

Republicans know this. Yet his nomination has been deadlocked not once but twice at the committee level. For all the howling our Republican friends are doing about rising costs, they are truly content with dragging their feet on public servants who could actually help solve the problem. So shame on those who are blocking that.

Without Mr. Bedoya, the FTC and members are left handicapped and incapable of moving forward. So today's motion to discharge is a matter of immense importance, and I hope all my colleagues who care about fighting inflation and price manipulation and collusion vote to proceed with Mr. Bedoya's nomination.

And on one other point I wanted to make, I read that stock buybacks by the oil companies have dramatically increased this year. Why is that money going into stock buybacks instead of into other much more productive uses? This is another thing the FTC could take a look at.

Now, as the day progresses, I also want my colleagues to realize the possibility of additional votes later today. On Monday, I filed cloture on five individuals to fill other important roles across the administration. Today, we will move on the first of these nominees, but we are working to move forward with the rest as soon as we can.

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. President, now on COVID, negotiations on COVID public health response funding continue. Yesterday, I met again with my Republican colleague Senator ROMNEY, as we work to an agreement, and, today, these negotiations will keep going.

To keep the process moving forward in the Senate, last night I took the first procedural step on a legislative vehicle through which the Senate could pass COVID public health funding, when the time comes that both sides reach an agreement.

We are not yet at the finish line, but we will keep working throughout the day, and I am committed to working with the other side reasonably and in good faith. The consequences of not getting COVID funding are really serious—scary, almost.

Additional public health funding is crucial for making sure every American can get a vaccine if needed, including booster doses and potentially new, more effective vaccines down the line. New funding would help make sure we have enough testing supplies throughout the country, which we know is perhaps the most effective way to keep track of the spread of the virus.

Of course, more funding would ensure the Federal Government can continue providing treatments like monoclonal antibody treatments, which are invaluable for preventing severe COVID infections. The lack of therapeutics is probably the greatest need of all, and we need money so we can have a supply so when, God forbid, the next variant hits, we will immediately be able to counter

it with the kind of medicines that are needed that limit the severity of the infection. The rest of the world is racing to buy up the supply of these treatments and these therapeutics, and if the United States falls behind because of a lack of funding, vulnerable Americans and our whole country will pay the price.

The bottom line is this: Both sides should come to an agreement for more funding as quickly as possible because that would mean more vaccines, more therapeutics, and more testing so we can keep schools and communities open, and when and if another new variant hits, we can stay as "normal" as possible.

If a new COVID variant extends its nasty tentacles across the country and we don't have the tools to respond, then woe is us. We don't want to see that. Americans don't want to endure that. So let's keep working to try to reach an agreement soon.

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. THUNE. 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.

The Senator from South Dakota.

OCEAN SHIPPING REFORM ACT

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, American families are currently struggling with the worst inflation in 40 years—40 years. Food prices, gas prices, used car prices—everywhere Americans look, they are paying more. Wages increased on average last year, but inflation outstripped wage growth, which means that, instead of a wage increase, a lot of Americans got a de facto pay cut. And there is no clear end in sight.

It is no wonder that nearly two-thirds of the American people disapprove of President Biden's handling of the economy, and they are right to do so because Democrats bear a substantial part of the responsibility for this inflation crisis. While it is true that supply chain issues and the reopening of economies after COVID shutdowns contributed somewhat to inflationary pressures, a big part of the reason for our current inflation crisis is the Democrats' decision to pass the American Rescue Plan last March.

The very definition of "inflation" is too many dollars chasing too few goods and services, and that is exactly the situation that Democrats helped create with their so-called American Rescue Plan. Democrats took control mere weeks after Congress had passed a fifth—fifth—bipartisan COVID relief bill totaling more than \$900 billion and meeting essentially all current, pressing COVID needs.

It was abundantly clear that we were not in immediate need of trillions more in government spending, but that

didn't stop Democrats. Now that they were in charge, they were eager to take advantage of the COVID crisis to begin implementing their Big Government vision.

