

legislation in the near future. To that end, a handful of my Democratic colleagues, led by Senator MURPHY, including the great work of Senators BLUMENTHAL, SINEMA, MANCHIN, COONS, HEINRICH, and others, have been holding extended and substantive talks with Republicans to see what we can pass in this Chamber that will meaningfully address our Nation's gunfire epidemic.

I am encouraging my Democratic colleagues to keep talking to see if Republicans will work with us to come up with something that will make a meaningful change in the lives of the American people and help stop gun violence. There is virtual unanimity among Senate Democrats that getting something passed through this Chamber is worth pursuing if it will make a tangible difference in preventing gun violence.

We know we are not going to get everything we want. We know the push for even more meaningful gun safety will continue after this debate, but making real progress is very important. Senator MURPHY has asked for some space to have these bipartisan talks continue, and I have given him that space. I look forward to discussing the status of those talks with my colleagues today.

We owe it to American parents. We owe it to American kids. We owe it to every single neighborhood, every single community, every single household that has been ripped apart by gun violence. This is a tough fight. Nevertheless, we have a moral obligation to do everything conceivable to break the cycle of violence.

In the wake of the tragedies in Uvalde and Buffalo, we have a chance to tell the American people that, this time, their anguish will not fall on deaf ears. We have a chance to tell them we hear them; that we, too, are angry and we will do everything we can to make real progress in the Senate, difficult as that is. But it is only going to happen if both sides keep working. Only with that will hope for a compromise translate into real, concrete legislation. We know it is a difficult hurdle to overcome; but, nevertheless, we must do everything we can to try and succeed.

HONORING OUR PACT ACT OF 2021

Mr. President, now onto the PACT Act. Later this morning, the Senate will take the first vote to advance one of the most important veteran healthcare bills that this Chamber has considered in decades.

Memorial Day was a little over a week ago, the day our Nation honors our war dead and rededicates itself for caring for those who sacrificed everything to protect our country. Our veterans deserve endless thanks, not just through words, but through action.

Today, toxic chemical exposure is one of the most devastating health problems impacting our Nation's veterans. Since 2001, as many as 3½ million servicemembers—3½ million—have been exposed to toxic smoke, including toxic burn pits and Agent Orange.

Sadly, many of them are unable to get the care they need because of outdated rules within the Veterans Administration that determine eligibility for benefits.

This is long overdue for a change. It is something I have been advocating for years. And, today, I am thrilled that the Senate will vote to begin consideration of the Honoring our PACT Act, which my colleagues Senator TESTER and Senator MORAN have done a great job putting together. Every single one of us in this Chamber has heard from a military servicemember who has struggled to afford quality healthcare, and this is one of the best steps the Senate can take to improve the lives of those who have given their all for our country.

The Honoring our PACT Act will be one of the largest expansions in healthcare benefits in VA history, and it would make sure no military servicemember exposed to toxic chemicals has to endure the indignity of carrying the burden of sickness and treatment alone.

I expect today's vote will yield strong bipartisan support, and once we are on this bill—because today is just a motion to proceed, not passage of the bill yet—there is no reason we can't pass it quickly and without needless distraction.

Once again, I want to thank Senators TESTER and MORAN for their leadership on this issue. This issue has been important to me. I have encouraged them, and they have worked so well together adroitly so that this bill can pass.

I want to thank every single VSO that has advocated for change. And I want to thank prominent voices like Jon Stewart and John Feal—who I just met in my office—who have fiercely advocated for our veterans.

We are moving forward today on this bill, and it is my hope we can reach final passage very quickly.

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.

BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

Mr. MCCONNELL. Back in 2019, while running for the White House, President Biden made a public promise. Here is what he said:

I guarantee you, we are going to end fossil fuels.

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Once in office, he wasted no time starting down that path, and now working families are paying the price.

During the previous administration, under Republican policies, our Nation

became a net exporter of oil for the first time literally in decades. We were producing all that we needed and then some. The headlines under this all-Democratic-controlled government are quite different.

Here are two from January 2021, right out of the gate: "Biden halts oil and gas leases [and] permits on US land and water." Here is another: "Biden Order Blocks Keystone XL Pipeline." January 2021.

