

on that bill to try to fix gaps in the background check system. The one area of consensus between people who are avid supporters of the Second Amendment and those who believe that we ought to ban some types of weapons, even for law-abiding citizens—the one area we can agree on is that people with criminal records and people who are mentally ill should not be able to purchase firearms. And that is simply enforcing current law.

So we were able to do something in the Fix NICS bill a couple of years back—I think it was 2018 now—that I believed met my test for whether we should do legislation like that, and that is: Will it save lives? And I believe it has.

More recently, we passed the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, which is so new that it is only now being implemented. This bill did, of course, a number of things. It provided for an enhanced background checks for gun purchasers between the age of 18 and 21. The reason why that age group is so important is because the profile of many of these disaffected young men—who are obviously suffering from severe mental illness, who are so tortured that they not only want to commit suicide, they want to take other people with them—that cohort, that group of young purchasers, I believed we needed to go back and look at some of the juvenile records for mental health adjudications, for criminal convictions.

These are the sorts of things that, if you had been an adult, would disqualify you, and you would not be able to purchase a firearm under existing law. But in Uvalde, TX, Salvador Ramos turned 18 years old, and even though everybody in the neighborhood knew he was a ticking time bomb—he had tortured animals; he had posted threats on social media; he shot his own grandmother who insisted he go back to school after a long absence due to COVID restrictions—he was able to purchase firearms without revealing anything about his juvenile record, without consulting with the local police, who knew him well.

That has all changed by the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act. And the most recent tally I saw from the FBI is that approximately 100 different purchases have been intercepted for individuals between the age of 18 and 21 who had disqualifying juvenile records that are now being queried as a result of that bill.

But the other parts of it that were so important are that we made the single largest investment in community-based mental health care in American history in that bill. We were able to find an offset so it didn't involve spending new money, but it was billions of dollars in investment so more communities can have locally based community health services. Because, frankly, there are too many people falling through that net. The net doesn't really even exist.

And we also made sure that our schools provided more comprehensive services. Part of the problem, though, is that, as there is more demand for mental health counseling and treatment, there are not enough people qualified to provide those sorts of services. So this is a huge problem.

The bill provided grants and incentives to educational institutions so more people would train in those areas and so there would be more resources available for people suffering from psychological stress or even mental illness so that they can hopefully get better and become productive members of society.

So I know, at times like this, people say: Well, we need to do something. Twice in recent history the U.S. Congress has come together on a bipartisan basis to do something that meets that test I mentioned a moment ago: Will it save lives? And I believe, in both instances, the legislation we passed that was signed by the President will save lives.

But, of course, then we see what happened in Allen, and we wonder: What else is there? I mentioned the fact that these mass shooters, not only are they taking the lives of innocent people, they are, essentially, committing suicide themselves. They know they are not going to make it out of here alive. And there is this phenomenon that I learned from law enforcement called “suicide by cop” where actually mentally ill individuals who are unwilling to take their own life will encounter the police in a violent encounter which results in their loss of life, which, essentially, is a way of their committing suicide.

I believe these mass shootings are also a form of suicide because these shooters know they are not going to make their way out of it. But, tragically, not only do they take their own life; they take the lives of innocent others.

So we grieve with all the families and the entire community in and around Allen, TX, as we do each time one of these incidents occurs, and we will continue to look for ways we can find solutions to this sort of violence. But eventually or ultimately, I believe, what we are talking about are crimes; that while we can investigate crimes, we can prosecute crimes, we can punish crime, and we can even deter crime, but we haven't yet figured a way to stop crime.

But, hopefully, there is more we can do.

DEBT CEILING

Mr. President, on another matter, the President of the United States convened his first meeting of the four top congressional leaders to discuss the looming debt crisis. A potential default has been on the horizon for months now, and from the beginning, both sides—Republicans and Democrats—have said: We believe the debt ceiling needs to be addressed.

Republicans, for their part, have said: We need to do what we have done

before, and that is to couple a debt ceiling increase with spending reforms because you just can't keep maxing out your credit card and go back and ask that the credit card limits be increased without coming up with some plan to actually pay down the debt you incur. That has happened time and time again. I believe President Biden, when he was in the Senate, voted for that sort of coupling of spending reforms and debt ceiling increase. I think it was four times, if memory serves me correctly.

