

they were writing it about the oak, as I'd posted a photo on social media. For the first time the expression didn't sound clichéd. "I've always loved that oak," wrote a neighbor. "She was a good friend," wrote another. Another quoted Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*. Someone suggested I take her heartwood to a carpenter to have furniture made. A great idea, but far too late; she was stacked like dozens of cords of firewood along the curb for some future when FEMA reared its head. By the time the tree service had arrived, we weren't thinking about milling porch rockers. We were hoping our batteries and candles would last. Maybe the rocker would have been a lovely memorialization. Or maybe it would have been like what John LeCarré said about seeing his novel turned into a movie—"like seeing your oxen turned into bouillon cubes."

It's day seven and counting of no power at our house, but as I write this we're warm and safe, a mile away. Retired colleagues who learned of our plight picked us up in their four-wheel-drive SUV, ensconced us in their guest room. We've been gobsmacked by the miracles of hot showers and coffee.

And kindness. Gobsmacked by kindness. One thing about a natural disaster: it pulls a community together. Mississippi is "the hospitality state." Evidence for that moniker has never been more apparent. The sometimes-snarky "What's Happening in Oxford?" Facebook page is churning with vulnerable requests met with acts of generosity. Someone's elderly grandfather needs firewood and food. Can anyone help? Yes, they could and did. Another poster offers to chainsaw free a family who lives ten miles out in the county. A family who scored a hotel room with hot water is offering showers to families without water. One of the few open restaurants is feeding first responders for free. A rental house of students is handing out coffee. It all makes me a little weepy, to tell the truth.

My middle child gets through on the phone, at last. He's a sophomore at Ole Miss, where my husband and I teach. He's living off campus with four friends and calling me from his car, where he's cradling his dead pet, a spotted gecko, holding it to the heater vents. Cold-blooded, reliant on an electric heating pad, poor Glizzy couldn't take the freeze. My son is despondent—allergic to cats and dogs, he's lavished years of affection on this stupid dead ten-inch reptile. But—thank you, thank you, thank you, God—"He blinked!" Thomas yells. "He blinked!"

We exhale shakily. My mind reaches vaguely for a lizard/Lazarus pun, but I'm too worn out to find it, and he's too worn out to laugh anyway.

He tells me a tree has fallen on his roommate's windshield, and they're trapped, but they can charge their cell phones in their cars. Texts are starting to get through. He's okay.

I tell him that we're okay, too. I don't tell him that ten Mississippians have died from the storm. I do tell him the university has cancelled classes for two weeks. And I tell him about the tree. Once upon a time, he'd hunted Easter eggs among its roots, parked his matchbox cars there.

He's silent for a while. "I can't wait for things to return to normal," he says.

They'll return, I want to tell him, but not to normal.

The ice will melt, and the people of Mississippi will roll up their sleeves and crank their chainsaws. The logs will be cleared. But an uncanny new light will compress the violently lopped canopies. On our corner, the picnic blanket of shade our oak had tossed down will go unfurled. The bewildered birds' questions will go unanswered. The squirrels will take new routes to work. The anthem of November will be forever altered without the

north wind's scattershot of acorns on the roof.

Do trees have souls?

Maybe it's an unanswerable question.

Or maybe the answer's never been more obvious.

Mr. WICKER. I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. SHEEHY). The other distinguished Senator from Mississippi.

Mrs. HYDE-SMITH. Mr. President, I join my colleague Senator ROGER WICKER to draw the attention of the American people to the widespread devastation caused by Winter Storm Fern. This powerful storm has affected millions of Americans across the country, but its effects were especially severe in the South, a region not typically equipped to manage prolonged snow, ice, sleet, and dangerous winter conditions.

This storm was particularly devastating in Mississippi, a State that simply lacks the infrastructure and equipment necessary to respond to a storm of this magnitude. We are just not prepared, and certainly don't know how to drive on the roads during this time.

Tragically, Winter Storm Fern has claimed the lives of at least 26 Mississippians as of February 2. Each loss is heartbreaking and comes with so many stories, as Senator WICKER reflected upon.

The breadth and severity of this disaster have left swaths of the Delta and north Mississippi with landscapes littered with shattered trees and downed power lines. Line crews in this bitter cold from Mississippi and other States are making steady progress in restoring power to nearly 200,000 families and businesses that lost power. While we applaud that progress, it may still take another week to fully connect everyone, especially in more rural counties that lack resources. Long-term recovery, of course, will take much longer than that.

