

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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 President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. DURBIN). Without objection, it is so ordered.

NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, after months of waiting, the Senate is finally on track to take up and pass the National Defense Authorization Act, 13 days now before Christmas. The pointless delay in this fundamentally critical legislation has been a major point of frustration, not just for colleagues here in the Senate but for the leadership at the Pentagon and the people who need to make plans for America's defense.

The Senate Armed Services Committee completed its work last summer, but the majority leader apparently had other priorities and refused to put the bill on the floor until now. It simply wasn't a priority.

We spent week after week confirming President Biden's judicial nominees, but the majority leader couldn't seem to find the time to take up and pass a must-pass piece of legislation, the annual Defense bill.

And this is not the first time. It is the second year in a row that the Senate has not passed its own version of the National Defense Authorization Act, and so we find ourselves repeating the same bungled process that played out last year.

Thanks, however, to Senator INHOFE and Senator REED and our colleagues on the Armed Services Committee, this bill still reflects the hard work of our Senate colleagues.

But I want to underscore how unconventional this year's approach was and make clear why this should not be the norm. We need to return to what we call regular order around here, which is actually to allow all 100 Members of the Senate an opportunity to fully participate in crafting critical legislation like this.

Of course, the Armed Services Committee did its job. The committee held its hearings, worked with Members throughout the Senate, and compiled a strong bill. But the majority leader is going to put a bill on the floor and probably, in all likelihood, not allow any amendments to that bill. In other words, this bill was voted out of the Armed Services Committee, it was preconferenced with the House of Representatives, and it is going to be laid before the American people and this Senate as a *fait accompli* without adequate opportunity for debate or amendment or for other noncommittee Members to have a hand in crafting this important piece of legislation.

This is not how the Senate is supposed to work. Members of the Senate don't run for the Senate and serve their States with the intent of being potted plants when it comes to crafting important legislation, and particularly

this legislation, which is perhaps the single-most important thing we do around here.

So for 2 years, we have skipped these critical steps. But this cannot be the norm, and here is why: The National Defense Authorization Act impacts every servicemember's pay. It pertains to military construction, improvement of barracks, and military modernization. This bill needs to follow regular order. It needs to be completed on time.

This bill should have been signed into law by President Biden last September. We are more than 2 months into the fiscal year, and our military commanders are still waiting for Congress to pass this legislation and provide the certainty they need to plan for the future.

Mr. President, as you know, I am just talking about the authorization bill. The actual appropriations process is similarly broken, where, ordinarily, the 12 appropriation bills would come across the floor as individual bills or as so-called minibuses rather than the anticipated omnibus, which is \$1.7 trillion worth of spending. The top line of that bill has not even been agreed to by the ranking member and the chairman of the Appropriations Committee and the leadership on both sides of the Congress. Yet we are sitting around, again, 13 days before Christmas, wondering: Are we going to be presented with another continuing resolution—it looks like we are—that will take us to the 2 days before Christmas, December 23? And then this bill of \$1.7 trillion, roughly speaking, will then be plopped out in front of us, and the only option we will be given is a chance to vote no or to vote yes.

This is not the way the Senate should be operating. It is really a slap in the face to the American people, who deserve a measure of transparency, and to the Members of the Senate, who deserve at least the courtesy and consideration of being able to participate in the process, rather than being given the ugly choice between voting for a \$1.7 trillion omnibus appropriations bill we had no hand in writing or to shut down the government. That is the decision that Senator SCHUMER has chosen to give Members of this Senate, Republican and Democrat alike. It is really outrageous.

Back to the Defense bill, it includes a significant increase in defense funding—at least the authorization for that funding—coming in at roughly \$45 billion above the White House's most recent budget request. So on a bipartisan basis, Members of the House and Senate—Republicans and Democrats—agreed that President Biden short-handed the Defense bill by about \$45 billion.

Given the far-reaching threats facing our country and the world and the continued impact of inflation, this is a necessary increase, and I am glad House and Senate negotiators agreed that President Biden's request was insufficient.

