

crossing another major item off of our December to-do list.

Off the floor, Democrats continue working to put the Senate in a position to act on President Biden's Build Back Better Act, along with the timeline I have set out for our caucus. This week, bipartisan Byrd bath meetings with the Parliamentarian will continue. I thank my colleagues, the Parliamentarian, and her team for working through this important and difficult process.

The President will also continue his conversations with our caucus as we hash out the final details of the legislation. Build Back Better is moving forward, and I thank all of my colleagues and the President for their diligence and their commitment to get this done.

JUDICIAL NOMINATIONS

Mr. President, on judges and nominations, in addition to our legislative agenda, the Senate will also work today and the rest of the week on confirming more of President Biden's nominees to serve on the Federal bench.

First, we will hold a vote this morning to proceed on the nomination of Samantha Elliott to serve as a district judge for the District of New Hampshire. As soon as today, we also hope to vote on the confirmation of Jennifer Sung of Oregon, nominated to sit on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. The Senate invoked cloture on Ms. Sung at the end of last week, and I want to say a few words in support of this remarkable nominee.

Throughout her career, Ms. Sung has proven herself to be an exceptionally impartial adjudicator, a valiant advocate for working Americans, and I am confident she will be an excellent judge who adds to the personal and professional diversity of the Ninth Circuit.

A graduate of Oberlin and Yale Law School, Ms. Sung's first experience with the Ninth Circuit came while she served as a clerk for Judge Betty Fletcher before embarking on a career in private practice focused on employment and on labor law. For over a decade, she regularly represented low-income workers, minority workers, and underserved communities in disputes against their employers. As a member of the Oregon Employment Relations Board, she struck a difficult balance between protecting the rights of working Americans while applying the law without prejudice—the key ingredients for any successful Federal judge.

If confirmed, Ms. Sung will be one of the very few Asian Americans to sit on the Federal judiciary. Along with Ms. Elliott, she would be the 31st judge whom the Senate Democratic majority has confirmed this year—the most under any President's first year in decades—and we are doing it with outstanding, impartial, and diverse nominees, and we are going to keep working in the months ahead.

Today, article III judges are still overwhelmingly White, overwhelmingly male, and overwhelmingly from big law firms or prosecutorial back-

grounds. Many of these individuals have served admirably on the bench, but we hope the trailblazers of today can be closer to the norm of tomorrow. We want our courts to include more women, more diverse candidates, both demographically and professionally, and more judges who come from unique walks of life. That is how we can strengthen Americans' trust in an independent and impartial judiciary—so important to the vitality of our democracy.

CORONAVIRUS

Now, Mr. President, on the COVID moment of silence, this evening, I will join the Speaker and other congressional leaders on the Capitol steps to mark a dreaded and sorrowful milestone as 800,000 Americans—800,000—have now lost their lives to the COVID-19 pandemic. We will hold a moment of silence in their memory.

As Americans come together for the holidays, as we take stock of the long road we have taken this year, many of us carry in our hearts an unresolvable contradiction: gratitude for the progress we have made but grief for the loss we have endured along the way.

Thanks to vaccines, tens of thousands of deaths—maybe even hundreds of thousands—have been, thankfully, prevented. Across the country, Americans are returning to work and once again are meeting at bars, at restaurants, at concerts.

Our country is far better off today than we were a year ago, but on this day—this day—we will remember that 800,000 loved ones did not make it this far: a lost father or grandfather, mother or grandmother, friend or familiar face in the neighborhood. All of us know someone whom this disease has taken away. And, of course, we are not out of the woods yet. As the Omicron variant makes its way across the country, I urge my fellow New Yorkers and all of my fellow Americans to get vaccinated and boosted as soon as possible, if eligible. Vaccines remain the best—the very best—way to bring this disease to an end.

I hope the milestone we observe today is the final one in our fight against this awful disease. With vaccines, we can rid ourselves of COVID and avoid adding to the awful sum that we have reached this week.

As for those we have lost, today, we remember them. We hold them close to our hearts, and we commit to doing our part to bring this pandemic to an end.

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 Republican leader is recognized.

