

Indeed, if you go back and you look at inflation, it was 1.4 percent the day that President Biden and Vice President HARRIS took office. Today, the latest number is 20.3 percent. In fact, excluding the emergency COVID spending in 2020, deficit spending under the Biden-Harris administration is at its highest point in American history—as I said, 121 percent of GDP. Previously, after World War II, it was at 106 percent.

The only other administration that has come even close to these numbers under Biden-Harris is the Obama-Biden administration. Before congressional Republicans fought for and secured serious spending cuts, that administration ran annual deficits as high as \$1.4 trillion between fiscal years 2009 and 2012.

With the deficit soaring again, our country needs another serious course correction. Yet, under their 2025 budget proposal, the Biden-Harris administration has called for—and I want you to get this number. Their 2025 budget proposal calls for \$86 trillion in spending over the next 10 years—\$86 trillion. It would increase our national debt—that \$35.3 trillion number—it would increase it by \$18 trillion.

Now, bear in mind, this is spending they are putting on the books. They are claiming it. They are out there shouting for it. Bidenomics, it is working. But, again, we look at this and say: How can you spend more and then say you are reducing the deficit? It is void of common sense.

Instead of fiscal recklessness, our country needs fiscal responsibility. Every year, I have legislation that would slash Federal spending—and I do these bills every year—by 1 percent, 2 percent, 5 percent for discretionary spending, excluding Defense, Homeland Security, and Veterans Affairs. I fully believe anybody can find a way to save one penny, two pennies, or a nickel out of what they are given to spend.

At a time when growth in government hiring is now outpacing growth in private sector hiring, Congress must also address the ballooning size of the Federal Government, which now employs nearly 2.4 million bureaucrats. It is time to start freezing salaries and freezing Federal hiring.

While there are many more steps that need to be taken to put America on a better fiscal trajectory, these moves would begin to tackle the threat that is posed to our Nation and to our freedoms because of overspending. If we don't get busy with this and find some ways to wrestle with this debt and with this out-of-control spending, it is our children and grandchildren who will suffer by having to pay that bill.

COUNTRY MUSIC MONTH

Mr. President, each year since 1961, the Country Music Association has inducted the legendary performers, songwriters, and artists of this uniquely American musical tradition into the Country Music Hall of Fame.

In many ways, this distinction is the highest honor in country music, with names like Hank Williams, Chet Atkins, Dolly Parton, and Elvis Presley among its roll of honor. Next month, three new names will join this legendary group during the Hall of Fame Medallion Ceremony: John Anderson, a force for traditionalism in country music, who achieved 20 Top Ten country singles across a five-decades-long career; James Burton, who is considered one of the greatest guitarists in all of music, performing and recording with the likes of Elvis, Merle Haggard, John Denver, and Emmylou Harris; and the late Toby Keith, an exceptional storyteller who brought joy to millions around the world through his music, especially to our men and women in uniform.

While each artist has their own distinct sound and style, they share a music tradition that reminds every American of the things that truly matter: faith, family, freedom, hope, opportunity, and patriotism.

To honor this incredible genre, this week I am introducing a resolution that would designate October 2024 as Country Music Month.

There is a reason the Grand Ole Opry—the most famous stage in country music—is known as the home of American music. Now is the perfect time for Congress to honor the contributions of country music and its legendary performers and artists to the story and the history of the United States.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

NOMINATION OF MICHAEL SFRAGA

Ms. MURKOWSKI. Mr. President, I have come to the floor this morning to speak about the nomination of Dr. Michael Sfraga. He is an Alaskan, and he has been nominated to be our Nation's very first Ambassador at Large for the Arctic.

We are going to have this vote very shortly, and my hope is that colleagues will see not only the imperative for an Arctic Ambassador at this moment in time but also to recognize that this nominee, Dr. Sfraga, is absolutely impeccable in terms of his qualifications for this position.

He is one who is known widely throughout Arctic circles as our Arctic expert and the expert in everything from research to policy, to national security.

We are the only Arctic Nation that lacks an Arctic Ambassador. I think colleagues are at that point in time where they recognize it is past time that we have that representation in the room when issues are as contentious as they are.