So, in the name of COVID relief, they pushed through a massive, partisan, \$1.9 trillion piece of legislation filled with unnecessary spending and handouts to Democrat interest groups, and the outcome was entirely predictable. Democrats flooded the economy with unnecessary government money, and the economy overheated as a result.

Unfortunately, there is no going back and undoing the American Rescue Plan Act; although, given the inflation crisis it helped create, I wonder if some Democrats wish they could go back and undo it.

There is no easy fix for Democrats' self-inflicted inflation crisis, but there are things that we can do to at least lessen its effects, starting with legislation to help ease supply chain woes.

Last week, the Senate Commerce Committee reported my bipartisan shipping legislation out of committee by voice vote. The Ocean Shipping Reform Act, which I introduced with Senator KLOBUCHAR, would help ease supply chain pressures by improving the fluidity of the supply chain.

For some time now, I have been hearing reports of ocean carriers refusing to transport certain goods, often American agricultural products. This would be a difficult situation at any time, as export markets around the world are critically important to American producers, but it is particularly painful at a time when inflation is soaring and the supply chain is under significant strain.

The Ocean Shipping Reform Act is designed to address these kinds of shipping problems and create a more level playing field for American producers. Our legislation would give the Federal Maritime Commission increased authority to respond to unfair ocean carrier practices whether that involves a refusal to carry certain cargo, like agricultural commodities, or discriminating against certain commodities for export.

Our bill would also provide the FMC with tools to more quickly resolve detention and demurrage disputes, which would bring greater efficiency and transparency to a process that leaves many shippers frustrated, especially agricultural producers and other small businesses; and our legislation would take steps to improve the movement of goods at our Nation's ports, which would help ease supply chain bottlenecks and improve the speed at which goods reach consumers.

The Ocean Shipping Reform Act would bring long-term positive changes to the maritime supply chain, which I hope would benefit exporters, importers, and consumers alike.

I was very pleased that our legislation received strong bipartisan support in the Commerce Committee, and I hope it can swiftly pass here in the

Senate. This is the kind of bill that we should be working on if we want to help alleviate our inflation situation and improve the economy.

I was dismayed to see that the President's budget, which was released this week, would double down on the kind of excessive government spending that helped get us into this inflation crisis in the first place. After a year of progressively worsening inflation, you would think Democrats would have learned their lesson, but, clearly, the President is still intent on more reckless spending, coupled, I might add, with job-killing tax hikes—and not just any tax hikes. According to Bloomberg, the President's budget would add up to being the largest tax hike in American history in dollar terms.

I hope that my Democratic colleagues here in Congress will decide to skip the President's irresponsible tax-and-spending proposals and focus on measures that would actually help alleviate this inflation crisis, not make it worse.

While there is no easy fix for our inflation situation, we can start to make things better for Americans with bipartisan legislation like the Ocean Shipping Reform Act. I hope my colleagues on both sides of the aisle will support the legislation Senator KLOBUCHAR and I have produced.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

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

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mrs. MURRAY. 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.

RESTAURANT REVITALIZATION FUND

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, I met with restaurant owners from all over my State last month—from Seattle to Yakima, to Spokane—and we talked about the American Rescue Plan and how important that was and how that bill made recovery possible for so many restaurants in our State—but not for everyone, and that is why I am on the Senate floor today.

The American Rescue Plan was absolutely a lifeline. It designated more than \$28 billion to establish a Restaurant Revitalization Fund that gave restaurant owners the financial support they needed to keep their doors open, to rehire workers, and to deal with the continued effects of COVID-19.

More than 3,500 Washington State businesses have received over \$9 billion in Federal loans and grants and debt relief since the start of the pandemic. That is not even considering the flexible dollars that we provided local governments to help local small businesses. Now, that really made a difference and helped a lot of folks keep their doors open and their employees on the payroll, but for many restaurant

owners, the funds were gone before they were able to get the same relief their neighbors got.

