

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Democratic whip.

TRUMP EXECUTIVE ORDERS

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, last week, I came to the floor to talk about the chaos that has been created by the announced proposed freeze on Federal funding and loans. I want to share a few stories about what I have seen and heard since I spoke on the floor last week.

Sharpsburg is near my home town of Springfield, IL. It has a water system in Christian County. It is in phase 3 of construction of a rural water project. It contains 18 miles of pipeline providing water to 50 new rural customers. The work is underway. The project is nearly complete, and it will be in jeopardy if there is a freeze permitted to take effect.

What does it mean? It means that these 50 homes and families will be without clean, safe, and affordable water. That is unacceptable.

The freeze also means that scientists at universities across the State are worried about their jobs and research. Parents of children with disabilities are worried about losing resources for their kids. Adults are worried about losing access to healthcare and social services.

Since then, not one but two judges have issued temporary restraining orders blocking President Trump's measure. As of yesterday evening, that pause has been extended.

But let me remind you: This freeze is unconstitutional. The Constitution gives the power to Congress, not to the President—the power of the purse—and the President has no legal authority to withhold funding that was signed into law for Americans on a bipartisan basis.

In the 1970s, former President Nixon tried to impound or withhold funding appropriated by Congress, and, in response, Congress passed the Impoundment Control Act of 1974, or the ICA. The ICA is still the law of the land, and it prohibits Presidents from withholding funds unless Congress approves the decision through outlined procedures.

But consider this: The current administration, apparently, does not care. The President and his people are ignoring the law, creating chaos in hopes that amidst the confusion, some part of his power grab will stick. He is testing the limits of how much he can chip away at our system of checks and balances.

There are reports that unelected Elon Musk and his "government efficiency team" now have access to the payment systems of the U.S. Treasury, which is essentially the checkbook of the entire Federal Government. Elon Musk tweeted to say he is planning to cut \$4 billion in Federal spending every single day from now to September 30—\$4 billion a day.

I am appalled to see so many of my Senate Republican colleagues falling in line as President Trump and Mr. Musk

attempt to strip Congress of our constitutional authorities and cause this kind of pain to our constituents. I am disappointed to see so many of my Republican colleagues vote to advance the nomination of President Trump's pick to run the Office of Management and Budget, Russell Vought. If this funding stunt is any indication, he is not fit to run that office.

The damage from the freeze extends beyond our shores. Bipartisan, congressionally appropriated funds to provide lifesaving humanitarian aid and freedom in places like Venezuela, Iran, and North Korea have been ground to a halt. For example, programs like PEPFAR, started by President George W. Bush—and I give him credit for that—with the support of the evangelical community and its partner, the Global Fund, have dramatically curtailed the AIDS epidemic ravaging parts of the world. The program has saved more than 25 million lives. It has been so effective that some have forgotten just how devastating AIDS happened to be in that part of the world, killing more than 2 million a year globally and leaving 14 million—14 million—orphans in sub-Saharan Africa.

Further, USAID clean water and sanitation programs have provided more than 70 million people with first-time sustainable access to clean water in the last decade—programs that have a 6-to-1 return in dollars saved in health, economic, and educational returns.

Low-cost vaccination programs eradicated smallpox and almost eradicated polio from the face of the Earth—something that was unimaginable just a generation ago. Food grown by American farmers helps save millions of lives when war and natural disasters strike. Gutting such programs puts innocent lives and American influence across the globe at risk. It is senseless, counterproductive, ill-informed, and increases the likelihood of costlier interventions that don't respect borders, including pandemics, war, and failed states.

The United States cannot and should not stand alone in the world. We are a global leader, and we have an obligation to continue to act like it.

But over the weekend, in what sounded like a dystopian story from an otherworldly dictatorship, the Trump administration and Elon Musk tried to shutter the U.S. Agency for International Development without congressional approval. Try to imagine that disgraceful scene, as one of the world's richest men gleefully guts programs for some of the world's poorest people.

And don't be fooled—this isn't about reform, and the U.S. budget deficit won't be solved by gutting USAID. The foreign assistance budget is only 1 percent of our Federal spending—a small, powerful investment that is not only the right thing to do but the smart thing to do to prevent conflict and famine and failed states as well as to build alliances and friends around the

world. Gutting such programs is a betrayal of American values.

Already, nations like China sense a strategic opportunity under President Trump. When these programs go away, the Chinese will step in.

Are Republicans going to roll over and cede congressional power on these bipartisan programs? I sincerely hope not.

