

century; the greatest financial crisis since the Great Depression; and then—and then—a violent attack on the Capitol by an insurrectionist mob, one of the darkest days in the history of this building and our Nation. The doubters said a 50-50 Senate coming into being with that circumstance was destined to be gridlocked. We proved them wrong.

Today, we begin the legislative work of a new Congress, the 118th Congress. Will these 2 years—the next 2 years—be remembered for dysfunction or democracy? chaos or consensus? That really is the challenge we face. The choice is not entirely in our hands here in the Senate with a 51-to-49 slim majority.

The new MAGA majority in the House of Representatives has promised endless investigations, confrontations, impeachments, and chaos, but it doesn't have to be that way. The Senate can be a steady force. We can pass a budget. We can give a helping hand to families and businesses. We can invest in a better future. We can defend democracy against the rise of autocracy. We can pay our Nation's bills if we are willing to work together for the common good.

If you want to see our choices, look at what we faced on January 4, just a few weeks ago. On that day, the House of Representatives was in chaos. A small band of MAGA hard-liners held the House hostage to their extreme demands. In the end, it took 15 rollcall votes, over 4 days, to elect a new Speaker, who will be, after all of his concessions to the extreme wing of his party, on paper, perhaps, the weakest Speaker in recent memory.

However, on that same day, January 4, President Biden and the Republican leader, Senator MCCONNELL, were together at a major bridge that connects Covington, KY, with Cincinnati, OH. It is a bridge that has needed repair for years, and now those repairs will happen because of the historic infrastructure bill passed by the last Congress—the largest infrastructure plan since the Eisenhower administration in the 1950s and the creation of the Interstate Highway System.

That bipartisan infrastructure plan will rebuild bridges and roads all across America and our State of Illinois. We have already seen evidence of that. It will expand affordable high-speed broadband services, and it will build the 21st century infrastructure America needs to remain the strongest in the world. It is already creating good jobs in Illinois and around the Nation, and it will continue to do so. That is just one of the achievements of this Congress that had a 50-50 Senate.

We also passed the CHIPS and Science Act to supercharge America's microchip industry and bring high-tech manufacturing back to America. We passed the boldest economic recovery and investment plan since President Franklin Roosevelt, the most sweeping legislation enacted by any government on Earth to confront the climate crisis, and the bipartisan PACT Act to help

millions of veterans who were exposed to burn pits and other toxic chemicals during their military service. We kept the price of insulin for seniors at \$35 a month. Now, for the first time ever, Medicare can negotiate on prescription drug prices, and Medicare recipients' out-of-pocket expenses for drugs will be capped at \$2,000 a year.

In the last Congress, we confirmed 97 outstanding new Article III judges, including the first Black woman ever to serve on the Supreme Court, Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson. These new judges will bring unprecedented diversity to our Federal courts both in terms of demographics as well as in their backgrounds and professional experience.

In the last Congress, with President Biden's leadership and the support of Congress, the United States rallied the free world to confront Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Yesterday, I was at a meeting in an area known as the Ukrainian Village in the city of Chicago. It was a gathering not only of proud Lithuanians, who were determined to do everything they could to help their friends and relatives back in Ukraine fight off Putin's invasion, but also a lot of others. There were many Polish people there, Lithuanians as well, and many other consulate generals were present to express their support for the common cause.

I am proud that the United States is leading this effort, and we must continue to. When I hear suspicions and rumors and suggestions that maybe the MAGA Republicans in the House have grown weary of this war and impatient for it to end, I have to remind them that freedom is worth fighting for. The Ukrainians are dying for it. We need to stand by them with the NATO alliance and see this through and put an end to Putin's terrible war crimes.

We ensure, as well, that the United States will not be a safe haven for the perpetrators of heinous war crimes in Ukraine. We will continue to stand with the Ukrainians until Putin's illegal war is over and Ukraine is once again free and at peace.

We authorized and strengthened the Violence Against Women Act; passed new laws to strengthen protections for survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, child sexual abuse, and sexual harassment.

Over the last 2 years, the Federal Government delivered 700 million COVID shots for free—in 2 years, 700 million vaccinations—and according to the White House, COVID deaths in America are down by 80 percent.