Here are the headlines more recently. From a few weeks ago: "Biden pulls 3 offshore oil lease sales, curbing new drilling this year." From just this past week: "Biden EPA to make it easier for states to block fossil fuel projects."

So even if oil and gas producers could get past the Biden regulatory gauntlet to actually explore and produce in this country, they likely could not get a pipeline approved to move it to market.

President Biden is delivering the holy war on domestic American energy that he promised on the campaign trail. Meanwhile, energy costs and gas prices for American families have absolutely skyrocketed. Gas prices have literally doubled since his administration took office. The average price at the pump has doubled.

The President's staff try to play this off as "Putin's price hike." How many times have we heard that? But the reality is that prices were already climbing steadily long before—long before—the escalation in Ukraine; up more than \$1 per gallon before—before—Putin's escalation. Prices for natural gas and other home heating sources were likewise elevated all last winter.

Don't count on the warmer months bringing much relief. Here is what the New York Times wrote about a month ago. "Get Ready," the Times said, "for Another Energy Price Spike: High Electric Bills."

Already frustrated and angry about high gasoline prices, many Americans are being hit by rapidly rising electricity bills . . . the biggest annual increase in more than a decade.

According to another report, "the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission predicts electricity prices could rise by as much as 233 percent over last summer's power prices."

And electricity costs aren't the only problem; there is also the question of reliability. According to the North American Electric Reliability Corporation, Americans—particularly in the West and Midwest—should brace for potentially dangerous electricity blackouts this summer.

Once again, you can credit Democrats' war on fossil fuels. It retired too many fossil fuel-powered electricity generators too quickly, while replacing them with big subsidies for less reliable sources of power.

Just a few days ago, President Biden said that soaring gas prices were just part of "an incredible transition that will leave us less reliant on fossil fuels." Did you hear that, American

workers? Democrats say your financial pain is the necessary cost to make America more to the liking of the radical environmental left.

The Secretary of Energy has naively suggested that green energy will leave us in a better strategic position than fossil fuels. Well, maybe she is not aware that more than 80 percent of the world's polysilicon is made in China, and about 80 percent of America's rare earth mineral needs are met by Chinese imports as well.

This is why it is such a joke for the administration to misuse the Defense Production Act to prop up solar panel manufacturers. They will just end up subsidizing Chinese suppliers upstream.

Our stockpiles of actual military requirements, like Javelin missiles and essential munitions, are being depleted. Production of critical inputs, like energetics and solid rocket motors, is backed up months and even years. But instead of using the Defense Production Act for our Nation's defense, the President is using it to indirectly line China's pocket.

Washington Democrats are hostile to the kinds of domestic mining and drilling that we will need to produce any kind of energy here at home, even green energy.

Last year, House Democrats proposed a literal dirt tax—dirt tax—that would crush domestic minerals and rare earth mining. They are so opposed to domestic mining, including for critical and rare earth minerals, Democrats literally tried to tax—listen to this—they wanted to tax dirt. Tax dirt.

So, look, this doesn't have to be this way. The American people know exactly what we need: an all-American domestic energy strategy, crude oil responsibly drilled in America, natural gas responsibly fracked in America, and more minerals and high-tech components responsibly mined in America. Democrats have a different plan: less production and higher prices. And Americans are paying for it literally every day.

UKRAINE

Mr. President, now on a related matter, last month, by an overwhelming bipartisan margin, the Senate approved a package of urgent assistance for Ukraine. Then, over the Memorial Day State work period, our friends on the frontlines marked their 100th day of resisting the latest stab of Russian aggression.

As colleagues and I can attest from our visit with President Zelenskyy and his team in Kyiv, the people of Ukraine continue to display incredible resilience and incredible bravery. Every day, brave Ukrainian soldiers pay the ultimate sacrifice to defend the sovereignty of their democratic country. Every day, innocent Ukrainians are suffering under Russia's brutal and indiscriminate assault.

Over a hundred days of war, Ukraine's resolve has remained quite firm. Can the same be said of the West?