There is a lot at stake in the first few weeks of this new administration. I want to give the President a chance to show his values, but so far, I have to tell you, there is a lot of disappointment. This temporary freeze hurt a lot of innocent people, and this notion now of shutting down USAID—I can't imagine Elon Musk would have it on his conscience that so many helpless people would lose the basics of life for his budget plan. He wasn't elected to anything, and I think we should return to the Constitution, which still guides us today and should.

I yield the floor.

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

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

Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, today, we find ourselves in a pivotal moment in American history, and millions of Americans, by their actions or lack of action, will determine the future of our country for decades.

In my view, the Trump administration is moving this country very aggressively into an oligarchic form of society where extraordinary power rests in the hands of a small number of unelected multibillionaires. The Trump administration is moving this country very aggressively into an authoritarian society, where the rule of law and our Constitution are being ignored and undermined in order to give more power to the White House and the billionaires who now control our government. The Trump administration is moving this country very rapidly toward a kleptocracy, where the function of government is not to serve the needs of ordinary people but to enrich those who are in power.

Mr. President, I think that today is a very good day to recall what one of our great Presidents said at Gettysburg in November of 1863. Looking out at a battlefield where thousands of Union soldiers had just sacrificed their lives in the defense of freedom and the ending of slavery, Abraham Lincoln famously stated:

The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did—

The soldiers did—

here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—

The great task remaining before us.

—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—

And this is how he concluded—

That this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

“Government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth”—I fear very much that under President Trump we are not seeing a “government of the people, by the people, for the people,” but rather a government of the billionaire class, by the billionaire class, and for the billionaire class.

And what is really interesting is that none of this is happening behind closed doors. It is not being done in secret. It is right out there for everybody to see.

Several weeks ago, Donald Trump was inaugurated for a second term as President. Standing right behind him were the three richest men in America: Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Mark Zuckerberg.

Combined, these three men are worth \$920 billion. These three men own more wealth than the bottom half of American society, 170 million people—three guys, 170 million people. And I should point out—and this should tell you exactly where we are going as a nation—these three men, the wealthiest three in America, have become some \$232 billion richer since Trump was elected, a few weeks ago—three guys, \$232 billion richer since Trump was elected.

This is how an oligarchic system works. Elon Musk, the wealthiest person in the world and now a key part of the Trump administration, spent over \$277 million to get Trump elected. In other words, within a corrupt campaign finance system, which allows billionaires to spend as much as they want, he helped buy the election for Mr. Trump.

Jeff Bezos and Mark Zuckerberg, the second and third wealthiest people in our country, both kicked a million dollars each into Trump’s inauguration fund. And let us remember that Mr. Bezos who, among other things, owns the Washington Post, rescinded the endorsement of that paper for Kamala Harris just before the election.

Mr. Bezos was showing early on that he was willing to bend the knee for Donald Trump. Mark Zuckerberg, the founder and CEO of Meta, which owns Facebook and Instagram, agreed to settle a lawsuit with Trump for \$25 million.

These three multibillionaires are working with Trump for one very simple reason: They understand that Trump’s policies are designed to make the very wealthiest people in this country even richer.

Since Trump’s election, Mr. Musk has become \$154 billion richer—not bad in a couple of weeks’ time. He earned a great investment. He only spent a cou-

ple of hundred million on the election, and now he is \$154 billion richer.

Mr. Bezos has become \$35 billion richer, and Mr. Zuckerberg has become \$43 billion richer.

I am concerned not only about the growing movement toward oligarchy in this country, but I am deeply worried that, under the leadership of President Trump, we are moving rapidly toward authoritarianism.

All over this country, people are alarmed and shocked by what they have seen in the last several weeks.

Just a few examples—just a few: Last week, President Trump attempted to suspend all Federal grants and loans, in direct violation of the U.S. Constitution and Federal law.

As every third grader in America knows—or I hope knows—the power of the purse in the United States belongs to Congress, not the President. Yes, the President can recommend legislation to Congress. The President can veto legislation Congress has passed. But he does not have the power to unilaterally terminate funding and legislation that has been passed by the U.S. Congress. That is a dangerous and blatantly unconstitutional act.

And I should add that Trump’s blocking of Federal funding would have had a horrific impact on millions of Americans who utilize programs like Medicaid, Head Start, community health centers, Meals on Wheels, homeless veterans programs, and many, many other initiatives. Tens of millions of Americans, including some of the most vulnerable in our country, were impacted by that decision.

But that is not all.

A few days ago, Trump fired 17 inspectors general, independent government watchdogs that were created by Congress in the wake of the Watergate scandal to prevent the abuse of power by the executive branch.

