

Donald Trump's supposed desire to root out all drug trafficking.

Let's be clear of the facts: The person Donald Trump just pardoned was convicted of helping move 400 tons of cocaine to the United States, all the while Trump blows up alleged drug boats to prevent drugs from getting to America and risks leapfrogging the United States into war with Venezuela.

You can't have it both ways, Mr. President. You talk a big game about hunting down drug traffickers and getting drugs off our streets and then turn around and free a dangerous, convicted drug lord. That sends a message to other criminals: Suck up to Trump, and you will get a pardon, no matter how many boatloads of drugs you pump into our streets.

Even one Trump adviser admitted that "how we justify this is really hard."

Trump's pardon reeks of hypocrisy; it reeks of corruption, which is the MO of the Trump administration.

The failure of the leadership at the Department of Defense is also a national embarrassment. The mess Secretary Hegseth creates regularly shows the consequences of picking an inexperienced FOX News host to lead a massively complex life-or-death Federal Agency. Donald Trump is learning it the hard way: If you pick a FOX News cable host to lead the largest, most complicated Federal Agency of all, you get burnt, and Hegseth is just way beyond what anyone would imagine in how bad he is at that Department.

In the past few days, more questions have arisen about Hegseth's order to attack alleged drug trafficking vessels off the coast of Venezuela. It is possible those strikes—which may have included verbal orders from the Secretary of Defense to "kill everybody" on those boats—violated the law.

But this is the problem: The American people still don't know exactly what happened because Pete Hegseth refuses to tell the truth.

Months ago, right after the strikes, Hegseth went on FOX News and bragged that he was present at every moment of the operation. He said on FOX News that he "watched it live." He said the same to us in person.

But then, last night, he tweeted that his admiral was actually the one who made all the combat decisions.

This is so spineless.

Pete Hegseth won't hesitate for a moment to talk a big game and take credit if he thinks it makes him look good, but the minute trouble arises, suddenly Hegseth says someone else was making the decision.

Now, let's be very clear about something: There is a very easy way for the American people to get the truth. Pete Hegseth should release the full tapes of the September 2 attack—both the first and second strike; not a clip, not some edited or redacted snippet. The full, unedited tapes of each strike must be released so the American people can see what happened with their own eyes.

Now, Pete Hegseth says he did nothing wrong. So prove it. If it is true, he should have nothing to fear from the truth. But if he refuses to release the tapes, if he stonewalls, if he keeps hiding the facts, then the question becomes unavoidable: What is Pete Hegseth hiding? What does Pete Hegseth not want the American people to see?

Is it that his story doesn't add up? We don't know because Pete Hegseth is right now hiding the truth. And, sadly, that has become the theme with this administration. When facts are inconvenient, they cover up.

So, Secretary Hegseth, release the tapes.

I also want to commend my Senate colleagues, including the chairman and ranking member of the Armed Services Committee, Senators WICKER and REED, for working together in good faith in a bipartisan way to conduct oversight of these boat strikes. I support those efforts wholeheartedly.

One of the first things we need is a classified briefing from the DOD—Department of Defense—about exactly what happened during these operations. Let me be clear: Secretary Hegseth must be part of those briefings. We need documentation. We need the tapes.

But we should go one step further: Secretary Hegseth should testify publicly before the committee, under oath, so that the American people hear the facts.

The truth should not be kept behind closed doors. The fresh air of public scrutiny should be let in. The public has a right to know. That is why Pete Hegseth must testify publicly and, most importantly, why he must release the full tape of the attacks.

HEALTHCARE

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, on healthcare, let me start with a shockingly candid quote from a senior House Republican on their plan to fix healthcare. This senior House Republican, when it came to healthcare, said about the Republicans in the House:

We're nowhere on healthcare.

That is what a senior House Republican said. It is a grim thing to say, but it is the truth. There has never been a clearer divide on what Democrats want on healthcare and what Republicans want on healthcare.

Democrats want to lower healthcare costs for families. We want to make healthcare cheaper, more effective, more accessible. We are united on that issue from one end of the party to the other.

