

the many Cabinet Secretaries in the Biden administration whose cell numbers I still have and I am happy to use. We were in this together.

I got to thinking about how very, very special this institution is, in a country that is made up of self-governed people. We, ladies and gentlemen—we, Mr. President—are the representatives of those self-governed people. And in many respects, what we are going through this weekend is in large part a direct reflection of the division of our country—for sure, for sure. But I submit that we have a higher responsibility than to simply gravitate to the worst instincts but, rather, elevate this institution to a more aspirational conclusion. It is not even really a new conclusion; it is the tradition and the history of this institution.

So as I was looking at the leader's chart in the cloakroom earlier, I see this rather rich history of an institution that, first of all, respects the prerogative of the person who won the Presidency while also protecting our prerogative to have some oversight and to advise and consent.

Boy, when I think of supporting Lloyd Austin for Secretary of Defense, a decision I came to regret—not because I didn't like him but because he proved to be a pretty bad Secretary of Defense—nonetheless, nonetheless, Joe Biden had won the election, and that is who he chose. When I supported Pete Buttigieg for Secretary of Transportation, I had higher hopes, but we had a decent working relationship, and I was happy to have supported him. When I introduced Shalanda Young in the Budget Committee in her hearing to become OMB Director, that was a decision I never regretted and still do not.

But I will tell you, this morning, as I stand here in early August on a Saturday morning, with this circle of zero percent bright-gray, as though there is such a thing as bright-gray, I am frustrated. This is the future of this place if something good doesn't happen today in this place. And I fear we are going down a path we may never ever be able to go down again—or at least go the other direction.

Some fights aren't worth winning, much less losing. I have always loved this institution and the norms of it, but this is not normal. This is the exception. And this I do not want to ever have become normal. But I, as somebody who appreciated the relationships—and still do—that I have had with Joe Biden's nominees, today, if you were to ask me to vote for a Joe Biden nominee, I don't give a rat's rear who they are, how great they are, how spectacular they may be—I don't care what their credentials are—the message to me is I have to vote no. We darned sure aren't going to let them have it the easy way. We are darned sure never going to do 46 percent of the next President's nominees with a voice vote or unanimous consent because the new norm is we fight every one of them

because they won the election instead of us winning the election.

It is not OK, friends.

It is not OK, Mr. President.

Last night, in this Chamber, we did something rather remarkable together with a very large bipartisan vote. We passed not one, not two, but three appropriations bills—as Chairman COLLINS reminded us, the first time we have done it before the August recess since 2018.

We celebrated for a complete—oh, I don't know—30 seconds maybe. And the American people instead are waking up to this—to this. And what this is—what this is—this is us voting for very low positions in the sub-Cabinet of appointees and nominees—not unimportant jobs, by the way, but low positions in comparison to the Cabinet—one every 2 hours, one every 2 hours, because that is as fast as we are allowed to go with the 1,200 or so nominees that we have the responsibility of confirming or not.

And here is what I fear. I fear that the occasional bad nominee will always pass now, from now on, because we have turned—somebody has turned this into a shirts-and-skirts game. So from now until eternity, the first question is going to be: Oh, I don't know. Who won that Presidential election again? Oh, yeah, the other team. Well, we can't allow them to have their nominees on a simple voice vote.

It will, I am afraid, have a very, very, very bad ramification on this institution if we don't correct course sometime today, if we don't come to some sort of an agreement that recognizes that Donald Trump won the election and has the right to have the government that he wants and that we have a prerogative to make sure that it is not just confirmed but that if there are some bad apples along the way, that they get held up for greater scrutiny.

But if this becomes a straight skirts-and-shirts game, then all discretion is out the window; then all oversight is really out the window; then the responsibility of scrutiny goes out the window because it is one team versus the other team, with nobody looking out for the American people.

As I said, I didn't intend to get up and talk today. I don't know that I feel any better for it. But we have an opportunity today—today—to knock out this obstruction by the leader of the Democratic Party in the U.S. Senate. If we don't, if something doesn't happen today, then we, in my view, are confronted with the only other choice, and that is a major rules change that acknowledges the new reality in this country. I don't want that to be the case. I am still more optimistic than the path we are on.

With that, thanks for your time.

I yield the floor.

Mr. MURPHY. Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. 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 PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Mr. COTTON. I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The legislative clerk continued with the call of the roll.

The Senator from Oregon.