KENTUCKY

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, Kentucky is working to recover from the deadly storms and tornadoes. Each day brings entirely new challenges. Tens of thousands are still dealing with water, gas, or power outages. Families are in shock and grief over the loss of loved ones. Rebuilding the areas in Kentucky leveled by this storm will take months, if not years, to complete.

Amid this pain, though, bright lights of hope shine through. In the face of tragedy, Kentuckians are still as strong and as generous as we have always been.

Yesterday, I spoke with the Taylor County judge-executive. He told me that 70 families in his county had lost their homes in the storm. Emergency responders made shelters available, but folks were completely taken in by family, friends, or neighbors—just the kind of people we have in Kentucky.

In Mayfield, residents are already beginning to rebuild only days after the storm leveled full city blocks. Churches hosted Sunday services this past weekend. Locals brought their chain saws and cleared debris from the city's roads. People from nearby counties and States have flooded—literally flooded—in to help.

One man, Jimmy Finch, has struck a chord with America's hearts all across the country. He had no connections to Mayfield whatsoever. He is from Clarksville, TN. But after the disaster, he borrowed a big meat smoker, got into his car, made the hour-and-a-half journey in the dead of night and started serving up food the next morning. This fellow from Tennessee came up to Kentucky and brought a whole bunch of food. On Sunday morning, for hours, he fed chicken, hot links, and burgers to hungry residents who had been without heat or power for days.

Western Kentucky's radio and TV stations have kept operating throughout this crisis, delivering vital information, even amid roving power outages. State parks opened their doors to residents who lost their homes. Businesses, individuals, and charities have been generous with food, water, and shelter.

Kentucky's first responders are working hand in hand with FEMA to provide coordinated relief. Doctors, nurses, firefighters, and law enforcement officers are working literally through the night. Utility workers are making a Herculean effort to restore power and water.

Hundreds of Kentucky National Guardsmen have deployed to Western Kentucky to offer their assistance. And in Fort Campbell, the Federal Government has provided a critical lifeline of support: 61 generators, 74,000 meals, 135,000 liters of water, thousands of cots and blankets, all supplied by Fort Campbell.

I am in close contact with Governor Beshear, our Federal Agencies, and local leaders. My staff and I have been in frequent touch with the White House.

Kentucky will come back from this bigger and better than ever before. I will make sure the Senate provides all the assistance we can to make sure that is a reality.

INFLATION

Now, Mr. President, on a totally different matter, Washington Democrats' printing, borrowing, and spending addiction is directly hurting American families.

Two-thirds of the American people, a supermajority, are worried about inflation. About half the middle class and 70 percent of low-income families say soaring prices have personally hurt their household. And it isn't getting better, like the Biden administration promised it would. It is actually getting worse.

Last Friday, the Labor Department released a jaw-dropping report: The consumer price index has shot up 6.8 percent over the past year; 6.8 percent inflation, the worst inflation—listen to this—the worst inflation in 40 years.

Now, it is true that the average American worker has gotten a pay increase since 2020, but rising prices have more—more—than wiped that totally out.

We have a remarkable situation where American workers are earning raises, but their bigger paychecks buy their families even less than what their smaller paychecks bought before the Democrats took power. The net effect is a nearly 2-percent pay cut for the average American.

Now, our citizens do know what is happening. Sixty-seven percent of the country says Washington needs to "cut back on spending and printing money." Let me say that again. Sixty-seven percent of the country says Washington needs to "cut back on spending and printing money."

But here in Washington, leading Democrats want to plow ahead and double down on the reckless taxing-and-spending spree that got us here. They want to respond to this stunning inflation report by printing, borrowing, and spending trillions upon trillions more on new entitlements and far-left programs.

If that weren't bad enough, on Friday, a new report showed their socialist shopping spree could cost the country trillions more than Democrats are willing to admit.

You see, as one of our Democratic colleagues explained last month, his party's bill is packed full of "shell games" and "budget gimmicks"—"shell games" and "budget gimmicks." For example, their bill pretends that major new entitlements would simply expire after a few years.

Of course, that never happens. As a wise man once said, "Nothing is so permanent as a temporary government program." And Democrats aren't even pretending they think the spending would stop. They are boasting about a permanent transformation. The fake expiration dates are just an accounting trick so the pricetag looks artificially low.

