

We are 1 day away from an Acting Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps. According to the Marine Corps History Division, there have been four Acting Commandants in the history of the Marine Corps, which was established in 1775, for those who are counting. The last Acting Commandant served over a century ago, in 1910, and three of the four Acting Commandants are the result of the previous Commandant dying in the position of Commandant.

Could General Smith, the current Assistant Commandant, serve as the Acting Commandant? Yes, of course, he can. But we must ask ourselves why we would allow it. Why would the Senate allow that to happen with not only our near-peer competitors watching but the eyes of all who serve watching? We have the ability and the responsibility to act. We should do so.

“Semper Fidelis”—always faithful—is the Marine Corps motto. Let this Congress show a modicum of that faith today and confirm Gen. Eric Smith as the next Commandant.

With that, Madam President, I would ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the consideration of the following nomination: Executive Calendar No. 249, Gen. Eric M. Smith to be Commandant of the Marine Corps; that the Senate vote on the nomination without intervening action or debate; that, if confirmed, the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table and the President be immediately notified of the Senate's action.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Is there objection?

The Senator from Alabama.

Mr. TUBERVILLE. Madam President, reserving the right to object, the Senate has a lot of very important work to do. We have been out a couple of weeks, and it is time to get back to work. Senator SCHUMER, yesterday—or this past week—sent the Democratic caucus a long to-do list that includes keeping the government open, which is very important; our annual Defense bill, which is very important; addressing prescription drugs, which we are all very concerned about; the farm bill. There are a lot of other things that we have got to address in this caucus, in this room. Missing from that list was military nominations.

This is my 11th time standing up here and continuing to harp on the fact that we need to do something about this new policy that the Secretary of Defense has passed down and passed to the military. So far this year, dozens of lower level military nominations have passed through unanimous consent, but a number of important nominations are pending or will soon be pending.

General Smith's, as the Senator just brought up, is one of the most important. I have got a great deal of admiration for General Smith.

Earlier today, General Smith became the acting head of the Marine Corps. He is doing the same exact job which he has been doing for several years. The only difference is that today he is

an acting official. This has minimal effect on his ability to lead.

There may be a delay in his planning guidance, and he cannot yet move into the Commandant's residence. But there is little doubt about General Smith's ability to lead effectively, even now. There is little doubt that soon he will be confirmed.

I have met with General Smith. I have got great respect and admiration for what he has done. General Smith has dedicated nearly four decades to the Marine Corps. He has got a record to be very proud of. During our meeting, General Smith assured me that he was committed to keeping politics out of the military. And for me to vote for somebody, that is exactly what I am looking for: keep politics out of the military.

The Marine Corps has done an excellent job of staying mission-focused. One result is, because of that, the marines are the only branch that is meeting its recruiting goals. I believe that the Marine Corps is in good hands now with General Smith.

But if Chairman REED and the Democrats are so concerned, let's vote. That is all I keep asking for. Let's vote on these nominees.

This week, the Senate will consider a DOJ nomination for an office that has around 20 employees—20 employees. I agree that this is an important nomination, but surely the Commandant of the Marine Corps is more important. So if the Democrats are so worried about General Smith being an acting official, then let's vote. I keep asking for that. Let's vote and clear this up.

With that, I object.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Objection is heard.

The Senator from Rhode Island.

Mr. REED. Madam President, reclaiming my time, first of all, the Senator from Alabama made a compelling case about the demands upon this Senate. They range from cyber security issues to a host of other important issues that we have to deal with. Yet he insists we have a vote.

Now, he has very subtly made a distinction between four or five senior officers, and forgotten the 245 other officers who play very critical roles in the military. And if one respects the Marine Corps and one respects the proposed Commandant, the first thing I believe you should do is allow a vote very quickly so that there is no period of time that he is an Acting Commandant.

And an Acting Commandant is different than a Commandant. Their policies cannot be firmly established because they are just “acting.” He is capable, but he is just “acting.” If we want leadership that is confirmed, that has not only the trappings of authority but every bit of influence generated by such authority, then we have to vote. That is why the Congress is required to confirm military officers.

We are in a situation where just pure obstinacy is inhibiting our service-

members. And I am amazed that someone would stand up and say: The quality I look for is a military officer who is not political, but what I do is make these officers political pawns in a game I am playing with national leadership. It is civilian leadership who proclaim these policies, which are legal and consistent with the history of the Armed Forces.

This is a very unsatisfactory answer. We will continue to come back and urge that our colleagues. I particularly hope my colleagues on the other side, many of whom do appreciate the fact that these officers must be confirmed for the good of our Nation and the safety of the world, come around.

