

South Dakota Retailers Association. I heard from a number of local businesses, from our car dealerships to a cupcake shop, and business owners from around South Dakota had positive things to say about the Working Families Tax Cut Act.

Todd Pharis, a Pizza Ranch franchisee in Sioux Falls, hailed the much needed certainty provided by the new tax law. Pro-growth provisions like bonus depreciation, research and development expensing, and the 199A small business deduction are now permanent, meaning businesses like Todd's can plan for the future and invest in their operations and in their employees.

Jim Lake, who owns car dealerships around South Dakota, said that 100 percent bonus depreciation enabled them to build a large addition to one of his dealerships and hire 10 new employees.

The owner of Harms Oil also talked about the significant reinvestment from bonus depreciation that benefits South Dakota businesses and the communities they serve.

Paul Forst from Agtegra Cooperative talked about how the 199A small business deduction is directly helping South Dakota farmers. He said his cooperative has opted to pass more than \$100 million in 199A benefits directly to South Dakota farmers since the deduction was created in 2017, and the farmers have invested that savings in new equipment, infrastructure, and jobs.

Then there is the death tax relief that we passed. The death tax relief that we passed—I mentioned that this roundtable was at Montgomery's furniture store in Sioux Falls. And I think it is worth noting that Montgomery's has been a family-owned business since 1888, the year before South Dakota became a State. It is currently run by the fourth and fifth generations in South Dakota. The sixth generation is learning the ropes.

Family-run businesses like Montgomery's aren't unique in our State. South Dakota is home to a number of family-owned businesses and family farms and ranches that have been passed down from one generation to the next.

Thanks to the working families tax cut, hard-working Americans who run their own businesses are breathing a sigh of relief because this landmark bill protects a lot more family-owned businesses from a potentially devastating death tax bill when the business passes to the next generation, as well as costly estate planning expenses. That is something that matters to a lot of folks who came to the roundtable last week and for business owners, farmers, and ranchers across South Dakota.

I have talked this morning about how the working families tax cut provides tax relief to South Dakota businesses. Those benefits are significant, but I should note what most excited the business owners at last week's round-

table wasn't the tax benefits for themselves; it was the benefits that their employees and the customers are going to see.

Todd Pharis, the Pizza Ranch franchisee said this:

The two that are going to help us the most, or at least our employees, are the no tax on tips and the no tax on overtime, which will give our employees more money, and . . . we'll actually be able to give them more overtime.

Melissa Johnson who owns Oh My Cupcakes! in Sioux Falls said of her employees:

With the no tax on tips and no taxes on overtime, it has already resulted in [my employees] having higher tax refunds so they can buy things they need for their families. My head chef just bought a baby crib because of a higher refund . . . It's really affected my team in positive ways.

And Eric Sinclair who owns Montgomery's had this to say:

Anytime the general consumer can get more back in their pocket with tax cuts, we hope they come into our stores and maybe buy something nice for their home, make their surroundings even more beautiful.

By all accounts, those bigger tax refunds are beginning to land in hard-working Americans' bank accounts. The IRS is reporting a significant increase in the average refund this year. And just recently, I got this message from a retiree in South Dakota who wrote:

Just did my income taxes. Putting more money in my pocket than last year . . . I am not a billionaire or a millionaire or even a hundreds of thousands thousandaire—just a retired senior citizen who appreciates that the middle class gets a break once in a while.

That is what the working families tax cut is all about. Whether you are a small business owner, a farmer, a rancher, or a senior citizen, or someone just trying to make ends meet and provide for your family, the working families tax cut puts more money in your pocket empowering Americans to spend, invest, and save their money how they see fit. And it is setting our country and the American people up for a much brighter future.

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.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, I move to proceed to legislative session.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is on agreeing to the motion. The motion was agreed to.

HOUSING FOR THE 21ST CENTURY ACT—Motion to Proceed

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, I move to proceed to Calendar No. 343, H.R. 6644.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the motion.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

Motion to proceed to Calendar No. 343, H.R. 6644, a bill to increase the supply of housing in America, and for other purposes.

CLOTURE MOTION

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, I send a cloture motion to the desk.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The cloture motion having been presented under rule XXII, the Chair directs the clerk to read the motion.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

CLOTURE MOTION

We, the undersigned Senators, in accordance with the provisions of rule XXII of the Standing Rules of the Senate, do hereby move to bring to a close debate on the motion to proceed to Calendar No. 343, H.R. 6644, a bill to increase the supply of housing in America, and for other purposes.

John Thune, Tim Scott of South Carolina, Katie Boyd Britt, Jim Banks, John Barrasso, John R. Curtis, Kevin Cramer, Joni Ernst, Pete Ricketts, Bernie Moreno, Markwayne Mullin, Mike Crapo, Ted Budd, Roger F. Wicker, James Lankford, Chuck Grassley, Cindy Hyde-Smith.