Last week, President Trump fired a member of the National Labor Relations Board, and in so doing, effectively neutered the only Federal Agency in America with the authority to hold corporations accountable for illegal union busting and to protect the constitutional right of millions of workers who want to join unions in order to earn better wages, working conditions, and benefits. Not only is that move blatantly illegal, it is exactly what Elon Musk, the owner of Tesla, and Jeff Bezos, the owner of Amazon, have been fighting for months. They don’t like unions, and what Mr. Trump has given them is the opportunity to make it much, much harder for workers to organize in their companies.

President Trump also illegally fired members of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the only independent Commission in our country that protects workers against discrimination in the workforce.

Further, and what should upset every American—no matter whether you are conservative, moderate, or progres-

sive—is that, in direct violation of the Constitution and Federal law, Trump is intimidating the media, with lawsuits against ABC, CBS, Meta, and the Des Moines Register. His FCC is now threatening to investigate PBS and NPR. What Trump is essentially saying to every media outlet in America: If you say or do anything that is critical of me, that displeases me, you may be subject to a lawsuit or a Federal investigation.

If that is not a direct attack on the First Amendment, on the U.S. Constitution, and on free speech in our country, I don’t know what is.

But that is not all.

Elon Musk and his unelected minions at DOGE have forced out officials at the Treasury Department and illegally shut down USAID, a program which, among other things, helps feed and provide medical help to starving and desperate children all over the world.

Presidents, much less unelected billionaires, do not have the unilateral right to shut down Federal Agencies established by Congress.

And when we talk about the very dangerous movement toward authoritarianism that we are seeing in this country now, let us not forget Trump’s pardoning of the January 6 insurrectionists who injured 174 police officers right here, right outside this floor. Even worse, not only did he pardon those people, but Trump is undermining the FBI by actually investigating the agents there who helped bring these violent criminals to justice. Imagine that, pardoning the people who broke the law and investigating the people who upheld the law. That is not what America is supposed to be about.

And under Trump we are rapidly moving toward a kleptocracy as well. Just before the President was inaugurated, he and his wife launched their own cryptocurrency coins, giving them the potential to earn many billions of dollars.

If Wall Street CEOs tried to bribe the President with a bag full of money, that would be illegal; that is against the law. But now they don’t have to do that. Today, if a multibillionaire or the head of a foreign country wants to curry favor with the President, all they have to do is buy his cryptocurrency coins; and when they do that, they are directly enriching Mr. Trump.

So the question that millions of Americans are asking is, given the move toward oligarchy, given the move toward authoritarianism, given the movement toward kleptocracy, where do we go from here? What should we, as Americans, be doing?

Let me tell you what I think and what most Americans think; and that is, instead of moving toward an economy which is designed to benefit the very richest people in our country, we have got to create an economy and a government that works for all of us, not just for Mr. Musk or Mr. Bezos or Mr. Zuckerberg.

At a time of massive wealth and income inequality, we have never had more income and wealth inequality than we have had right now. It is beyond stupidity to provide more tax breaks to the very richest people in our country and then to pay for those tax breaks by cutting back on Medicaid and other programs desperately needed by working families all across this country. That is what we should not be doing.

But let me take a moment to tell you what we should be doing. At a time when 85 million Americans are uninsured or underinsured in our broken healthcare system, we have got to do what every other major country on Earth does, and that is guarantee healthcare to all people as a human right, not a privilege. That is what we have got to do.

At a time when one out of four Americans cannot afford the outrageously high prices that the pharmaceutical industry charges, we have got to end the absurdity of the American people paying by far the highest prices in the world for prescription drugs. We have got to cut the cost of medicine in this country in half, making it comparable with what the rest of the world is paying.

The Federal minimum wage today is \$7.25 an hour. That is a starvation wage. While 60 percent of our people—60 percent of Americans—live paycheck to paycheck, we must raise that minimum wage to a living wage, at least \$17 an hour. If you work 40 hours a week in the richest country on Earth, you should not be living in poverty.

Mr. Musk and Mr. Bezos want to make it harder for workers to join unions. Well, we have got to do exactly the opposite: Make it easier for workers to join unions by passing the PRO Act.

At a time when we need the best educated workforce in the world, we need to have the best public schools in the world, and, among other things, that means we need to substantially raise teachers' salaries. We need to attract the best and the brightest young people into education, and we do that, among other things, by making sure that no teacher in America earns less than \$60,000 a year. We also radically reform our broken childcare system so the little kids in this country get the quality care they need and the workers there are adequately compensated.

