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Senate

The Senate met at 10 a.m. and was called to order by the Honorable PATTY MURRAY, a Senator from the State of Washington.

PRAYER

The Chaplain, Dr. Barry C. Black, offered the following prayer:

Let us pray.

King of kings and Lord of lords, we worship You for great is Your faithfulness. Today, show our lawmakers the way You desire for them to choose. Enable them to know with certainty that You are the God who delivers them.

Lord, inspire them to cultivate such a spirit of humility that they will obey Your commands regardless of the consequences. Let integrity and uprightness preserve them as they discover the joy of fellowship in Your presence.

We pray in Your merciful Name. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The Presiding Officer 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.

APPOINTMENT OF ACTING PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will please read a communication to the Senate from the President pro tempore (Mr. LEAHY).

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the following letter:

U.S. SENATE,
PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE,
Washington, DC, February 2, 2022.

To the Senate:

Under the provisions of rule I, paragraph 3, of the Standing Rules of the Senate, I hereby appoint the Honorable PATTY MURRAY, a Senator from the State of Washington, to perform the duties of the Chair.

PATRICK J. LEAHY,
President pro tempore.

Mrs. MURRAY thereupon assumed the Chair as Acting President pro tempore.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Morning business is closed.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the Senate will proceed to executive session and resume consideration of the following nomination, which the clerk will report.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the nomination of Rupa Ranga Puttagunta, of the District of Columbia, to be Associate Judge of the Superior Court of the District of Columbia for the term of fifteen years.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

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

TRIBUTE TO BEN RAY LUJÁN

Mr. SCHUMER. Madam President, yesterday, we all received the awful and frightening news that one of our dear friends, Senator BEN RAY LUJÁN of New Mexico, suffered a stroke last Thursday after experiencing dizziness and fatigue while back in his home State. Our thoughts, our prayers, and our most fervent well-wishes go out to BEN RAY and his family.

I was glad and relieved to hear that he is expected to make a full recovery, and all of us are rooting for him every

step of the way between now and the day he makes his return to the Senate.

Senator LUJÁN has served in this Chamber for only a year, but already he has become one of the most beloved Members of this body. Public service literally runs in the family, and you will be hard pressed to find someone who fights for their home State like BEN RAY does for New Mexico.

As Senator LUJÁN begins his path to full recovery, I want to offer encouragement and praise for his superb staff, who will continue their work providing vital constituent services for the people of New Mexico.

In the days to come, we will continue working and communicating with Senator LUJÁN's staff about his recovery process, and all of us are hopeful and optimistic that he will be back to his old self before long. In the meantime, the U.S. Senate will continue to move forward in carrying out its business on behalf of the American people.

BUSINESS BEFORE THE SENATE

Now, Madam President, it is going to be another busy day here on the Senate floor as we confirm more of President Biden's nominees to serve in his administration and on the Federal bench.

For the information of all, we will be holding three votes starting around 11 a.m. this morning to either confirm or invoke cloture on a handful of nominees to serve as associate judges for the District of Columbia.

Later this afternoon, at approximately 2:15, we will hold three more votes on additional judicial nominees. Members should be advised that additional votes may be scheduled as the day progresses. So I ask all of us to be patient and to be flexible. We have a lot of votes to get through today.

Most of these votes, in the old days, would have just occurred by voice, but our colleagues on the other side of the aisle—just a handful—are making us vote even for DC judges, circuit judges. But we have to get through them—the DC courts have come to a standstill—and many other votes.

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



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S463

So we will have a lot of votes to get through today. All of us want to get to them and get them done in a timely manner to respect the schedule of our colleagues.

So in order to move things along, I am urging my colleagues to be ready to vote early when each vote is called so we can prevent extended delays and confirm as many of President Biden's qualified nominees as possible.

BANNING BOOKS

Now, on book banning, an entirely different matter, over the past year a truly Orwellian trend has spread across our schools, libraries, and State legislatures. With an intensity not seen in decades, far-right extremists at the local and State level are engaging in efforts to ban hundreds of book titles from the shelves of schools and public libraries.

These efforts are framed as attempts to regulate obscene or inappropriate content, but if you even take a passing glance at the books under scrutiny, it is clear the goal here is to censor and suppress materials that deal with matters of race, sexual and gender orientation, and, more broadly speaking, social injustice.

In Texas, for instance, State legislators have been demanding that schools send lists of titles to be scrutinized and, in some instances, have already pulled hundreds of titles from their shelves, from mere fear of repercussions.

In Mississippi, one mayor withheld funding from local public libraries and said he would only relent when all books exploring LGBTQ themes were removed. That is patently disgusting.

And in Tennessee, one school even banned a Pulitzer prize-winning graphic novel depicting the Holocaust because some mice weren't wearing clothes.