WAIVING QUORUM CALL

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to waive the mandatory quorum call in relation to the McCormack nomination.

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

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Democratic leader is recognized.

IRAN

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, today, U.S. and Iranian officials are holding talks in Geneva as America stands at the brink of another potential conflict in the Middle East.

Earlier this week, Senate leaders and I met with Secretary Rubio. Everyone is asking what the plan is with respect to Iran, and we are all looking for answers that the administration has refused to give.

The issues we discussed in our classified briefing were very serious, and the American people deserve to hear it directly from the President and his administration. The administration should come clean and tell the American people exactly what the goal is in Iran.

I have always said that confronting Iran and halting its nuclear ambition requires a strategy, clarity, and transparency. Thus far, we are getting none of that from the administration. The American people deserve answers.

EPSTEIN FILES

Mr. President, on Epstein, the way Pam Bondi and the Justice Department handled the release of the Epstein files has all the stench of a coverup.

Yesterday, news outlets reported that several memos detailing a woman's accusation against the President from when she was a minor have been withheld from the public. We know

these memos exist. An index of all the investigative materials confirm their existence, and under law—the law we passed unanimously here in the Senate—they need to be made public.

Pam Bondi does not have the right to pick and choose which Epstein files to release to the public. Protecting the President from embarrassment is not her job. The American people were promised the truth, and Pam Bondi's job is to give Americans full access to the truth.

What else is the administration keeping behind a lock and key? Is this incompetence, or is it a full-blown cover-up? Pam Bondi owes the American people some answers.

Remember, the law Congress passed had very specific criteria for withholding the Epstein files: protect victims' identities, protect the integrity of an ongoing investigation, or avoid duplication. Protecting Donald Trump's image does not—does not—fit any of these buckets.

So I ask Pam Bondi: Whose side are you on, the victims or the perpetrators?

STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS

Mr. President, on the "State of Delusion" and Democrats' plan to lower costs, there has never been a State of the Union where the President spoke for so long but had so little substance, so little truth.

Tuesday night was 2 hours of Donald Trump's "State of Delusion." He is in a bubble. He doesn't know what is going on with the American people. All he wants to do is stroke his own ego. Donald Trump told the country that everything is great, that costs are coming down, that manufacturing is up, that he is going to fix healthcare, and that we are going to win so much that we don't know what to do. That is what he said. It is amazing.

I ask very seriously: Who else in America feels this way, that we are winning so much we don't know what to do? Maybe billionaires, but that is it.

Today, I want to talk about a couple of things that Donald Trump didn't mention during his 2-hour "State of Delusion."

For one, Donald Trump didn't talk about how he will bring down the cost of living. Ground beef is up 11 percent. Coffee is up 14 percent. Rent is up. Thanks to Donald Trump's tariffs, American families are spending over \$1,700 more this year—\$1,700 out of the average working family's pocket. That is a heck of a lot of money when people are struggling to pay the bills.

Where is Donald Trump's plan to fix any of this? He said nothing.

In a moment, I will talk about what Democrats plan to do about this.

Donald Trump also talked about manufacturing, but he failed to mention that America is not creating manufacturing jobs. We are bleeding them.

So many lies—he says we are growing manufacturing jobs? Well, look at this chart.

These are the numbers of manufacturing jobs that were lost in the last year—in May, in June, in July, in August, in September, in October, in November, and in December. We lost in every month. We lost manufacturing jobs, and Donald Trump just lies about it.

This is the state of manufacturing in the United States. Manufacturing jobs are down by 100,000. We shed manufacturing jobs every single month—every single month—right after Trump's "Liberation Day." Yet he lies about it. He just makes it up.

Donald Trump has this uncanny ability which misserves human beings and which particularly misserves Presidents. He thinks that by saying it is so, it is true and that everyone will just believe him. Well, his minions believe him, no matter what he says, but no one else. He talks past America.

Again, we lost manufacturing jobs, Donald Trump. We didn't gain them.

Trump also failed to speak about his plan to fix healthcare because he has none. Donald Trump claims he will always protect Medicare, but that is false. The CBO found that, thanks to Donald Trump's "Big Ugly Bill," the Medicare trust fund will run out 12 years sooner than before. In other words, Donald Trump has accelerated Medicare's demise by more than a decade with one single bill which every Republican voted for in this Chamber but no Democrat because we knew the damage to healthcare he was doing.

Donald Trump also failed to mention anything about China. It is the second leading power in the world. The United States has lots of issues with China, but when was the last time a President of the United States avoided talking about America's biggest rival on the world stage during his State of the Union?

The way Donald Trump has handled China is an embarrassment. He has promised to be tough on China, but he is playing with them with kids' clothes, giving them critical American technology, and his tariffs have failed to win any meaningful concessions.

