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Senate

The Senate met at 9:30 a.m. and was called to order by the Honorable MARK L. PRYOR, a Senator from the State of Arkansas.

PRAYER

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

Let us pray.

Eternal God, the giver of blessings, thank You for Your many gifts. We praise You for the gift of strength for the present duties we must do and for the doors of opportunity You continue to open. We are grateful for the gift of courage to face the future unafraid and to trust You to direct our steps. Lord, we are thankful also for our lawmakers who strive to build a better Nation and world. Bless and keep them. Keep them from being blind to their own faults and from a critical spirit that looks for faults in others. Help them to see and count Your blessings until their lives overflow with ceaseless praise.

We pray in Your great Name. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The Honorable MARK L. PRYOR led the Pledge of Allegiance, as follows:

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

APPOINTMENT OF ACTING PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will please read a communication to the Senate from the President pro tempore (Mr. BYRD).

The legislative clerk read the following letter:

U.S. SENATE,
PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE,
Washington, DC, March 26, 2009.

To the Senate:

Under the provisions of rule I, paragraph 3, of the Standing Rules of the Senate, I hereby appoint the Honorable MARK L. PRYOR, a

Senator from the State of Arkansas, to perform the duties of the Chair.

ROBERT C. BYRD,
President pro tempore.

Mr. PRYOR thereupon assumed the chair as Acting President pro tempore.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The majority leader is recognized.

THE CHAPLAIN

Mr. REID. Mr. President, while the admiral, the Senate Chaplain, is on the floor, I wish to take a minute and acknowledge the prayers he offers here every morning. I have the good fortune to be here almost every day, and the thought and preparation he puts into his prayers is meaningful to most all the Senators; I don't know if there is an exception to that. Often, these prayers are directed, it seems, to me; I guess that is what prayers are all about.

I appreciate very much his leadership and the hard work he does not only with individual Senators but with our staffs. He has been a comfort to so many different individuals who work in this huge Capitol complex with their personal tragedies and difficulties. Most of those don't take place as the prayer does in the Capitol before millions of people. They are very private matters. We recognize that, and word comes back to me and others about all the good he does.

SCHEDULE

Mr. REID. Mr. President, following leader remarks, the Senate will be in a period of morning business for an hour, and Senators will be allowed to speak for up to 10 minutes each during that period of time. The Republicans will control the first 30 minutes. The last

half hour will be controlled by the Democrats.

Following morning business, the Senate will resume consideration of the national service legislation.

Cloture was filed last night on the underlying bill. As a result, there is a 1 p.m. filing deadline today for first-degree amendments.

Today will be a very confusing day on the floor. We have the Budget Committee meeting. There will be a series of votes starting at noon and then at 3:30 this afternoon. Those could take a considerable period of time. In addition, there is a White House meeting that I believe is a bipartisan meeting; is that right? Is the Senator going to the White House today?

Mr. MCCONNELL. I am not sure I am going to be able to go.

Mr. REID. But it is a bipartisan meeting.

Mr. MCCONNELL. Yes.

Mr. REID. The President will brief the bipartisan group of Senators on what is going on in Afghanistan. It is a report that has been completed. I mention that because that takes place at 1 p.m. today. There will be a lot of difficulty in scheduling votes here today.

In addition, there is a 4 p.m. Senators-only briefing with Ambassador Richard Holbrooke to talk about Afghanistan and Pakistan. We are going to try our best to finish this bill, so everyone be patient. I have had extended conversations with Senator HATCH. It is very doubtful whether we will have to try to invoke cloture on this. I think people have had opportunities to offer amendments.

If there are other amendments to be offered today, I hope Senators will do it quickly so we can schedule the debate and votes on those. We have had a good week on this important, truly bipartisan piece of legislation, with heavy bipartisan support.

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



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RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Republican leader is recognized.

PUBLIC FINANCING OF CAMPAIGNS

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, at the moment, I think it is safe to say that the most important issue for the American people is the state of the economy and the massive amount of taxing, spending, and borrowing that some in Washington are proposing as an antidote to the downturn.

Yet now comes news of another proposal out of Washington that is sure to make most Americans join together in unison and exclaim, "Only in Washington."

Earlier this week, the Washington Post reported on the return of a uniquely bad idea. I am referring to bailouts for politicians or what some people politely refer to as public financing of campaigns.

In recent years, this horrible idea has been championed by some who later abandoned this very system during their own campaigns. Well, it is hard to defend a system that is rejected even by its strongest advocates. It is harder still to justify handouts for politicians at a time of soaring deficits, a shrinking economy, and massive job losses.

At a time when most Americans are outraged that tax dollars have been used to pay million-dollar bonuses to executives at failed financial firms, it's hard to convince anyone that taxpayer dollars should cover the cost of balloons, bunting, and campaign barbecues.

