

The actions taken were totally partisan, just like those in all the other legislatures. So the idea that this can have some kind of bipartisan solution befuddles me, because every action taken in the legislature is done just with Republican State Senators, Republican assembly members, with no Democratic participation or input. In fact, the Texas legislators told us they were deliberately excluded from certain meetings and conference committee hearings.

Speaking for our caucus, we were all taken by the courage of the Texas legislators, their fortitude, and, most importantly, by their mission to defend the right of every American to be able to access the ballot, not just in Texas but across the country. These lawmakers in one State put everything on the line to protect voting rights in their State. The Senate should put everything on the line to protect voting rights in this country.

Now, tomorrow, Senate Democrats will hold another special caucus meeting to continue discussing the best path forward to achieve voting rights legislation.

AUTHORIZATION FOR USE OF MILITARY FORCE

Mr. President, 2 days ago, the Biden administration became the first administration since the beginning of the Iraq war to support repealing the authorization for the use of military force in Iraq, passed in 2002 and now in effect for 19 years.

The Iraq war has been over for nearly a decade. An authorization passed in 2002 is no longer necessary in 2021. It has been nearly 10 years since this particular authorization has been cited as a primary justification for military operations. It no longer serves a vital purpose in our fight against violent extremists in the Middle East.

So I strongly and fully support repealing the 2002 authorization for the use of military force in Iraq. This is the first time I am formally announcing my support for repeal.

I want to be clear. In no way will America abandon our relationship with Iraq and its people as they rebuild their country after years of war in our shared fight against ISIS, but there are very good reasons to repeal the specific legal authority.

For example, it will eliminate the danger of a future administration reaching back into the legal dustbin to use it as a justification for military adventurism. At the beginning of last year, we saw that danger become frightfully real when President Trump ordered an airstrike against an Iranian target in Iraq without transparency, without proper notification to Congress, and without a clear strategy. President Trump cited the 2002 AUMF as partial justification, ex-post facto—a claim that legal scholars and foreign policy experts resoundingly rejected. There is no good reason to allow this legal authority to persist in case another reckless Commander in Chief tries the same trick in the future.

Tomorrow, the House of Representatives will vote on whether to formally repeal the authorization. Next week, Chairman MENENDEZ and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee will mark up a resolution led by Senators YOUNG and KAINE which will repeal the Iraq war AUMF. It is my intention, as majority leader, to bring this matter to a floor vote this year, and we will discuss the precise timing with Chairman MENENDEZ.

JUDICIAL NOMINATIONS

Mr. President, sometimes good news comes to those who wait. Other times, it comes rather quickly. Earlier this year, I recommended to President Biden a prominent voting rights attorney for a key position on the Federal Bench in New York.

Yesterday, President Biden agreed with my recommendation and announced his intention to formally nominate Myrna Perez for the Second Circuit Court of Appeals. I am very pleased that the President has chosen her and am proud to have championed her candidacy.

Ms. Perez is not only an accomplished attorney who has dedicated her career to equal justice under the law, but she is one of the Nation's foremost experts on voting rights and elections. With a national focus on voting rights now, it is a significant step to elevate Ms. Perez to the Federal Bench.

Beyond that important exercise, she would also be the first Latina to serve on the Second Circuit Court since now-Justice Sonia Sotomayor—who, incidentally, I suggested to President Obama that he put her on the Supreme Court. Ms. Perez is a perfect example of Democrats' desire to bring balance, experience, and professional and personal diversity back to the judiciary.

So far this year, I have made two recommendations to the Second Circuit in New York: Ms. Eunice Lee, a former Federal defender, and now Ms. Perez, a voting rights attorney.

The cupboards of the Federal judiciary have long been stocked with former prosecutors and corporate lawyers. It is about time that civil rights attorneys, voting rights attorneys, and Federal defenders like these two outstanding nominees join the ranks.

So, again, I applaud President Biden's decision. It is a very bright day for the future of the Federal Bench in New York.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Republican leader is recognized.