It doesn't have to be this way. Americans deserve better than a President and a Republican Party that think "affordability" is a made-up word. Later this morning, I will join my colleagues—Senators CANTWELL, LUJÁN, BOOKER, and WELCH—and experts from across the country to talk about how we lower food costs, how we make trips to the grocery store less painful for families, and how we fix the structural problems that keep prices high, like the consolidation of the food industry.

Today's roundtable is part of a larger Senate effort by Senate Democrats to, all year long, talk about how we will drive costs down, because we don't believe affordability is some kind of hoax. He called it a hoax. That was insulting to America. He seems to have fun insulting people. That is what it seemed like up there on the "State of Delusion" stage that he occupied. Af-

fordability is the most real thing in the lives of the American people economically.

In the weeks and months ahead, we are going to go issue by issue, taking the time to dig in and roll out serious, practical battle plans to bring costs down. We started a month ago with housing, and I am proud of the work Democrats are doing to lower housing costs. We will soon take on energy and electricity. We will take on childcare, and we will take on healthcare.

Lowering costs will be Senate Democrats' North Star in 2026. Let me repeat that so America and our Republican colleagues hear it: Lowering costs will be Senate Democrats' North Star in 2026.

The conversations we have today about high food prices will lay the groundwork for real legislation so that, when Democrats have the majority, we can deliver real relief and bring down the cost of living.

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

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

The majority whip is recognized.

STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS

Mr. BARRASSO. Mr. President, this week, President Trump called attention and paid tribute to families who lost loved ones—loved ones who were killed by illegal immigrant criminals. Now, these are known as Angel Families. On Monday, President Trump declared February 23 National Angel Family Day.

On Tuesday, during the State of the Union, when we were both there, the President honored a heartbroken Angel mother—a mother who was there in the audience from the State of Texas. It was her 16-year-old daughter, Lizbeth Medina, who was brutally murdered by an illegal immigrant. Lizbeth's killer had a criminal background and should not have been in our country.

Just like Laken Riley, the nursing student who had been brutally murdered by an illegal immigrant, Lizbeth dreamed also of becoming a nurse. Think of all the lives that could have been helped and saved had hers not been stolen away.

Republicans are determined to ensure that no more families are forced to feel this sort of pain.

During his State of the Union Address, President Trump asked a single and powerful question. He said to the entire Chamber, everyone—Republicans, Democrats, everyone there—he said: If you agree with this statement, then stand up and show your support.

He then presented the statement to the American people. This is the statement. He said:

The first duty of the American Government is to protect American citizens—not illegal [immigrants].

So what happened? Republicans stood up and cheered, as they should and should every American citizen, for putting American citizens first. Not a single Democrat, that I saw, stood up. They sat on their hands. They sat in the Chamber. They refused to stand to the important statement of "The first duty of the American Government is to protect American citizens—not illegal aliens." To me, that revealing moment said it all.

Now, I have said it many times before, and I will say it again: Democrats care more about illegal immigrant criminals. Every one of them on the other side of the aisle cares more about illegal immigrant criminals than they do about the safety and the security of the American people. That is wrong, Mr. President. That is not what our country is all about.

DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

Mr. President, we are now 13 days into the shutdown of the Department of Homeland Security. It is another Democrat shutdown. They are the ones that shut it down—a shutdown against American safety and security. That is who those people are. That is what they believe in. That is why they would not stand, the other night, during the President's State of the Union Address, to support American citizens as opposed to illegal immigrant criminals.

But the Department of Homeland Security stands between illegal immigrant criminals and the American people, between terrorists and American citizens. And yet this is the very Department that the Democrats have decided to shut down.

We funded 96 percent of the Government through the usual approach that we do, the Appropriations Committee, and they refused that last 4 percent of Government because that is the 4 percent that deals with the Department of Homeland Security.

So today these heroes that protect American lives are working without pay. It is wrong. We are talking about TSA agents, Secret Services agents, the Coast Guard that patrols our coastal waters, our Nation's cyber security—260,000 people in all working without pay because the Democrats have shut down the Department of Homeland Security or, at least, refused to pay them. They are still working, but they are not getting paid because of the Democrats.

Funding the Department of Homeland Security is about protecting American citizens. That is the fundamental role of Government. It is not coddling illegal immigrant criminals, which is what the Democrats seem to want to do, especially criminals who brutally murder American citizens.

Republicans have offered fair terms to fully and immediately fund the Department of Homeland Security. What do the Democrats say? Well, they continue to make unreasonable and unserious demands. Democrats want the Department of Homeland Security to remain closed. It is very evident from their statements.

Democrats have submitted a laundry list of demands in order for the Government to fund the Department of Homeland Security. They demand harsh restrictions on cooperation between the Federal Government, State governments, and local officials.

Mr. President, you would want them all to work together. I mean, wouldn't it be better if we coordinated efforts at the State, local, and national levels? Of course.

