

borders, and weakness on the world stage.

Then, of course, the American people will witness historic contrast. They will hear our colleague Senator BRITT tell her story and offer a very different assessment of this moment in American history, one that embraces what makes our Nation great. I am glad for the Nation to hear directly from the youngest Republican woman ever elected to the Senate and one of our conferences brightest stars.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. 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 President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.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 (Mr. Lujan). Without objection, it is so ordered.

The Republican whip.

NATIONAL SECURITY

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, tonight President Biden will come to Congress to deliver his State of the Union Address. It is a natural time to look at a President's legacy. And if one thing is certain, it is that the Biden Presidency hasn't done much for the state of our union.

Yesterday, I came down to the floor to talk about the national security crisis we are facing at our southern border. It is a crisis we have been facing almost since the day the President took office.

The President marked his inauguration by taking measures that weakened our Nation's border security, including halting construction of the border wall, rescinding the declaration of a national emergency at our southern border, and pausing deportations except under certain conditions. The effect was to declare to the world that the U.S. borders were effectively open, and the number of migrant encounters at our southern border ticked up accordingly.

And the surge has never stopped. President Biden has presided over 3 recordbreaking years of illegal immigration at our southern border. And if we continue on our current track, he will likely be presiding over a fourth. The first 4 months of fiscal year 2024 saw nearly 1 million migrant encounters at our southern border—1 million in just 4 months. These kinds of numbers not only represent a logistical and humanitarian crisis, they represent a gaping hole in our national security.

There is no question that the kind of numbers we are seeing smooth the way for dangerous individuals to enter our country. Last year, 169 individuals on the Terrorist Watchlist were apprehended attempting to cross our southern border, and we are on track to exceed that number this year.

And those numbers only reflect individuals who were actually apprehended. With around 1.8 million known "got-aways" since President Biden took office and an untold number of

unknown "got-aways," I think we can safely assume that there are plenty of dangerous people making their way into our country without being stopped.

And President Biden's border crisis is not the only way in which he has jeopardized our national security. His disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan weakened our standing with our allies, and his failure to prioritize ensuring our military is equipped to meet and defeat current and future threats sends a dangerous signal to bad actors around the world.

Then, of course, there is the fact that the President is setting us up for a future energy crisis that will jeopardize our Nation's security by jeopardizing our energy security, not to mention jeopardizing American's pocketbooks. The President's hostility to conventional energy production and his determination to push us into a Green New Deal regime that our current energy system simply cannot cope with is setting us up for long-term instability in our Nation's energy supply.

That threatens our national security, which depends on stable access to energy; and it threatens America's financial security as an unstable supply will almost unquestionably result in higher prices. The steep rise in energy prices so far under the Biden administration could look small compared to the energy prices Americans could see under the Green New Deal regime President Biden envisions for the future.

Speaking of higher prices, perhaps the defining feature of the Biden administration is the inflation crisis the President helped create when he signed the so-called American Rescue Plan Act and flooded the economy with unnecessary government spending. Three years in, inflation is still well above the Federal Reserve's target rate.

Americans continue to suffer. Today, it costs the typical family \$1,000 more per month to maintain the standard of living it had when President Biden took office—\$1,000 more per month, just to tread water.

Grocery prices are up 21 percent under President Biden, and the cost of food now takes up a larger share of Americans' disposable income than it has at any point in more than 30 years.

Then there is the 31 percent increase in energy costs, as I alluded to earlier, the 19 percent increase in housing costs, the 27 percent increase in the cost of car repairs, and the list goes on.

The President likes to talk about giving American families breathing room. Well, President Biden has eliminated the breathing room for a lot of American families. Along with higher prices—much higher prices—on everything from groceries to gas, Americans are also dealing with the high interest rates the Federal Reserve has had to impose to deal with President Biden's inflation crisis.

Those interest rates have helped to drive up mortgage rates and credit card rates, compounding hardship for a lot of Americans.

It is no wonder that, in a recent poll, just one in three voters said the economy was on the right track, or that 57 percent of respondents in another recent poll rated the economy as "fairly bad" or "very bad." Sixty-six percent of respondents in that same poll said that things in America are going "somewhat" or "very" badly.

