

modernization, and that locks in—listen to this—the largest pay raise in a decade.

These bills touch every single State. Of course, there are major national and international issues at stake, as well, but the Democrats are still holding the NDAA hostage for a partisan wish list that is meant to appease trial lawyers, public sector unions, and their own far-left base. They are holding up the NDAA over unrelated, nongermane, leftwing wish-list items.

Meanwhile, the Speaker and the Democratic leader are withholding their assent from important bipartisan provisions like the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, which has previously passed both Houses and has been modified to resolve all concerns by the committees of jurisdiction. Unlike the Democratic leader's rhetoric on Syria in recent weeks, this bill would actually do something to stand up for the Syrian people and hold Assad accountable. So I hope the Democratic leader will allow this important demonstration of our support for the Syrian people to go forward.

In the meantime, as if to underscore that the Democrats' top priority is performance art for coastal elites and not the people's business, I understand the Speaker of the House spent part of this week in Madrid, talking about climate change. She took an international flight to discuss carbon emissions. So the Speaker was in Spain, lamenting President Trump's decision to pull us out of the Paris Agreement. Maybe she pitched her conference's Green New Deal—its socialist plan to hurt our economy for American families—while bigger emitters like China go roaring right by.

As an aside, over the past 15 years, the United States' carbon emissions have actually fallen significantly. We appear to be on track for another decline in 2019. Meanwhile, Paris Agreement signatories, like China and India, continue to emit more and more every year. China already emits, roughly, twice as much as the United States, and it is increasing every year.

Kentucky and many other States know exactly what happens when Washington Democrats ignore these facts and decide America needs to take on unilateral economic pain for no meaningful change in global emissions. We are still trying to recover from the Democrats' last "War on Coal." We certainly don't need the Speaker of the House to promise the Europeans that she is going to start a new one. So working Americans and their families are not well served by the Democrats' political performance art. What they really need are results.

The only path to results is bipartisan legislation, and, fortunately, it is a well-trodden one. There are 58 consecutive annual defense authorizations to prove it. Always in the past we have been able to overcome these partisan differences and go forward. There is a bipartisan-bicameral agreement that

the Speaker and the Democratic leader signed just a few months ago to help them find their way back to the table, but the agreement needs to be honored. I hope they do so sometime soon.

NOMINATIONS

Mr. MCCONNELL. Madam President, on another matter, while we wait for our Democratic colleagues to let this legislation move forward, the Senate has used the time to confirm more of President Trump's impressive nominees for the Federal courts.

Some of my friends across the aisle complain that we devote too much time to nominations. First, I would like to remind everyone that district judges are the kinds of nominations that, historically, have sailed right through the Senate in big groups by voice votes. If our Democratic colleagues want to spend less time voting on district judges, they should take it up with the Democratic leader, who is forcing us to take cloture vote after cloture vote. As of this morning, we have taken cloture votes on 81 district judge nominees.

By this point in President Obama's Presidency, we had taken one cloture vote on a district judge nominee. Let me say that again. As of this morning, we have taken cloture votes on 81 district judges. By this point in President Obama's Presidency, we had taken one cloture vote on a district judge nominee—just one.

At the comparable point in the five Presidencies preceding President Obama's, combined, we had not taken a single cloture vote on a district judge's nomination—not one. Yet, 3 years into the Trump Presidency, there have been 81 cloture votes and counting just on district judges. So there is your answer on floor time.

More broadly, I want to take a moment to help clarify why I and millions of other Americans care so much about having Federal judges who believe in the radical notion that words matter and that a judge's job is to follow the law and the Constitution.

Take, for example, the subject of religious freedom. The liberty of conscience and the freedom to live out our faiths has been a foundational principle from the Republic's earliest days. Many of the first Europeans who arrived in the New World came here after having fled religious persecution.

James Madison wrote that religion "must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man; and it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate."

Samuel Adams said in the summer of 1776 that America would be the "last asylum" for "freedom of thought and the right of private judgment."

Let me contrast the Founders' understanding with a couple of current events. Last month, New York State convinced a district judge to throw out the Trump administration's conscience protection rule for healthcare pro-

viders. This straightforward rule ensured that healthcare workers could not be forced to perform or assist with medical procedures that profoundly violated their religious beliefs. Yet the radical Democrats in New York could not abide by this basic protection for people of faith. Instead, they wanted to force Christians and other people of faith who work in healthcare to either assist in procedures like abortion or lose their jobs—so much for freedom of conscience.

New York's behavior is part of a disturbing trend. Powerful interests on the left want to shrink freedom of religion until it means freedom to go to church for an hour on Sundays as long as it doesn't impact the rest of your life. That shrunken interpretation is nothing like what our Founders intended, and, candidly, I am not sure how much longer the modern Democratic Party will even believe in that.

A few months ago, a Democrat who is running for President told CNN that the government should take away the tax-exempt status of churches and religious institutions that disagree with leftwing positions. He was not some fringe candidate. He was a guy whom the Democrats and the mainstream media had likened to John F. Kennedy. He was openly suggesting the Federal Government should punish churches if liberals don't like their social views—how appalling.

These disturbing signs have not been limited to the courts or to the Democratic campaign trail. Absurd anti-religious arguments have appeared right here in the Senate. In the last several years, some of our Democratic colleagues have tried, literally, to impose religious tests on nominees for Federal office. Just take the "no religious test" clause and the First Amendment and throw them right out the window. Get rid of them.

Judge Brian Buescher, now a district judge in Nebraska, was attacked by two Democrats on the Committee on the Judiciary for being a faithful Catholic and a member of the mainstream, worldwide Catholic group the Knights of Columbus. He was attacked for being a member of the Knights of Columbus? In written questions, one Senator called standard Catholic teachings "extreme positions" and asked if he would dial down his personal faith practice if confirmed. That happened in the Committee on the Judiciary of this Senate.