I have just one example that comes to mind. The President of the Naval War College, Admiral Chatfield—a remarkable woman—changed command a few weeks ago. She is nominated to be a three-star admiral and be our representative in Brussels at NATO. This, at a time when NATO and the United States are engaged in supporting the Ukrainian people in trying to survive, save their people, and, indeed, probably save their country. But Admiral Chatfield cannot go to Brussels. She remains in Newport waiting—helping out a bit, I am sure, with her replacement, but just waiting. And meanwhile, the general officer in Brussels has other plans, obviously, because he knew, or hoped, that Admiral Chatfield would be arriving soon.

That is the kind of disorder, disorganization, and, I would say, disrespect that is being generated by these holds.

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Texas.

BUSINESS BEFORE THE SENATE

Mr. CORNYN. Madam President, it is actually good to be back in the Senate this week after 2 weeks back home, and we certainly have a busy schedule ahead of us. The fact is that, unfortunately, this was a product of the inattention or lack of urgency that the majority leader has had to deal with the Senate's necessary work so far. We are a quarter of the way through the 118th Congress, and we, frankly, don't have a lot to show for it.

Under our colleagues' leadership, this Chamber developed an embarrassingly short list of accomplishments. Despite the chaos at the southern border, we haven't had the opportunity to vote on legislation to address this humanitarian and security crisis, either in the Senate Judiciary Committee or here on the floor. They simply just ignore it: 5 million border encounters since President Biden took office. Last year alone, 108,000 Americans died of drug overdoses. Seventy-one thousand of those were from synthetic opioids, virtually all of which come from Mexico, the precursors having been imported from China.

Would that be enough to get the attention of the President and the majority leader to actually do something in that area? Well, apparently not.

Yesterday, I was interested to see that the Senator from New York—the majority leader—sent a letter to our Senate colleagues highlighting his plans for the next 3 weeks. Actually, we only have about 10 workdays in these next 3 weeks before now the regularly scheduled August recess. Again, more of the same that we have seen so far this year—not much time and a lot to do.

Senator SCHUMER mentioned his desire to move forward on bills relating to drug pricing, fentanyl, permitting reform, rail safety, marijuana banking, China competition, artificial intelligence, and a number of other topics in the next 3 weeks.

Now, to be clear, I don't think the majority leader actually believes we are going to produce legislation in these areas. Maybe you would call this a wish list. But it is only wishful thinking to believe that in the U.S. Senate you are going to be able to get all of these necessary items addressed in the next 10 working days.

And, of course, that ignores the fact that we have a bicameral legislature. We have the Senate and the House. Has he prevetted any of this legislation with the House to see whether, assuming the Senate would act, that the House would actually take it up and pass it and the President would sign it into law?

That is how we legislate around here. It is not performance art. It is not show business. This is actually about doing the people's business and passing legislation through an admittedly difficult process.

But this is where we find ourselves having waited until this late moment to deal with so much important legislation. The Democratic-controlled Senate has been downright sleepy for the last 6 months. And I have no reason that this letter, this wish list, will prompt some miraculous turnaround.

The lack of productivity in this Congress has created a major backlog of important bills, which must be our top focus. We have a lot to do and not much time to do it, but that is by design. That is not the way the Senate should be operating.

We heard from the previous speakers a lot about the national defense authorization bill, which is our annual Defense bill, which we passed for the last 61 years in a row—61 years in a row. Before this last break, the Senate Armed Services Committee completed its work on that bill and passed it out of committee by a vote of 24 to 1—bipartisan bill out of the Armed Services Committee demonstrating an overwhelming bipartisan support.

This legislation, as we all know, is about supporting our servicemembers, modernizing our military, and addressing our biggest security challenges, including China.

Senator WICKER, from Mississippi, the ranking member, has shared his disappointment over the fact that this year's Defense bill doesn't adequately seek to fund our defense needs.

Now, of course, this is an authorization, in the jargon of the Senate—it is not an appropriation—but typically what happens is the authorizing committees will set a level of funding and then the Appropriations Committee will come behind that and fund it, presumably, at that level.

But I know many of us are committed to working in the coming weeks to increase those funding levels to ensure that our military has the resources it needs to protect the American people, especially in the face of 40-year-high inflation.

I don't have to tell anybody within the sound of my voice what inflation has done to their standard of living and their purchasing power over the last couple of years. Basically, this is like a silent tax, where you have less and less to spend for the necessary expenditures in your life, whether it is your transportation, your food, your clothing, your childcare, your healthcare, or the like. Well, the military is experiencing the ill-effects of this 40-year-high inflation, too, and its purchasing power has been decreased dramatically.

Well, I hope that we will have a turnaround of sorts and that the Defense authorization bill will get off to a strong start, but it is a long way from the finish line.

While this bill did pass the committee, it still needs to be brought to the floor. There needs to be an opportunity for Senators to offer amendments and debate the bill, hopefully improve it, and then vote on it by the full Senate, and that takes time.