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

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

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST—S. 2557

Mr. MERKLEY. Mr. President, nobody in our country should ever be above the law, certainly not powerful people who believe that they can perpetrate crimes on victims and get away with it because they have so much wealth and so many lawyers and so many friends in high places.

If you go outside the doors of the Senate Chamber, to my right, and you continue straight ahead and you go out the second set of doors to the steps of the Capitol, you are looking straight across at the Supreme Court. And while scaffolding is up right now, making it hard to see the words, the words that are engraved above those pillars are those words "Equal Justice Under Law." Powerful words. A powerful vision that all Americans are subject to the law.

There is no special get-out-of-jail-free card under that vision for the powerful, but all too often the combination of reams of well-paid lawyers and a whole lot of friends ready to help you, the powerful commit crimes and get away with it.

We should aspire to the vision that is there above the Supreme Court, that vision of "Equal Justice Under Law," that no politician, no celebrity, no megamillionaire or billionaire can buy their way out of justice when they commit crimes and particularly not crimes that involve life-altering damage, crimes in which people are killed, crimes in which people are mutilated, crimes in which people are raped.

No matter how powerful someone is, they need to be prosecuted when they commit these crimes. And the American people have a right to know what information the government is suppressing to protect these individuals. So this brings us to the conversation of the Epstein files. There is only one right answer, complete and total disclosure. That is the only pathway to justice.

We have a lot of suspicions across this country about what is contained in those files hidden in the Department of Justice, those files that are hidden in the Department of the Treasury.

My colleague Senator WYDEN, on the Finance Committee, has been working on this for years. I heard an objection from across the aisle. Why are you interested now? Well, Senator WYDEN has been leading the search to understand what went on. There is a billion dollars

of money that was transferred, thousands of transfers that were ignored by key banks that would have painted a portrait of a criminal empire in motion. And yet, somehow, none of those transfers triggered the attention that they merited.

So here is what we know: We know that Epstein ran a massive network of sex trafficking, sex trafficking of young girls to powerful men. Now, we don't know who they are, in terms of those powerful men, and there may be many names in the files—the Epstein files—that involve people who had nothing to do with those crimes. They may simply be friends in a network; they may be business associates in some other legitimate way; but some of them may well be these powerful men who raped young girls.

So those folks who were not part of that shouldn't be objecting to the release of the files because the files would simply show that they had nothing to do with those crimes against young women. But the folks who were the perpetrators, whose names might be in that file, right now, I can guarantee you, they are working the system of every high friend across this country, every megamillionaire and billionaire who participated in these violent acts on the innocent young, and they are trying to make sure this information never comes out. So far, they have succeeded, and that is wrong.

Several of my colleagues are preparing to speak to this, and Senator DURBIN—I am looking to see that he is here, yes, he is—is going to speak to it next. My colleague from across the aisle is here to respond to a request to hear and vote on a bill that will tell the Department of Justice, you must release these files; transparency must happen.

Now, why did I write this bill? I wrote this bill because the Attorney General said we don't have legal permission to release the information. So let's give her the legal permission to release this information. In fact, let's pass a law right now, today, here in the Senate, that says you not only have permission to release the Epstein files, but we are passing a law saying you must release the Epstein files, with the names of the victims redacted to protect them.

So as if in legislative session and notwithstanding rule XXII, I ask unanimous consent that the Committee on the Judiciary be discharged and the Senate proceed to immediate consideration of S. 2557; further, that the bill be considered read a third time and passed and the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

I recognize the majority whip.

Mr. BARRASSO. Mr. President, reserving the right to object.

Senate Republicans included a provision to address this very issue in an appropriations bill that Democrats blocked earlier this week.

This issue would have been addressed here on the U.S. Senate floor. Yet Senate Democrats came to the floor and objected to what was in this bill having appropriations and dealing with the funding of the Government of the United States.

And the shutdown Democrats, who want to shut down the government, did exactly that. They objected to the appropriations bill that addressed this very item. That is what happened. And what is really happening today, we are here on a Saturday morning in August, on the floor of the U.S. Senate, and why are we here?

We are here because Democrats are still trying to distract from the unprecedented obstruction of President Trump's well-qualified nominees. As of this morning, there are still 154 qualified nominees awaiting confirmation in the U.S. Senate.

Many have been approved in committee with Democrat support, bipartisan support, in many cases, strong bipartisan support. These are not controversial individuals but patriotic Americans patiently waiting for their opportunity to serve our Nation.

