

came away feeling confident that big steps forward have taken place in the last 2½ years.

Thanks in large part to these measures, the 2018 elections went more smoothly than 2016, and as we look to 2020, it is encouraging to learn how seriously the administration is taking the threat and proactively working to counter it because we know the threat is not going anywhere. Foreign adversaries are going to keep at it, so I am glad the administration is so focused on staying strong and remaining vigilant.

Of course, as I said yesterday, the roots of the issue run deeper than our elections themselves. A foreign adversary like Russia didn't just wake up one day in 2016 and decide to interfere in the American democracy. The meddling was an outgrowth of a long pattern of weakness and naivete that permeated all 8 years of the Obama administration.

Punching back against this misbehavior, and deterring future episodes like it, has also meant taking broad steps to strengthen America's posture abroad and to get more realistic about our relationship with the Russians. Obviously, nearly 30 Russians and Russian corporations have been indicted by the Special Counsel for election meddling.

More broadly, we have a new national security strategy—an improved roadmap for our global presence that takes seriously the need to check great power competitors like Russia and China.

We are recommitting to the alliances that preserve American values around the world, reforming NATO to meet 21st century threats, and equipping our allies and partners who are on the frontlines of Russia's geopolitical prospecting. Congress and the administration have worked together to restore our Armed Forces and unwind harmful funding restrictions that cut readiness and limited our commanders. So not just our efforts on election security but, really, our entire foreign policy have made strides under the leadership of this administration.

To conclude, yesterday's briefing made it clear that our work has led to huge progress—huge progress—but the work certainly isn't over. Leaders across government are continuing to explore and repair potential vulnerabilities and increase cooperation ahead of the 2020 Presidential election. Congress will certainly continue to monitor this closely while resisting any efforts to use the failures of the past to justify sweeping federalizations of election law, as some on the other side have consistently sought to do.

Let me say that again. Congress will certainly continue to monitor this closely while resisting any efforts to use the failures of the past to justify sweeping federalizations of election law, as some on the other side have consistently sought to do.

Make no mistake, many of the proposals labeled by Democrats to be

“election security” are measures, in fact, for election reform that are part of the wish list of the left called the Democrat politician protection act.

What they do is ignore the great work this administration has done and sweep under the rug the necessary measures this Chamber has passed.

But speaking broadly, I think all Americans should remember this: What Russia really set out to do was to sow division, spark doubt, and trigger a crisis of confidence in our country that would extend far beyond the actual actions that they undertook.

So as I have said before, as we continue taking action and shoring up our defenses, it is also vital that we not fall into precisely—precisely—the trap that Putin and company have laid. It is vital that Americans not take the bait on fear and division and ultimately do Russia's work for them.

Our country is strong. American democracy is strong. Our elections are already safer and more secure, and the important work continues. Our adversaries will not let up, so we are not letting up either.

NOMINATIONS

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, on another matter, all week the Senate has continued our productivity in overcoming partisan opposition and confirming the President's well-qualified nominees for important offices.

We have confirmed the newest judge on the Ninth Circuit. Yesterday we confirmed three district judges by overwhelming bipartisan margins—78 to 15, 80 to 14, and 85 to 10. Those are the margins on three district judges. Clearly, we are not exactly talking about radioactive, controversial nominees here, not when 78 votes for confirmation is the low end.

Nevertheless, as has become typical over the past 2½ years, our Democratic colleagues insisted on cloture votes to cut off debate before we could confirm any of them. In fact, we have yet to voice-vote a single judicial nominee this entire Congress. We haven't voice-voted a single judicial nominee this entire Congress.

It is really a shame. It is not the precedent the Senate ought to be setting for these lower tier nominations. Of course, we have confirmed them nonetheless.

Before the end of this week, the Senate will have done the same for three other lower level nominees to the executive branch.

Weeks like this were impossible before my Republican colleagues and I did the right thing for the institution a few months back and moved the Senate back toward our historic norms for nominations of this sort. We argued that Senate Democrats were mindlessly obstructing even the least controversial nominees just for obstruction's sake.

Our colleagues across the aisle insisted, no, the majority would be ram-

ming through these extreme individuals and cutting off intense debate that these extreme nominees deserve. Well, who is right? Well, one more time for good measure: 78 to 15, 80 to 14, and 85 to 10. Enough said.

It is particularly ironic that some of my friends across the aisle elect to complain that the Senate is spending too much time on nominations—the Presiding Officer has heard that—spending too much time on nominations. I am not making this up. We actually hear protestations from the Democratic side that confirming these men and women is taking too long, as though it weren't totally obvious to everyone that their own unprecedented delaying tactics are the only reason these nominees have not been quickly confirmed in big batches on a voice vote.