But never before has the national debt been the size it is now. Of course, you can point to COVID-19. This was, to my mind, sort of the equivalent of a domestic “World War III”; although, it was a healthcare battle and war, and we had to do whatever we could to deal with it, and we did. But that spending continued when President Biden was in office with a Democratic House and Senate; and, without any additional votes from Republicans, after we had done that together—as we should do things in a bipartisan way if we can—Democrats, including the President, added another \$2.7 trillion to the national debt.

And now the President takes the incredibly irresponsible position that: I am not going to negotiate. We just want to raise the debt ceiling. We don't want to talk about how we pay down that debt or any spending reforms.

Now, we all know the fact that, at \$31.5 trillion, \$31.7 trillion, we are on an unsustainable path. Everybody knows that. And the debt ceiling is important because it forces us to do something we should do anyway, and that is have a serious conversation about our Nation's spending habits, about Congress's spending habits.

Well, President Biden announced this debt ceiling crisis that was looming and subject only to how much money was coming in the door in terms of tax revenue as to when the “X” date would hit. Now we hear from the Secretary of the Treasury it is probably sometime in June. But instead of engaging back when the announcement was made, the President stuck his fingers in his ears and refused to even discuss any sort of negotiated outcome. Again, this is the party that spent more than \$2.6 trillion by themselves, and now they are refusing to entertain any ideas or any suggestion that, yes, America has a spending problem. But we know it does. We know we do, and we know Congress and the President are the only ones who can deal with it.

Well, to make matters worse, Democrats in Congress, including the President, have even attacked Republicans for trying to act responsibly to deal with this debt ceiling and have the temerity to suggest that, yes, there are some spending reforms that need to be coupled along with it.

Earlier this year, the Senate majority leader criticized House Republicans' approach to the debt ceiling as hostage-taking. He described it as

“dangerous” and “destabilizing,” but he failed to mention this was the exact same approach he took several years ago.

You know, that is one thing I have learned about the Senate. If you are around here long enough and if you are not careful, you are liable to find yourself on both sides of an issue and look a little hypocritical in the process.

So back in 2017, our country was in a similar position. The United States hit the debt ceiling. The Department of the Treasury began using extraordinary measures to continue to pay the bills, and Congress was racing the clock to avoid a default. At that point, Republicans held the majority in the Senate, and Minority Leader CHUCK SCHUMER said the debt ceiling gave Democrats leverage in bipartisan talks. He and then-Speaker NANCY PELOSI strategically used a potential debt crisis to strengthen their hand in broader negotiations, which is a pretty sharp contrast with Senator SCHUMER's position today. When he was the one trying to negotiate, the debt ceiling was fair game as leverage, but when it is House Republicans who are being the responsible ones by initiating a proposal to raise the debt ceiling—and I say initiating a negotiation, hopefully—he says it is dangerous, it is destabilizing, it is hostage-taking. The hypocrisy is palpable.

The problem with Democrats' argument here isn't just rhetorical; it is also impractical. From the get-go, Speaker MCCARTHY has made it absolutely clear that a clean debt ceiling increase will not pass the House. The votes aren't there, plain and simple. Now, Senate Republicans have made it abundantly clear that a clean debt ceiling cannot pass the Senate. Those are the facts. It won't pass the House, and it can't pass the Senate.

Last week, I joined 42 Republican colleagues in affirming our support for the House's proposal to initiate a negotiation to raise the debt ceiling. We signed a letter to Senator SCHUMER, that was led by my friend Senator LEE of Utah, saying, we will not vote for cloture on any bill that raises the debt ceiling without substantive spending and budget reforms.

We all know that in a Chamber that requires 60 votes to move legislation, a united block of 43 Senators means it ain't going to happen. If Senator SCHUMER puts a clean debt ceiling increase on the floor, it will fail; he won't have the votes. And that is just a fact of life.

The big question now is, Where does that leave us? I see two options. Option 1: The Senate can spend the next few weeks holding show votes on bills that are guaranteed to fail. Democrats can waste even more time, as our country inches closer and closer to a debt crisis—something both sides have said they want to avoid—or, second option, the President can get off the sidelines and start negotiating with Speaker MCCARTHY so we can make progress on a bipartisan bill that will actually pass both Chambers of Congress.

