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Senate

The Senate met at 10 a.m. and was called to order by the Honorable RAPHAEL G. WARNOCK, a Senator from the State of Georgia.

PRAYER

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Our guest Chaplain, the Reverend Dr. Adolphus Lacey, senior pastor of the Bethany Baptist Church, Brooklyn, NY, will open the Senate in prayer.

The guest Chaplain offered the following prayer:

Let us pray.

Gracious God, we evoke Your Name in this place. We thank You for the life and for giving it to us more abundantly. We thank You for the power and privilege of prayer, and we humbly approach Your throne of grace to thank You and share our petitions.

We offer thanks to those who surrender their lives in service to this great Nation by willingly choosing to represent us. We thank You for their families and friends who loan them to us. May there be no lack in their lives because of their service.

We pray that, at this moment, You will pour out Your spirit of wisdom and compassion on these Senators as they chart the course of this Nation. Embolden them with the burden that they are someone's last resort and the hope that they can make a difference in someone's life.

Bless this assembly as they wrestle with how to express Your love for all of us and for this moment. Then, O God, bless all the people of all the States in this land that we love, to emulate and require of our leaders what you require in the words of the Prophet Micah: to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God.

In Your Name, we pray. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The Presiding Officer led the Pledge of Allegiance, as follows:

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

APPOINTMENT OF ACTING PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will please read a communication to the Senate from the President pro tempore (Mrs. MURRAY).

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the following letter:

U.S. SENATE,
PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE,
Washington, DC, March 21, 2024.

To the Senate:

Under the provisions of rule I, paragraph 3, of the Standing Rules of the Senate, I hereby appoint the Honorable RAPHAEL G. WARNOCK, a Senator from the State of Georgia, to perform the duties of the Chair.

PATTY MURRAY,
President pro tempore.

Mr. WARNOCK thereupon assumed the Chair as Acting President pro tempore.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The majority leader is recognized.

WELCOMING THE GUEST CHAPLAIN

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, I would just like to make my morning remarks a bit later, but I want to acknowledge and thank my good friend the Reverend Adolphus Lacey of the famous Bethany Baptist Church, not too far from where I live in Brooklyn, for leading us in this morning's prayer.

It is great to see you here. You are a leader in bringing the message of the Lord down here to all of us, but also doing many good works here on Earth. You do both, as the Prophet Micah would have wanted you to do.

And I have a great relationship with Bethany Baptist Church. Bill Jones—when I ran for Congress, they were sort of running a racist campaign against me, and Bill Jones—the Reverend Bill Jones—who was a disciple of Dr. King, rallied the ministers to support me and help me win.

So the relationship with Bethany Baptist goes way back, but it has even blossomed further under the great leadership of Pastor Lacey. I am so proud he is here so all of the Nation can see why we in Brooklyn love Pastor Adolphus Lacey.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from New York.

Mrs. GILLIBRAND. Mr. President, I also want to recognize the Reverend Adolphus C. Lacey for not only offering that beautiful prayer but for his extraordinary leadership and advocacy in Brooklyn, NY, and beyond.

He is the senior pastor at Bethany Baptist Church in Brooklyn. He is a pastor, theologian, and activist who has served as the spiritual adviser to the New York Justice League. He is also a member of the East Brooklyn Congregations in the National Action Network and also a member of the Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc.

He is an extraordinary public servant who has dedicated himself to lifting up other communities, to lifting up his community, to lifting up those who need a voice. And I am so grateful for his shining presence, for the light he is bringing to this community, as he brings to all of New York.

I yield the floor.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

• This "bullet" symbol identifies statements or insertions which are not spoken by a Member of the Senate on the floor.



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CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Morning business is closed.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the Senate will proceed to executive session to consider the following nomination, which the clerk will report.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the nomination of Jose Javier Rodriguez, of Florida, to be an Assistant Secretary of Labor.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The majority leader is recognized.

GOVERNMENT FUNDING

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, earlier this morning, the legislative text for the final six appropriations bills was released, I am happy to say, clearing another hurdle toward our ultimate goal of funding the Federal Government. I thank the appropriators, their staffs, and everyone involved for working themselves to the bone to release these bills. I imagine some folks here in the Capitol are past the point of exhaustion.

This funding agreement between the White House and congressional leaders is good news that comes in the nick of time. When passed, it will extinguish any more shutdown threats for the rest of the fiscal year, it will avoid the scythe of budget sequestration, and it will keep the government open without cuts or poison pill riders.

It is now the job of the House Republican leadership to move this package ASAP.

Just like the funding bills Congress passed 2 weeks ago, this package avoids draconian Republican cuts on major Democratic wins that help American families, American workers, and America's national defense. We have secured an increase in childcare services. We boosted disease research and prevention. We funded school mental health programs and suicide prevention—so needed in this modern world in which we live. We are strengthening the border with new resources for frontline personnel. We are investing in safer, more secure elections. We Democrats are very proud of both. The hard right pushed for cuts that would have impacted K through 12 education and services for low-income families. Democrats stopped it. The hard right wanted to add terrible poison pill riders to attack freedom of choice. Democrats stopped that too.