I am grateful for the strong response from our State and Federal partners. More than 600 Mississippi National Guard soldiers are on extended deployment after performing critical missions, including road clearance, refueling operations, distribution of goods, and conducting welfare checks.

The Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks is assisting with welfare checks and emergency calls in Alcorn and Tippah Counties that were hit so hard.

Numerous State agencies are playing vital roles in the response, including the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency, Mississippi Department of Public Safety, the Mississippi Department of Transportation headed by Brad White, Mississippi State Department of Health, and Mississippi Forestry Commission. FEMA has also been on the ground, providing \$3.75 million in rapid emergency funding from generators to tree removal and other urgent needs.

I want to also recognize the extraordinary contributions of volunteer orga-

nizations—we certainly feel better when we see them pull up—including national groups like the Salvation Army, the American Red Cross, Samaritan's Purse, and Christ In Action, as well as countless local organizations whose help has been invaluable to our State.

These accolades cannot overshadow the resiliency and kindness of individual Mississippians who are simply looking out for each other to overcome yet another natural disaster.

Still, the work is far from finished. I, along with fellow members of the Mississippi congressional delegation, strongly support Governor Reeves' request for a major disaster declaration, and we encourage President Trump to approve it swiftly.

I ask my colleagues and the American people to keep the people of my State and everyone harmed by Winter Storm Fern in your prayers.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Texas—sorry, the Senator from Tennessee.

Mr. HAGERTY. I would note that Texas only exists because of Tennessee.

TENNESSEE

Mr. President, I rise today to acknowledge my home State Governor Bill Lee on his exceptionally well-received state of the State address this week, which I was honored to attend.

In Tennessee, we believe that parents know best for their children. We are committed to expanding school choice and education options for students to succeed, an effort Gov. Bill Lee has championed from the outset of his tenure as Governor.

Governor Lee started the Education Freedom Scholarship Program, and it is already in high demand among parents and students. This year the program received 54,000 applications so far for 20,000 slots. It is truly remarkable.

Under Governor Lee's leadership, Tennessee has gone from the bottom half of States in educational scores to a top-five State for gains in reading and in math. Students are thriving, and their future is only getting brighter.

As a former commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development, I know firsthand what it means to bring new jobs and better opportunities for Tennesseans. Just last year, private companies invested more than \$11 billion in Tennessee. Business leaders are flocking to the Volunteer State because of the strategic advantages that we provide in nuclear energy, in low taxes, in skilled labor, and in our entrepreneurial spirit. Job creators are seeking the benefits of having a strong partner, not an adversary, in the Tennessee government.

Governor Lee and Republican leadership in the State have prioritized investment in nuclear energy; and because of that, Tennessee is the No. 1 State for nuclear energy development. Indeed, the Volunteer State is the global leader in nuclear energy, recruiting

\$8 billion of investment from nuclear companies around the world. And I am certain we are only just getting started.

I have had the honor of working with Governor Lee on an issue that is very near and dear to my heart: That is making Memphis the safest city in America. I have worked with President Trump, Attorney General Bondi, FBI Director Patel, Senator BLACKBURN, Representative KUSTOFF, Governor Lee, Commissioner Long, Sheriff Bonner, and Mayor Young for more than a year to get the Memphis Safe Task Force in motion. Because of Governor Lee's commitment to provide not only funds, but law enforcement personnel, we are seeing real results in Memphis that will provide a generational change for Memphians.

Crime in the Shelby County area is way down. As of yesterday morning, law enforcement has arrested 5,681 criminals and gotten them off the streets. They have seized 926 firearms and located 148 missing children. Think about how many families have had their lives changed for the better with 148 missing children returned to them. That, along with everything else I have laid out before you today, has benefited from Governor Lee's leadership.

NOMINATION OF BRIAN CHARLES LEA

Mr. President, I would like to address a separate issue. President Trump's nomination of Brian Charles Lea to be his District Judge for the Western District of Tennessee.

Brian is a fourth-generation Memphian, a graduate of Union University. His academic credentials are outstanding with a 4.06 GPA in law school followed by clerkships for Judge Ed Karnes and the U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas.

Brian has experience teaching law alongside Justice Thomas, and also as a partner at Jones Day, one of the nation's largest law firms, one of the Nation's finest law firms. He has even defended our legislative privileges as lead counsel in the case on behalf of our colleague Senator GRAHAM.

Brian currently serves as Deputy Associate Attorney General, serving the people of the United States of America as counsel in some of the most complicated civil litigations that we encounter.