America's economy created 11 million jobs—the strongest job creation in the history of our Nation. The Nation's unemployment rate is near a 50-year low. Gas prices are headed down, and inflation is finally easing a little bit.

All of that happened with a 50-50 Senate. That is not gridlock. That is government working for the common good.

The priorities for this Congress are pretty obvious. We need to continue

our efforts to protect the basic rights of Americans. As well as voting rights, we need to include on that list reproductive health rights for the women of America.

We are determined to end the crisis on our southern border by securing the border, finally fixing our broken immigration system, and passing the DREAM Act—my ambition for almost two decades. Well, it has been longer than that to be honest with you.

Over the last week, I visited with some of the migrants who were bused to Chicago, and I talked to them about their families and what they face. If there is anyone who thinks that they are trying to game the system in America, they ought to talk to them. They are ready to go to work, and we need to make sure that that is done in a proper fashion.

Last year, we passed the most significant gun safety law in nearly 30 years, but the horrific shooting that killed 11—now the latest number is 11—and wounded 9 more this past weekend at the Lunar New Year celebration in Monterey Park, CA, is another terrible reminder that more work needs to be done for gun safety. The Lunar New Year shooting was the 33rd mass shooting in America so far this month—33 so far this month.

Last year, there were 600 mass shootings. I remember one of them well, and I am sure the Acting President pro tempore does too. The gunman opened fire on the Fourth of July parade in Highland Park, IL. He discharged 83 rounds in less than a minute, and he killed 7 people and injured dozens more. There were 19 little children and 2 of their teachers who were murdered in their classroom in Uvalde, TX, just days before. There were 10 people who were killed in a grocery store in Buffalo, NY, in a racist attack. The list goes on and on and on.

It is madness. It is sickening. It is a uniquely American problem. Try to explain it away. You can't. There are just too darned many guns in the hands of the wrong people, and they continue to produce them and sell them with abandon and without any sense of responsibility for the results.

DEBT CEILING

Madam President, we must pay our Nation's bills. We all agree with that. Using the debt ceiling as a bargaining chip to force deep cuts in Social Security and Medicare is unacceptable. Pushing through other extreme changes that can't pass on their own merits ought to be unthinkable; yet this is what the MAGA extremists in the House appear hell-bent on doing.

I would remind those who want to pose for holy pictures as budget balancers that one-fourth—almost one-fourth—of our entire national debt that has been accumulated in the United States over the last 230 years was racked up during the 4 years that Donald Trump was in the White House—almost one-fourth of our national debt. What we are doing with

the debt ceiling now is paying for Donald Trump's priorities voted for by Congress and the Republicans. It is the responsible thing to do.

Even in their policies, such as tax breaks for the wealthiest people in the country, the fact is it was enacted into law, and we have a responsibility, in preserving the good faith and credit of the United States, to extend the debt limit even for those policies which I personally disagree with. The Republicans moved to raise the debt ceiling three times during the Trump administration, and the Democrats supported them every time.

We don't want to turn America into a deadbeat nation. Defaulting on our national debt for the first time in history, as the MAGA Republicans are threatening in the House, would throw millions of Americans out of work. According to a think tank, the Third Way, a worker with a 401(k) retirement account could lose \$20,000 because of interest rates, and a new 30-year mortgage would cost an additional \$130,000. How many people would be willing to buy a new home or a new car facing those circumstances? Borrowing would become harder and more expensive, and the national debt would increase by \$850 million just from our failure to extend the debt limit.

Abraham Lincoln once said, "We cannot escape history," warning Congress and a nation torn apart by a civil war. Thank God we are not facing anything like that today, but we are facing deep divisions and continued assaults on our democracy.

So as we begin this new Congress, we need to ask ourselves: What do we want history to say about this Senate during the next 2 years? Will we be remembered for chaos or consensus? Will we work to heal the divisions in our Nation or deepen them? Will we solve the problems that really matter to the American people or invent problems and stoke them for political advantage?

My Democratic colleagues and I are hopeful that there will be a positive answer to those questions, that we can negotiate and work together in good faith for a better America.

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Alabama.

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. TUBERVILLE. Madam President, it is great to be back with my Senate colleagues this week. It has been a while. But we need to get a lot done in this year's new Congress.