I think we know what is going to happen. There has to be a negotiated outcome. The President can say: I am not going to negotiate. He will negotiate if he wants to avoid economic catastrophe.

Already, the public is very anxious about the condition of our economy. Inflation is at a 40-year high. It has come down a tad, but the Federal Reserve continues to raise interest rates, make everything more expensive. Companies are laying off employees, particularly in the tech sector. People are worried. Their cost of living has increased dramatically.

I was having lunch with a friend of mine in Austin, TX, yesterday who is a homebuilder. And he talked about the dramatic increase in the components of homes that he builds—everything from lumber to air-conditioning, to plumbing. You name it, everything is more expensive.

So President Biden will, contrary to his current position, negotiate. I am confident of that. But it seems like he is committed to a soap opera in the meantime—a lot of drama, a lot of wailing, and gnashing of teeth, a lot of speculation that is going to do nothing but to rattle the confidence of the American people in their economy and what the future may hold.

This is really an unforced error by the President. It is time to accept the fact that a clean debt ceiling increase has no chance of becoming law.

So the ball is in our Democratic colleagues' court. I think President Biden didn't think Speaker MCCARTHY would be able to pull together the votes to pass a bill in the House, and he thought, That gives me ultimate leverage because if Republicans in the House can't get it together, they are going to have no option but to deal with me on my terms.

But Speaker MCCARTHY and House Republicans, I am proud to say, were able to come up with a reasonable bill that includes raising the debt ceiling.

Now, I understand President Biden may say: Well, I don't like that; there are parts of it I simply can't accept. But that is how negotiations get started. But not if the President of the United States, the leader of the free world, is sitting on his couch, waiting for the American people to become more and more anxious about their future, including the future of the economy and their jobs.

Last month, the House passed a bill to avert a debt crisis, and now it is the Democrats' turn to respond. That is negotiating 101: One side makes an offer, and the other side counteroffers.

Each day our country is moving closer and closer to a debt default. President Biden has wasted months parroting the same ridiculous talking points, and now is not the time to double down on that tired rhetoric. It is time to start talking. And, again, it is not uncommon for debt limit increases to be coupled with broader negotiations.

As I pointed out, Senator SCHUMER was a proponent of that back in 2017. He said at the time the debt ceiling “gives another ample opportunity for bipartisanship, not for one party jamming its choices down the throats of the other.”

I agree with Senator SCHUMER in 2017, and I disagree with CHUCK SCHUMER in 2023, in his current position.

So far, Democrats have blindly adhered to this position of no negotiations, no reform; let's just keep on spending until we bankrupt this country.

It is time to change course and to focus on solutions. The art of the possible—that is what we are here to do. We need to focus on solutions that can pass a Republican-led House and a Democrat-led Senate.

And that means Speaker MCCARTHY and President Biden need to talk. And more than that, they need to reach an agreement and to do so soon. It is time for President Biden to respond to the House's offer with a reasonable counteroffer and to negotiate an end to this potential debt ceiling crisis.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Louisiana.

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to use a prop or two during my remarks.

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

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST—S. 878

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. President, today, I would like to talk about a distasteful subject to me—I get angry whenever I think about it—fentanyl dealers. I hope there is a special place in Hell for them—fentanyl dealers.

Today is National Fentanyl Awareness Day. In 2021, fentanyl killed 71,000 Americans. If you break down these sterile statistics, you will see that somebody in our country dies from fentanyl poisoning every 7 seconds. There ought to be a special place in Hell for fentanyl dealers.

And these aren't just sterile statistics. These are real people, and they have real families whose lives are torn apart. A lot of these deaths occur among young people. Fentanyl is now the leading cause of death for Americans who are 18 to 49.

From 2020 to 2021, fentanyl deaths in our country increased by 24 percent. It was even more among young people.

What you allow is what will continue. And today, this body—the U.S. Congress—allows fentanyl dealers to carry on their person, if they would like to, enough fentanyl to kill 20,000 Americans before they face a mandatory 5-year minimum sentence if they are caught. Until these fentanyl dealers have to deal themselves with real consequences, I think the carnage is going to continue.

I have a bill—it is called the Fairness in Fentanyl Sentencing Act of 2023, and it will change what I just talked about drastically. It will reduce the amount