

one of the weakest and fraught economies in generations.

At the start of the pandemic, the U.S. unemployment rate spiked to 14.7 percent. Last February, the Congressional Budget Office forecasted that the United States would not see 3.9 percent unemployment for another 5 years. The unemployment rate now is actually 4 percent. America's economic recovery is breaking records. The United States was the first country in the G7 to recover all of its GDP lost by the pandemic. Average wages were up 5.7 percent last month from a year ago. The increases were not all at the top; workers in the middle and lower rungs of the economy earned more too.

I have to say, as important as that is, we all know that people working in this economy are also facing inflation and higher prices. Whether it is for gasoline or groceries, they are finding it more expensive to meet the basic necessities of life. Although this is good news, that is bad news that we have to address and should address on a bipartisan basis.

The progress that we have made was not inevitable; it was a product of good old-fashioned American ingenuity. It is also the result of bold and decisive economic decisions by the Biden administration.

The American Rescue Plan, which Congress passed without the support of a single Republican Member of Congress—all Democrats all the way—broke the grip of the pandemic on our economy. We were able to get shots in arms, help small businesses stay afloat, and rush emergency assistance to people who had lost jobs or had seen their hours cut drastically. That emergency help worked in Illinois, and it worked all over this country.

We also passed the bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. Let me remind those who follow, if you are wondering about the infrastructure bill passed by the Trump administration, let me put your concern to rest. There was no bill. There was no legislation. There was no infrastructure plan despite President Trump's repeated promises to deliver one. He walked away from the table, and I was in the room when he did. He wouldn't even negotiate.

We have not fixed all of the weaknesses in our economy. The jobless rate among Black workers is still twice that of White workers. Unemployment among teens and young adults is still too high. Research from the National Women's Law Center shows that, while men have recouped all job losses since the pandemic started, there are nearly 1.1 million fewer women in the workforce. Daycare is part of that calculation, I might add. If we want to reach our full economic potential, we need to help families find affordable, quality daycare, and we have to address the issue of inflation nonstop.

UNITED STATES INNOVATION AND COMPETITION ACT

Mr. DURBIN. Madam President, last year, for the first time in more than two decades, America's economy grew faster than China's. That is incredible. Let's keep that streak going by passing USICA, the bipartisan U.S. Innovation and Competition Act. We need to promote products made in the United States by Americans and purchased in the United States. We passed it in the Senate last June by a vote of 2 to 1. The House passed its version last Friday. Let's go to conference and get this bill into law. If we negotiate in good faith, I believe we can do that.

I want to thank Leader SCHUMER and Senator YOUNG, a Republican from Indiana, for their leadership.

This will boost competitiveness with China and help to reindustrialize America, make investments in manufacturing and research, and provide seed money to create good new jobs. Importantly, it includes \$52 billion for research and designing and manufacturing semiconductor chips—what Senator CANTWELL, chair of the Commerce Committee, calls the “oil of the 21st century.” Let's agree to make those chips here in America and not be dependent on importing them from China.

USICA also allows for new sanctions against China for human rights violations. We can stand up for American workers and American values.

I yield the floor.

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. GRASSLEY. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Ms. DUCKWORTH). Without objection, it is so ordered.

OFFICE OF NET ASSESSMENT

Mr. GRASSLEY. Madam President, on November 18 of last year, I came here to speak about the Office of Net Assessment. That is an office within the Pentagon. That office's purpose, under law, is to produce an annual net assessment, which is supposed to be a long-term look at our military's capability and those of our greatest adversaries. I don't think it lives up to its mission.

In 2018, according to the Director of the Office of Net Assessment, that office had not produced a net assessment since 2007. Not doing its job for those 11 years and—who knows—possibly longer calls into question whether this office should even exist. Yet a recent inspector general report states that the office “produces . . . highly classified net assessments.” I question the IG's conclusion based upon available evidence that I know about, and I will give some of that evidence.

In last year's speech here in the Senate and others that I have given over the years on this subject, I discussed my oversight of this office dating back to 2019. I also discussed my amendment to the national defense bill. That amendment would have done one very simple thing: required the Government Accountability Office to determine how much taxpayer money the Office of Net Assessment actually uses for net assessment—its purpose for existing. I want to know how much we can cut from their budget to save the taxpayers money.

Apparently, this type of pro-taxpayer legislation was too much to ask for. Accordingly, it appears that the Office of Net Assessment in the Department of Defense gets to keep operating like a Pentagon slush fund for irrelevant and political research projects.

On February 5, 2020, the Director of the Office of Net Assessment told me:

We review all deliverables to ensure they're consistent with the statement of work. We evaluate each deliverable to assess whether we should seek additional information or require a resubmission of commissioned work.

Now, I am going to return to that statement in a little bit, but I want to give you some evidence of why what he said doesn't work out in reality.

In December 2020, I asked the inspector general to take a deeper dive into the Office of Net Assessment's contracting practices. That means connecting all the dots in the contract transactions to ensure that everything matches up. The inspector general reviewed 20 contracts. On January 25 of this year, the inspector general issued its results and found these three or four points:

Office of Net Assessment acquisition personnel inappropriately performed contracting officer representative duties for 20 contracts.

Next point. Office of Net Assessment acquisition personnel and an office providing contract support did not maintain complete contract files, including preawards and contract administration documentation. That also included the failure to maintain signed contracts and modifications. Since 2019, I have repeatedly asked for a full accounting of Stefan Halper's contracts. Either they never had one or they have decided to obstruct Congress.

Next point. Office of Net Assessment acquisition personnel and an office providing contract support inappropriately approved invoices for payments totaling \$9.8 million dollars due to the lack of oversight. And that is just for the 20 contracts the inspector general sampled. So without required supporting documentation for payment, the door is, obviously, wide open to fraud, theft, and improper payments.