Republicans, meanwhile, are a total mess when it comes to healthcare. Republicans don't know what to do. One day Trump floats a so-called healthcare plan. The next day, Speaker JOHNSON forces him to shoot it down.

Some Republicans say they want to dismantle the ACA—probably a major-

ity of them in the House and a large number in the Senate—just dismantle it altogether. Other Republicans seem more focused on eradicating reproductive care in every State than helping people afford healthcare.

The bottom line is, Republicans are in total disarray on healthcare. And while Republicans continue the infighting, who is paying the price? The American people, the people whose premiums are going up by \$500 to \$1,000 a month. These people know that Trump and the Republicans are to blame.

America, we all know, is in a healthcare crisis, and Republicans are only adding fuel to the fire.

Democrats have been clear from the start: The first step—the first step—to solve this crisis is extending the ACA tax credits. Democrats are ready to do so. We are united, and we are committed to lowering the cost of healthcare.

Republicans, however, by their own admission, are nowhere on healthcare, and that is a disastrous message to send to the American people who are suffering from skyrocketing healthcare costs.

I yield the floor.

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

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

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority leader is recognized.

HEALTHCARE

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, the Democrat leader was just talking about healthcare, and obviously there has been a lot of conversation around that here in these past few weeks and months. In fact, the Democrats shut down the government for 43 days, the longest shutdown in history, allegedly, for healthcare; although, I think we all know that it was Trump derangement syndrome more than anything else that led to the government shutdown.

But I would just say because there is a—you know, sometimes you have to take a walk down memory lane to remind people that facts are stubborn things, and facts are stubborn things.

The Democrat leader implied Republicans are not interested in lowering healthcare costs and that somehow they are. The contrary is actually the truth.

If you look at what has happened since the ObamaCare exchanges went live over 10 years ago, healthcare premiums on the exchange have gone up, on average, 221 percent—a 221-percent increase in healthcare premiums in the

individual marketplace on the ObamaCare exchanges.

Now, you might ask, why is that? There are a lot of reasons behind it. When they put the law in place in the first place, it was flawed structurally. But then he referred to these so-called Biden COVID bonuses, which were the enhancements that the Democrats now want to lock into place.

Now, remember, this was done in 2021 with a Democrat majority, Democrat in the White House, under reconciliation. So there wasn't a single Republican who voted for these enhancements in the first place. But, remember, they were enhancements designed to be responsive to the pandemic.

They were COVID bonuses, only supposed to be temporary. And then, in 2022, they extended them again and set them up to expire at the end of this year. This is a problem of Democrats' making, pure and simple.

So to suggest for a moment that Republicans somehow aren't interested in lowering healthcare costs when, in fact, it is Democrat policies that have led to the runup, the rampant increase—221 percent increase in premiums since the exchanges went live over 10 years ago. You find me anything else in our economy that has seen that kind of an increase over that same time period, Mr. President. That is a staggering increase.

The Biden COVID bonuses that were enacted with all Democrat votes in 2021 and then extended again in 2022 and are set to expire at the end of this year were, again, designed to be a response to a COVID emergency which no longer exists.

So what has happened? They locked in the Biden COVID bonuses that are set to expire at the end of this year, and they expect Republicans now to bail them out. Well, frankly, Republicans are interested in things that will drive down and lower healthcare costs.

The other thing they did in 2022, which is sort of interesting, is that the base ObamaCare policies covered people up to 400 percent of the poverty level. Well, today, that is about, for a family of four, \$128,000. So in the exchanges, you could get coverage, and if your healthcare insurance premiums hit a certain percentage of your income, anything above and beyond that was covered by a government subsidy. That is, in fact, the way it worked prior to 2021. The Biden COVID bonuses took that cap off. There is no cap—no cap. So now you have people making \$500,000, \$600,000 a year who are getting subsidies from the Federal Government to buy insurance.

The other thing they did is they did away with—there are what are called zero-dollar policies or zero-dollar premiums. In other words, there are people out there who pay nothing for coverage. Their coverage is entirely covered by the Federal Government through the subsidy.

