

sometime this afternoon. And after that, we will proceed with a rollcall vote to advance the Murillo nomination. It is my hope that we can finish voting on these two judicial nominees by the end of the day.

SOCIAL SECURITY FAIRNESS ACT

Mr. President, finally, the Senate will keep working on the Social Security Fairness Act. We should pass the bill sent to us by the House as soon as we can. It is very important for our retired teachers and firefighters and postal workers and police officers and so many other public servants who deserve their full Social Security benefits.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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 President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

The Senator from Iowa.

GOVERNMENT FUNDING

Mr. GRASSLEY. Mr. President, I am here to visit with my colleagues about the Social Security bill that is before the Senate, but before I do that, I would like to give my point of view from past shutdowns of the Federal Government and why the shutdown of the Government is a bad idea.

Usually, people approach shutting the Government down because they have some big scheme they want to accomplish, and they will accomplish it during the negotiations to opening up the Government or accomplishing from the threat of shutting down the Government. What I have found in past instances when that has been tried: You shut the government down. You open the government up. And that Member or Members have not accomplished the goal that they wanted to accomplish.

It costs money to shut the Government down. It costs money during this week to get ready to shut the Government down. And after a period of time of a day or, at the most, 35 days, about 6 or 7 years ago, Government opens up, and it costs money to open the Government up.

The Government is supposed to be a service for the American people, and you can't serve the American people when the Government isn't operating. So I hope that something can be accomplished today or tomorrow so the Government stays open.

SOCIAL SECURITY TRUST FUND

Mr. President, now to the Social Security trust fund, that fund is speeding toward insolvency. Come 2033, seniors will automatically see their retirement benefits cut 25 percent, absent congressional action. Congress should be working toward a consensus on legislation to ensure that this never happens. Instead, we are on the cusp of enacting

significant changes to Social Security that will result in larger cuts that would normally happen 2033 but now happen sooner. If the bill before us is enacted, a typical senior would see their benefits cut by an additional \$4,000 and 6 months earlier than that date that is predicted now to be the year 2033. That is quite a stocking stuffer for 50 million seniors that depend on Social Security, some who have no other income, like from pensions, for example.

While the vast majority of seniors stand to receive a lump of coal for Christmas, a select few State and local government employees will be gifted a boost in their benefits. In Iowa, only 1 percent of the retirees would benefit, while everyone else would get less. That doesn't sound fair to me.

Now, don't get me wrong. I have great respect for the government workers in Iowa. This includes the police officers and firefighters to whom we owe our gratitude. Congress should work to address the inequities that the bill before us is trying to solve.

Let's be crystal clear: This bill would increase unfairness in how Social Security benefits are calculated. The Social Security windfall elimination provision—or WEP, as it is called around here—which this bill repeals, addresses a real concern that exists in how the Social Security benefit formula works, or more, how it fails to work when the government employee spends most of their career in non-Social Security covered positions. The Social Security benefit formula is designed to be progressive; that is, it provides a low-income worker a more generous benefit relative to their contributions compared to a middle-class income individual. As a result, absent the windfall elimination provision, senior-level employees who spend most of their career not contributing to Social Security, while also earning a high salary and a government pension, would receive a generous Social Security benefit working as few as 10 years covered by Social Security.

The Social Security formula treats those 10 years as if this was their only income during their working life and therefore provides an unfair bonus. That is simply not fair to the average private sector worker who spends their entire career paying Social Security taxes, earning similar or lower pay than the government workers but receives less Social Security benefit per dollar paid in.

Now, you don't have to take this Senator's word for it. AARP, the premiere voice for senior citizens, says as much in its website, noting that repealing the WEP without replacing it would allow individuals to inaccurately receive a higher Social Security benefit than if they had worked their whole careers in jobs covered by Social Security.

This unfairness doesn't only exist between government workers and private sector workers. Most States have opted

into Social Security for the vast majority of their workers. These States' government employees and retirees covered by Social Security see no benefit under this bill.

