

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

of emergency spending. But experts say as much as \$800 billion or \$900 billion of the money that we have already set aside has not even been spent yet. Eight or nine hundred billion of the money that we have already set aside has not been spent yet. What about a full accounting of the \$6 trillion that has already been approved?

If there are urgent needs for true, medical COVID needs, let's discuss it, and let's start the discussion by talking about repurposing the hundreds of billions that are already sitting in the pipeline.

As one report put it, "[T]he vast majority of almost \$200 billion allocated to K-12 schools has not been spent." That is \$200 billion. "The same goes for half of the \$195 billion sent out to state governments. And most city and county governments have not spent much of the \$130 billion they . . . received, either." Many States are swimming in cash and running surpluses. They have had to dream up creative non-COVID-related uses for these windfalls.

So, look, 2 years in, if Democrats call for more giant sums of emergency spending, the burden of proof lies with them to demonstrate that the hundreds of billions of dollars of unspent money already in the system are not sufficient. And unless something changes, so long as COVID continues retreating to the level of risk that we all regularly face in other aspects of daily life, then our leaders' duty to the American people is perfectly clear: Trust the vaccines, follow the data, forget the tribalism, work to assuage people's fears and neuroses with facts instead of feeding into them, and articulate your clear game plan to give the American people back their normalcy in the very near future.

UKRAINE

Madam President, on another matter, today, more than 100,000 Russian troops are holding positions along Ukraine's eastern borders. More have been deployed to Belarus to threaten Ukraine from the north. For the second time in a decade, Vladimir Putin's campaign to forcibly redraw the map of the European continent is on the verge of massive escalation.

For those of us who remember the Cold War, this strongman routine from stale Kremlin autocrats is quite familiar. But Ukraine is not a captive nation trapped behind the Iron Curtain; it is a free, democratic, and sovereign European country.

The proper response from the West should not be a mystery. The United States and our allies need to do four things right now.

First, we need to cut through the bureaucratic caution, inertia, and redtape that is slowing the delivery of military, economic, and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. This help needs to arrive before—before—a Russian escalation so our friends can defend themselves and prepare for what could be a cold and bloody winter.

Ukraine is a proud, independent nation that wants to defend itself, but

after years of combating Russian aggression while simultaneously trying to tackle major political and economic reform, Ukraine needs help. It needs weapons. It needs communications equipment. It needs logistical and intelligence support.

We should be building the logistical networks now to prepare to keep flowing support to Ukraine in the event of escalation. I have been encouraged by the United Kingdom and other allies who are already making serious commitments to this effort.

Second, we need to bolster the defenses of our Eastern European NATO allies most threatened by Russia. This is a decision that the NATO alliance as a whole should make, but if it doesn't, the United States and other partners should not wait for consensus to act. We should strive for unity but not at the expense of security. Our most nervous allies cannot get unilateral veto power over the policy of the greatest Nation in world history.

Yesterday, I was glad to hear that U.S. forces are finally moving to reinforce our eastern flank allies. I urged President Biden to take the step nearly 2 months ago. I hope this belated action will lead other NATO allies to follow our lead.

Third, we need to impose overdue sanctions now—right now—to confront a litany of Russian threats, including their use of energy as a geostrategic weapon. At the same time, let's make clear we are prepared to impose even more devastating costs should Russia continue its aggression.

Again, we may have differences of opinion with parts of Europe, but we have priorities here that run deeper than matching our most timid allies.

As we consider sanctions, we should be honest about our past mistakes. In 2014, the Obama administration and our EU partners tried to use sanctions to halt the conflict, deter further aggression against Ukraine, and compel Russia to comply with the Minsk accords. Those sanctions are still in place, but they failed on all counts.

For Ukrainians, this is not a frozen conflict but an ongoing one. Russia's continued aggression is self-evident. Its Minsk commitments remain unfulfilled. We need to learn these lessons, avoid empty symbolism, and get ready to impose serious costs that could actually change Putin's calculus. But we also know that sanctions alone are not enough. Putin's behavior is a reminder that there is no substitute for hard power. Deterrence is stronger when our enemies question whether their military plans can succeed.

Fourth and finally, we and our NATO allies need to take a hard look at growing security threats and commit to investing in defense capabilities to actually meet those threats. This means revisiting the 2-percent pledge. It means having hard conversations about building real military capabilities.

When the Biden administration abandoned Afghanistan last year, China and

Russia were paying close attention. Now, Russia is testing our resolve in Eastern Europe, and China once again is taking notes. Our adversaries understand their best path to outmaneuver America is to outspend our commitment to defense.

So I hope President Biden will act swiftly to equip our European friends, reinforce our NATO allies, and punish Russian escalation. We must also pay serious attention to equipping the U.S. military for the next threat. It is past time—past time—to invest in modernization, hypersonic weapons, and our nuclear arsenal, and to encourage our European allies to wake up—wake up—follow our lead, and stand side by side against common threats.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. CASEY). The assistant majority leader.

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that Senators BRAUN, MURRAY, and I be able to complete our remarks prior to the scheduled votes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Without objection, it is so ordered.

APPROPRIATIONS

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, I want to follow up on the statement made by the Republican Senate leader, and I agree with many of the things he said. We disagree with others. But there is a way for us to show our commitment not only to our troops but to the defense of causes that are important to America, and it is in his hands. It is known as the appropriations bill for the Department of Defense. It is known as the appropriations and budget for the United States of America.

Where are we now? We are on something called a continuing resolution. That means we haven't decided. We can't get an agreement from the Republican leader to move forward on the spending bills for this fiscal year, which began October 1. We are spending at last year's levels when the Biden administration has asked for more money for the Nation's defense, and who is stopping him? The Republican leader.

So he can't have it both ways and argue we need to invest more in the defense of America and then stop us from an appropriations process that does just that. Let's get it done. This should have been done before last October 1, and his cooperation means it can be done now.

Now, let me say there is another aspect to it. Many speeches are given about the rise in crime in America. I know this personally, representing the State of Illinois and the great city of Chicago. The number of violent gun crimes in this last calendar year was just shocking. When you look at all of the people who have been hurt and killed with the use of guns in cities across America, it is clear that we need to invest in our police force and law enforcement. Hold them accountable for the right values and the right conduct, but put in their hands the resources to