Democrats are demanding an outright ban on immigration enforcement at so-called sensitive locations. So they have a list of sensitive locations. One, astonishingly—this is the first time this has ever appeared in any of their lists of demands, but it is now here—they want a sensitive location for protection of illegal immigrants to be polling places.

Why are illegal immigrants in polling places? It is illegal for them to vote.

That is who the Democrats are. That is who they are supporting. That is what they are trying to do—protect illegal immigrant criminals. Their demands are driven not by the protection and safety of the American people. It is for the protection and safety of illegal immigrants, and it is just flatout wrong. It flies in the face of who we are as American citizens.

The Democrat demands are driven not by the traditional Democrats of yesterday. Oh, no, they are driven by the extreme Democrats of today. And it is the extreme Democrats of today who have captured and are controlling today's Democrat Party. The Democrats of yesterday are gone. This is a party under the control of the radical left—a party that calls for defunding the police, a party that encourages defying the law, and a party that refuses to stand when they are asked to support the citizens of America.

The Democrats' demands are reckless, they are radical, and they are dangerous. The Democrats' demands compromise public safety. They fly in the face of the rule of law. They turn America into a sanctuary country. That is not what the American people want.

The danger is real. The cartels remain a serious and deadly threat. Just this week, in Mexico, they launched a violent new drug war. This violence started after the Mexican military, encouraged and assisted by the United States, eliminated one of Mexico's most powerful drug lords.

As the cartels spread chaos across Mexico, they also seek to harm law enforcement officers inside America—inside our own country. ABC News has now reported that the Mexican cartels have placed cash bounties on ICE and Border Patrol officers living and working here in America, cartels paying for damage—physical damage—of ICE and Border Patrol agents serving here at home.

They actually have a payment list. They offer \$2,000 to dox an agent, in-

cluding photos of the agent's family or details about the agent's family. They are paying \$5,000 to \$10,000 to kidnap or assault an enforcement officer, and \$50,000 to murder a high-ranking official. That is what the Mexican cartels are up to these days, at a time that the Democrats here stand for the illegal immigrants but remain seated in terms of support for the American people.

So think about it. Criminal cartels in Mexico have put a price on the heads of our law enforcement officers here at home in America, and yet the pro-crime Democrats here in the U.S. Senate, as part of their list of demands, are demanding that ICE officers remove their masks in the face of such assaults, making it easier for the cartels to get what they want, to go after their families.

But Republicans are not at all going to accept these dangerous demands from the Democrats—demands that make our communities less safe and demands that put our enforcement officers at increased risk.

Republicans here in this body and across the country and most American citizens agree with President Trump: It is the No. 1 duty of any government—and certainly ours—to protect its citizens, not illegal aliens. And Republicans will stand every day for the safety and security of our Nation's citizens.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. SHEEHY). The Senator from Louisiana.

TRIBUTE TO CANDICE HUMBLE

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. President, with me today is one of my colleagues from my office, Ms. Candice Humble. She is a member of my communications team. She is not responsible for anything I say.

I am losing her. She is not leaving government; she is going to work for the White House. Today is her last day, and I asked her to come down so that I could thank Candice publicly for all of her extraordinary work and for giving so much to the people in Louisiana and to the American people.

IRAN

Mr. President, about 90 percent of my personal and political philosophy is, don't hurt someone unless they are trying to hurt you first, don't take other people's stuff, and leave me alone—let me live my life, exercising the free will and responsibility that God gave—which leads me to my first topic: Iran.

I am not talking about the people of Iran. I am talking about the political and religious leadership of the Government of Iran. I am talking about the Ayatollah and his followers.

In America, we separate government from religion. Not in Iran, thanks to the Ayatollah. The government tells you what religion to practice. The government is the religion.

Now, everybody has the right to believe what they want. I will tell you what the Ayatollah believes. He is Muslim, but his strain of Islam says

that if you do not agree with his interpretation of God, then you deserve to die. You do. And he acts on that belief.

Now, let me say again, the Ayatollah is entitled to believe what he wants. I was raised a Presbyterian. My parents founded two Presbyterian churches. When Becky and I got married, Becky was a Methodist, and I was a Presbyterian. We compromised: I became a Methodist. I am entitled to believe what I want. But the Ayatollah not only thinks that I am going to Hell because I don't agree with his religion; he wants to kill me. He wants to kill Americans and Israelis and anybody who does not believe in his jihad and drink our blood out of a boot. And he has acted on that. I don't need to tell the Presiding Officer. I don't need to tell the Presiding Officer. He has acted on that, and that is not acceptable.

Now, a lot of the people in Iran—the good people in Iran—don't agree with the Ayatollah. If they disagree with him too loudly, he just kills them.