Let me just share with you a few reminders about what is happening in the Far North. We were all made aware, on July 24, when Russian and Chinese bombers flew a joint patrol for the first time off the coast of Alaska. What was unusual was not the fact that Russia and China were flying together, but it was the fact that it was the first time they had done it jointly in the Arctic.

We see the Russians regularly fly into our air defense identification zone—or ADIZ—but this was the first time to see the Chinese flying in this area with a joint mission. And we have just seen events continue to unfold throughout the summer.

Just a couple of weeks ago, September 10, Russia began a massive, weeklong, worldwide “Ocean-24” exercise with hundreds of warships, more than 100 aircraft, and nearly 100,000 troops. This exercise is the largest since the fall of the Soviet Union, but it also had Chinese participation.

Between its start and end, NORAD and the air forces stationed in Alaska detected, tracked, and intercepted four different Russian incursions into our Alaska ADIZ.

So we have come to expect incursions throughout the year, usually about six or seven. Think about that. In just 5 days, our air defenses were tested as much as they tend to be tested in any given year. So we are now way ahead on publicly reported intercepts this year, up to 10. We have got 3 months left.

There has also been an unprecedented level of naval activity off the coast. We saw the U.S. Coast Guard detect four Russian naval vessels 50 miles northwest of Point Hope. Just take it back a couple of years when Russian warships chased Alaska fishermen out of an area within our EEZ. That was back in August of 2020. Those are not isolated incidents either.

Last August, the Coast Guard detected and shadowed a Russian intelligence ship operating off of the Aleutians. This July, the Coast Guard detected and shadowed a Chinese surface action group within our EEZ and the Bering Sea.

We all remember the Chinese surveillance balloons that transited above Alaska and the Arctic last year.

And then just last night, I received notification from NORTHCOM of yet further intercepts of four Russian aircraft.

I hope that we can all agree that this is an unprecedented time for the region. Normally, we think of the Arctic as “High North, Low Tension,” but right now it is “High North,” and it is “Rising Tension.”

One thing that is missing is a Senate-confirmed diplomat who will spend his or her time focused on Arctic issues, working with our allies, engaging our adversaries, and sending these very clear messages that we will protect America's interest in the Arctic.

I had a chance to talk to Dr. Sfraga just literally hours ago. We were talking about this very intercept and what

we are seeing. He wanted to issue a statement as to his concern regarding what we are seeing with these air incursions into our ADIZ and into our EEZ off of Alaska shores.

He says as follows:

If confirmed as the U.S. Ambassador at Large for Arctic Affairs, I commit to do everything in my power to relentlessly push back against these malign actors in this new era of authoritarian aggression and press for more military assets and infrastructure in the Arctic region to protect America's economic and security interests.

So it is clear, we need an Arctic Ambassador. And we need this individual, Dr. Mike Sfraga, to be that Arctic Ambassador.

He was nominated in February of last year. His nomination was reported out of the Foreign Relations Committee in March, and today we have got an opportunity to confirm him.

I have mentioned that I think his qualifications are second to none. All you need to do is look at this gentleman's background: 30 years focused on the Arctic, a career of service in this area.

He is an accomplished geographer, a researcher, a teacher with a Ph.D. from the University of Alaska. He helped establish the University of the Arctic. He co-created, co-led the State Department's Fulbright Arctic Initiative. He established the Polar Institute at the Wilson Center, which has become the Arctic Public Square for high-level conversations about the Far North.

He chairs, currently, the US Arctic Research Commission, which advises us in Congress and the President on international research in the Arctic.

When I spoke to him—he is in Helsinki, and he is going to be attending the Helsinki Security Conference. Next week, he is going to be at the Warsaw Conference.

This man is in every conversation—every conversation—that surrounds the Arctic. He has the respect of those within the military, within the academic community, within policy. He is the person who knows the Arctic best.

And his vast experience means that he knows how to handle our adversaries like Russia and China—across the interagency process with allies and partners—and doing it through a position of strength.