I don't think it is right that a business on one side of the street in Seattle got Federal dollars from the Restaurant Revitalization Fund but another mom-and-pop shop just next-door and just as qualified—that also got approved—didn't get the money because the funds ran dry.

Now, I know this is true for communities in red States and in blue States—that our restaurants are often the heart of a community. They serve their local favorites that remind us of home. They sponsor our sports teams and community causes. They allow us to get together and share a meal and celebrate with family and friends and make memories. Making these businesses whole is critical for our economy, but it is essential to preserving what makes Seattle “Seattle” or Spokane “Spokane.”

I know many of my Republican colleagues feel the same way. So I want us to look at every possible option to replenish the Restaurant Revitalization Fund and get help to every restaurant that applied and got approved but didn't get the same help as everyone else.

We have got good bipartisan bills to get this done. Our legislation would help hard-to-reach businesses and communities apply for the assistance because I really want to make sure we are helping actual small businesses, not giant corporations that don't need it.

Any Senator who has spoken to local restaurant owners knows they are dealing, still, with really tough challenges right now: increased costs from inflation and shortages of everything from straws to chicken wings, and it is not easy to find wait staff and cooks and a lot more. That is why it is so urgent that we get a bipartisan small business relief package—that makes our restaurants whole—over the finish line as soon as possible. So let's do whatever we need to do to get this done and keep our restaurants open.

CORONAVIRUS

Now, Mr. President, everyone here knows how strongly I feel that we get a COVID supplemental passed as soon as possible. We do not know when the next variant might come or how bad it could be. We don't want to end up in the same position as before, when we did not have enough tests or vaccines or therapeutics. We all know we have to get funding for a COVID supplemental passed and soon.

So let's get both of these passed together to make sure we are doing everything to keep every part of our economy up and running and so that this administration has what it needs to fund every other tool that we know will keep restaurants open, keep our schools open, and every other part of our communities.

I feel strongly that we need to pass both of those bills. So let's get them

done together, and let's get it done as soon as possible. Let's keep America healthy and our restaurants open for business.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

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

The 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 (Mr. Kaine). Without objection, it is so ordered.

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, we have some rare good news on the public health front. COVID cases are down at the lowest level since July. Crucially, hospitalizations and deaths are also down dramatically, more than 70 percent lower than they were in January during the Omicron wave. Compared to just a few months ago, our Nation is experiencing far less suffering and death, thank goodness.

But despite the progress we have made, COVID continues to be a threat. Every day, 800 American families lose a loved one to COVID—800 a day—and catch new infections, which present an opportunity for the virus to mutate.

We are at a turning point in this fight against COVID. Now, we need to strengthen our healthcare system. We need to stay a step ahead of this deadly virus. That is especially true since the subvariant of Omicron—BA.2, as it is known—has become dominant in America.

Remember the frenzy last holiday season when we were running from pharmacy to pharmacy trying to find rapid tests for our families or waiting in the freezing cold for hours on end to get a PCR test? Why would we ever want to be caught flatfooted again? We need to sustain our public health funding so that our hospitals and healthcare professionals have the equipment and tools they need to keep us safe.

The one thing dramatically worse than returning to the dark days of COVID-19 and the deadly variants would be to return unprepared. If we want to keep our masks off—and I do—if we want to keep our kids in school—and I do—and our businesses open, we need to make smart investments in America's capacity to confront future strains of these variants. We can't continue this cycle of neglect and panic. These pendulum swings harm our health system and contribute to unnecessary costs and suffering.

Congress must come together on a bipartisan basis. And shouldn't we all agree on this: that we move as a nation in the same direction? That means providing funding to purchase new booster doses, including those which the FDA authorized this week for adults over the age of 50. I got mine yesterday morning. If we don't purchase these vaccines now ahead of time, then we