to provide essential services to their communities, as our government is in Vermont. It included nothing for Low Income Home Energy Assistance, or LIHEAP. And it was snowing in our State and in a lot of other northern States this weekend. It had no funding for mental health services. Can you imagine what is going on—no funding for mental health service? There is no funding for nutrition assistance. There wasn't a dime for NIH research. And it didn't have a plan—a vigorous plan—or an investment in vaccination production and distribution.

It is one thing to say we have these supercold things on an airplane. Wonderful. When are you going to be able to bring it to our factories, our schools, our hospitals, and our senior citizens and actually vaccinate them?

So what was the legislation brought up here? It created a shield for corporate misconduct. And what it said is that my friends, the Republicans, are more keen to shield corporate cronies than to work on behalf of the American people. That is a sham. It is a shame, especially when you find that at least in one of those corporations that want a shield, the managers were betting on who would get COVID first.

In my home State of Vermont, our Governor and our State legislature, our mayors, and our town leaders across State have taken bold moves to slow the spread of COVID. Our Governor is Republican, and I am a Democrat. I praise him for what he did. I talked with him again today about the steps he has taken—difficult steps, hard steps, but steps to keep Vermonters safe. And these moves taken in my State of Vermont resulted in lower instances of the virus than anywhere else in the country. But as the Governor said and what I have said and everybody else has said, they have come with a cost. We have kept people safe, but not without a cost. Unemployment remains. Small businesses continue to struggle, if they are even able to stay in existence. That says nothing of the personal hardship families are facing across our small State.

One elderly woman called my office. She expressed frustration with the President. She told my staff that she has only been able to visit her husband, who is in a medical rehab facility, a couple of times during this pandemic due to COVID restrictions. That is not an anecdote. That is a personal tragedy.

In Vermont, the State and local governments are worrying about how to clear the roads this winter if COVID hits the plow crews. Snow removal isn't a luxury in Vermont in the winter. It is a necessity. We sometimes have 7, 8, 9, 10 inches of snow overnight. But we expect our businesses

and our schools to open that day. I don't know how many times, at home, on a snowy night, I wake at 4:30 in the morning as I hear the snowplows going by on the road, and I know I can get to my office a couple of hours later—and we have had nearly a foot of snow.

My staff spoke with one Vermont mother—not unusual. She is raising a son with autism. With school systems strained to their limits, special education services have been sharply reduced. That is going to have a lasting impact on these students, both educationally and socially.

For those who are facing challenges like addiction, depression, or mental health issues—and that can be any one of our States—or who were simply down on their luck before COVID hit earlier this year, access to vital resources like counseling or intervention has been made more complicated by COVID restrictions, often with tragic results.

I heard of one Vermonter who passed away alone in a motel room in Rutland in October. Battling mental health issues, he had become homeless just as COVID struck earlier this year. And due to the risks of the virus, family and friends were unable to take him into their homes. This isn't just a story. It is a man's life. And there are so many more people out there facing the same struggles.

We are seeing images of car lines at food banks stretching for miles, as an unprecedented wave of food insecurity is washing over our country. In my State alone, one in every four Vermonters are now food insecure. Before this pandemic, it was already an unacceptable 1 in 10.

We are asking children to learn without providing the necessary resources their teachers need. We are asking families to pay rent without their jobs and for people to deal with their chronic illnesses while our hospitals are still stretched to capacity. All of this is while an unacceptable amount of people are unsure how they will put food on the table through the end of the week in the wealthiest Nation on Earth. That is unconscionable.

I must say that the leadership across the aisle has got to bring up these bills. Stop stalling. You know, they say we only need a targeted approach, and they point to the stock market as proof. These people who are out of jobs aren't looking at the stock market. These people who can't feed their children aren't looking at the stock market. For these people whose rent has come due and they can't pay it, to them that is nonsense.

The economy is not going to recover until we have vanquished the virus. It is that simple. It is that basic. And people are suffering now. That is the cost of inaction—inaction on real, comprehensive, COVID relief legislation.

Now with our backs against the wall with a funding deadline looming, we are racing to accomplish what should

have been done months ago: annual appropriations bills to keep our government running. We were ready on this side of the aisle to vote on those back in June and have a couple of amendments up or down. Republicans, in the majority, if they didn't like a Democratic amendment, they could vote it down. We could have done it back then. Now the deadline is this week, months later. We have to pass these bills before Congress adjourns this year so there is no disruption in our government, in our services during this difficult time in our country. It will only exacerbate the growing problems facing many Americans today. But our annual appropriations bills are no substitute for the significant investment we need to confront this national and international emergency. We need a comprehensive COVID relief bill.

It is time to get serious. Instead of flying off every weekend back home, stay here. Vote these things up or down. Bring up amendments on both sides of the aisle. Have an agreement on the amendments and vote them up or down, because time is wasted.

How many hours have we spent racing to confirm nomination after nomination at the expense of everything else, including dealing with the emergency of this pandemic, while COVID cases soar and more and more people succumb to this virus? How much more time will the Senate waste while American families and communities suffer? It is time for us to do our job. We are elected for 6-year terms. Let's stay here for 6 days during the week, if need be. Let's get it done. The American people are suffering enough. We shouldn't be adding to that strain by playing politics with these essential priorities.