The inflation crisis, the national security crisis at our southern border, and the potential energy crisis—it is no wonder that Americans aren't feeling very optimistic about the state of our Nation. It would be nice if the President spoke to their concerns tonight, but I expect that his speech tonight will involve more blame shifting than solutions to the crises that he has helped create, along with, of course, a host of election-year handouts designed to attract voters. If Americans are looking for relief, they are not going to find it from President Biden in his speech tonight on the state of the Union.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Texas.

I-27 NUMBERING ACT OF 2023

Mr. CRUZ. Mr. President, I rise today to pass the I-27 Numbering Act, bipartisan legislation to officially designate the route between Laredo, TX, and Raton, NM, as the future Interstate 27.

I will say I am particularly gratified that the Senator from New Mexico is presiding because this is legislation that he and I offered together. It is bipartisan legislation that is supported by the State of Texas and the State of New Mexico.

This bill is the next step to advance major highway infrastructure in Texas and New Mexico that will support trade and commerce and jobs and economic development.

What is so important about a future interstate number?

By officially designating the highways between Laredo and Raton as future Interstate 27, this bill is a clear signal to the communities and businesses across Texas and New Mexico that Congress supports their work to develop the current highways to become part of the Interstate System.

Communities across this route need better infrastructure because of the increasing demands to move goods and people. Last year, Mexico was the top U.S. trade partner, with \$798 billion of trade between our nations. That is higher than the trade with our second and third biggest trading partners, Canada and China.

Even better, the port of entry in Laredo, TX, was the top trade gateway in the United States, outperforming the Port of Los Angeles—Laredo, TX. This is fantastic news for Texas. It means more jobs and economic development in Texas to move those goods. It is also part of a broader trend of a flourishing freight business in Texas.

Last year, I was proud to pass bipartisan, bicameral legislation to streamline the Presidential permit application process for bridges across the Rio Grande River in South Texas—four bridges: two in Laredo, one in Brownsville, one in Eagle Pass. And two of them are along the future I-27 route, the World Trade Bridge in Laredo, currently with 8 lanes—the proposal is to expand that to 18 lanes—and the Puerto Verde Bridge in Maverick County.

Passing the I-27 Numbering Act would support the increased trade we are expecting to come across those new bridges and those new lanes of traffic.

We have received letters of support for the I-27 Numbering Act from the Texas and New Mexico Departments of Transportation, the agencies tasked with building infrastructure along this route. We also have strong support from the Ports-to-Plains Alliance, which has worked so hard to bring the ports-to-plains route to reality. We have strong support from cities up and down the future Interstate 27.

Notably, the Texas Department of Transportation is working to improve infrastructure all along the future I-27. TxDOT currently has \$5.5 billion in active projects along the route related to planning, engineering, and construction, including \$481 million from the Texas Transportation Commission to upgrade parts of the route to a four-lane divided highway.

I want to thank Senator LUJÁN, who is presiding right now; Senator CORNYN, my colleague from Texas; and Senator HEINRICH, your colleague from New Mexico, for working hand in hand with me on this bill. It is notable that all four Senators representing Texas and New Mexico are standing in unison with this bill because it is good for Texas, it is good for New Mexico, and it is good for the country.

There should be no objection to this bill. The Senate previously passed this bill unanimously in July of last year. It then passed the House, which made some very small technical changes in December of last year. And there were no substantive changes to the bill, which means there should be no objections here now. The Senate should pass the I-27 Numbering Act today.

Before I proceed, I want to yield to my colleague from Texas, Senator CORNYN.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Texas.

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, I want to thank Senator CRUZ for his leadership on this legislation, which I am, of course, proud to cosponsor. We represent a booming State. We represent in excess of 30 million people, and because of geopolitical shifts of manufacturing from China back to near shore or places like Mexico, thanks to the USMCA—the U.S.-Mexico-Canada trade agreement—we are mutually dependent with Mexico and Canada for trade, which creates millions of jobs right here in America, and principally in Texas.

The first time I went to Lubbock, TX, when I ran for statewide office, a former Congressman, Randy Neugebauer, before he was a Member of Congress, said: There are three things you need to remember about Lubbock, TX: cotton, Texas Tech University, and ports to plains. It was that important back then, and it is even more important today.