As a new Congress is getting underway, our country faces many problems, many problems that we need to address. However, as we look ahead to what we can accomplish this Congress, we also need to look back and learn from the past. Having the courage to recognize and address problems prevents us from making problems and continuing the same thing in the future.

It is high time we take a look back at the devastating impacts of some of

the Federal and State government policies in response to COVID-19 and the pandemic. Most importantly, we have to focus on education. We have to look at the toll the lockdowns have taken on our country's youngest citizens.

Unfortunately, like many issues in DC, the COVID crisis was weaponized for some political gain. The government misused emergency measures to grow its control over Americans' daily lives. Hopefully, those days are over.

This time 3 years ago, COVID was making its way around our country, through the States and through the communities. Of course, in the early days, we knew very little about the virus and how to respond to it, so leaders in both parties, leaders across our States and our communities, called for a pause in daily activities to get control of the spread of COVID-19. But what we didn't know then was how long that pause would last, not just in some areas but all over our country. And we certainly didn't know that our response could end up being worse—the response that we had being worse than the actual COVID that was running across our country.

We are just now starting to understand the impact of COVID-related lockdowns. They weren't just extreme, they were deadly in some areas.

Research led by a professor at the University of Chicago exposed the deadly impact of lockdowns by analyzing the excess death rate in our country during the use of these lockdowns. The "excess rate" is a term used to describe the number of deaths above historical norms—or how many more Americans died than we would typically expect to pass away during any given year. So those were balanced up and looked at from the years of COVID to the years past.

According to the data from the CDC, the number of non-COVID excess deaths reached almost 100,000 people in 2020 and in 2021. The hundreds of thousands of non-COVID excess deaths during the pandemic can be mainly attributed to shocking increases in accidents, overdoses, and death from alcoholism and homicide. Those causes disproportionately impacted minorities and low-income Americans—the same groups lockdowns were often billed and made to protect.

The number of deaths from hypertension and heart disease and diabetes also skyrocketed during the pandemic. This was especially true for America's young people. In total, excess deaths among young adults throughout the pandemic were 27 percent higher than they should be, according to historical records of years past.

It does not take a scientist to draw the connection between lockdowns and all the excess deaths that we have had the last 3 years. Not only were Americans kept out of gyms, parks, churches, social settings, and family gatherings, they were forced to skip routine doctor visits, surgeries, and in-person medical treatments out of fear. And fear was

the main weapon used against the American people. As a result, mental and physical health plummeted.

While lockdowns across the country slowly ended, the deadly repercussions did not. For example, through the middle of last year, overdose deaths per year outnumbered the total number of military deaths in the past 60 years.

The truth is, the physical and mental health consequences of overreaching lockdowns will be measured for years and years to come.

Locking Americans out of school, work, church, and social contact had disastrous impacts on our economy, our education system, and our society as a whole.

We all saw businesses across the country go under as customers were kept away and the daily hum of our economy was silenced.

As kids were forced into virtual schooling, an entire generation of Americans lost months and even years of valuable educational opportunities. Research conducted by the global consulting firm McKinsey found that COVID-related school disruption left students 5 months behind in math and 4 months behind in reading. Students who were already underserved were hit even harder by school closures. High schoolers were left more likely to drop out and less likely to pursue further education after the lockdowns. And more than 35 percent of American parents were left "very or extremely concerned about their children's mental health."

Today, our schools are facing a shortage of teachers, months of instruction still missing, and a mental health and behavioral crisis among our country's students. It is a pandemic.

As someone who spent decades myself as an educator and a coach, who fostered the potential of young adults, I am committed to ensuring we never inflict the damage on our school-age kids again, no matter what.

I bring up these sobering facts on health and education to call on this body to join me in this commitment in this Congress to do away with what we just did. We have to evaluate it. We cannot keep going forward this way.

This is especially important as some influential people in our government, media, and public health circles continue today to call for measures that disrupt our society in ways we know have terrible consequences.

The Biden administration is hellbent on keeping the COVID-19 public health emergency that is still in place. We still have it today.

Just last week, President Biden extended the emergency declaration because of the extra power it gives to the Federal Government, and he does that for another 90 days.

Attorneys for the Federal Government were in court asking an unelected judge to reinstate the national mask mandate for air travel just in the last few weeks.

Keep in mind, this body, in a bipartisan manner, voted to end the emergency declaration just this last year—