These new and unprecedented efforts by the far right to ban books that explore matters of injustice and racism are deeply disturbing and downright Orwellian. Many of the titles under attack have been well known for decades. Some are Pulitzer prize-winning works. Others are—get this—children's picture books—children's picture books. The list is broad—dizzily broad. Many of these works are vital to our society because they can do only what literature can do—explore timely social issues and expand people's understanding of the world around us.

We don't need to look that far into history to see what happens when we go down the dangerous road of censorship and suppression. When free expression is weakened, the mob is empowered. The groundwork is laid for further discrimination, intimidation, and, God forbid, increased violence.

It is one thing for families and local communities to have good-faith discussions about the best way to help our students learn and grow, but what we are seeing here today isn't that. These modern-day efforts from the far right to ban hundreds of books from the top

down are dangerous, patently un-American, and this right-wing cancel culture should be resoundingly condemned.

I yield the floor.

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

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

TRIBUTE TO BEN RAY LUJÁN

Mr. McCONNELL. Madam President, first, the entire Senate is praying for and pulling for our colleague Senator LUJÁN. We learned yesterday that our colleague suffered a stroke late last week and has been hospitalized in New Mexico as he recovers. It is certainly encouraging to read that our friend and colleague is expected to make a full recovery.

I know that all 99 of his colleagues are thinking of him every day, rooting for a swift and smooth recovery, and already looking forward to the next time we see him.

CORONAVIRUS

Madam President, this week marks 2 years since the Federal Government first declared the new coronavirus outbreak a public health emergency. I don't need to recount the staggering number of lives lost or the terrible upheaval throughout our society that our citizens have had to endure.

Two years in, it is time for leaders at all levels of our society to take a deep breath, clear the decks, and review where we stand today.

Here is what we know in February of 2022: Thanks to the prior Senate's work with the prior administration, our country is flooded with safe and effective vaccines for all who want them.

We know the vaccines do not prevent us from catching the current variant of the virus or transmitting it to others, so there is no moral justification for vaccine mandates. But it is absolutely clear that vaccines slash the odds of hospitalization and death. They are a powerful personal shield that lowers the fatal risk of COVID beneath other normal background risks that we face regularly in our daily lives.

As the New York Times explained this week, "With a booster shot, COVID resembles other respiratory illnesses that have been around for years," and "[t]he chance that an average American will die in a car crash this week is significantly higher." That is from the New York Times.

The good news goes on. As we have known for months, children are even better off still. Unvaccinated kids seem to face the same extremely low risk as vaccinated people on the younger side of middle age.

In February 2022, we know we are currently facing an Omicron variant that seems both significantly more contagious than its predecessors but also significantly less severe.

Even in hard-hit States like my own, where hospitalizations remain too high, the curve of cases and hospitalizations appears to be starting to bend back down.

I continue to encourage Kentuckians and all Americans to discuss the vaccines with their doctors and take this safe and effective step. It can be the difference literally between life and death.

But from a society-wide perspective, after 2 years on this hellish highway, it appears our country is finally arriving at the off-ramp. The virus appears to be heading endemic. Seventy percent of Americans agree with the statement "It's time we accept that COVID is here to stay and we just need to get on with our lives." It is time for the state of emergency to wind down.

But, disturbingly, whether or not we should trust the science and reclaim normalcy is somehow becoming a partisan question. As a New York Times writer observed this week, "[M]illions of Democrats have decided that organizing their lives around COVID is core to their identity as progressives, even as pandemic isolation and disruption are fueling mental health problems, drug overdoses, violent crime, rising blood pressure and growing educational inequality." Those are not my words; that is the New York Times.

For goodness' sake, nearing 60 percent of partisan Democrats told one survey they would support placing unvaccinated people under a form of house arrest.

Let me say that again. Nearly 60 percent of partisan Democrats told one survey they would support placing unvaccinated people under a form of house arrest. A supermajority of Americans oppose that absurd idea, but most Democrats say they would support it.

A majority of Americans oppose the heavyhanded vaccine mandates where mayors and local politicians are trying to substitute their own judgment for the decisions of free citizens and their doctors. A majority of Americans oppose these vaccine passports, but nearly 80 percent of Democrats want them.

In communities across the country, bureaucrats are still forcing young children to wear a mask to participate in society, when neither kids nor vaccinated adults are remotely—remotely—likely to get gravely ill.

So what exactly are we doing here? Where are the goalposts? What is the end game?

Consider if this variant were its own separate virus that we were just meeting for the very first time, without the scar tissue from the prior 2 years. Nobody would accept anywhere near this much disruption to fight the virus that we are actually facing right now.

Here in Washington, multiple Congresses have spent a staggering \$6 trillion on this crisis. Of the most recent \$2 trillion that our Democratic colleagues rammed through last year, only 9 percent went to healthcare in any form; less than 1 percent went to vaccines. Even within that 9 percent, the Biden administration then diverted important COVID funding to other unrelated crises, like their border crisis.

Now we hear Democrats may request yet another—yet another—huge chunk