So far this year, Democrats have allowed exactly zero—zero—nominees to be confirmed by voice vote. This is a drastic departure from the norms and the traditions of the U.S. Senate. It is very different from how Republicans treated Democrat nominees when we were in the minority in 2021. We continued to work with the other side to reach a fair agreement to end this blockade.

I am hopeful that an agreement is within reach, and I objected to this exact legislation 4 days ago. Nothing has changed since Senator MERKLEY brought this to the floor 4 days ago, other than we continue to be here with an obstruction—a historic obstruction by the Democrats of President Trump's qualified nominees, and therefore I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The objection is heard.

The Senator from Oregon.

Mr. MERKLEY. Mr. President, my colleague has come to the floor and said that there is a provision in a bill, but will he yield for a question about that provision?

He will not because he has just left the floor because he doesn't want to answer the question. But I invite him to come back because the provision he is talking about does not require the release of the Epstein files—not at all. And so he has come to the floor, and he said Democrats blocked a provision, and he won't tell you what I am telling you right now, that provision does not require the release of the Epstein files. So it is misrepresenting the situation.

And you saw him change the topic. Why change the topic from this topic? Americans have been very clear that they want these files released. This is the bill that will do it.

And I yield to my colleague from Illinois.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Illinois.

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, I thank the Senator from Oregon for his leadership on this bill, which I am proud to cosponsor. I want to respond to my friend and colleague from the State of Wyoming and say when he goes back in time looking at the votes on nominees, don't overlook the JD VANCE precedent. JD VANCE, then-Senator for Ohio, came to the floor of the U.S. Senate and objected to any type of vocal arrangement—oral vote, when it came to the approval of U.S. attorneys. He said that he wanted all of them to go through the regular order. That stopped, under President Biden, the appointment of all U.S. attorneys.

So to argue that they have clean hands in the situation is to ignore the Vice President's former status, establishing the standard that made it impossible to consider U.S. attorneys on a voice vote.

Let me say about the issue before us on Epstein. Two weeks after the Senate confirmed Pam Bondi as Attorney General, she told FOX News—the mother ship—the list of Jeffrey Epstein's clients are “sitting on my desk right now to review.”

Six days later, Bondi released binders of documents related to Epstein to MAGA influencers, but these documents were largely already publicly available. The absence of any client list led to immense blowback.

Attorney General Bondi returned to FOX News and made another startling claim. She said that a whistleblower told her the FBI withheld “thousands of pages of documents” and the country would see “the full Epstein files.”

Over the next 4 months, DOJ and FBI were silent on this issue until an unsigned July 7 memo was issued finding that “systemic review revealed no incriminating ‘client list.’”

So what happened during the 4 months between Attorney General Bondi's blockbuster claims in February and this July 7 memorandum?

My office received a highly credible whistleblower disclosure describing Attorney General Bondi's pressure on the FBI to quickly review and produce more Epstein documents. For 2 weeks in late March, the FBI assigned approximately 1,000 professional personnel in its Information Management Division and hundreds of additional agents from the New York field office to work 24-hour shifts to review and produce more documents. These officials were told to “flag” any records which mentioned President Trump.

Essentially, agents were pulled out of the field from their work combating violent crime to review these documents. Other important work was effectively shut down.

Using tens of thousands of personnel hours at the expense of public safety, for no other reason than to try to bolster baseless claims they have made, is reckless.

President Trump has not helped the situation. Despite his administration

continuing to make promises about transparency on Epstein and the existence of records they have not produced, he is currently telling the country it is all a “scam.”

Last month, President Trump posted on his personal social media that “my PAST supporters have bought into this [BS],” hook, line, and sinker. They haven’t learned their lesson, and probably never will.”

This is the way the President is talking about his own constituents who are raising concerns about the claims that President Trump’s own administration has repeatedly raised.

President Trump and Attorney General Bondi are directly responsible for this confusion and mistrust. They owe Congress and the American people full transparency. Instead, the situation gets more murky when Epstein’s girlfriend Ghislaine Maxwell is being interviewed by one of the highest ranking members of the administration. We don’t know what the conversation is. We sent a letter that said we want full disclosure to both sides of the aisle on what they discussed, and we want to make sure there are no promises of pardon or clemency for her to speak. She is serving a 20-year term for human trafficking and exploitation of children.

The prosecutor said that she was not a credible witness, and we ought to take that into consideration when considering her role.

So I support Senator MERKLEY’s bill. I am sorry there was an objection.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Idaho.