It is quite the two-step: Democrats systematically drag their heels for 2½ years and counting and then complain we are not moving fast enough. Well, if it weren't clear by now, the tactics are not going to work. The Senate is going to press on. We are going to do our job.

Today, we will press on despite 492 days of obstruction—492 days of obstruction—and confirm Peter Wright, the President's nominee to serve as—listen to this—an Assistant Administrator at EPA. He has been waiting for 492 days.

As it happens, we will also vote on two Kentuckians—Robert King and John Pallasch. Mr. King has been nominated to serve as Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education. He comes with an impressive record of experience in higher education administration and advocacy at home in the Bluegrass State and beyond. Mr. Pallasch has been tapped for Assistant Secretary of Labor. His résumé includes service as director of the Kentucky Office of Employment and Training as well as previous service with the Department as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Mine Safety and Health.

I will be proud to support each of these well-qualified nominees as their senior Senator from Kentucky but moreover as someone who believes that the American President deserves to have his team in place and that citizens ought to be governed by the government they actually voted for.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mrs. HYDE-SMITH). Without objection, it is so ordered.

STUDENT LOAN DEBT

Mr. THUNE. Madam President, the Democratic Party's motto this year might as well be “Free Stuff”—free

healthcare, free college, free debt relief, free childcare, and free income. The problem, of course, is that the old adage “There is no such thing as a free lunch” is 100 percent true.

Healthcare has to be paid for by someone. College has to be paid for by someone. Democrats, of course, think they should all be paid for—and often controlled—by the government, but what they don’t like to talk about as much is that the government has to get its money from somewhere, and that somewhere is the American people.

If you ask Democrats how they are going to pay for all of this free stuff, what they will say is, they will tax the rich. The problem is, there simply aren’t enough people to even come close to paying for the Democrats’ free programs and expansive policy proposals.

Every year, *Forbes* magazine reports the combined net worth of the 400 richest people in the United States, but if you took every penny from every one of those people, it would be a tiny drop in the bucket next to the cost of the Democrats’ proposals.

Free healthcare alone—and these are my conservative estimates—would cost \$32 trillion over 10 years. Taking every penny from the richest people in the United States wouldn’t even cover 1 year of that proposal. In fact, you could take every penny from every billionaire in the entire world, and it would still only cover roughly 28 percent or less than 3 years of Democrats’ Medicare for All proposal.

That is just free healthcare. That is not the Green New Deal or guaranteed income or free childcare or anything else. What if we move away from billionaires? How about millionaires—even millionaires? What if we taxed every household in the United States making more than \$200,000 at a 100-percent rate for 10 years? Well, we would still barely have enough to cover free healthcare, much less Democrats’ other proposals.

Let’s look at one of the Democrats’, what I would say, relatively smaller proposals, and that is student loan forgiveness and free college. No one can deny that student loan debt is a problem in this country. Many graduates emerge with tens of thousands of dollars’ worth of debt that they struggle to repay, and it burdens them for years. It is a growing problem. Ways to alleviate this burden and encourage more affordable education are conversations we need to have, but the free college and debt elimination solutions offered by two leading Democratic Senators are no solutions at all.

The U.S. Government is not swimming in money. We are deeply in debt, and we already need to shore up existing programs, like Social Security and Medicare, both of which are on shaky financial footing.

Paying for a college education for millions of Americans is not something the government can easily afford. The

Senator from Vermont’s plan for free college and student loan forgiveness would cost approximately \$2.2 trillion over 10 years. That may not sound like much when compared to Democrats’ budget-busting plan for government-run healthcare, but it is still a lot of money.

The entire Federal budget for 2019 is less than \$5 trillion, and that is supposing the Senator from Vermont’s proposal comes in on budget, which seems unlikely. For one thing, when you offer something for free, demand for it generally increases.

The Senator from Vermont is making his estimate based on today’s numbers, but what happens when demand skyrockets? The Federal Government can be on the hook for far more than the Senator estimates, and these proposals would do anything but incentivize colleges and universities to lower the cost of tuition.

Both the Senators who have proposed free college and debt elimination plans this year have said they will pay for it. The Senator from Vermont would impose a financial transactions tax, while the Senator from Massachusetts would impose what she calls an ultramillionaire’s tax on the very wealthy, but as one *Wall Street Journal* editor highlights in a recent column, this is unlikely to cover the costs:

Financial-transaction taxes chronically underperform estimates of the revenue they’ll generate, and wealth taxes are so ineffective that even France scrapped its version in despair in 2017. Much heavier middle-class taxation is what feeds European social-welfare States.

