

of our list, but, unfortunately, we came up short this time. I know many of my Republican colleagues are eager to have a frank discussion about the path forward for our party, and it is essential that we do so.

We need to ensure that in 2 years our policies and our message will resonate with the voters. So I agree with the need to have a frank, meaningful conversation—debate even. We shouldn't be afraid of spirited debate in the U.S. Senate. After all, debate about what our message should be and what our priorities should look like, that is essential.

Those discussions will begin tomorrow, and I hope there will be plenty of time to listen to one another and then to work toward consensus on a clear, concise, and impactful plan of action.

In terms of what to expect from our Democratic colleagues, I don't expect much to change. Given that Senator MANCHIN and Senator SINEMA—given their strong support for the 60-vote threshold for the Senate to act, I believe that will remain firmly intact. If the majority leader tries to go nuclear—as he has threatened to do time and time again—and blow up the rules of the Senate, he simply doesn't have the votes. That is the good news.

There will be no Green New Deal. There will be no court packing, no DC statehood, no mass amnesties. Republicans, maybe with some Democratic support, will block the most radical aspects of the agenda for progressives in the Democratic Party, and we will continue to fight the irresponsible spending and government overreach our colleagues have pushed the last 2 years.

Instead, we will push for common-sense policies to bring down the costs and improve the standard of living for working families. We will work to increase domestic energy production, rather than go hat in hand to autocrats in the Middle East, and we will secure the border. I hope we can do this through bipartisan progress. These are the top issues facing families across the country and they deserve our attention and, more than that, they deserve our action here in the Senate.

Unfortunately, it is not just the Senate that is in a bit of a holding pattern. Several House races have yet to be called, and it is not clear which party will hold the majority. Republicans have a lead right now, and I am optimistic that that is where things will end up in the House. A Republican majority in the House would force our Democratic colleagues to abandon partisan governance, which has dominated in the last 2 years, as they have held the White House, they have held the House, and then had a working majority in the Senate.

But now Democrats would no longer be able to abuse the budget reconciliation process to circumvent the normal legislative process. They would be forced to work in earnest to find common ground, which is what the American people, I believe, clearly want.

Again, we are all eager for the ballot counting to conclude. It has been nearly a week since election day, and everyone is eager to have a final roster for the 118th Congress.

While there is a lot we still don't know, there are some exciting things we do know. The Senate will welcome at least five new Republicans at the start of next year. KATIE BRITT, TED BUDD, MARKWAYNE MULLIN, ERIC SCHMITT, and J.D. VANCE will join the ranks of the Republican conference.

Each of these individuals is coming to Washington with a fresh perspective, right off the campaign trail, and a long list of ideas to improve the lives of folks in their State and across America.

While I am sad to see our retiring colleagues go, I am eager to welcome this new blood, this new energy, and these new ideas into the Senate.

There are also some new faces joining the Texas delegation. Given the explosive population growth in our State, we have added two new House seats this cycle, bringing the total to 38 House Members from the great State of Texas.

Next Congress, we will welcome five new Texas Republicans in the House, and I am eager to work with these men and women to solve some of the biggest issues families in our State are facing.

But if the truth be known, I am happy to work with anybody who shares my interest in trying to make life a little bit better and to address the critical issues facing American families today, which brings me to my next topic, the National Defense Authorization Act.

NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT

Madam President, while we wait for the final ballots to be tallied and run-offs to be held, there is still work to be done here in the Senate.

The first item on the agenda should be the National Defense Authorization Act. To be frank, I don't know why this is still outstanding, why we haven't acted as we have, I believe, for 61 years in a row, passing a National Defense Authorization Act, given its importance to the safety and security of our Nation.

Thanks to the bipartisan leadership of Senator REED and Senator INHOFE and our colleagues on the Armed Services Committee, they completed their work in the Senate Armed Services Committee last summer, but the Defense Authorization Act has just lingered on the Senate's agenda without any action by the majority leader, the Senator from New York.

Thanks to bipartisan leadership on the Senate Armed Services Committee, they have compiled a strong bill that will strengthen and modernize our national defense. But that bill was filed on July 18, last summer. In the meantime, nothing has happened here on the floor of the Senate, now 4 months later.