ECONOMIC RECOVERY

Mr. McCONNELL. Key economic indicators continue to show that our Nation's recovery is still facing significant headwinds.

Last week, we learned that inflation has logged its steepest increase since the 2008 financial crisis. There are more unfilled jobs in America than at any point on record, and, when asked, more than 90 percent of the small business owners trying to fill them say they are having trouble finding qualified candidates.

So how did we get here?

When COVID-19 arrived last spring, emergency shutdowns put the brakes on what had become a roaring economy. The pro-growth agenda enacted by Republicans had helped drive unemployment to its lowest level in a half-century. Take-home pay was rising and rising fastest for lower earners, and millions of new workers were coming off the sidelines to join a competitive market for American talent.

The past year presented harsh new challenges, but thanks to the bravery of frontline workers, the genius of scientists, and targeted, bipartisan relief measures passed here in Congress, our Nation was beginning to turn the corner.

The Biden administration actually inherited the conditions for success. It had a bipartisan roadmap of how best to support our economic recovery.

Alas, but instead, the Democrats chose to ram through trillions of dollars in liberal pet projects—a relative pittance for actual pandemic relief and a massive expansion of Federal unemployment benefits that has made staying home the most sensible financial decision for literally millions of American workers.

As one pair of economists put it recently, "The stimulus bill stimulated unemployment, not employment." To be specific, their analysis found it created conditions in at least 19 States where a family of four could claim the equivalent of a six-figure salary by staying out of the workforce.

Let me say that again. One recent study found that in 19 States, a family of four, with two working parents, would have had to earn at an annual rate of more than \$100,000 from working for it to make financial sense not to stay home. In 19 States, it made more sense to stay home than to go back to work.

But burying American workers in incentives to stay home hasn't just hurt rehiring; it has also magnified supply shortages. A few months back, the recovery made possible by bipartisan action last year had our economy geared up for a rush of consumer spending, but today, short-staffed producers are having to pass the rising costs on to households just as this rush was set to ramp up.

A tough year forced American families to put off some big purchases, but now they are facing some of the worst sticker shock in a generation. Used car

prices are 30 percent higher than last year, and the cost of some home appliances has spiked nearly as much. Everyday essentials are getting pricier too. Milk is up 7 percent, and gas has jumped by more than 50 percent.

Consumers are feeling the real cost of what the White House Chief of Staff called “the most progressive domestic legislation in a generation.” But it didn’t have to be this way. These are exactly the conditions economists have been writing about and warning about for months.

Back in March, the Washington Post ran an ominous line:

For policy experts and even members of Biden’s own party, the improving picture is raising questions about whether the stimulus bill is mismatched—

Mismatched—

to the needs of the current moment.

Sure enough, not just any member of the President’s party but a top economist under both the last two Democratic administrations, Larry Summers, cautioned even earlier that a massive spending plan like the one Democrats were proposing could “set off inflationary pressures of a kind we have not seen in a generation.” Prescient, to say the least. That is exactly what has happened.

These exact fears have been realized, and experts are still clear about the source of the problem. “Labor shortages are the last thing that we need” with inflation on the rise. Until very recently, the White House has been unwilling to connect these dots.

States have been on their own to turn off the perverse incentives driving the shortages. To date, 25 States have done so, announcing suspensions of excessive Federal unemployment supplements. But across the country, Main Street has already been feeling the pinch.

In my State of Kentucky, the consequences of Democrats’ misguided spending are growing more serious. Small business owners in particular are nearing a breaking point. One restaurant owner in Clark County wrote to me to say that “each week it gets harder to create a full schedule. Restaurants are already reducing hours of operation. Next will come closing.”

I have heard the same story from constituents all over the Commonwealth. A sign manufacturer in Woodford County had to ask his staff to work as many as 10 hours of overtime each week just to keep up with demand. An outdoor supplies maker in McCracken County saw shipping costs quadruple in the past year. He can’t find a prospective employee who will even show up for an interview. He can’t even find a prospective employee who will show up for an interview. After 25 years of production, he is facing the prospect that his company may not be able to stay afloat.