As Russia pumps more combat power to the front, Ukraine's soldiers need

more weapons. They need more powerful weapons, and they need longer range weapons to counter Russia's offensive forces from safety. We should not delay the provision of these life-saving capabilities.

Our objective is not to humiliate Putin but to help Ukraine defend itself. That is what should guide our decisions, not Vladimir Putin's ego. We should not be self-deterred by fears that Putin will escalate. Those most affected by the risk of escalation are the Ukrainians, and they are certainly not deterred. They are fighting for their lives, and Putin is already indiscriminately leveling their cities.

Those concerned with escalation consider what Putin will do to their cities if he is not stopped by Ukraine. But some of Ukraine's supporters here in the West have yet to learn the lesson. Some of our wealthiest NATO members have dragged their feet in greenlighting the sort of military assistance our eastern flank allies have delivered willingly and at a tremendous cost. Some eastern flank partners have also welcomed millions of Ukrainian refugees into their countries. And there is more that wealthy European countries can do to help provide military, economic, and humanitarian relief in this time of crisis.

Here at home, the Biden administration's hemming and hawing and self-deterrence has slowly, incrementally given way to a more competent policy, but it has come attached to utterly incoherent public messaging.

The Biden administration should clarify that it will continue to provide Ukraine with long-range rockets so it can defend itself—defend itself—from massive military barrages that are being fired from Ukrainian territory.

The administration should clarify whether it will provide anti-ship missiles so Ukraine can target Russian threats to Ukraine's Black Sea ports and the critical export of Ukraine's grain harvest. Putin is weaponizing global food shortages, and we can and should help the Ukrainians do something about it. Doing so will send a signal to hesitant partners that they, too, should be providing Ukraine with these critical—critical—capabilities.

But reluctance to get Ukraine what it needs is particularly baffling when you consider what a Russian victory would mean for our own national security interest. Letting a vibrant, Western-facing democracy fall into Russian control would send the price of our own security operations on the continent literally through the roof. It would put America's closest allies and trading partners one border closer to an autocratic bully. And half a world away, it would tell other bullies, like the Chinese Communist Party, that lawless conquest of their neighbors isn't just possible; it is actually permitted.

If America and our allies aren't willing to do everything we can to help Ukraine win before it is too late, we will face costly, outsized consequences quite soon.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

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

The bill 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.

INFLATION

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, the White House has apparently decided to spend June focusing on the economy.

President Biden kicked things off with an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal entitled "My Plan for Fighting Inflation."

Before he gets to the actual "plan," though, the President spends the first half of the op-ed touting his supposed economic successes. As usual, he takes credit for the economy's recovery from COVID-related woes, even though the recovery was well underway before he became President and was a natural result of the economy reopening after COVID shutdowns.

He touts job creation figures without mentioning the fact that businesses are struggling to find workers to fill jobs. He touts the number of new small business applications in 2021 without mentioning that small business optimism is at its lowest level since April 2020 at the height of the pandemic shutdowns. And he mentions "millions of Americans getting jobs with better pay," while leaving out the fact that inflation continues to outstrip wage growth, meaning that, on average, Americans are experiencing a de facto pay cut.

In all, he spends multiple paragraphs attempting to convince Americans that the economy is thriving, which I have to think feels pretty meaningless to the millions of Americans struggling with massive increases in the cost of gas, groceries, and other everyday goods.

In fact, a poll released yesterday found that just 27 percent of Americans believe they have a good chance of improving their standard of living, and it is no wonder. The President can talk about his supposed economic achievements all he wants, but that means little to Americans who have seen their disposable income eaten up by price hikes or whose raise failed to keep even pace with the increase in the cost of living.

And, of course, the President completely omits the fact that it was his economic plans that helped create our current inflation crisis in the first place. When President Biden took office, inflation was at 1.4 percent, well within the Federal Reserve's target inflation rate of 2 percent. Today, it is at 8.3 percent, near a 40-year high.

And how did we get from there to here? In substantial part, via the President's so-called American Rescue Plan. Democrats' massive partisan spending spree flooded the economy with unnecessary government money, and the