It goes on to say: And “much heavier middle-class taxation” is likely to be the end result of Democratic proposals, like free college and student loan forgiveness.

Even leaving aside the cost, let’s talk about the merits of the Democrats’ proposals—for starters, the sheer unfairness of these plans. Let’s suppose one of these proposals becomes law. Now, suppose you are someone who has lived frugally for years, and you have just finished paying off \$30,000 in student loans. You are not going to get a penny back from the Democrats. Meanwhile, someone who has just incurred that \$30,000 in debt is going to get it completely wiped out. There is no need to live frugally or think about paying off the debt you have freely incurred; the debt will just be gone.

Then there is the fact that Democratic proposals for free college and debt forgiveness are not going to solve the education debt problem.

The director of the Education Policy Program at New America—not a conservative think tank, by the way—recently published a column in the *New York Times*, where he noted that the proposals for free public college from the Senator from Vermont and the Senator from Massachusetts would “not eliminate future student debt—not even close. That’s because most

student loan debt isn’t taken out to attend undergraduate programs at public colleges and universities. Most loans are used for private colleges, for-profit colleges, and most of all, graduate school.”

As the column points out, that is not something that free public undergraduate education will fix. In fact, the column notes: “The day after Senator SANDERS ‘hits the reset button,’ as he put it in the news conference, the national student debt odometer would begin rapidly spinning again.”

So what can be done to help those struggling with student loan debt? What can we do to help while still maintaining fiscal responsibility and preserving a respect for honoring the commitments you have made? One Democratic Senator and I have a proposal that could definitely help. The senior Senator from Virginia and I reintroduced our Employer Participation in Repayment Act earlier this year. Our legislation would amend the Educational Assistance Program to permit employers to make tax-free payments on their employees’ student loans. Right now, employers can contribute to their employees’ tuition if their employees are currently taking classes, but they can’t help employees with education debts they have already incurred. Our bill would allow them to help with employees’ already-existing student loan debt.

This would be a win-win situation. It would be a win for employees who would get help paying off their student loans, and it would be a win for employers which would have a new option for attracting and retaining talented workers. Our bill would not be a silver bullet, but it would certainly help ease the pain of paying back student loans for a number of young Americans.

I also look forward to seeing other efforts to help alleviate the burden of student loan debt in a feasible and fiscally responsible way. I know Republicans on the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee are working on legislation to make it easier to pay back student loans.

Another big thing we can do is to make sure that graduates have access to good-paying jobs. Thanks to Republican economic policies over the past 2 years, our economy is thriving, good jobs are being created, and wages are rising at the strongest pace in a decade. All of that can go a long way toward enabling people to pay off their debt, and Republicans are committed to building on the economic success that we are experiencing and expanding opportunities even further.

“Free College” makes a great bumper sticker, but it doesn’t make very good policy. We need to address the problem of student debt without weighing down the economy or hard-working Americans with massive new government spending and massive new taxes. The Employer Participation in Repayment Act is a step in the right direction, and I hope to see it receive a vote in the very near future.

I yield the floor.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING
BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Morning business is closed.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will proceed to executive session and resume consideration of the following nomination, which the clerk will report.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the nomination of Robert L. King, of Kentucky, to be Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education, Department of Education.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Mississippi.

Mr. WICKER. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent to proceed as in morning business.

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

CHINA

Mr. WICKER. Madam President, I call to the Senators' attention today a disturbing article in the June 29, 2019, issue of *The Economist*, on pages 36 and 37. It is about the military buildup in China and the way it affects the United States. It says:

Xi Jinping wants China's armed forces to be "world class" by 2050. He has done more to achieve this than any of his predecessors.

I will quote from the lead of this article in *The Economist*.

Over the past decade, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been lavished with money and arms. China's military spending rose by 83 percent in real terms between 2009 and 2018, by far the largest growth spurt in any big country. The splurge has enabled China to deploy precision missiles and anti-satellite weapons that challenge American supremacy in the western Pacific. China's leader, Xi Jinping, says his "Chinese dream" includes a "dream of a strong armed forces". That, he says, involves "modernising" the PLA by 2035 and making it "world-class"—in other words, America-beating—by mid-century. He has been making a lot of progress.

In the second column of this article, it goes on to say:

He has done more in the past three years to reform the PLA than any leader since Deng Xiaoping.

This quote is not from some advocate of defense spending but is from one of the leading publications, *The Economist*.