The Ayatollah—it has actually been the case for the last—I don't know—10, 15, 20 years—the Ayatollah has decided he wants a nuclear warhead. Why should we care? I hear from some of my fellow Americans all the time: Why do we need to be involved in Iran? Why should we care?

Well, No. 1, we are not trying to start a war in Iran; the President is trying to end a war in Iran. If the Ayatollah gets a nuclear weapon, he will use it. He could use it against America. He could use it against Israel. I don't know who he will use it against, and I hope I am wrong, but he will use it.

Do you know what else will happen as soon as he gets a nuclear weapon? Saudi Arabia is going to get a nuclear weapon, and the UAE is going to get a nuclear weapon, and Japan is going to get a nuclear weapon, and South Korea, and I could go on and on and on. The more nuclear weapons you have in the world, the more likely you are to have a nuclear war.

But that is not the only thing the Ayatollah has done since he became the Ayatollah. He exports terrorism. He was the person behind Hamas and Hezbollah that have killed so many people throughout the world—not just in the Middle East but across the world—including but not limited to Americans. That is why we ought to care.

The Ayatollah also has conventional ballistic missiles and is building more as we speak. Now, those missiles can't reach America yet, but they are working on one. And they can sure reach our military bases in the Middle East, and they can sure reach Israel. Yes, sir. Yes, ma'am. That is why we should care.

Finally, the Ayatollah, if you disagree with him—and we have seen it happen on TV. We don't know how many people he has hung in the last 6 months. We don't know how many people he has tortured. I have seen estimates as high as 50,000.

So that is what this business with Iran is all about. We are not trying to be the world's policeman; we are trying to stop the Ayatollah from being the world's policeman. He is getting a lot of support from President Xi Jinping in China and Vladimir Putin in Russia and Kim Jong Un in North Korea. So that is where we find ourselves trying to stop this war.

To the Ayatollah, I would say: Ayatollah, you are entitled to believe what you want. You can hate me. You can believe that. I know you hate me and what I stand for. You know how I sleep at night knowing that you hate me? With the fan on. That is your right. But you can't act on that belief. Put down the nuclear weapons. Put down the nuclear enrichment. Stop exporting terrorism through Hamas and Hezbollah. End your missile program. Stop killing and torturing your people.

That is all we want, and he is doing that as we speak. He is at war; we are trying to stop it.

I am not about to give the President any advice. He has intelligence that I don't have, and I respect the fact that he is being very deliberate and careful in making a decision. If we make a deal with Iran, let's make sure we have a protocol to enforce it because, in my experience in watching the Ayatollah through the years, I wouldn't trust this man if he were 3 days dead. I wouldn't trust him if he were 3 days dead. Anybody whose religion tells them that in order to be saved, they have to go kill hundreds of millions of people—you can believe it if you want, but as far as I am concerned, it is time to get a new religion.

That is what we are doing in Iran. Let me say it again. We are not trying to start a war. This war began a long time ago. We are trying to end it. Our President presiding today knows exactly what I talked about. He served honorably—at great physical, mental, and emotional expense—in the Middle East. That is what we are trying to stop.

NEW ORLEANS

Mr. President, topic No. 2: New Orleans. I love New Orleans. I am not from New Orleans. I used to live there. I met my wife there. I used to live uptown. I used to practice law in New Orleans. I taught a little while in law school in Baton Rouge, but my first teaching job was going to be in New Orleans before I moved to Baton Rouge. I love New Orleans—one of the most unique cities in the entire world.

So what I am about to say, I say from my heart with love and affection and as a former resident and frequent visitor. Here is my message to the political leadership in New Orleans: Get your act together. Get your act together.

I don't go to New Orleans that I don't hear from my people down there: We need affordable housing. We need affordable housing. We need affordable housing.

Let me tell you something. We spend a lot of money on affordable housing in

America, billions every year—the American taxpayer. Not State money. Not local money. This is American taxpayer money. We take that money and send it to States and local governments to build affordable housing for people who can't afford a home, because the American people are so generous.

We do that through what are called housing agencies. Every State that I am aware of has a housing agency, and many local governments have a housing agency. The State housing agencies and the local housing agencies take the Federal money and use it—given to them out of the goodness of the American taxpayers' heart—to create affordable housing.

We have been doing that for years in New Orleans. There is a local housing authority. We call it HANO, the Housing Authority of New Orleans. It is run by a board of commissioners appointed by the mayor. Last year, I think we gave them \$70 million. By "we," I mean the American taxpayer. They have been around since 1937.

The Housing Authority of New Orleans has a spectacular and impressive record of graft, corruption, mismanagement, incompetence, theft. Do you think I am kidding? I came with receipts. It got so bad from 2006 to 2009 that Housing and Urban Development in 2009 had to take them over—the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development.

From 2006 to 2009, the chief financial officer of HANO stole \$900,000 of taxpayer money. A few years later, the guy running HANO's section 8 voucher department just took a voucher for himself and paid his own rent. The skillethead got caught. Boy, that really gave us confidence.