The Commonwealth still has 90,000 fewer workers than we did before the pandemic. In the past year, the Consumer Price Index in Kentucky and

surrounding States has increased by a whopping 7 percent. The recovery teed up by smart, targeted, bipartisan policies last year has been buried under an ill-advised, self-inflicted avalanche—avalanche—of spending. Folks in Kentucky know all too well what happens when Democrats get carried away here in Washington. They know who ends up footing the bill back home.

Higher prices at the gas pump and the grocery store, just as families were hoping to put a year of sacrifices in the rearview mirror—these are the real-world effects of the Biden administration’s multitrillion-dollar economic debacle. These are the effects that Republicans and nonpartisan experts have warned about literally for months.

The American people are, nevertheless, resilient. Job creators, innovators, and skilled workers are ready. But as our economy slowly gets back up to speed, it certainly won’t be because Democrats stroked an outsized check; it will be in spite of it.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

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

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

RUSSIA

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, today President Biden had the first of his meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin. He certainly has many important messages to convey to Mr. Putin about ongoing cyber attacks against us and our allies, the murdering of peaceful political opponents, and potential areas where we may be able to work together to deal with nuclear proliferation. The important discussion comes after several days where President Biden reaffirmed our relationship with our most important allies, those in the G7 and NATO. There were important announcements about leading the global COVID vaccine effort and standing up to the outrages perpetrated by nations around the world. But perhaps what was most important was that President Biden reasserted America’s role as a leading champion of democracy, security, and international norms.

I hope this spells an end—and I believe it does—of the unimaginable events that occurred in the previous administration: Coddling a foreign dictator such as Putin, dismissing our closest allies, and threatening the critical North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

President Biden knows that America’s leadership and its example are critical in leading shared efforts to stop this pandemic, tackle climate change, push back on rogue nations, and maintain global norms of behavior. President Biden also knows that how we manage our democracy here at home affects our ability to lead abroad.

The last administration bullied our allies, who watched in disbelief as it cozied up to the autocrats around the world. I have often said that a great deal of America’s influence around the world comes from the power of its ideals and values—critical and precious assets that we must nurture and never take for granted.

Our historic peaceful transfer of power has been a marvel for generations for much of the world. I will never forget the power and emotion felt walking with my friend the late Senator John McCain through Ukraine’s Maidan square, looking at the makeshift memorials to those who lost their lives hoping for a free and democratic Ukraine.

John McCain once said:

America’s greatest strength has always been its hopeful vision of human progress.

I couldn’t agree more. I couldn’t be more proud that President Biden is reaffirming this belief on the world stage this week. So let me take this moment to commend the President and his team for a timely, critical, and important visit with international allies and adversaries in recent days. It won’t solve all the problems we face, but we can be proud of this example of American leadership, generosity, and decency.

JUNETEENTH

Mr. President, this Saturday is Juneteenth, the oldest nationally celebrated commemoration of the end of slavery in America. Our Founders were brilliant and brave about many, many things, but they lacked the wisdom, perhaps the courage, maybe even the resolve, to face a poisonous contradiction at the heart of our new Nation. How could this Nation, founded on the belief that all people are created equal, condone and allow human slavery? Many of our Founding Fathers owned slaves themselves.

Eighty-five years after our founding, that unresolved contradiction plunged America into civil war. Halfway through that war, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, declaring that all persons held in bondage in rebellious States “are, and henceforth shall be free.”

His action meant little to most enslaved people in America. Most of those held in bondage didn’t gain freedom for another 2 years after the Civil War ended. For the 250,000 men, women, and children enslaved in the State of Texas, the wait was even longer. They learned of their freedom on June 19, 1865, 2 months after the Civil War ended, when Army MG Gordon Granger and 2,000 Union troops marched into Galveston, TX, with orders to enforce the Emancipation Proclamation.

One year later, African Americans in Galveston held America’s first Juneteenth celebration to commemorate that moment when they knew of the end of slavery in America. Formerly enslaved people wore their finest clothes, read the Emancipation Proclamation, and prayed together.