Now Congress must now race to pass this package before government funding runs out this Friday. Once the House acts, the Senate will need bipartisan cooperation to pass it before Friday's deadline and avoid a shutdown.

I want to thank President Biden, Speaker JOHNSON, Leader JEFFRIES, and Leader MCCONNELL for their leadership. I also thank Chairwoman MURRAY and Vice Chair COLLINS and their staffs, as well as my own staff, for their tireless leadership of the Appropriations Committee throughout the entire process. I don't think they got any sleep from about Saturday to today. I really thank particularly Meghan Taira and Ray O'Mara from my staff, who did such a strong job on this.

JUDICIAL CONFERENCE

Mr. President, now on judge shopping, last week, I was very pleased that the Judicial Conference announced commonsense policy reforms limiting the practice of judge shopping, by having civil cases with statewide or nationwide implications assigned to judges at random.

Unfortunately not everyone was pleased—namely, those on the right who have made judge shopping their specialty. So today, I am sending a followup letter to the Judicial Conference encouraging them to defend their policy as it is implemented across the country.

I am also writing the chief judge of the Northern District of Texas, where judge shopping has been rampant, urging him to apply the reforms of the Judicial Conference as quickly as possible. When I wrote to the chief judge roughly a year ago about judge shopping, he said fixing the problem through random assignments presented logistical challenges.

So, in my letter today, I will ask the judge to please explain: How many civil cases with statewide or national injunctions does his jurisdiction handle? How does the district create rules for case assignment? How will they implement the Judicial Conference's rules to ensure public trust? The answers to these questions would greatly inform us in the Senate as we think about ways to strengthen our judiciary.

I must say, over the past week, I have really been troubled to hear some of my colleagues on the other side attack the Judicial Conference simply for doing its job, which Congress authorized it to do over a century ago. My Republican colleagues forget or ignore that even their side has acknowledged in the past that not only is judge shopping a problem but that the Judicial Conference itself has a role to play to address it. But now some Republicans are howling at the Moon over this announcement. My friend the Republican leader, for one, led his colleagues in writing a number of chief judges, urging them to basically ignore the Judicial Conference.

Let me say this: Judge shopping as it is practiced here in Texas distorts the entire judicial system. There is only one judge sitting in one district. Hard-right plaintiffs from across the country know they can bring their cases and get them before a judge who has views that are way over. It jaundices the fairness of the legal system. When you

know there is one judge sitting and he or she has a particular philosophy and you have to get that judge when you file a case, again, it attracts hard-right plaintiffs who are so unrepresentative of America, like bees to honey, and they all flock to those one or two or three judicial districts where there is one judge or a minimal number of judges sitting.

My Republican colleagues actually refuse to explain why judge shopping is remotely defensible—because it so distorts the system and casts a cloud of unfairness over our whole judicial system, like the system is sort of rigged because you know you can get this judge, and you know what the outcome will be. The mifepristone case is the most glaring, immediate example.

Of course, my Republican colleagues don't explain why, by the way, because, of course, they can't say the quiet part out loud: Judge shopping is a key part of the hard-right's toolkit, something they have built up over the years. Just take the example of the Amarillo Division of the Northern District of Texas, where a single district judge has become the darling of extremist litigants for his outlandishly fringe opinions on everything from birth control to affordable healthcare to LGBTQ discrimination. Republicans might not want to say it openly, at least those who opposed here, but nobody is being fooled. Conservatives go to this one judge because they know he is on their side ideologically—what an abuse of the functioning of our Federal courts.

So, yes, the Judicial Conference was right to issue reforms to limit judge shopping. Neither party—no philosophy—should be able to cherry-pick judges of their choice. Random assignment is the way it works for nearly every court in the country.

I am always ready to work with Senators from either party to consider all commonsense ways to improve how our courts are administered. I wholeheartedly agree that Congress should take its role of judicial oversight seriously, particularly at a time when activist judges committed to special interests are eroding the rule of law. Congress must provide a check on the judiciary, and that is what the Founding Fathers intended in our legislation as decades, even centuries, also point out.

In this instance, it is troubling Republicans can't seem to admit the obvious: Abuses like the ones we see coming out of the Northern District of Texas should come to an end.

REPUBLICAN STUDY COMMITTEE BUDGET

Mr. President, on the RSC budget, yesterday, as President Biden announced tens of thousands of new jobs to take our country forward, House Republicans released a budget plan that would take us backward. The Republican Study Committee's fiscal year 2025 budget plan reads like a wish list for Donald Trump and the MAGA hard right, and it sure is a loser for the American people.