In 2007, the Feds had to step in and investigate—I think in some cases, they prosecuted—a vendor kickback scheme. In 2014, the director of the Housing Authority of New Orleans was investigated for giving out \$1 million in no-bid contracts. Guess who they went to. The director's friends. An audit in 2010 found—our auditors couldn't find \$7.2 million.

I could go on. I could give you a list as long as King Kong's elbow.

Now I am going to tell you about the most recent episode that has made me want to stick my head in the oven. We have a housing project in New Orleans called the Guste Homes complex. It is in a part of our city called Central City. It is pretty big. It is not particularly well run, but it is pretty big. It has a 12-story building that houses apartments, and I think they have some townhomes as well.

We provide housing—"we," once again, being the American taxpayer—to the elderly and the disabled. They can live there.

And the Guste Homes complex—I call it Guste Homes—is run by HANO, the Housing Authority of New Orleans, the board of commissioners appointed by our mayor.

The Housing Authority of New Orleans has an administrator—and I am not denigrating her. I don't know anything about her. I am just telling you what is going on. But the board and the administrator of the Housing Authority of New Orleans don't run Guste. They are supposed to. They went and hired a management company to run Guste. And the management company, its overhead is about \$8 million a year. I am not kidding you. That is money that doesn't go to provide housing to people; it goes into their pocket.

I was looking up one of their consultants. They hired a consultant—I don't think she works there anymore—a Mrs. Sherri—I am going to mispronounce this name—Sengsouvana. Never met her. I do know that from 2003 to 2024, HANO gave her \$660,000 as a consultant. I looked her up.

Here is the way she describes herself:

I am an author, a grief mentor, and an entrepreneur who has built a career around helping others navigate loss and find spiritual healing.

Six hundred and sixty grand to her as a consultant; isn't that special?

Well, now, the management company and HANO, they stopped paying the water bill for the people who live in the housing. They have run up a water bill for \$1.5 million. They say they don't have the money, and the water company predictably says: Well, hey, we are going to have to cut off your water.

What are we going to do with these 310 folks—elderly, disabled—that the American taxpayer gave money to for their housing?

And now HANO is saying, you know, don't pay the water bill. The water bill is wrong.

I don't know who is right and who is wrong, but I will tell you what else HANO was saying. HANO was saying the Guste project is a mess. Even though we have hired consultants out the wazoo and given them money, we have got a big vacancy rate—no kidding. They don't have running water. We have got a big vacancy, and there is too much deferred maintenance so we want to start over, and, by the way, we want the Federal Government to give us \$60 million.

When donkeys fly.

Now, we have got a new mayor in New Orleans. I am delighted we got some new council people. They have got to do their job. I don't want to hear that we are not responsible for HANO. The mayor appoints them. Get rid of the thieves. Get rid of incompetence. Don't come back and ask for more money to fix your mistakes from the American taxpayer. The good people of New Orleans deserve that. They deserve better. Do better. The people living in this complex deserve better.

I have had enough. I have just had enough. Fix it. And if you say: Well, New Orleans—I know, it is a sanctuary city and they have their political beliefs and, by God, they are entitled to them. That is America. You can believe what you want. OK. And they may dis-

agree with the current administration in Washington. That is fine too. This is America, and that has really got nothing to do with this.

But you need to clean up your own act first. I don't know how. I can't tell you how to do it, but the American people gave at the office. I can't tell you how to do it. Maybe you are going to have to borrow the money. Maybe you are going to have to actually raise taxes on the people of New Orleans; I hope not. But at some point—at some point—the money has got to come from somewhere.

Get your act together before you come back to me or anybody else in Washington, going: You got \$60 million dollars lying around? Not only can we not pay the water bill, we want to tear the whole thing down and build a new one and have somebody else pay for it.

Gag me with a spoon.

Anyway, I am going to miss Candice. Thank you for your good work, Candice.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant executive clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. President, since we have a little time, I know we have got the vote coming up, and I am certainly not going to delay that. I like my life too much. But I want to spend a few minutes talking about the Department of Commerce.

I had this discussion the other day with our Secretary of Commerce Mr. Harry Lutnick, for whom I have great respect. One of the Agencies in the Department of Commerce is an Agency called the Census Bureau. And I know that sounds like they count people—and they do—but they have a multitude of responsibilities. One of their responsibilities is to define the poverty level in America, tell us who is poor.

According to the Census Bureau, if you are single in America and you make \$16,000 or less, you are poor; you are below the poverty level. If you are a family of two and you make \$20,000 or less, you are at or below the poverty level; a family of three, \$27,000; family of four, \$32,000.

We take that seriously in America. Other countries let you die in a ditch. We don't do that in America. It is one of the reasons we spend \$1.4 trillion a year helping our neighbors who are poor. In our country, if you are hungry, we will feed you; if you are homeless, we will house you; if you are too poor to be sick, we will pay for your doctor. That separates us from just about every other country in the world.

