

OPINION

LETTERS POLICY

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Reid misses opportunity

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid blew it. He had the votes for serious filibuster reform in the palm of his hand, and he chickened out.

Reid feared a day ahead when Democrats are no longer the majority party in the Senate. But his legacy will be that he abandoned desperately needed reform and chose more gridlock instead.

Every four years, following a presidential election, the Senate can review and revise its rules. Filibuster rules have strayed far from the tactic's purpose and now allow the minority party to block not only votes but even debate on issues of the day. Whether Democrats or Republicans are in the majority, that's just wrong.

Reid concocted a compromise with Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell that includes some limits on filibuster use, but it appears to put a lot of control in the hands of the minority and majority leaders, a plan ripe for abuse. In brief, the Senate will be able to avoid a filibuster if the majority leader, the minority leader and seven senators from each party agree.

But once the deal is sealed, what incentive does McConnell have to cooperate? By his own admission,

he spent the last four years doing everything possible to block President Barack Obama from succeeding. And soon enough, the next presidential election will loom, giving GOP leaders an incentive to throw government back into gridlock and make Democrats look bad, regardless of what it does to the country.

Reid said Wednesday that he had the 51 votes to pass a "talking filibuster" rule, which would have required a senator to continuously hold the floor if he or she wants to hold up legislation. This is the filibuster famously depicted by Jimmy Stewart in "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington."

When the talking filibuster was in effect, it was rarely used. But McConnell and his Republican cohorts used today's "filibuster lite" rules - pretty much just lodging an objection - to block more than 130 bills in recent sessions. Often they prevented even discussing an issue.

The Senate should indeed be the more deliberative body of Congress. The problem, as Reid well knows, is that the current filibuster rules prevent deliberation of some of the most pressing issues. If gridlock returns in the next four years, it will be on his head as well as Republicans'.

OTHER VIEW | PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

Find out why military suicides have risen

More American soldiers took their own lives last year than were killed in combat in Afghanistan.

That startling statistic should intensify efforts to explain why so many suicides are occurring in the military. Even as that answer is being sought, the situation begs for more mental health counselors and efforts to encourage potentially suicidal soldiers to seek help.

Recently obtained figures show there were 349 suicides in 2012 among active-duty troops, up from 301 the previous year. It was the highest number since the Pentagon began closely tracking suicides in 2001, and exceeded the Pentagon's projection of 325. According to the Associated Press, 295 Americans died in Afghanistan last year.

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta has called the suicides an epidemic. It's good that the military recognizes the depth of the problem. Now the Pentagon must find out how to address a situation that could get worse as the war winds down and soldiers prepare for a return to civilian life.

American soldiers have been under tremendous stress from repeated and extended tours of duty for more than a decade in Iraq

and Afghanistan. Some have problems related to the families and jobs they left at home, as well as legal and financial issues.

Among active-duty troops, the Army had the most suicides last year, 182. After a decline for two years, the Marine Corps had the largest percentage increase - a 50 percent jump to 48 suicides. The Marines' worst year was 2009, when they had 52 suicides.

The Air Force had 59 suicides last year, up 16 percent; and the Navy had 60, up 15 percent from the previous year. All of the branches' numbers are preliminary; some cases could change pending pathology reports.

Even though civilians commit suicide at a higher rate, the military numbers are troubling. The alarming trend began in 2006 and reached a then-record 310 suicides in 2009. The rate leveled off for two years, but spiked in 2012.

Some soldiers may be experiencing anxiety over the prospect of leaving the military and returning home to an uncertain future. The demands on them and their families can be overwhelming. This country owes its military men and women an answer to why so many are committing suicide before it's too late.

POLITICS | SEN. TOM O'MARA

Staying the course for upstate

When Gov. Andrew Cuomo, first unveiled his plan for 10 regional economic development councils back in 2011, his first year in office, it led one long-time western New York reporter back into the archives to recall when he covered a previous governor who tried something similar back in his first year in office in 1984.