I am hearing from Vermonters every day, worried about unemployment benefits, their children's education, their health or for that of their loved ones, about food security, about keeping their homes and paying their bills.

The Senate, when it has been at its best, has been the conscience of the Nation. It is long past time that we started acting like the conscience of the Nation. It has been 256 days since the Senate took meaningful action on this COVID epidemic. We shouldn't wait a day longer. Let's set everything else aside. Let's have votes on these programs. Let's vote up or down. This Senator is ready to do that.

I see the distinguished leader on the floor.

I yield the floor.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Ms. ERNST). The majority leader is recognized.

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. MCCONNELL. Madam President, we have reached the time of year when the Senate has more important outstanding business than we have days to complete it. Delivering for the American people will take focus, dexterity, and genuine bipartisanship. On govern-

ment funding, as I have said for weeks, it is my hope that our committees' work will bear fruit and a full-year funding package will come to the floor in both Chambers.

I anticipate that the Senate will take up a 1-week extension this week so the government does not close on December 11 and work can continue through the end of next week.

The Nation needs our Democratic colleagues to resist the temptation to play brinksmanship with long-settled policy issues or push poison-pill riders that they know would tank the process.

We also expect to receive and pass a conference report on the annual Defense authorization. And we need to continue confirming nominees to vacancies in the judiciary and the executive branch.

We Senators are no strangers to the end-of-year drama, but this time the stakes are far higher. We are up against another, even steeper surge in COVID-19 than we saw back in the spring. Workers and small businesses are once again struggling to make ends meet as States and localities step up precautions.

And while the latest news on the vaccine trials suggest that victory over the virus may soon be within reach, our work in that area is far from complete. As one recent article put it, "State [and] local officials plead for vaccine distribution funds."

Our Nation's historic sprint to victory through vaccines seems poised to succeed in record time, but the critical last step—hundreds of millions of doses out to the American people—is still in front of us. Congress cannot stay on the sidelines.

Yesterday, our colleague from Illinois, the Democratic whip, gave an interview in which he named three examples of highly urgent matters that need to be addressed for our Nation right now. This is the Democratic whip of the U.S. Senate.

Here are the three things Senator DURBIN mentioned as flashing red, urgent priorities: "The millions of people who are going to . . . lose their unemployment insurance the day after Christmas"; "the businesses that are trying to decide . . . whether or not they can continue"; and "the [vaccine] logistics . . . to make sure that this vaccine is on the road and vaccinating people across America as quickly as possible."

Those are the three things he mentioned. Those are the three urgent issues he named as examples: extending unemployment insurance, helping small businesses, and funding vaccine distribution.

Well, I do not question the sincerity of our colleague, who I believe is engaged in these discussions in good faith. But these comments illustrate perfectly a point that Republicans have been making for weeks. These three urgent issues are issues where there is almost total bipartisan consensus, no real disagreement whatsoever.

In fact, the framework for a small, targeted relief package that I put forward last week—something Democrats quickly attacked—would have resolved all three of those subjects. The targeted Republican framework extends unemployment insurance programs that will otherwise expire; it creates an entire second round of the Paycheck Protection Program for the hardest hit small businesses; and it lays groundwork to distribute the vaccines that appear to be on the horizon. Check, check, and check.

The Democratic whip is right to recognize these three subjects as especially urgent because they are especially urgent. That is why Republicans have been trying over and over to get them passed. That is why Republicans have been saying for months that Speaker PELOSI and the Democratic leader should let Congress get out of the places where we already agree rather than holding everything hostage over their most controversial, partisan demands.

But month after month after month, it has been the Democratic leaders who have said that no relief whatsoever can pass, no consensus items can become law unless multiple controversial areas where we don't agree are resolved to the Democrats' liking.

That is why the Democratic leader had every single Senate Democratic vote to filibuster a targeted COVID-19 relief package back in September and again in October. That bill would have taken care of small businesses, unemployment insurance, and vaccine distribution months ago. Senate Democrats blocked it.

I think, if the Senate Democratic leader would allow it, the three things that the Democratic whip mentioned just yesterday—small business aid, reupping unemployment aid, and setting up vaccine distribution—would pass the Senate in a landslide.

A targeted compromise on the most urgent items would pass by a massive bipartisan margin. We could easily put together a whole slew of commonsense policies—including those three and other things, like legal protections that universities and the American Council on Education have been pleading for—bring it to the floor, and pass it.

Everyone knows why this hasn't happened. There is one reason the Speaker of the House and the Democratic leader have spent months tying the most bipartisan, most commonsense policies to their most controversial requests and saying that the country can't get the former unless they get the latter. Their strategy has been all or nothing, so struggling Americans have, of course, gotten nothing.

Well, we are down to the wire. The light at the end of the tunnel is in sight. Operation Warp Speed seems poised to deliver vaccines on a historic, almost miraculous timetable. We have seen some hopeful signs of engagement from our Democratic colleagues, but