Under the regular procedures of the Senate, to bring a bill like that to the floor and to account for all of the potential procedural obstacles that would be encountered, it would take you more than a week to process the bill. And we have 3 weeks before August—10 days of actual working time—and this is what the majority leader has presented us with.

So we know that we need to get to work. The NDAA should pass before the end of fiscal year, which is September 30, and the Senate is only scheduled to be in session for 7 weeks before then. So even after we come back from the August recess, in order to meet the deadline of the end of the fiscal year, September 30, we only have 4 more weeks after we get back before the NDAA essentially lapses—the national defense authorization bill—absent our action in the meantime.

I don't have to tell my colleagues that providing for the common defense is one of our most important responsibilities. And the National Defense Authorization Act is the foundation for that. So I hope the majority leader will allow the Senate to take up the bill soon.

I think I heard the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee just now suggest that perhaps the NDAA will come to the floor next week, and I hope that is true. But certainly, in order to give Senators an opportunity

to participate and hopefully debate and offer amendments and improve the bill, it is going to take time, and that is something we don't have a lot of.

Every Member of this Chamber has the right to offer their ideas to strengthen and improve this legislation, just like we should on any piece of legislation. And the majority leader should not try to jam the process by saying: Oh, now, we don't have enough time so we are going to have to do away with the opportunity to have full debates and amendment process because we are running up against a deadline. Well, that deadline is of his own making because he failed to deal with this in a timely manner.

But September 30 isn't the only deadline that we have for the Defense authorization bill. It is also the farm bill. Every 5 years, Congress passes a farm bill to support everything from crop insurance to nutrition programs, to rural broadband. The impact of the farm bill is felt in communities across America, including those in my home State of Texas.

Texas is home to nearly a quarter of a million farms and ranches, more than any other State in the country. And one out of every seven working Texans actually works in an ag-related job. These hard-working men and women raise cattle, chickens. They grow corn and sorghum. They produce cotton and hay, not just for the Nation but for the world. Texas farmers and ranchers produce food and fiber for America and for exports as well, and they are facing increasingly strong headwinds.

I mentioned inflation, which has been at a 40-year high. It has increased the cost of every input that farmers and ranchers have, from diesel to fertilizer, you name it. It has eroded their purchasing power. Their operating costs have skyrocketed for everything. I mentioned fertilizer and fuel. Pesticides is another major expense. And so their profit margins continue to get slimmer and slimmer.

I was somewhat amused to hear that President Biden, during our 2-week period away from Washington, DC, began to tout something he calls Bidenomics, like he is proud of it. He said: This is a lot like Reaganomics, except it is Bidenomics. It has nothing to do with Reaganomics, which actually worked. But I was amused because when I looked at the RealClearPolitics' average of the President's approval rating for his economic policies, it stands at a whopping 38.7 percent—38.7 percent approve of President Biden's economic policies. Bidenomics is like putting lipstick on a pig to try to dress it up to make it look better than it really is.

But in addition to our economic woes, Mother Nature has unleashed a set of challenges as well. Last year alone, natural disasters caused more than \$21 billion in crop losses nationwide. Today, areas across Texas are experiencing a hot and dry summer. We are used to that. It is summertime. It is July. We are used to hot and dry

summers. But farmers are also battling very little rainfall, and they are praying that their crop loss will not be more than minimal.

The farm bill includes farm safety net programs which are a lifeline for countless producers. They are critical at managing the risks inherent with this critical industry. Everybody knows farming and ranching is risky, for the reasons I mentioned and others.

But this year I hope we can build on the progress we made in the last farm bill to ensure that the agriculture sector is as resilient as possible.

This sector not only feeds, fuels, and clothes America, as I said, it also drives our economy and feeds the world.

In Texas alone in 2021, ag exports totaled more than \$7.2 billion. In 2019, Texas A&M's AgriLife Extension Service estimated the economic impact of the ag sector to be nearly \$160 billion, which is more than 8 percent of my State's GDP.

So a strong, on-time farm bill is essential to the health and well-being of this important sector of the economy, but it is also important beyond that. It is important to the American people, and it is important to our economy.

Our colleague Senator BOOZMAN from Arkansas is a ranking member. And our colleagues on the Agriculture Committee, I know, have been working hard to draft this year's farm bill, and I appreciate the hard work that they put into it. But I am eager to work with our colleagues to get this bill across the finish line on time, again, before it lapses at the end of this fiscal year.

And then, there is another big one, Federal Aviation Administration Reauthorization. As though we needed another big, heavy lift before the end of the fiscal year, it is also the deadline to reauthorize the Federal Aviation Administration. Over the last couple of years, travelers have dealt with widespread flight cancellations, paralyzing staffing shortages, and rising prices. We have also witnessed some jarring safety issues, including near-collisions on airport runways in Minneapolis and New York.