I have been all over this world. I know the Presiding Officer has too. In other countries, they will just let you die in a ditch. We don't do that in

America. Mr. President, \$1.4 trillion is how much we spend every year. That is taxpayer money. It didn't just fall from Heaven—we thank Heaven for it—it came out of people's pockets.

If you go talk to the Census Bureau—I pointed this out to Secretary Lutnick—if you go ask the Census Bureau how many poor people we have in America, they will tell you 11 percent—1 out of 10 Americans. It has been that way since 1974. We have been spending \$1.4 trillion a year, and the poverty level hasn't budged. Eleven percent, they will tell you, and they will shout it from the rooftops.

When they get a letter from another Agency saying “We need some help to research how many poor people we have in America today,” they will tell you “Eleven percent. Eleven percent.” They are lying. It is a bald-faced lie. Do you know why? Because they don't count—they refuse to count all of the public benefits the American people give to the poor. According to the Census Bureau, the only thing that counts is if you get cash from the Federal Government. We call that welfare. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. We have another program I think that pays cash; it is called WIC.

But according to the Census Bureau, that is the way you define if somebody is in poverty. You look at how much money they make, and on top of that, we consider cash transfer payments from the Federal Government, and when you do that, 11 percent are poor. What planet and what solar system did these people parachute in?

Do you know what they don't count? I will tell you what they don't count. They don't count earned income tax credits. If I make a low enough income myself—let's say I make \$15,000 a year. I have to pay tax on that, file a tax return, but if I do, I get an income tax credit. It is called—it is refundable. That means the IRS sends me a check. The American people pay for that, but the Census Bureau says that doesn't count in determining the poor.

Do you know what else they don't count? They don't count food stamps. Huh? Real strong drugs is the only possible explanation for them to not even count food stamps.

Do you know what else they don't count? Housing subsidies, section 8 vouchers, getting to live in a place for free.

Do you know what else they don't count? Utility bill subsidies. They don't count Medicaid. They don't count free school meals.

Do you know why? Because if they counted it, do you know how many Americans would be living in poverty? One percent. And that is an actual fact.

I am going to give you an example. Let's suppose you are a mom with two kids, and you are poor. You work, and you make \$11,000 a year, OK? In determining whether that mom is poor, the Census Bureau counts her income and counts any payments she gets, as I said, from welfare. But that mom with

two children making \$11,000 a year is going to get back from the Federal Government \$4,100 in refundable earned income tax credits.

Remember what I just talked about? The Census Bureau says: Oh, that doesn't matter; not real money.

That mom is going to get back \$3,400 in a check in child tax credits. That mom is going to receive \$9,200 in food stamps. That mom is going to receive \$9,500—or at least she will be eligible to receive it—in housing subsidies. That mom is going to receive \$900 in utility bill subsidies, \$16,000 in Medicaid for her and her two children, and \$31 a year for free school lunches at school for her two kids. Let's suppose that on top of that, she gets \$6,600 a year in welfare payments.

Remember, the Census Bureau says that all this stuff doesn't count. The only thing that counts is that the lady works and makes \$11,000 a year, and she gets \$6,600 in welfare payments, so her income is only \$17,600, and she is below the poverty line.

Wrong. You don't have to be Euclid to be able to figure out that if you add up the TANF money and the \$11,000 that she earns and the refundable child tax credit and the refundable earned income tax credit and the food stamps and the housing subsidies and the utility bill subsidies and the Medicaid and the free school lunches that I have just talked about—do you know what her income is? It is \$64,100 tax free. Yet the Census Bureau says she is below the poverty line.

Now, look, I am not here to begrudge this lady, this hypothetical person. I am going to say it again: The American people are the most generous people in the world. We help our neighbors. But the American people put up this money, and they ought to get credit. And when the Census Bureau, which has been telling us since 1974—they have been lying to us. They have been lying to us. They learned to lie over there before they learned to talk.

They need to redefine the poverty level in America and the definition of "poverty." It is the Census Bureau's job, and that is what I talked to the good Secretary Howard Lutnick about. I talked to him in committee, and he said he would work on it. I thank him for that, and I am going to chase him like he stole Christmas until he does. I am going to chase him like he stole Christmas and Thanksgiving. He can do it with a rule or regulation. I have introduced a bill.

Again, the purpose of this is not to take any money away from anybody; the purpose of this is to tell the American people the truth—that they are the most generous people in the world and they should be proud of that.

This mother, this poor mom of two—she is not just getting around \$17,000 a year; she is getting almost \$65,000 a year tax free, but the American people get no credit. And do you know why? Because there are so many people in the bureaucracy—they want us to

think everybody is poor so they can go back and back and back to the taxpayer.