So the ports-to-plains system, as Senator CRUZ pointed out, is a 963-mile transportation corridor. And building on the success we had in passing a bill to designate the Ports-to-Plains Corridor in Texas and New Mexico as an interstate, this I-27 Numbering Act does exactly that.

I look forward to seeing the Ports-to-Plains Corridor fuel more trade, more jobs, more energy security, and agricultural production for years to come.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Texas.

Mr. CRUZ. Mr. President, as if in legislative session, I ask the Chair to lay before the Senate the message to accompany S. 992.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Chair lays before the Senate the following message from the House, which the clerk will report.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

Resolved, That the bill from the Senate (S. 992) entitled “An Act to amend the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 to designate the Texas and New Mexico portions of the future Interstate-designated segments of the Port-to-Plains Corridor as Interstate Route 27, and for other purposes.”, do pass with an amendment.

MOTION TO CONCUR

Mr. CRUZ. I move to concur in the House amendment, and I ask unanimous consent that the motion be agreed to and that the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. CRUZ. I yield the floor.

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR—Continued

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Texas.

TEXAS WILDFIRES

Mr. CRUZ. Mr. President, on Monday of this week, I visited the towns of Fritch and Borger in the Panhandle of Texas.

Fritch is a town of roughly 1,800 residents. They are no strangers to hard times. In 1992, a tornado a mile wide ripped through the town and destroyed over 1,300 homes. Ten years ago, in 2014, a wildfire in Fritch destroyed over 100 homes. In the past week and a half, Fritch and the rest of the Texas Panhandle, and the Oklahoma Panhandle as well, have been dealing with devastating wildfires.

When I was there on Monday, 242 homes had been lost. I met with local officials, county judges, mayors, the police chiefs, fire chiefs, volunteers at churches, and charities. I met with

families who have been devastated and lost everything.

I saw homes that had been burned beyond recognition. At one home I saw, outside was parked a truck that had been utterly burned and charred. The heat was so intense that the windshield glass had melted, and there were just pools of glass on the hood. I also saw, in front of a house, a motorcycle—I think it was a Harley—that had been utterly incinerated. The tires were burned and gone. I saw a boat—I think it was a bass boat, a fishing boat—again, utterly incinerated, nothing but fiberglass just melted on the ground.

One of the officials I met with was Volunteer Fire Chief Zeb Smith. I met with Chief Smith on Monday. Less than 24 hours after, Chief Smith passed away fighting that wildfire, running into a home that was on fire, trying to stop the blaze. He had been fighting fires for 9 days straight when he entered that home first thing Tuesday morning.

On Monday, I asked Chief Smith: Have any firefighters been injured yet? He said: “Thankfully, no.”

Neither he nor I knew when we were having that conversation that, 24 hours later, he would be first, and he would give his life to save his community.

These wildfires have been raging for a week and a half, and they devastated communities like Fritch all the way from Lake Meredith to Canadian. One of the fires, the Smokehouse Creek fire, is the largest wildfire in Texas history and the second largest in our Nation’s history. The scar from these fires can be seen from space, and they currently cover more acreage than the entire State of Rhode Island.

These fires have had a devastating impact on farmers and ranchers in Texas. More than 500 structures have been lost, and 10,000 miles’ worth of barbed wire has been destroyed. It is still unclear exactly how many cattle have perished, but we know it is thousands upon thousands of cattle that have been taken by the fire.

I texted a good friend of mine who lives in Canadian. I told her I was thinking of her and just asked how she was doing and how she was doing with the fires. I didn’t expect her response.

She responded: Well, not too well. My home burned down, so did my barn, and I lost half my cattle.

But then she responded: Do you know what? I am actually feeling pretty lucky because the ranchers on both sides of me lost all their cattle.

I have to say I prayed for my friend. I prayed for all the men and women in the panhandle. But that response also embodies the frontier spirit. These are tough Texans.

The destruction we are seeing is enormous. Throughout all of this, to date, there have been only three deaths attributed to the wildfires. That is extraordinary given the magnitude of this disaster as there could easily have been scores and scores of deaths. That is a testament to the firefighters and