Brian has the patience, courtesy, humility, and thoughtfulness of a good trial judge. He recognizes that the Constitution should be interpreted according to its original meaning, and it must be followed regardless of the ebbs and flows of public opinion or the personal preferences of the one who dons the robe.

I am confident Brian will serve the people of Memphis well and will uphold the highest standards of our judiciary. I urge my colleagues to support his confirmation.

With that, Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Hawaii.

APPROPRIATIONS

Mr. SCHATZ. Mr. President, among the bills in the funding package that was signed into law yesterday was the State and Foreign Operations appropriations bill. And while people are understandably focused elsewhere, I want to take a moment to talk today about what is in the so-called SFOPS bill and why it matters because, simply put, this bill will save lives all around the world. It will strengthen our alliances and partnerships at a moment when global instability is at an alltime high. And, crucially, it will make Americans safer here at home.

As ranking member of this subcommittee, I saw in realtime the destruction and devastation wrought by Donald Trump's illegal dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development. Estimates are that more than 760,000 people, including 500,000 children, have died over the past year since American assistance suddenly vanished—760,000 people. Worse, millions more are expected to die in the next 5 years if the current trend continues.

So it is in that context that this bill is essential. It is proof that there is still broad bipartisan support for America showing up in the world, not just with tanks and guns but with food and lifesaving care and economic assistance. And we do that not just because we are the indispensable Nation and that is the right and moral thing to do—although that would be enough—but also because projecting power in all of its forms is smart, it is strategic, and it makes us more safe and more competitive.

In this bill, there are vital investments in global health, humanitarian aid, and economic and development assistance. There is more than \$9 billion for global health programs to help to fight HIV/AIDS, malaria, TB, and polio. The funding also supports vaccination efforts that the administration tried to eliminate and strengthens maternal and child health programs.

The bill includes close to \$7 billion for development programs focused on economic resilience, education, water and sanitation, and disaster mitigation. And there is a reason why we have funded these programs for decades. Yes, our partners want them. Yes, they employ tens of thousands of Americans. But more than that, these programs benefit our national interests in unique ways. For instance, it is because of USAID's war legacy work in Vietnam that we share a strong security partnership today. It is thanks to our disaster risk mitigation programs in the Pacific islands that we have as much access to the region as we do.

So it is not as if we just invest this money and hope for the best. This is not charity. This is not charity. It pays off over years and decades.

This bill also rejects the administration's efforts to retreat from multilateral institutions like the United Nations. It ensures that we can pay our

treaty dues to international organizations, restores voluntary funding for organizations like UNICEF, and fully meets our commitments to multilateral development banks that focus on economic development.

Relatedly, the bill includes billions of dollars in funding to allies and partners across the globe, including those in the Indo-Pacific and Eurasia who are working to counter Chinese influence and Russian aggression.

Now, I want to be clear: This bill is definitely not the bill that I would have written if it were up to me. There are steep cuts to really important programs, and we are asking our diplomats and our partners to navigate a riskier world with fewer resources. The cuts to humanitarian assistance are especially disappointing, and they are the result of the administration effectively shutting down the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, slowing assistance for those impacted by conflict, and reprioritizing funds for its own agenda. Our international broadcasting grantees are also experiencing significant cuts even as they try to provide essential information and services in Ukraine, Iran, and across the Indo-Pacific.

And I want us to understand that what happened in the spring around DOGE and USAID—a lot of people are not tracking some of these funding areas, but, for instance, this is about getting our message out in Ukraine, this is about countering the Government of China's propaganda in the Indo-Asia Pacific, and this is about people in Iran having access to the internet through VPNs that we helped them to get.

And so some of these programs—if you are just a tech guy and you have been assigned to find things to cut and you read a line item and you say: 75 million for what? VPNs in the mid—what is that? That is what this is. All of these programs serve our national interests.

That said, there was nothing inevitable about this bill. We are here today, a year on from the wholesale evisceration of the American foreign assistance enterprise, enacting a bipartisan law because Members on both sides were committed to preserving this enterprise. So I want to thank Senators GRAHAM, MURRAY, and COLLINS as well as Representatives DIAZ-BALART and FRANKEL for their partnership in negotiating the bill. It was one of the toughest negotiations and most important negotiations I have ever been involved in.

And I also want to thank the incredible staff here in the Senate who worked tirelessly to get this done. On the Democratic side, that is Alex Carnes, Sarita Vanka, Kali Farahmand, and Drew Platt, and on the Republican side, Paul Grove, Paul Denaro. This would not have been possible without all of you.

And now the hard work of implementation and oversight begins. We can appropriate as much money as we want,