Last month, Senators CANTWELL, CRUZ, DUCKWORTH, and MORAN introduced the FAA Reauthorization Act to address these and other issues. But like the National Defense Authorization Act and the farm bill, the FAA needs to be reauthorized by September 30. Again, all of these deadlines are well-known by the majority leader, but here we are finding ourselves with very little time and a lot to do.

And last but not least is, likely, the biggest lift before us for before September 30, and that is to fund the government. As part of the debt limit agreement, Senator SCHUMER vowed to bring all 12 appropriations bills to the Senate floor by September 30. How he is going to be able to keep his promise is not clear to me, given the traffic jam that we are going to experience, be-

cause this includes funding for our military, veteran services, border security, and so much more.

Senator COLLINS and Senator MURRAY and all of our colleagues on the Appropriations Committee are determined to restore some regular order and common sense to the funding process. I hope the majority leader will stick by his word and put all 12 appropriations bills on the Senate floor before the end of the fiscal year.

We don't need, and the country does not want, another omnibus spending bill like we saw at the end of last year, which, of course, was by design, because it empowers the leadership to the detriment of rank-and-file members of the Congress. When you are presented with a "shut down the government," "take it or leave it" proposition at the end of the year, having bypassed all of this normal process, the question is, Are you going to keep the government open? Are you going to fund the government? Are you going to fund defense, veterans, border security, or not? And that is simply an abomination we do not need to repeat again. And so I do hope the majority leader will keep his word.

None of these bills are an easy lift. They require a lot of hard work, cooperation, and time, and we only have 7 weeks of legislative session to pass them all. So far, the 118th Congress hasn't been a productive one. The Democratic majority has struggled to complete even the most basic tasks, and now we have a lot of work to do, maybe an impossible amount of work to do, by design. The clock is ticking, and we can't let these critical responsibilities slip through the cracks.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Ms. HIRONO). The Senator from Kansas.

EDUCATION

Mr. MORAN. Madam President, I was sitting home reading the newspaper, something I still do, and last month I read an article that captured my attention. National test scores of American students showed an alarming decline in the education of our children. Reading scores in America have continued to worsen since the height of COVID-19 pandemic, dropping to the lowest scores in decades.

The troubling deterioration in American education was demonstrated by average scores on the 2023 National Assessment of Educational Progress known as the Nation's Report Card. The report showed that 13-year-olds declined nine points in math compared to 2020. This was the largest drop for 13-year-olds seen in 50 years.

When 13-year-olds are struggling, it portends even worse problems ahead, because mastery in seventh and eighth grade is necessary to progress to more complex knowledge and analytical abilities required in high school and beyond. We know that failures in early childhood education, in early education have a long-lasting consequence.

We must turn these test scores around and accelerate the education of America's young as though our future depends on it, because it absolutely does.

America's strength as a global power—let me say that the education of our children is hugely important to our students and their families. But, also, America's strength as a global power doesn't just depend upon a strong military or possessing the latest weapons. Those things are important, but it also depends upon our economy and our ability to maintain a technological edge over our adversaries. And that all begins in the classroom, equipping our students to read, multiply, divide, and succeed.

The mental health, confidence, and contributions of young Americans cannot be thought of as a secondary issue. It is not a secondary issue to other national security imperatives. What that means is that the well-being, health, confidence, contribution, the capabilities, knowledge, intellect, and intelligence of our children have consequences to our security—our national security.

One of those greatest threats in our national security is China. China understands that to force their way into being a global superpower, they must be able to challenge the U.S. militarily and economically. This can be done by dislodging the United States as a leader in key technology areas that will dictate the success of nations in the coming decades.

Those technologies include semiconductor design and manufacture, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, aerospace engineering, advanced manufacturing, and biotechnology. If China were to overtake the United States in any of these areas—in any of these areas—the United States would lose out on trillions of dollars in economic value, our military edge would erode, and the Chinese global influence would increase dramatically.

As we grapple with the implications of a new Cold War with China and as we take stock of many of the associated challenges more complex than the old Cold War, the fact that our youth remain grades behind in math poses a concerning obstacle to future competitiveness. Advances in science and technology will build on basic math. Right now, our children are unprepared; and, therefore, we are unprepared to meet this challenge.

While we work to regain this ground in education, particularly in these STEM fields, we also need to create more opportunities for others that have gained a STEM education here in the United States to practice their profession in this country and contribute to the U.S. economy.

Educating people, only to send them back to strengthen their own home country, at a time in which the U.S. demand for STEM talent is through the roof, defies logic. Only 11 percent of foreign-born recipients of a bachelor's