As our colleague Senator SASSE observed at the time, the Democrats were transparently implying that Brian's religious beliefs and his affiliation with his Catholic, religious, fraternal organization might make him unfit for service. It was plainly unconstitutional.

Judge Amy Coney Barrett, now a circuit judge on the Seventh Circuit, was likewise subjected to a religious test during her confirmation hearing. One Democratic Senator literally asked: Do you consider yourself an orthodox

Catholic? She was asked that in the Committee on the Judiciary.

Another offered this bizarre and ominous remark: "The dogma lives loudly within you, and that's a concern."

So, look, these warning signs on religious freedom are literally popping up everywhere the modern political left rears its head.

Religious freedom in America has never—never—meant and will never mean solely the freedom to worship privately. It has never meant and will never mean the ability to practice only a subset of faiths acceptable to some subset of politicians. What it means is the right to live your life according to the dictates of your faith and your conscience, free from government coercion.

If those statements strike anybody in this Chamber as remotely controversial, that is exactly why President Trump, Senate Republicans, and millions of Americans are focused on confirming Federal judges who will apply our Constitution as it was originally written.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

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 to resume consideration of the following nomination, which the clerk will report.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the nomination of Richard Ernest Myers II, of North Carolina, to be United States District Judge for the Eastern District of North Carolina.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from South Carolina.

FOSTERING UNDERGRADUATE TALENT BY UNLOCKING RESOURCES FOR EDUCATION ACT

Mr. SCOTT of South Carolina. Madam President, first, I thank the Democratic leader for the opportunity to move forward on this unanimous consent.

As in legislative session, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the immediate consideration of Calendar No. 212, H.R. 2486.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the bill by title.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (H.R. 2486) to reauthorize mandatory funding programs for historically Black col-

leges and universities and other minority-serving institutions.

There being no objection, the Senate proceeded to consider the bill.

Mr. SCOTT of South Carolina. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the Alexander-Murray amendment at the desk be agreed to and that the bill, as amended, be considered read a third time.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Without objection, it is so ordered.

The amendment (No. 1255), in the nature of a substitute, was agreed to, as follows:

(Purpose: In the nature of a substitute.)

(The amendment is printed in today's RECORD under "Text of Amendments.")

The amendment was ordered to be engrossed and the bill to be read a third time.

The bill was read the third time.

Mr. SCOTT of South Carolina. Madam President, I know of no further debate on the bill, as amended.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there further debate?

Hearing none, the bill having been read the third time, the question is, Shall the bill, as amended, pass?

The bill (H.R. 2486), as amended, was passed.

Mr. SCOTT of South Carolina. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Democratic leader.

Mr. SCHUMER. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senators from South Carolina, Tennessee, Washington State, and Alabama be allowed to speak for brief moments on the great job they have done and that I be given back my leadership time at 10:50.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Tennessee.

Mr. ALEXANDER. Madam President, on behalf of all of us, I want to thank the Democratic leader for his courtesy and his support on this. He and Senator MCCONNELL have made it possible for us to do this.

I am going to limit my remarks to a couple of minutes, and then Senator MURRAY and then Senator SCOTT, Senator COONS, Senator JONES are here, and we will finish by 10:50.

Madam President, it is hard to think of a piece of legislation that would have a more lasting impact upon minority students in America than the bill that the Senate just passed.

I believe, in doing so, we have improved the provision in the House bill that was sent to us. That is what we did; we amended a House bill that we are now sending back to them. We have been working with leaders in the House to make sure that our bill is something

the House can accept and pass. We hope that will happen in the next couple of weeks, and here is the result of it happening: No. 1, a big step for historically Black colleges and minority institutions—permanent funding at the level of \$255 million a year for those institutions that serve up to 2 million minority students. That is No. 1.

The second big step is one that Senator MURRAY and I and our committee, Senator JONES, Senator BENNET, Senator KING, and many others have been working on for 5 years to simplify the form that students use to apply for Federal aid for college. Twenty million families fill out what is called the FAFSA, a Federal aid form, every year; then we have students who borrow more than \$100 billion a year. What we have done in this bill is reduce the complexity of filing that FAFSA form by saying to students: You don't have to give your Federal tax information to the government twice. We will take the up to 22 questions that are a part of the 108-question FAFSA, and we will eliminate them, and if the student gives his or her express consent, the Internal Revenue Service will answer those questions for the student.

I can't tell you how many times students, parents, college presidents, Federal aid counselors have told me that the application and the verification of this information has discouraged low-income students from coming to college.

Five and one-half million of the twenty million students who fill out these forms have the accuracy of those forms questioned. This will eliminate that for most of the students because they will have to give that information to the government only once.

I want to thank Senator MURRAY especially for her work on this. We work together on the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee in the Senate, but Senator COONS, Senator SCOTT, Senator RICHARD BURR of North Carolina—which has the largest number of historically Black colleges—and Senator JONES of Alabama have also been crucial with their support.

I yield the floor to Senator MURRAY.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Washington.

Mrs. MURRAY. Madam President, HBCUs, Tribal colleges, and other minority-serving institutions—or MSIs—are an essential part of our entire higher education system, and those institutions serve nearly 6 million undergraduate students, a large majority of whom are students of color or Native students.

Funding for those critical institutions should never be up for debate, and now, because of this, it will not be. I am so glad we have reached a bipartisan deal that will permanently fund HBCUs and MSIs.

I know many of our colleagues worked very hard on this, but I especially want to thank Senator JONES for his leadership in pushing to make sure this got done, as well as my partner