First and foremost, though, this bill should take care of our brave men and women who serve in our Armed Forces. Thankfully, it includes an authorization for the largest pay raise for our troops in two decades. That is particularly important when inflation is roughly at a 40-year high. Servicemembers and their families are facing the same inflation headwinds as folks all across the country. So, starting next month, they will receive a much-needed and well-deserved 4.6 percent pay increase.

This year's National Defense Authorization Act also includes a range of reforms to better support military families. In an all-volunteer military, it is critical that we not only support the men and women who wear the uniform but also the families who support them and, in effect, serve with them.

This bill will extend reimbursement authority for spouse relicensing. For example, it will ensure that nurses, teachers, and other spouses whose jobs may require State-specific licenses are not saddled with an added expense when they are reassigned to a State where their current license is not valid. They can get a new one in their new home State without additional expense.

This bill also funds programs in Texas independent school districts that help military dependent children with severe disabilities.

And I am glad it includes bipartisan legislation that I introduced to help improve sexual assault and domestic violence prevention policies within the Department of Defense.

In addition to these reforms, the National Defense Authorization Act will repeal the COVID-19 vaccine mandate, which led to the dismissal of 8,500 servicemembers. Recruiting has become a growing challenge across the military, particularly the U.S. Army. Last year, the Army fell 15,000 soldiers short of its benchmark and was only able to recruit 75 percent of its recruitment goal.

Army Secretary Christine Wormuth called it "the Army's most challenging recruiting year since the start of the all-volunteer force." Given the threats posed by Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran, among other threats, this is not the time to force courageous servicemembers out of the Armed Forces, particularly for a vaccine that doesn't actually prevent COVID. This isn't like a lot of other vaccines that will actually prevent you from contracting the virus.

This year's NDAA also authorizes investments in nuclear modernization and other critical projects. It makes major investments in our military installations, including those in Texas. It will fund military construction projects at Fort Hood, Joint Base San Antonio, Corpus Christi, Fort Bliss, and the Army Reserve Center in Conroe, TX.

It also authorizes 16 new F-35 Joint Strike Fighters, which will be built by

Texans in Fort Worth. And it will ensure the United States can replenish our defense stockpile and remain the arsenal of democracy for the rest of the world, particularly Ukraine.

As Ukrainian forces continue to defend their country, this legislation will provide additional resources to help them keep up the fight. Now, this assistance is not a handout or a charity. As much as we want to see Ukraine win this war, our financial support is not entirely altruistic.

The United States is not just investing in a Ukrainian victory. We are also putting our resources toward a Russian defeat. We are trying to snuff out the fire before it spreads even further west.

Ukrainian forces have shown tremendous courage and stamina in the face of Russian attacks, and they deserve our unequivocal support. And I am gratified, as the Presiding Officer knows, that that support has been bipartisan and overwhelming. For the last 10 months, the United States has supplied Ukraine with critical military assistance, and there is no question that our support has been vital to Ukraine's success so far. But the one thing we can't supply that Ukraine has supplied in abundance is a will to fight, and they have done so in a magnificent way.

But the unavoidable fact is that, when we provide weapons to Ukraine to defend their sovereignty, we take them out of our own defense stockpile. The transfer of weapons to Ukraine combined with the production challenges in the defense industrial base has made it challenging to quickly replenish our own stockpiles; but this legislation, when it is passed, will help that. It provides \$2.7 billion for new munitions, which will help backfill our stockpiles and expand production capacity. We need to be ready not just to deal with the current challenges in Europe; we need to be ready for any challenge, no matter where it arises, especially including in Asia.

It also provides \$1 billion to more than double the size of the national defense stockpile, which will help safeguard against future supply chain disruptions. This will ensure that our support for Ukraine does not come at the cost of our own military readiness.

Well, in all the last-minute political jockeying before this bill was released, we were at least able to keep unrelated matters out of the bill. There is no marijuana banking provision, for example—hardly something that has anything to do with providing support for our brave men and women in the military.

That is how it should be. We need to eliminate those extraneous matters. This isn't the place for political horse trading. A well-funded and modern defense is not a Republican priority; it is not a Democratic priority; it is a national priority. We shouldn't use our troops as a bargaining chip for woke priorities.