All over this country, from Vermont to L.A., we have a major housing crisis, and it is not just the 800,000 Americans who are homeless; it is millions of working families who are spending 40, 50, or 60 percent of their limited incomes on housing.

Instead of spending almost \$1 trillion a year on a wasteful and bloated Pentagon budget, we have to build millions of units of low-income and affordable housing. When we do that, we put large numbers of American workers to work at good-paying, union jobs.

I have heard time and again from Mr. Trump's supporters that the President

won the election and he has been given this huge mandate—just an overwhelming mandate—to do whatever he wants. Well, no President has the right to move us to oligarchy or authoritarianism or kleptocracy. But more important, let's not forget that while Trump did win this election, he actually received 4 million fewer votes than Biden did in 2020 when Biden won the election.

So here we are. Where do we go? What do we do? I think now is the time for the American people to come together, to not allow those who want to divide us up by the color of our skin or our sexual orientation or where we were born—that is what they want to do. They want to divide us up. Now is the time for us to come together like never before and make certain we do not move toward oligarchy, make certain we do not move toward authoritarianism or a kleptocracy.

Most important, in the richest country in the history of the world, we must understand that we have the capability of providing a decent life for all of our people. We can do that when we stand together and we don't let folks divide us.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. MORENO). The Senator from Iowa.

NOMINATION OF PAMELA BONDI

Mr. GRASSLEY. Mr. President, in a few minutes—probably shortly, I should say—we will vote to confirm Pam Bondi as the Attorney General of the United States. Before we do, I would like to speak in support of her nomination and, in doing that, urge my colleagues to vote for her, hopefully in a bipartisan way like we did for Garland under the Biden administration.

Ms. Bondi has been nominated to one of the most important offices in our country, and she has shown that she is up to that task. Her impressive record and presentation at her hearing are proof that she is ready to take the helm of the Justice Department.

Ms. Bondi made history in 2010 as the first woman elected to be Florida's attorney general. She held this role for 8 years after she was comfortably re-elected by the people of Florida to that second term. Eight years of service as attorney general of the third largest State in this Union is excellent preparation for the role of Attorney General of the United States.

As Florida's attorney general, Ms. Bondi was a member of the Florida cabinet, its chief legal officer, and led a very large agency. She handled many issues at the State level that she will be handling at the Federal level, and by all accounts, she has handled those jobs expertly.

As attorney general, Ms. Bondi didn't shy away from hard work or complicated problems. She engaged in an aggressive campaign to eliminate pill mills, took a leading role in securing a \$3¼ billion settlement following the Deepwater Horizon oilspill, and eliminated the backlog of rape kits. She also

stood for law and order and sought justice for victims of violent criminals. Her record shows that she is highly qualified to be Attorney General of the United States.

During her confirmation hearing, Ms. Bondi answered questions for more than 5 hours. What we learned during her hearing reinforced what we knew from her existing record as attorney general of Florida: She is a tough, fair, career prosecutor who built her reputation by enforcing the rule of law—pretty simple.

We also heard from witnesses who praised Ms. Bondi's character, fairness, and willingness to work with members of both parties to solve the problems in Florida, and we are sure she is going to work the same way as Attorney General of the United States.

What did we hear from these witnesses? We heard from an elected Democrat who never voted for President Trump. He said Ms. Bondi was fair, tethered to the rule of law, and could work with both Democrats and Republicans to serve the American people.

We heard from Florida's statewide prosecutor, who praised her competence running the legal department, as I have said, of the third largest State in the Union.

We heard from a Florida sheriff, who testified about her commitment to law and order and to her partnership with law enforcement to keep Floridians safe.

These witnesses have worked with Ms. Bondi for decades, and they all vouch for her capability and character.

Ms. Bondi's nomination has also received a flood of support from all across America. I have a group of people here that have expressed their view through letters to the committee. Law enforcement groups representing more than 650,000 officers wrote to urge us to support Ms. Bondi's nomination. A few of these groups include the National Association of Police Organizations, the Fraternal Order of Police, the National Sheriffs' Association, Major County Sheriffs, National Narcotic Officers' Associations, the International Association of Chiefs of Police, and still some others. This support is a testament to Ms. Bondi's history of backing the blue.

We should all be backing the blue. I just met with some law enforcement people just before coming over here, and I tell every one of them, I am not for defunding the police, and thank you for keeping the peace.

We have also received letters of support from more than 100 former senior Department of Justice officials, scores of former U.S. attorneys, dozens of State attorneys general, women's rights groups, Second Amendment groups, and, of course, others.

Between her record, her presentation in committee, and the support she has received from across the country, I am convinced that Ms. Bondi is the right choice.