The majority leader has so far refused to provide floor time for the De-

fense authorization bill. This isn't a matter of scheduling. The Senate has had plenty of time to work on the Defense bill in September, and there was certainly bipartisan appetite to get that done. But the Senate majority leader, Senator SCHUMER, the Senator from New York, could not be swayed. He hasn't prioritized our national defense, which I believe is the single most important duty of the Members of Congress.

Given our global risks, this should be our No. 1 priority. Day after day, Russia continues its unjustified assault on Ukraine. As it tries to find friends on the global stage, it is cozying up to Iran. At the same time, the Chinese Communist Party has become increasingly hostile to the West, and its threats against the people of Taiwan are as strong as ever.

North Korea has declared itself a nuclear weapons state. The global threat landscape is evolving at a pace we haven't seen in a long time.

We need a strong National Defense Authorization Act that gives our commanders the predictability they need to plan and to prepare for the future and, hopefully, to deter military conflict—what Ronald Reagan called peace through strength.

It is completely baffling to me that the majority leader has put the National Defense Authorization Act at the very bottom of his to-do list. Radical nominees can wait. Our national defense must be the top priority, and I hope he will put this bill on the floor soon.

Senators on both sides of the aisle—as I mentioned, the Defense authorization bill is a bipartisan bill that came out of the Senate Armed Services Committee and was filed July 18, last summer, and nothing has happened on the floor of the Senate since then. There is one person who can change that, and that is the Democrat majority leader, Senator SCHUMER. I hope he will decide, finally, to get this bill on the floor.

Once the Defense authorization bill passes the Senate, we still have to keep the lights on. We have a continuing resolution that expires December 16. We have just over a month until the current stopgap spending measure expires, and a government shutdown is the last thing our country needs.

Given the fact that this is the end of Democrats' unified government, where they have majorities in the House and the Senate and the White House, I worry that our colleagues will try to weigh this down with tons of partisan freight, sweetheart deals, and earmarks. I am afraid they will include every remaining item from the far left's Christmas wish list and turn a critical funding bill into a Christmas tree.

This bill should be as clean of poison pills as much as humanly possible. This is not the place to cash in on political chits; there is far too much on the line.

Like all of our colleagues, I am eager to have more clarity on the makeup of

the 118th Congress, but we have work to do before the end of the 117th Congress, and I, for one, am ready to get to work.

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.

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

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

TENNESSEE NATIONAL GUARD'S 268TH MILITARY
POLICE COMPANY

Mrs. BLACKBURN. Madam President, I want to begin by welcoming the Tennessee National Guard's 268th Military Police Company home after a 305-day deployment to Africa.

We are so incredibly grateful for their service and for the service and sacrifice that their families make during these times of deployment, and I know I speak for every Tennessean when I say to them: Welcome home. Job well done.

NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT

Madam President, well, the Senate is back in session and all anyone back in Tennessee wants to know is: What will this Chamber get done next? What is it that the Democrats are going to push next?

And they are not feeling very optimistic right now. One thing is clear, and that is that my Democratic colleagues have completely ignored the stress that they are causing Tennessee servicemembers and their families by dangling the NDAA in front of them and then snatching it away.

Inaction sends a very powerful message, and right now, all they are hearing is that the military has become a political football, and that does not inspire confidence.

We have passed the Defense Authorization Act 61 years in a row, and I am confident that there will be bipartisan support for No. 62, which makes this tight timeline even more unnecessary.

The American people don't have all the details on what this authorization will do, but they don't need them to know that it is the only thing standing between us and getting steamrolled by the CCP—the Chinese Communist Party—and the new axis of evil, which is Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea.

Our servicemembers might not know every line item in the 2,000 pages of the bill, but they know that its contents will determine the course of their lives for the next 5, 10, or 25 years. Passing this bill is the bare minimum as far as the Senate is concerned, but it means a lot to our men and women in uniform.

We are ready to get this thing done. I know that the Presiding Officer, as a Member of the Armed Services Committee who has worked so hard on this, joins me in being ready to get it done. We finished our committee work back in June on this bill. We considered

more than 400 amendments. We adopted about 200 of those amendments, and it passed out of Armed Services Committee 23 to 3. So when I say we are ready to go, we are. There is bipartisan support for getting this finished.