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Secretary Lutnick, with all the respect I can muster, please fix this. Please fix this. And I am going to keep bringing it up until you do.

I will pass a bill if I can, but it is going to be kind of tough. The short way home here is to have the Secretary—I don't mean disrespect—to have the Secretary do his job.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant executive clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. KENNEDY. 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. KENNEDY. Mr. President, I ask that the scheduled rollcall begin immediately.

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

CLOTURE MOTION

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Pursuant to rule XXII, the Chair lays before the Senate the pending cloture motion, which the clerk will state.

The senior assistant executive clerk clerk read as follows:

CLOTURE MOTION

We, the undersigned Senators, in accordance with the provisions of rule XXII of the Standing Rules of the Senate, do hereby move to bring to a close debate on the nomination of Executive Calendar No. 651, Ryan McCormack, of Virginia, to be Under Secretary of Transportation for Policy.

John Thune, Katie Boyd Britt, Jim Banks, John Barrasso, John R. Curtis, Tim Scott of South Carolina, Kevin Cramer, Joni Ernst, Pete Ricketts, Bernie Moreno, Rick Scott of Florida, Markwayne Mullin, Mike Crapo, Ted Budd, Roger F. Wicker, James Lankford, Chuck Grassley.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the mandatory quorum call under rule XXII has been waived.

The question is, Is it the sense of the Senate that debate on the nomination of Ryan McCormack, of Virginia, to be Under Secretary of Transportation for Policy, shall be brought to a close?

The yeas and nays are mandatory under the rule.

The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk called the roll.

Mr. BARRASSO. The following Senators are necessarily absent: the Senator from South Carolina (Mr. GRAHAM), the Senator from West Virginia (Mr. JUSTICE), and the Senator from Kentucky (Mr. PAUL).

Further, if present and voting: the Senator from South Carolina (Mr. GRAHAM) would have voted "yea."

Mr. DURBIN. I announce that the Senator from Delaware (Mr. COONS), the Senator from New Hampshire (Ms. HASSAN), and the Senator from Rhode

Island (Mr. WHITEHOUSE) are necessarily absent.

The yeas and nays resulted—yeas 60, nays 34, as follows:

[Rollcall Vote No. 42 Leg.]

YEAS—60

Banks	Grassley	Moreno
Barrasso	Hagerty	Mullin
Blackburn	Hawley	Murkowski
Boozman	Hoeben	Ricketts
Britt	Husted	Risch
Budd	Hyde-Smith	Rosen
Cantwell	Johnson	Rounds
Capito	Kaine	Schatz
Cassidy	Kelly	Schmitt
Collins	Kennedy	Scott (FL)
Cornyn	King	Scott (SC)
Cotton	Klobuchar	Sheehy
Cramer	Lankford	Sullivan
Crapo	Lee	Thune
Cruz	Lummis	Tillis
Curtis	Marshall	Tuberville
Daines	McConnell	Warner
Ernst	McCormick	Welch
Fetterman	Moody	Wicker
Fischer	Moran	Young

NAYS—34

Alsobrooks	Hickenlooper	Sanders
Baldwin	Hirono	Schiff
Bennet	Kim	Schumer
Blumenthal	Lujan	Shaheen
Blunt Rochester	Markey	Slotkin
Booker	Merkley	Smith
Cortez Masto	Murphy	Van Hollen
Duckworth	Murray	Warnock
Durbin	Ossoff	Warren
Gallego	Padilla	Wyden
Gillibrand	Peters	
Heinrich	Reed	

NOT VOTING—6

Coons	Hassan	Paul
Graham	Justice	Whitehouse

(Mr. HAGERTY assumed the Chair.)

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. BANKS). On this vote, the yeas are 60, the nays are 34. The motion is agreed to.

The motion was agreed to.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Alaska.

CAPE FOX LAND ENTITLEMENT FINALIZATION ACT OF 2025

SLOAN CANYON CONSERVATION AND LATERAL PIPELINE ACT

Ms. MURKOWSKI. Mr. President, I come to the floor with my friend and colleague from Nevada Senator CORTEZ MASTO to seek unanimous consent to pass two noncontroversial bills as a bipartisan pair. The first is H.R. 2815. This is sponsored by Congressman BEGICH from Alaska. It is the identical companion to my Cape Fox Land Entitlement Finalization Act. And the second is H.R. 972, sponsored by Representative DINA TITUS of Nevada. It is the identical companion to Senator CORTEZ MASTO's Sloan Canyon Conservation and Lateral Pipeline Act.

These are important bills to those in Southeastern Alaska and in Nevada. It probably won't make headlines out of those two areas, but they are very significant and important bills. After more than five decades, the Cape Fox bill will finally complete the land entitlement for the Native Village of Saxman in Southeast Alaska. The Sloan Canyon bill will facilitate construction of a water pipeline in the Las