Mr. RISCH. I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST—S. 2557

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, the American people have been treated to an extraordinary spectacle. It is the spectacle of a President of the United States trying to stonewall and stall the disclosure of a file from the U.S. Department of Justice that directly implicates him and others in places of power after boasting to the American people that he would reveal everything. He promised again and again and again that he would disclose all the files—not only of this investigation, but the JFK investigation and others—because the American people deserve transparency. They deserve disclosure. They deserve to know what is in the files of the Department of Justice when there are credible allegations that an investigation is incomplete and potential evidence concealed.

And the American people are rightly asking now: What do they have to

hide? Why are they concealing this information in the files of the Department of Justice?

We are talking about documents, interviews, testimony that may mention the survivors and innocent people, and their names should be redacted and removed from any public disclosure so they are not victimized again by the public ignominy of having been victims. And if there is any ongoing investigation here that requires confidentiality, it can be held.

I know from my days in the Department of Justice—I was the U.S. attorney for Connecticut—that this kind of disclosure is done not routinely, not commonly but in exactly this kind of instance when the credibility of the Department of Justice may be at stake, and people deserve to know the truth.

And here, let’s be very blunt. There are questions about whether this investigation and prosecution of Jeffrey Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell was full and complete. There are names; some of them rich and powerful people. There are stories; some of them believable. There are places and locations. There is testimony that describes a situation that may be much broader than just these two individuals who have been prosecuted.

And at the end of the day, we are talking here not about just legalities and about politics. We are talking about girls, the youngest victim—and some of them survivors. The President referred to them as beautiful women on the younger side, some of them.

Well, some of them were actually not women; they were girls. This crime is about the most heinous kind of exploitation of women, predatory victimization of girls, in effect, trafficking them—which was Maxwell’s specialty. And the President has said that they may have stolen some of them from his spa, as if they were chattel to be bought and sold. But that was the attitude that Epstein and Maxwell had toward them, and, sadly, that was the attitude that, perhaps, some of their aiders and abettors or coconspirators or simply enablers had as well.

This action about disclosure is necessary now because the administration continues to stonewall and stall, concealing information and betraying its promise to the American people.

And what is at stake here is not just the President’s promises—although they are absolutely clear when he said:

President Trump says he will declassify the 9/11 Files, JFK Files, and Epstein Files. That is President Trump.

What is at stake here is the credibility of our justice system. That is why an act of Congress is not only appropriate but necessary. And what is at stake here is also the victims.

This crime involved money laundering. It involved financial illegality. It involved fraud against the government. It involved a range of crimes that may sound abstract, even technical. But at the end of the day, it was

not a victimless crime. It was about exploiting girls, young women, girls—girls who were mercilessly and repeatedly subject to abuse and trafficking.

Donald Trump has broken these promises, but he has also remained actively engaged in a coverup. That is why he sent his Deputy Attorney General to interview Maxwell for 2 days. Unprecedented, absolutely mind-boggling to send the Deputy Attorney General, who may then be a witness and potentially implicated in a coverup, to interview a vital witness.

We don’t know who was with him, but we have to believe there were notes or recordings. They ought to be disclosed as well. And we should require that the disclosure be immediate, as this legislation would require.

That Deputy Attorney General also happens to be the President’s personal lawyer, or he was in all his criminal prosecutions. That is unprecedented as well.

The American people deserve an end to this stonewalling and stalling. And that is why, as if in legislative session and notwithstanding rule XXII, I ask unanimous consent that the Committee on the Judiciary be discharged, and the Senate proceed to the immediate consideration of S. 2557; further, that the bill be considered read a third time and passed; and that the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

I recognize the majority whip.

Mr. BARRASSO. I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The objection is heard.

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, I yield to my colleague Senator WYDEN.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Oregon.

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, we have been looking at this for well over 3 years now, and what I would like to do with my colleague Mr. MERKLEY, with all of my colleagues, is make an important point. I wanted to just take stock of where things stand.

The Trump administration came in promising radical transparency on Jeffrey Epstein. Now the fact is that the Epstein files are being suppressed, and the administration is obstructing oversight from the Congress.

The President’s story about his relationship with Epstein changes by the day, and that is true of his administration as well. His personal lawyer went to talk to Ms. Maxwell, and who knows what was said in that conversation.

What we do know is that Maxwell has been moved—Epstein’s partner in crime—to a minimum security prison without giving any good reason as to why a child sex trafficker deserves that additional comfort.

House Republicans seem no longer interested in having Maxwell testify.

Yesterday, it was reported that a member of Donald Trump’s inner circle gave a high-paying job to another close Epstein associate, a man named Darren