Some have argued that perhaps his past interactions with regional players disqualify him from serving in this role.

He is an Alaskan. We share a maritime border with Russia. We used to have regular nonstop air service to Russia, believe it or not. That is part of a time when, obviously, relations were better and Putin hadn't decided to invade Ukraine. But it wasn't uncommon for Alaskans to visit and work and know people who live there.

He has also been criticized for attending international forums. Remember, he is not the only American or U.S. Government official in attendance at these meetings. I can't count the

number of times I have gone as the U.S. representative to these meetings, and Mike Sfraga is there in the room, leading the conversation.

Another area of criticism is that he failed to disclose fully before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee when his application came forward. Keep in mind, he is at every conference on the Arctic happening out there.

I am told—I am told—that attendance on panels or conferences are not required for inclusion in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee questionnaire. When the committee came back and said: We know that there are other conferences you have attended. You have failed to disclose these. He went back, and he fully—fully—amended his disclosure to make sure that there were no omissions.

So he then, when he submitted that to the committee, realized, through looking at his airline records, that he had failed to disclose yet another conference. So he went back voluntarily to do it. He has made sure that everything that has been asked has been provided.

I tell you, the criticisms that Dr. Sfraga has faced, I think, are a great way to ensure that the United States never has an Arctic Ambassador or that we ultimately have to confirm an individual who has never even been there, who knows very little about it, and won't do anything to protect or advance our strategic interests. That would be a loss because the Arctic is no longer this isolated, distant region. It is the place of strategic importance, economic potential, and growing competition.

And the United States must be prepared to lead. We have to be sitting at the table. We have to have that representation that we have lacked—that we have lacked.

Personnel is policy, and Dr. Sfraga is ready to take this on. So I urge the Senate to see through the challenges, the attacks, I think, on Dr. Sfraga.

There is nothing in his past or in his file that is disqualifying. We know exactly what we are getting. He has been a public figure. He has shared his views on the Arctic for years, and he continues, to this day, to do just that.

I urge all of my colleagues to join me in voting yes to confirm Dr. Sfraga.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Idaho.

Mr. RISCH. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that I be permitted to speak for up to 4 minutes prior to the scheduled rollcall vote.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. RISCH. Mr. President, fellow Senators, I rise today in opposition to the nomination of Michael Sfraga to be Ambassador at Large for Arctic Affairs, not because I don't think we need an ambassador—we do—and not because I don't think Mr. Sfraga has the knowledge and the expertise to do this—I think he does—and not because

he is not a nice person—I have met him. He is very engaging. I think he is a nice person, generally.

The Arctic is a critically important region under threat from increasing Russian and Chinese activity. An Arctic Ambassador should help advance U.S. leadership, but this person must demonstrate experience and sound judgment, not just in science but also in matters of national security. Dr. Sfraga is not qualified in that regard as far as I am concerned. In fact, I believe he makes the situation worse.

Based on his evasiveness during his vetting by the Foreign Relations Committee, I believe Dr. Sfraga could pose a counterintelligence and foreign malign influence threat to our Nation. I don't say that lightly.

Dr. Sfraga was asked repeatedly to provide his foreign travel, his foreign contacts, and his appearances on panels to the vetting personnel, and he failed to be open and transparent. He updated his file four times—maybe a new record—each time only after being confronted with additional information he tried to conceal.

For instance, while at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, Dr. Sfraga negotiated no less than 27 MOUs with Chinese academic institutions tied to China's intelligence services. Only after confronting him did Dr. Sfraga admit that he negotiated these MOUs. One in particular was with a Chinese university with ties to Chinese intelligence services, and the MOU gave the Chinese access to the university's IT systems, exposing it to substantial cyber threats.

On Russia, Dr. Sfraga failed to disclose a panel he spoke on in November 2021. Transneft, a sanctioned Russian state-owned energy firm, sponsored this conference.

He also failed to disclose articles he wrote and events he spoke at where he advocated for Arctic engagement with Russia and China, as required by the SFRC's questionnaire. There is no one questioning that engagement is necessary. I really think that he is naive, at best, as far as dealing with Russia and China. And, in his defense, the entire academic community, for that matter, shares this naivety when compared to our national security Agencies.