In Iowa, only 8 percent of government workers are not covered by Social Security. For some States, it is fewer than 5 percent. But there happens to be a handful of States where 50 percent or more of their workers are exempt from Social Security and thus don't pay Social Security taxes. For instance, in the State of Massachusetts, it is over 97 percent of their government employees.

Can you imagine that? Liberal Massachusetts thinks their government employees are too good for Social Security.

It is these States that will be the big winner under this bill. Effectively, States like Iowa, where the vast majority of government employees are covered by Social Security, are being asked to subsidize the retirement of government workers in Massachusetts, California, Colorado—States that largely choose to opt out of Social Security.

I have put forward a commonsense and fiscally responsible amendment. It would address the inequity that can arise due to how current law addresses noncovered Social Security employment without the unfairness that will arise under the bill before us.

My amendment would pay for the repeal of the windfall elimination provision and the government pension offset, while also making Social Security fair for everyone.

Under my amendment, if State and local employees who are not currently covered by Social Security voluntarily opt in to Social Security, these rules are repealed for current and future retirees of that State's government pension system.

Only current workers under 52 or with at least 10 years until retirement would need to join Social Security. This helps ensure such workers will work long enough to earn Social Security benefits. They would also be able to get the benefit of the more generous Social Security formula.

The underlying bill would raid from the Social Security trust fund \$200 billion. In contrast, my amendment would increase Social Security solvency by \$100 billion if all States took advantage of my proposal. So that is a win-win for everyone.

Now, I know that this bill will probably be debated under no opportunity to offer my amendment or an amendment by Senator CRUZ of Texas that would also be more fiscally responsible than the bill before us and not harm senior citizens by reducing their income from the Social Security trust fund 6 months sooner than otherwise.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

GAZA

Mr. MERKLEY. Mr. President, we are all here, getting ready to leave after we fund the government and return home to our families. We get pretty excited about this time of year thinking about the holidays to come. We are heading home to our loved ones. We know there will be extended family gatherings. There will be games with the children. There will be exchanges of presents. There will be food. There will be awesome food—ham, turkey, all kinds of wonderfully crafted vegetable dishes—and there will be so much that we can drink. Oh, yes. There will be wine varieties. There will be eggnog; perhaps some of it will be spiked. There will be carbonated apple juice or cranberry juice for the kids. We will put it into glasses, and we will have a toast. We will really celebrate life. We will celebrate life with a roof over our heads, with our loved ones close by, and with our cupboards well-stocked.

Also in these holidays, there will be time for reflection in every religious tradition. For those of us who are fortunate to have that roof over our heads and food in the cupboards and our loved ones close by, we will recognize that, for so many, that is not the case. For so many here in the United States, who by virtue of economic conditions or the ravages of disease or mental afflictions, they will not have a roof over their heads; they may not have family members close by; they may not even have a cupboard, let alone one that is well-stocked. We will ponder our responsibility to try to improve those conditions.

We will ponder the landscape across the broader globe, knowing that in many places, people have been so ravaged by natural disasters, so affected by conflict and war. I am sure we will see programs and commentary about Sudan, where millions have been displaced by civil war and by drought and by famine; or in Burma, where so many are suffering escalating violence; or in Ukraine, where people are brutalized by Putin's invasion, in the efforts to defend their country.

No matter where you look, there is no shortage of suffering, but the place that weighs the heaviest on my heart this season is the Middle East. We have the families of Israel continuing to grieve the losses of 1,200 of their own loved ones on October 7, 2023. We have families in Israel who continue to not know the fate of their loved ones taken hostage—whether they are alive, whether they are dead, whether they are being cared for, whether they are suffering. Will they be released? And there will be an empty chair at the table.

The victims in Israel weigh on my heart, but the Palestinian victims also

weigh on my heart, individuals in the West Bank—Palestinians who have suffered from decades of occupation, of the economic constraints and indignity that come from checkpoints, that come from land lost to settlements and to outposts, to olive orchards bulldozed down, to lives lost and injuries suffered from increasing violence by settlers against Palestinian villagers.