But don't take it from me—every year, Americans register their opposition to the idea of taxpayer-funded campaigns in the largest nationwide poll ever devised. On April 15, Americans are asked on their tax forms whether they support taxpayer-funded elections. The question is clear and straightforward: Do we want our money to go to soldiers and schools or streamers and stump speeches? Well, more than 90 percent of us vote for the former—and the percentage only seems to get higher every year. In 1980, the percentage of Americans who agreed to divert their tax money from the Treasury to pay for political campaigns reached its high water mark at 28.7 percent. Since then, it's plummeted. In 2007, the last year for which figures are readily available, 8.3 percent of taxpayers thought taxpayer funded elections were a good idea.

America faces many challenges at the moment, and the American taxpayer is justifiably worried about the prospect of what too much spending, too much taxing, and too much borrowing will mean for the future of our country and for our children. Congress should heed the advice of nearly all Americans: Don't use our tax dollars to pay for your political campaigns. Tax-

payer-funded campaigns are a bad idea at any time, according to 90 percent of Americans. They are a really bad idea in the middle of a recession.

I yield the floor.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

MORNING BUSINESS

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the Senate will proceed to a period of morning business for up to 1 hour, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each, with the time equally divided and controlled between the two leaders or their designees, with the Republicans controlling the first half and the majority controlling the final half.

The Senator from Tennessee is recognized.

THE BUDGET

Mr. ALEXANDER. Mr. President, I understand the Senator from North Dakota, the chairman of the Budget Committee, may come to the floor. If he does and wants to speak, I will defer to him.

In the meantime, I will address the President's budget, which the Senate will begin to consider this morning at 10 o'clock. Those of us who have spent a lot of time around schools, children, and education know there is a very good way to get a picture of the future and that is to walk into a first-grade class in Arkansas, Tennessee or anywhere else in America and take a photograph of the first graders. If you do that, you have a picture of that town, that neighborhood, that community, and our country 10, 15, 20 years out.

The President's budget plan for the next 10 years gives us that kind of photograph of the future of our country. I commend the President for his candor, but I don't like the picture I see. I think, increasingly, our friends around the world and people in this country feel the same way. The Budget Committee chairman, Senator CONRAD, has developed a different budget—somewhat different. He says it is about 98 percent similar to the President's budget. What the chairman, Senator CONRAD, does is say let's look 5 years out, not 10 years, as the President has suggested. Senator CONRAD has moved a few "children" out of the picture—the alternative minimum tax "child" is over here during the class photograph, so we will not be seeing that person. I think the "doc fix" to avoid cuts in physician payments, which we are going to spend money on, is over here, so we will not see that "child" during the class picture. The money for the banks—I think we all hope Secretary Geithner's plan to begin to get

toxic assets out of the banks will work. If it doesn't, we may have to go to plan B, and we should have the money in reserve if that is necessary. That "child" is also out of the class photograph.

With all respect, the attempt of the chairman of the committee to present a 5-year budget, leaving out items that we know we will be spending money on, doesn't come nearly as close to giving us an accurate picture of what the country would be like 10 years from now with the budget we are acting upon.

The President's photograph of the future is a more accurate picture, one we should pay attention to. But it is a blueprint for America that is a very different kind of America—an America with less freedom, with more Government, with more taxes, with more spending, with more borrowing, and an America that our children and our grandchildren will have difficulty affording. This blueprint that President Obama has laid out for us includes a trillion dollars more in spending for health care on top of the trillion dollars in so-called stimulus money that was spent. It includes more than a trillion dollars in taxes, including a national sales tax on energy in the middle of a recession. It would double the debt in 5 years and nearly triple the national debt in 10 years.

There is nothing in the President's budget that would seriously get to work on something he said he wants to work on, which is out-of-control entitlement spending, which accounts for more than 60 percent of the spending in this budget.

It is important for the American people to know this budget that we begin working on at 10 a.m. this morning is a budget of which 60 percent is out of Congress' hands. It is on automatic pilot. It is spending for Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and it is going up—everyone agrees—at an unsustainable rate, which means we cannot earn enough money to pay at that rate 10, 15, 20 years out; and there is nothing in the budget that would begin to take charge of that problem, such as the commission that Senator GREGG and Senator CONRAD have proposed; whereby, we would, as a Congress, come up with a plan and present the plan for controlling entitlement spending, and we would vote it up or down—much in the same way that we deal with the difficult problem of closing defense bases.

This 10-year picture of America's future is causing concern around the world. In China, where the savings rate is as high as 50 percent, compared to ours of about 1 percent—although it is up temporarily in the recession to about 5 percent. In China, a country that buys many of our dollars, leaders there express extraordinary concern about the value of the dollar and whether they should continue to buy our dollars.

Of course, if people overseas do not find buying our dollar as attractive,