In May 2023, I took the unusual step of formally requesting the FBI to conduct a supplementary background check. In the 16 years that I have been here as a Senator, I have never asked the FBI for any kind of an investigation. I asked that this be supplemented. The FBI's response stated it could not conduct this investigation without White House permission, which the White House would not grant.

This means the Senate does not have a complete picture of the counterintelligence or other risks to our national security posed by Dr. Sfraga. The majority leader should never have scheduled a vote on Dr. Sfraga until a full

vetting was complete and until this body, which is a safeguard for our national security, had all the information that it needed. It doesn't.

Despite the poor due diligence on this nominee, there is still time for the Senate to do the right thing. I know it won't. I know this is essentially going to be a party-line vote. The Democrats want this person; they are going to get him.

If we truly care about advancing American and U.S. leadership in the Arctic and tackling the threats posed by our adversaries, we must do better—a lot better—than deliberately putting personnel in place that can pose a risk to national security. This appointment is such an appointment. This is not some political person going into a place where they can't do any harm. This is a person who is going to be at the crossroads of national security, dealing with people from China, for instance, every one of whom is an agent of the Chinese Communist Party, because every Chinese national is an agent of the Communist Party, and they have no ability to conduct themselves freely.

I urge my colleagues to vote no on the nomination of Michael Sfraga for Ambassador at Large for Arctic Affairs.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. HICKENLOOPER). The Senator from Colorado.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT AGREEMENT—H.R. 1555

Mr. BENNET. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the cloture motion with respect to the motion to proceed to Calendar No. 457, H.R. 1555, ripen at a time to be determined by the majority leader in consultation with the Republican leader, no later than Thursday, September 26, 2024.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Without objection, it is so ordered.

CLOTURE MOTION

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Pursuant to rule XXII, the Chair lays before the Senate the pending cloture motion, which the clerk will state.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

CLOTURE MOTION

We, the undersigned Senators, in accordance with the provisions of rule XXII of the Standing Rules of the Senate, do hereby move to bring to a close debate on the nomination of Executive Calendar No. 550, Michael Sfraga, of Alaska, to be Ambassador at Large for Arctic Affairs.

Charles E. Schumer, Benjamin L. Cardin, Raphael G. Warnock, Ben Ray Lujan, Patty Murray, Jack Reed, Richard J. Durbin, Tammy Baldwin, Sheldon Whitehouse, Robert P. Casey, Jr., Angus S. King, Jr., Michael F. Bennet, Mark Kelly, Jeanne Shaheen, Tim Kaine, Chris Van Hollen, Debbie Stabenow, Brian Schatz.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. By unanimous consent, the mandatory quorum call has been waived.

The question is, Is it the sense of the Senate that debate on the nomination of Michael Sfraga, of Alaska, to be Am-

bassador at Large for Arctic Affairs, shall be brought to a close?

The yeas and nays are mandatory under the rule.

The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk called the roll.

Mr. DURBIN. I announce that the Senator from California (Ms. BUTLER), the Senator from Maryland (Mr. CARDIN), and the Senator from Delaware (Mr. COONS) are necessarily absent.

Mr. THUNE. The following Senators are necessarily absent: the Senator from Arkansas (Mr. COTTON), the Senator from Mississippi (Mrs. HYDE-SMITH), the Senator from Alaska (Mr. SULLIVAN), the Senator from North Carolina (Mr. TILLIS), and the Senator from Ohio (Mr. VANCE).

The yeas and nays resulted—yeas 56, nays 36, as follows:

[Rollcall Vote No. 250 Ex.]