I say to my colleagues, we need to be mindful of the threat that is arising to the United States from around the globe—not only from China, as I have just read, but also from Vladimir Putin's Russia, from Iran, and from international terrorism. There is a deteriorating security situation in almost every sector of the globe. The fact that the United States has always been super supreme and able to defend

the free peoples of this world is being challenged. We can no longer assume that any war would never be a fair fight. That has been the goal of the United States if we have to go to war. And we want to avoid war. But the best way, in our judgment, as a national strategy down through the decades, to avoid conflict of any kind is to make sure that if America ever gets in a fight, it will not be a fair fight; it will be a fight where we have overwhelming superiority, so no one will dare challenge the sea lanes and the freedom that we stand for in the United States of America. That is being challenged today.

I would submit to you that it is a good time for the United States to point out that we passed the National Defense Authorization Act—the NDAA—on a huge bipartisan basis. It was 80-something votes to 8. It is just unbelievable, the way we came together under the leadership of Chairman INHOFE and Ranking Member REED, his Democratic counterpart, working together as professionals, as legislators, and as Americans to send a strong statement that we need to go from the \$700 billion that was spent last fiscal year to \$750 billion to give our troops the pay raise they need, to recognize the sacrifice they have made, and to give our military—the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines—the tools they need, the equipment they need, and the innovation and manufacturing they need to get us where we need to go.

We went through a 7- or 8-year period when—we ought to all be ashamed because our fingerprints are all on it, those of us who were in office at the time. The distinguished Presiding Officer was not a Member of the Senate at that time, but those of us who were, we got our fingerprints on it, Republicans and Democrats. Somehow, try though we might, say what we might, we were unable to prevent sequestration from happening—an unthinkable result. The military branches couldn't believe this was happening and couldn't believe Congress would be so irresponsible, but somehow we were.

We have righted the ship over the past 2 years. It would be unthinkable to me, my fellow Americans, after making the progress to get back on the right track and return to responsible defense spending and responsible stewardship of our national security, if somehow we heeded some voices we have been hearing in Washington, DC, and around the country during the past few days about a continuing resolution, perhaps—maybe a continuing resolution of an entire year. The thinking there is, well, we just do a continuing resolution, and that will amount to level spending, and we can live with that.

I just left a hearing on the confirmation of GEN Mark Milley as the next, I hope, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and I asked him about that. Would a continuing resolution simply

be level spending, and might we be able to live with that? And he absolutely made the point which we all know if we study the law. It is way more than level spending. It stops innovation. It stops the new starts. It stops everything that we planned in the NDAA, which we passed with an overwhelming bipartisan vote, and it makes it against the law for the shipbuilders to do anything new and for the people working on our next-generation aircraft to do anything new. It stops them in their tracks. It creates uncertainty in every branch of the military. And then we have to pay millions and billions to get back going again. It is an unthinkable result. Surely we can avoid that as Republicans and Democrats.

Let me quote now-retired Secretary Mattis. When he was asked about this very subject on a recent occasion, Secretary Mattis said this:

I cannot overstate the impact to our troops' morale from all this uncertainty. The combination of rapidly changing technology, the negative impact on military readiness resulting from the longest continuous stretch of combat in our Nation's history, and insufficient funding have created an overstretched and under-resourced military.

According to Secretary Mattis, "Under continuing resolutions, we actually lose ground."

We need a budget deal. We need a 2-year budget deal, as we have had in the past. Give our defense leaders, the Secretaries and Assistant Secretaries, as well as the ones who put on the uniform and agreed, for a career, to put themselves in harm's way—give them the certainty they need in order to defend against the threats *The Economist* talked about and the threats General Mattis talked about. Give them that certainty.

A new CR—a continuing resolution—would prevent us from having that certainty. It would delay maintenance for the *Harry S. Truman* aircraft carrier. It would prevent a guided missile frigate program we already authorized from even starting. This would happen September 30 if we go to a continuing resolution. It would cripple research and development, and it would prevent the Pentagon from aligning its funding with upcoming priorities.

We need to realize a fact of life around here. I didn't exactly get my way in the election last November. If I had my druthers, the House of Representatives would have remained in Republican hands, with a Republican Speaker and a Republican Chair. The voters, in their wisdom, decided to vote for divided government last November.

Our team was elected to continue leadership in the U.S. Senate. The Democratic team was elected to leadership in the House of Representatives. And I can assure you, if I were writing a defense appropriations bill, which is half of discretionary spending, and all of the other appropriations bills, which is so-called nondefense discretionary, it would look far different from the bill