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Senate

The Senate met at 11 a.m. and was called to order by the President pro tempore (Mr. GRASSLEY).

PRAYER

The Chaplain, Dr. Barry C. Black, offered the following prayer:

Let us pray.

Eternal God, the Apostle Paul admonished us in Romans 12:15 with these words:

Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.

Lord, we weep because of the Bondi Beach shooting during Hanukkah in Australia. We weep because of the murders of Rob and Michele Reiner. We weep because of the victims of the Brown University shooting. Because of events like these, we weep for our Nation and world. Wipe away our tears because we weep.

We pray in Your merciful Name. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The President pro tempore led the Pledge of Allegiance, as follows:

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. SHEEHY). Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT FOR FISCAL YEAR 2026

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will resume consideration of the motion to concur in the House amendment to S. 1071, which the clerk will report.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the following:

House message to accompany S. 1071, a bill to require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to disinter the remains of Fernando V. Cota from Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery, Texas, and for other purposes.

Pending:

Thune motion to concur in the amendment of the House to the bill.

Thune motion to concur in the amendment of the House to the bill, with Thune amendment No. 3961 (to the House amendment to the bill), to change the enactment date.

Thune amendment No. 3962 (to amendment No. 3961), to change the enactment date.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The President pro tempore.

UKRAINE

Mr. GRASSLEY. Mr. President, I understand that representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church are on Capitol Hill this week falsely claiming persecution by the Ukrainian Government. This is because of a law requiring churches in Ukraine to stop taking directions from the patriarch in Moscow, who was a KGB agent and reports directly to Vladimir Putin.

Two years ago, I met with Ukrainian faith leaders in my office—about 30 of them—from many backgrounds, including Orthodox, Catholic, Evangelical, Jewish, and Muslim. They told me everyone in Ukraine can freely practice their religion, but in occupied Ukraine, Russians have turned churches into a secular, Russian Ministry of Culture. They have also tortured pastors, and the faithful are forced to worship in secret. That is what I heard from religious leaders of Ukraine 2 years ago.

In September, I highlighted a report by the Free Russian Foundation titled “The Russian Orthodox Church and the War.” That report showed how this body supports the invasion of Ukraine through propaganda, rituals for invaders, diplomatic manipulation, and espionage.

The Atlantic Council hosted an event about the Free Russia report featuring a discussion with Orthodox priests ti-

tled “How the Russian Orthodox Church supports the Kremlin’s war against Ukraine.” You can view it online.

It is no wonder that only between 4 to 8 percent of Orthodox Ukrainians still identify with the Moscow church. The overwhelming majority of Orthodox Ukrainians identify with the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which is recognized by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, the First Among Equals in the Orthodox tradition.

The Ecumenical Patriarch is also head of the largest Orthodox Church in the United States, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. So we should listen to what he said in response to the Russian Patriarch blessing the war and claiming that Russian soldiers who die invading Ukraine will have their sins washed away.

His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew said this:

It is damaging to the prestige of the whole of Orthodoxy, because Orthodoxy doesn’t support war, violence, terrorism.

Do not believe anyone who claims the Russian Orthodox Church is somehow a victim of religious persecution in this war in Ukraine that was started when Russia invaded in February 2022. The Russian Orthodox Church is a leading perpetrator of the persecution of fellow Orthodox believers, as well as Catholics, Evangelicals, and others.

You can learn about real religious persecution in the occupied parts of Ukraine at russiartortureschristians.org, and you can watch the documentary “A Faith Under Siege” on YouTube.

I yield the floor.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority leader is recognized.

NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, this week, the Senate will be taking up the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2026. For the 65th consecutive year, the NDAA is the product of a

• This “bullet” symbol identifies statements or insertions which are not spoken by a Member of the Senate on the floor.



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bipartisan process in both Chambers. This bill reflects the input, expertise, and tireless efforts of many of our colleagues, and I am especially grateful for the work of our colleagues on the Armed Services Committee and for the leadership of Chairman WICKER on this year's bill.

This annual Defense bill is critical to ensuring the U.S. military is prepared for any threat we face—and not just the threats that may come in the next year. It is about putting us on a path that will ensure our military can deter and, if necessary, defeat any threat that may arise in the future.

Unfortunately, this long view has not always prevailed, and we have continued to see the consequences of underinvestment in our military. In the last few years, we have had repeated reminders that the world remains a dangerous place, that there are evil people in the world bent on aggression, and that there are those who wish America and our allies harm.

Sadly, that was clear this weekend. My prayers today are with the families of the three Americans—two soldiers and an interpreter—who were killed in Syria on Saturday in an apparent ISIS attack.

The surest way of securing peace and keeping it is through restraint. It is a long-held tenet of American national security, and it is a view that the American people widely share.

Republicans have made it a priority to restore peace through strength, and we know we have no time to waste. That is why we made a generational investment in our Armed Forces in the One Big Beautiful Bill this summer. The NDAA before us this week builds on that important work.