And last Friday, the Congressional Budget Office announced that if we acknowledge the permanent entitlements would be permanent—in other words, tell the truth—their bill would actually cost \$4.9 trillion in the first decade alone. That is the truth of the situation. It would explode the deficit by \$3 trillion in that same 10-year period.

Democrats are trying to reassure their alarmed Members that they would find new ways to offset future extensions. But let's think about it. They have just spent months shoveling every possible pay-for into this existing bill. They already burned through huge permanent tax hikes just to partially offset the bill with the gimmicks. Extending these programs further would either explode our national debt or it would take even further trillions and even further gigantic tax hikes that Democrats are simply unwilling to specify.

So which is it, historic deficits or trillions more in secret tax hikes? The right answer for the country is neither.

Later today, every Senate Democrat is going to vote along party lines to raise our Nation's debt limit by trillions of dollars. If they jam through another reckless taxing-and-spending spree, this massive debt increase will just be the beginning: more printing and borrowing to set up more reckless spending, to cause more inflation, to hurt working families even more.

What the American people need is a break.

NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT

Mr. President, now, on one final matter, for months, while our colleagues have been writing their reckless taxing-and-spending spree behind closed doors, the Democratic majority let the National Defense Authorization Act sit in limbo. This week, 4½ months after it was cleared by the Armed Services Committee, the Senate should finally—finally—finish this legislation.

Unfortunately, those who mean America harm haven't been waiting around for us to act. Threats to our national security are grave and getting graver. Since the Biden administration's disastrous retreat from Afghanistan, according to our top commander in the region, the U.S. military has but a small fraction of the actionable intelligence they had before the coalition withdrew.

But the predictable, avoidable resurgence of terrorist networks, of course, has continued apace. We also know that more American citizens and permanent residents remain stranded under Taliban rule than the Biden administration is willing to admit.

Meanwhile, the threat of further Russian aggression toward Ukraine is testing whether this White House and our allies in Europe will avoid misguided half measures to deter and defend against grave and growing threats.

So at the risk of stating the obvious, the United States needs to follow through with promises of urgent, substantive assistance to Ukraine and en-

courage other NATO allies to do the same thing. This should not be controversial. Only in the warped world of Kremlin propaganda is giving Ukraine the means to defend itself considered provocative.

These real threats to national security and others too numerous to name should serve as a reminder of the need for America to lead by example and commit to modernizing our own military capabilities, which in turn means taking the National Defense Authorization Act seriously.

So I am glad the Senate is finally set to vote on this crucial legislation. While the process has been imperfect, I am glad that bipartisan work has produced a bill that authorizes an increase in top-line funding for our national defense.

After months of delays, our colleagues have an opportunity to begin showing that America is serious about keeping pace with adversaries like Russia that have spent literally decades modernizing their militaries with a singular focus on countering our military advantage.

We have an opportunity to pay more than just lip service to competition with China. We have an opportunity to lay a foundation that we ought to follow through with robust and full-year Defense appropriations.

I would encourage all Senators to advance this legislation today.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The majority whip.

TORNADOES

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, the monstrous chain of tornadoes and violent storms that rampaged across Illinois and five other States last Friday is a terrible reminder in America that we are all one people.

The killer storms didn't stop at State lines. They didn't discriminate based on skin color, creed, political party, or age. Among the more than 90 victims that we know of at this moment, the eldest was 86 years old; the youngest, sadly, was a tiny baby of just 5 months old.

Even as people in my State of Illinois grieve for victims in our State, we also mourn for and with all those who died and are suffering in nearby States: Arkansas, Tennessee, Mississippi, Missouri, and especially our neighbor to the south, Kentucky.

Senator MCCONNELL has spoken, and we have all seen reports, of the staggering destruction in Mayfield, KY, and other communities.

I want to say a few words about the destruction that was wreaked on my own State and also about the tremendous outpouring of compassion and community.

The National Weather Service tells us more than 30 tornadoes tore through 6 States last Friday night. The most destructive may go down as the longest continuous tornado in the history of the United States. That tornado appears to have remained on the ground for 4 hours, traveling 290 miles across