But, by far, the most devastated communities are the Palestinian communities in Gaza because of the extraordinary level of devastation. And it weighs on my heart because of the connection between the United States and Israel, our close connection with our ally, where we share security strategies, where we provide economic and military assistance. We share intelligence on the issues of the world. We are so closely connected that we are connected to the devastation in Gaza.

Since October 7, 2023, more than 45,000 Palestinians in Gaza have died. More than 100,000 have been severely injured. The vast bulk of those injured and those who have died are women and children and seniors—people who have no connection whatsoever to Hamas, which conducted the raids on October 7 of 2023. The devastation is massive.

This same picture, taken in North Gaza, could be almost copied for community after community from north to south of Gaza.

Of the 2.1 million people, the Palestinians in Gaza, some 1.9 million—almost everyone, that is—are without a home, either because their home has been blasted into smithereens or because they have been forcibly moved to a different location within Gaza—forced relocation.

A year ago, Senator VAN HOLLEN and I went to Rafah gate. We had hoped to get inside Gaza to see with our own eyes and talk to people and understand better the devastation, but what we heard a year ago was that all of the fundamentals for a normal community were devastated. Shelter I have already spoken to—the 1.9 million people relocated either because they were forced to flee or because their homes no longer existed; that the phone networks were down; that the cell networks were down; that the internet networks were down. Even if they were up, people had very little opportunity to recharge their cell phones because there wasn't electricity. So the power was down. The transportation was down because many roads were impassable. Food was in short supply, driving malnutrition a year ago. Clean water was often unavailable a year ago.

A year ago, Senator VAN HOLLEN and I could not get into Gaza. Reporters have not been allowed into Gaza except for very carefully monitored, short visits monitored by the Netanyahu government. Humanitarian organizations were having a hard time getting in and often had to do a very careful exchange of an exact number for an exact number coming out.

But as we stood there at that gate, a couple of doctors came out, and I spent some time talking to them. One of them was a burn specialist, who described how hard it was to treat many of the massive burns he had witnessed. The other was a bone doctor, and he said: I can treat the broken bones, but I can't necessarily treat the soft tissue damage that comes from the shock waves that emanate from all of the explosions taking down the buildings. The impact, he said, of a blast's radius in terms of the shock waves was even greater than the physical damage.

We were able to talk to humanitarian organizations of aid workers who had been in Gaza, and they said: Understand this—that we are seasoned workers who have been in the worst places in the world. We have been in Yemen. We have been on the frontlines of Ukraine. We have been in Sudan. Nothing compares to the devastation in Gaza.

That was a year ago.

I was particularly affected by hearing about the challenges of mothers. Mothers receive our attention particularly when they are carrying babies because all our efforts go to making sure that delivery—that child will come safely into the world, healthy into the world, and that the mother will be cared for. But what we heard from the humanitarian organizations was that hunger was driving malnutrition and malnutrition made people more susceptible to disease, and for mothers, it meant increases in miscarriages, increases in stillbirths, increases in very low birth weight babies, increases in the difficulty of mothers' breastfeeding their children because they were too malnourished to produce milk, and babies getting sick because when formula was used, if available, the water might be contaminated.

Think about the children you have brought into the world or that your wife or your partner has brought into the world and how horrific it would be to see those circumstances.

This time of year is a time of year in my spiritual tradition where we think a lot about the challenges Mary went through. She and Joseph were traveling from Galilee to Bethlehem, and they were traveling there at the time that Mary was very pregnant with Jesus, because a census had been ordered by Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus, and they were required to be there and report to Joseph's ancestral home of Bethlehem. Traveling the roads when one is pregnant is very hard. And then they weren't able to find a room in Bethlehem, and Mary went into labor and delivered in a barn—not ideal circumstances.

Because of this time of year and because we think about that story so much, the mothers in Gaza—their conditions are so much worse. It is something we can connect with. And now the children in Gaza are entering their second year in this devastation. Some have some format of school, but many do not.