In order to protect the American people and our democracy, our service-

members and military commanders need a strong and on-time National Defense Authorization Act. We are too late for on-time, but this is ultimately a strong bill that will deliver certainty and stability to our Armed Forces.

There is no such thing as a perfect bill, of course, but this legislation will go a long way to support our troops and strengthen our national security, and I look forward to finally getting a chance to vote for it.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

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

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

KIDS ONLINE SAFETY ACT

Mrs. BLACKBURN. Mr. President, this year, those of us at the Consumer Protection, Public Safety, and Data Security Subcommittee have spent hours working through how we deal with social media and hold them to account. And it has been a heartbreaking task of investigating thousands of pages of reporting testimony and other evidence that really has proven to us there is a devastating impact from social media on our Nation's children and teens.

This past February, Senator BLUMENTHAL and I introduced the Kids Online Safety Act after a series of hearings that exposed Big Tech's disregard for the safety of their underage users.

The bill provides kids and parents with the tools and transparency that they need to stay safe and requires social media companies to make those platforms safer in the default settings. It also requires independent audits to ensure that these companies are, indeed, addressing the risk to underage users.

I am appalled that this is necessary, but the committee has a mountain of proof to show it is time for Congress to do something to hold these platforms to account. And we can't wait. We really cannot afford to wait any longer because as bad as things are here in Washington, they are really worse for the kids and teens who have been pulled into these platforms.

Depression, self-harm, and suicide in teens increased at an alarming rate between 2010 and 2020. There are a limited number of plausible explanations for why this has happened, but I would remind my colleagues that the 2010s ushered in the golden age of social media. This is when social media transformed from a novelty into an almost mandatory activity, especially for teens. So it is no coincidence that it was a good decade for Silicon Valley but a very dark decade for our Nation's children.

Between 2011 and 2016, as social media became popular, sleep deprivation among U.S. teens increased by 17

percent. We also know that teens who are heavy users of social media sleep about an hour less per night than their friends who are not using social media. And as I am sure many of my colleagues know, sleep deprivation is a significant risk factor for depression among adolescents. Between 2011 and 2018, the rates of teen depression increased by more than 60 percent. Between 2011 and 2015, emergency room admissions for children and teens for depression, anxiety, and other psychiatric issues rose by 28 percent.

Before 2010, suicide by young people had stabilized and declined for decades; but, over the next decade, the teen suicide death rate increased by 62 percent. And now, suicide is the second leading cause of death for Americans between the ages of 10 and 24, only behind unintentional injuries like auto accidents.

Think about that. This is what is happening to our children. It is not my stats. It is not your stats. These are stats that are coming from research, from surveys, from medical research on our children—anxiety, depression, suicide. All of this is coming, and, when you look at the growth rate, what does it parallel? The use of social media.

Many of these platforms are robbing our children of their childhood. They are ripping it from them. American teens are succumbing to despair, and we know that social media is a big part of this reason.

In 2018, Pew released a survey revealing that close to 60 percent of youth have experienced some form of abusive online behavior. I have spent years examining what that behavior looks like, and I can tell you that calling it "abusive" is a gross understatement.

And as the years have gone by, the stories have gotten worse. And over the past few weeks, I have worked with dozens of parents and friends of young people who died because of what and whom they encountered on social media.

Today, with permission of their parents, I am going to share a few of the stories of these children because it is imperative that we realize what children are being exposed to online.

I had one mom tell me this. She said: You know, when you see these things and you hear these things, you cannot unsee it; you cannot unhear it.

I had another mom tell me: You know, MARSHA, I once felt that, when I had my kids home and we had locked the doors, we were safe—that we were safe from the outside world. But the pandemic happened, and I realized we were not, that the enemy, the evil, the harm that was wrecking my child's life—the drug traffickers, the sex traffickers, the pedophiles—they were right in there with us.

This is what our children are being exposed to—and the extent of the damage, the severity of the harassment, the bad behavior that takes place. And parents call it out to Big Tech, and too often these platforms do nothing—nothing. They hardly even respond.