It aims to grow our Navy fleet to deliver more ships capable of deploying American power anywhere in the world and help narrow the gap between China's shipbuilding and our own.

It supports the construction of the Golden Dome missile defense system to keep our country safe from missile, drone, or other airborne attacks.

It proposes to ramp up munitions production and to ensure that we have sufficient munitions for whatever may come our way—with the added benefit of helping to revitalize the industrial base and support industries in South Dakota and across the country.

Then there is our airpower. The National Defense Authorization Act supports delivery of next-generation aircraft. That includes the B-21 Raider, the sixth-generation stealth bomber that will soon be making its home at South Dakota's Ellsworth Air Force Base.

I am proud that this bill fully authorizes the B-21 Program and procurement of these aircraft, which will be the backbone of our future bomber force, as well as the military construction efforts underway at Ellsworth to support this new mission.

Investing in weapons and technology is important, but strengthening our

military also means supporting the men and women who wear the uniform, and this bill has their back. For one, it authorizes the first increase in Active-Duty end strength in several years. It will help ensure that we can sustain the record recruitment levels that we have seen this year. It also supports critical investments in servicemember quality of life. That includes a 3.8-percent pay raise for our troops. It includes investments in on-base housing, education opportunities, childcare, and other support for military members and their families.

This bill will help rebuild our military, but what makes this year's National Defense Authorization Act exceptional is not how it rebuilds but how it reforms.

Thanks to Chairman WICKER's leadership, this NDAA will make the most significant reforms to the way the Pentagon does business in a generation. It takes dozens of burdensome rules and laws off the books, streamlines the buying and innovation processes, and ensures more American businesses will be able to contribute to America's arsenal, including small businesses and startups.

This bill will harness the full strength of American innovation to get American's men and women in uniform the very best capabilities our country has to offer—and not just get it to them but get it to them faster and at a lower cost to the taxpayer.

These reforms will make our military stronger, more agile, and more ready for whatever the mission may be. And that needs to be our mission here, to do whatever it takes to support American soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and guardians.

We ask a lot of the brave Americans serving in uniform and they give a lot and I am proud that this year's National Defense Authorization Act will help ensure that they have what they need to keep America safe in a dangerous world.

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. SCHUMER. 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 MINORITY LEADER

The Democratic leader is recognized.

TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

MR. SCHUMER. Mr. President, this morning, the American people got more proof that Donald Trump's policies are a disaster to them. This morning's jobs report shows the unemployment rate rose to 4.6 percent in November. That is the highest level since 2021, the highest level in 4 years under Donald Trump's leadership—or lack thereof, more appropriately.

This is what Donald Trump's so-called golden age looks like in all its

ugly glory: higher costs, more tariffs, and the highest unemployment rate since COVID. And make no mistake, this unemployment number didn't just come out of the blue. It didn't just come because of external forces. This high, awful unemployment number—the highest since COVID—is a consequence of Donald Trump's failures, his reckless tariff agenda, his draconian cuts to basic services like healthcare, and his refusal to listen to Americans who are already struggling to pay for what they need.

Donald Trump can try and spin these job numbers all he wants. That is his nature. That is what he does. He doesn't care about the truth. He just cares about his own ego. But Americans aren't buying his fantasy. They are fed up with his agenda, and the damage is beginning to set in.

JEFFREY EPSTEIN

MR. President, now on Epstein, 27 days ago, every single Senator and all but one Member of Congress sent Donald Trump a simple message. They said: Mr. President, release the Epstein files.

The American people have waited long enough for the truth about Jeffrey Epstein. Who knew about his crimes? Who stood by and said nothing? The Epstein files may have some very real answers on that. And it is time—it is time—for the truth to come out.

Donald Trump promised to release the files and, to date, he has failed to deliver. Well, no more. Congress has spoken, and Donald Trump must comply.

Now, I want to be clear that the "Epstein files" is not a fight between Democrats and Republicans; it is a fight between those who want the truth and those who keep lying to the public, between those who want the truth and those who want to cover it up. And if Donald Trump won't come clean, if he keeps hiding the truth, the American people are going to be asking a very simple question: What the hell is President Trump trying to hide? Why won't he release those files?

Now, because of the law that Congress passed just 1 month ago, the Department of Justice has until Friday to release the documents.

I will be blunt. We fully expect that Donald Trump and Pam Bondi will try every trick they can think of to weasel out of fully releasing the Epstein files. After all, we are dealing with Donald Trump here, a notorious liar, someone who tried desperately to make Americans move on from Jeffrey Epstein. Why? Why is Donald Trump so afraid of these files? Well, as they say, where there is smoke, there is fire. Mark my words, if Donald Trump and Pam Bondi try to hide the truth this Friday, the legal and political public backlash will be ferocious. After all, it was the public who demanded these files be released. Democrats, Republicans, liberals, conservatives—people wanted the truth and continue to demand the truth.