Well, what that has done and because of the way the program is structured—

they structured it—is to provide the subsidies directly to insurance companies. This is called, falsely, a premium tax credit. It is not a tax credit. A tax credit would be something that would lower tax liability dollar for dollar when you file your income taxes. This is a subsidy, a direct subsidy.

So you have literally millions of people—millions of people—who have no idea they are covered because they aren't paying anything for it, and the insurance companies are getting the payment. So the insurance companies are incentivized to go out and autoenroll all these people across the country. So what you have today are literally millions of people of the 23 to 24 million people who get their coverage in the exchanges—millions of those have no idea that they are even covered because the insurance company is getting the subsidy, autoenrolling them, which might explain why last year 40 percent of the people who get their insurance coverage through the exchanges didn't file a claim.

Now, you could say that maybe they are healthy; maybe they are younger. That is all partially true, but do you think 40 percent of the people in the exchanges didn't file a claim? I mean, think about that. That means there are literally millions of people out there—millions of people who don't know they have coverage, and the insurance companies are getting the payments and making bank at the expense of everybody else in this country. And those who are paying premiums are seeing those premiums go up, as I said, 221 percent since these exchanges went live 10 years ago.

So this is not something the Republicans—they blame the Republicans for the healthcare crisis. The healthcare crisis was created by Democrats with all Democrat votes in 2021 and then again in 2022, setting them up to expire at the end of this year and with no income limits and zero-dollar premiums and the subsidies going directly to the insurance companies instead of into the pockets of the American people.

Now, there is a better way to do this, but it is going to take cooperation from both sides to do that. It seems to me, at least, that what the Democrats would rather have than a solution is an issue. They want a political issue, and they want to blame Republicans. But you have to come back to the basic premise that facts are stubborn things.

These are the facts: In 2021, these Biden COVID bonuses went into effect. Lifted the cap, so there is no cap, so you can have unlimited amounts of income and still get coverage in the exchanges; zero-dollar premiums, so some people are paying nothing for their health insurance premiums; and insurance companies that are incentivized to autoenroll those very people. In many cases, those people have no idea they are covered. That is a pretty amazing contraption, if you will, and, some would argue, scam on behalf of

the insurance companies in this country but certainly to the detriment of the American people, who do need more affordable coverage. They need to be able to afford healthcare along with the other things they buy on a daily basis. People need access to healthcare in this country, and they need affordability when it comes to healthcare in this country.

I would say there is a path forward here. It can't happen unless there are significant reforms because you can't have people who are making unlimited amounts of money being able to qualify for government subsidies in these exchanges. Nor should you have, in my view, people who pay absolutely nothing—not one dollar—for coverage getting coverage and insurance companies being incentivized, because they get a subsidy for doing it, to cover these very people who don't even know they are covered. That is a really, really bizarre business model. I mean, you couldn't make this stuff up.

Now the Democrats are saying: Oh, we created this, but it is your problem. Please, please fix it. If you don't, if you don't do something that will extend this program that has premiums that continue to go up like this for the American people, we will use it against you in a political campaign as a political issue.

That is the state of play right now, which is why we need a solution and a solution that brings us back to where the American people have options, where there are some sort of income limits, where there are people at least paying something for their coverage, where the insurance companies aren't being enriched at the expense of the American people, and where the American people have choices and options to get the plan they want that works for them and for their families. That is a business model that works. Competition, optionality, market forces, driving down prices, giving the American people more choices to buy the insurance they want at a price they can afford—that is a business model.

The business model we are operating under today was created by the Democrats, and now there is some expectation that somehow Republicans are supposed to come here and fix the problem they created.

BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

Mr. THUNE. So let me get back to my remarks here and start by saying that last month, the incoming mayor of New York City, who is a leading voice in today's Democratic Party, promised New Yorkers:

We will prove that there is no problem too large for government to solve, and no concern too small for it to care about.

No problem too large and no concern too small for government to get involved. That was the quote. That is a dangerous way of thinking. It is a license for government growing