Next point. Without established and documented surveillance measures for Office of Net Assessment service contracts, the Office of Net Assessment may not have received all services outlined in a contractor's statement of work.

Next point—and last point. At this point, the next finding ought to be no surprise from the inspector general. The Office of Net Assessment did not administer contracts in accordance with the Federal Defense Department and Washington Headquarters Services internal regulations and policies.

Further, the audit states the “[Office of Net Assessment] acquisition personnel cannot verify whether they received services, valued at \$4.1 million, in accordance with the statement of work.”

Now, let's return back to that first quote I gave you from the Director of Net Assessment.

We review all deliverables to ensure [that] they're consistent with the statement of work. We evaluate each deliverable to assess whether we should seek additional information or require a resubmission of commissioned work.

Based upon all of the available evidence from these 20 contracts that were inspected by the inspector general—and that is not all the contracts that the office negotiated—this Director's statement is absolutely false.

So here is the bottom line: The Office of Net Assessment has no clue what they are paying for and whether they even received a complete work product. And whatever they are actually doing, it is not in compliance with Federal regulations, policy, and law.

This is a complete embarrassment and a slap in the face of American taxpayers. While the Office of Net Assessment wasted millions of dollars in taxpayer money every year, the communist Chinese Government developed hypersonic missiles that can travel the globe.

If this unit isn't doing the job that they are supposed to, to assess our national security capabilities and the capabilities of our enemies, why are we still funding it? It would be better to take the \$20 million budget and give it to our servicemembers. At least we know that those servicemembers have earned it.

A government slush fund will always be a government slush fund unless Congress, with our power of oversight and appropriations, steps up and fixes the problem. So I encourage my colleagues, especially those on the Senate Armed Services Committee, to take a stand against this blatant waste, fraud, abuse, and gross mismanagement.

FREE SPEECH

Mr. GRASSLEY. Madam President, on another subject, I have come to this floor several times in recent months—maybe over the course of a couple of years—on my concerns about free speech on campus. There has been a lot said in opposition to reports of crack-down on speech on campuses, but today I come to the floor to give one shining example of a university upholding expressions of free speech and making it still happen.

This all started with former University of Chicago President Robert Zim-

mer. The institution, starting with him and continuing, has consistently pushed back on the trends of safe spaces, trigger warnings, and the cancellation of invited speakers.

Instead, in a letter to all incoming freshmen, the University of Chicago lays out its philosophy in plain English. In the letter to the 2020 freshman class, it said that one of the university's “defining characteristics is our commitment to freedom of inquiry and expression.”

Now, this is more than just words; the university has consistently followed through on this policy. Even today, the university is still open to dissenting points of view. It even goes so far as to tell freshmen “at times this may challenge you and even cause discomfort.”

They are absolutely right. The point of college is not to be coddled. The point of college or university is to learn. How can students do that if they don't step out of their comfort zone?

I often say that my definition of a university is a place where controversy should run rampant. At the University of Chicago, that means noting that “diversity of opinion and background is a fundamental strength of our community.”

Both opinion and background are very important, and it defeats the point to just have the one. Our universities cannot just have just a veneer of diversity; the whole point of bringing in students of different backgrounds is to get different points of view. That aim is meaningless if all students who go to the college believe the same things.

I have introduced several bills to provide transparency for prospective students. My bills focus on transparency of cost, but in many ways openness about a university's values are just as important.

So I congratulate former President Zimmer, who is doing just that and putting his university's values on his sleeve. If some schools keep cracking down on free speech and invited speakers, then the free market will send their students elsewhere. That is because I don't think all kids want to go to a school where they will never be challenged and where their ideals will always be reaffirmed.

I am happy to see projects like the University of Austin, a newly founded college dedicated to free speech principles.

So, in conclusion, it takes time to start new institutions. Instead, we need people to stand up in the colleges that we already have. And I hope others will join me in doing just that.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. SCHUMER. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Mr. SCHUMER. Madam President, I move to proceed to legislative session. The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is on agreeing to the motion. The motion was agreed to.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. SCHUMER. Madam President, I move to proceed to executive session to consider Calendar No. 498.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is on agreeing to the motion. The motion was agreed to.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the nomination.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the nomination of Douglas R. Bush, of Virginia, to be an Assistant Secretary of the Army.

CLOTURE MOTION

Mr. SCHUMER. Madam President, I send a cloture motion to the desk.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The cloture motion having been presented under rule XXII, the Chair directs the clerk to read the motion.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

CLOTURE MOTION

We, the undersigned Senators, in accordance with the provisions of rule XXII of the Standing Rules of the Senate, do hereby move to bring to a close debate on the nomination of Executive Calendar No. 498, Douglas R. Bush, of Virginia, to be an Assistant Secretary of the Army.

Charles E. Schumer, Jack Reed, Sheldon Whitehouse, Richard Blumenthal, Catherine Cortez Masto, Richard J. Durbin, Jacky Rosen, Margaret Wood Hassan, Mark Kelly, Benjamin L. Cardin, Brian Schatz, Debbie Stabenow, Angus S. King, Jr., Patrick J. Leahy, Martin Heinrich, Tim Kaine, Gary C. Peters, Chris Van Hollen.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Mr. SCHUMER. Madam President, I move to proceed to legislative session.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is on agreeing to the motion. The motion was agreed to.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. SCHUMER. Madam President, I move to proceed to executive session to consider Calendar No. 362.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is on agreeing to the motion. The motion was agreed to.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the nomination.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the nomination of Homer L. Wilkes, of Mississippi, to be Under Secretary of Agriculture for Natural Resources and Environment.