As we prepare to move forward on this legislation, I want to highlight two of my own proposed amendments that, unfortunately, fell victim to partisanship. But, first, here's a little background.

The Tennessee National Guard has a reputation for answering a cry for help no matter where it comes from. Last month, they deployed to Warren County, TN, to help first responders gain control of a wildfire. In September, members of the 194th Engineer Brigade, the 278th Armored Cavalry Regiment, the 230th Sustainment Brigade and the 1-230th Assault Helicopter Battalion deployed to Florida to help with the cleanup in the wake of Hurricane Ian.

In July, members of Nashville's 1-230th Assault Helicopter Battalion pulled people to safety after flash floods destroyed communities in Kentucky.

This year, the Guard has rescued multiple hikers who got into trouble on or near the Appalachian Trail. And last September, members of the 269th Military Police Company, the 913th Engineer Company, and the C Company, 2d Battalion, 151st Aviation Regiment made it home after spending more than a year helping law enforcement officials in Texas try to contain the border catastrophe.

The sight of that National Guard uniform makes people in this country feel safe when things are going wrong. But the continued enforcement of the COVID-19 vaccination order will inevitably jeopardize that sense of security.

I introduced two amendments to the 2023 NDAA that would have injected sanity into these vaccination requirements. The first would have prohibited involuntary separation of any servicemember for refusing the COVID-19 vaccine until each service achieves its end strength authorized by last year's NDAA.

The second amendment would have made sure that members of the National Guard or Reserve maintain access to pay and benefits while their request for a religious or health accommodation was pending. This is about as noncontroversial as you can get on the issue of vaccine mandates. These amendments would create a simple rule to stop this Biden Department of Defense from railroading their own troops.

There is nothing political about preserving readiness and a basic sense of fairness, which has been completely absent in this process.

I am going to use the Army as a case study to show you how destructive this mandate has been for the military. Now, the Army has not achieved the end strength authorized in the 2022 NDAA. What does that mean? It means that we don't have enough men and

women doing the job, filling the slots that the Army has.

The data backs this up. If you head over to Fort Campbell and ask anyone in uniform if this is true, they will tell you that I am 100-percent correct. They do not have enough people. Members of the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment have been consistently deployed for more than 2 years. And we thank them for that service.

I would encourage my Democratic colleagues to ask them what this Democrat-led administration's lack of attention to readiness and force strength could mean for our national security. What kind of impact does this have? This mandate has already separated 1,796 active duty soldiers from their service. What is worse, the Army has only approved less than 4 percent of medical exemption requests and just over 1 percent of religious exemption requests.

The Guard is still in a holding pattern on the issue of separation, but their exemption denial statistics are just as troubling: 15 percent of medical exemptions have been approved but only 0.0047 percent of religious exemptions.

The Reserves are not faring much better. The Army has only approved a little more than 5 percent of the medical exemptions and 0.004 percent of their religious exemptions.

Prospects are looking bleak for guardsmen with legitimate exemption claims, and it is pretty bleak for the military as a whole. The National Guard is already missing recruitment goals, and they are set to lose 9,000 members in fiscal year 2023 and 5,000 in fiscal year 2024.

In the United States, the number of new servicemembers joining the military has reached a record low. The Army alone fell 15,000 soldiers short of its goal for 2022 and is projecting a deficit of 21,000 soldiers for 2023. This administration knew manpower was a problem, but still they chose to fire servicemembers who were perfectly healthy and ready to defend this great country. And so we shouldn't be surprised that 18-year-olds in this country don't feel that they can trust this Democrat-led administration at the Pentagon with full control of their young lives.

The fact is, the Democrats have a perfect record of making decisions that end in a disaster. They spent trillions of dollars, provoked recordbreaking inflation, and hired 87,000 new IRS agents to squeeze small businesses who are struggling to survive in communities all across the wonderful State of Tennessee.

They have abandoned the southern border and caused the worst illegal immigration crisis we have ever seen, the worst humanitarian crisis we have ever seen. And, remember, it would be even worse if the Tennessee National Guard hadn't come to the rescue.

They latched on to the Green New Deal and replaced American energy