YEAS—56

Baldwin	Hassan	Peters
Bennet	Heinrich	Reed
Blumenthal	Helmy	Rosen
Booker	Hickenlooper	Sanders
Brown	Hirono	Schatz
Cantwell	Kaine	Schumer
Capito	Kelly	Shaheen
Carper	King	Sinema
Casey	Klobuchar	Smith
Cassidy	Lujan	Stabenow
Collins	Manchin	Tester
Cornyn	Markey	Van Hollen
Cortez Masto	Merkley	Warner
Cramer	Mullin	Warnock
Duckworth	Murkowski	Warren
Durbin	Murphy	Welch
Fetterman	Murray	Whitehouse
Gillibrand	Ossoff	Wyden
Graham	Padilla	

NAYS—36

Barrasso	Hagerty	Ricketts
Blackburn	Hawley	Risch
Boozman	Hoeven	Romney
Braun	Johnson	Rounds
Britt	Kennedy	Rubio
Budd	Lankford	Schmitt
Crapo	Lee	Scott (FL)
Cruz	Lummis	Scott (SC)
Daines	Marshall	Thune
Ernst	McConnell	Tuberville
Fischer	Moran	Wicker
Grassley	Paul	Young

NOT VOTING—8

Butler	Cotton	Tillis
Cardin	Hyde-Smith	Vance
Coons	Sullivan	

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. LUJÁN). The yeas are 56, the nays are 36.

The motion is agreed to.

RECESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate stands in recess until 2:15 p.m.

Thereupon, the Senate, at 1:19 p.m., recessed until 2:15 p.m. and reassembled when called to order by the Presiding Officer (Mr. LUJÁN).

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR—Continued

VOTE ON SFRAGA NOMINATION

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is, Will the Senate advise and consent to the Sfraga nomination?

Mr. PADILLA. I ask for the yeas and nays.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there a sufficient second?

There appears to be a sufficient second.

The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk called the roll.

Mr. DURBIN. I announce that the Senator from California (Ms. BUTLER), the Senator from Maryland (Mr. CARDIN), the Senator from Delaware (Mr. COONS), the Senator from Illinois (Mr. DURBIN), and the Senator from Vermont (Mr. SANDERS) are necessarily absent.

Mr. THUNE. The following Senators are necessarily absent: the Senator from Arkansas (Mr. COTTON), the Senator from Mississippi (Mrs. HYDE-SMITH), the Senator from Alaska (Mr. SULLIVAN), and the Senator from Ohio (Mr. VANCE).

The result was announced—yeas 55, nays 36, as follows:

[Rollcall Vote No. 251 Ex.]

YEAS—55

Baldwin	Heinrich	Reed
Bennet	Helmy	Rosen
Blumenthal	Hickenlooper	Schatz
Booker	Hirono	Schumer
Brown	Kaine	Shaheen
Cantwell	Kelly	Sinema
Capito	King	Smith
Carper	Klobuchar	Stabenow
Casey	Lujan	Tester
Cassidy	Manchin	Tillis
Collins	Markey	Van Hollen
Cornyn	Merkley	Warner
Cortez Masto	Mullin	Warnock
Cramer	Murkowski	Warren
Duckworth	Murphy	Welch
Fetterman	Murray	Whitehouse
Gillibrand	Ossoff	Wyden
Graham	Padilla	
Hassan	Peters	

NAYS—36

Barrasso	Hagerty	Ricketts
Blackburn	Hawley	Risch
Boozman	Hoeven	Romney
Braun	Johnson	Rounds
Britt	Kennedy	Rubio
Budd	Lankford	Schmitt
Crapo	Lee	Scott (FL)
Cruz	Lummis	Scott (SC)
Daines	Marshall	Thune
Ernst	McConnell	Tuberville
Fischer	Moran	Wicker
Grassley	Paul	Young

NOT VOTING—9

Butler	Cotton	Sanders
Cardin	Durbin	Sullivan
Coons	Hyde-Smith	Vance

The nomination was confirmed.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. WELCH). Under the previous order, the motion to reconsider is considered made and laid upon the table, and the President will be immediately notified of the Senate's action.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from New Jersey.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST—EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. BOOKER. Mr. President, I am rising right now to speak about the urgency to quickly confirm two bipartisan members to the U.S. Sentencing Commission. Time is really of the essence as the term of two voting members, Judge Claria Horn Boom and Judge John Gleeson, will expire this Congress.