"If all that sounds familiar," the reporter wrote referring to the present-day Gov. Cuomo, "it's probably because the governor's father, former Gov. Mario Cuomo, made that same announcement 27 years ago."

That's right, a regionally targeted approach to economic development especially targeted to upstate, has been tried in various ways by most governors throughout the past generation.

But not like this. All that was then, this is now, and while the upstate New York economy has largely been a story of steady decline over the past 30 years (at best, in some places, a story of highs and lows, starts and stops), and while governor after governor since Gov. Mario Cuomo has pledged to turn around upstate's future and fortunes, hopefully this current effort takes a permanent hold. So I'll say again what I've said repeatedly for the past two years: We need to stay this course for upstate.

Now it's Year No. 3 and Gov. Andrew Cuomo's recently released 2013-14 state budget proposal stays focused on Upstate in several ways, including plans for:

■ Innovation Hotspots and Tech Transfer, which



TOM O'MARA

the administration pegs as a "multi-faceted plan to foster the commercialization of innovative ideas from our academic institutions" via the designation of 10 "high-tech innovation incubators at locations affiliated with higher education institutions to encourage private-sector growth".

■ A new Innovation Venture Capital Fund to provide incentives for the creation of new businesses and to facilitate the critical transition from "ideas and research to marketable products".

■ The NY Works Economic Development Fund for capital grants "that support job creation and retention and fund investments that facilitate business expansion and the attraction of new businesses".

■ The Next Generation Job Linkage Program to distribute performance grants to encourage community colleges to place students in high-demand jobs.

■ Market NY, a largely Upstate-oriented effort to boost the promotion of growing upstate agriculture- and tourism-related industries like Greek yogurt, craft brewing, and distilling, as well as anchors like the wine-and-grape industry.

■ A 3rd round of funding to support the work of the 10 Regional Economic Development Councils created in 2011.

On this last point, the

regional councils, including those covering the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes, have directed dollars-and-cents investments to key economic development projects and infrastructure improvements. But equally important is that they've established the public-private partnerships and the sense of collective achievement that promises long-term commitment and energy.

Take a look at the comprehensive blueprints each of the councils have advanced, which you can find on www.regionalcouncils.ny.gov, and you'll read strategies that summon the resources of the public sector, the private sector, higher education, manufacturers, small business owners, researchers, innovators and so many others. You'll find plans that pinpoint our strengths and recognize the importance of addressing issues from agriculture to transportation, broadband development to telemedicine, energy to workforce training, and so much more in between.

You'll find, above all, testaments to staying the course for upstate.

As a result, we all keep on winning because this ongoing effort in an of itself can only keep producing positive results. It means that on a regional basis we keep meeting, working, fine tuning, sharing resources, developing ideas, rallying support and moving forward. The bottom line of this effort is that it promises to keep regional leaders focused and cooperating on the creativity, vision and nuts-and-bolts planning that produces jobs and creates stronger economies built for the long run.

There's a powerful

argument being made that that's exactly the point: this unprecedented (in many regions) cooperation and desire to succeed is worth more than anything money could buy. Ten distinct routes have been mapped, each one pointing toward a revitalized economy, growing communities, exciting opportunities, a better business climate and more opportunities for workers.

But we can and should be even bolder. Last year, for example, I co-sponsored a "New Jobs-NY" plan. Among numerous provisions, New Jobs-NY called for an unprecedented phase-out of the state corporate franchise tax and personal income tax paid by manufacturers; providing small businesses with a significant corporate tax rate cut; a Hire Now-NY tax credit for each new job a business creates; and a Hire-A-Vet tax credit for any business hiring a returning veteran. It was bold, and we're going to push for its approval again this year. I think it's especially important to target a manufacturing resurgence as the foundation of future private-sector upstate job growth and economic security for upstate communities and workers.

So we've taken important steps over the past two years to stay the course for upstate. Still, we've seen too many similar efforts go up in smoke too many times before. This time, the commitment can't lose steam.

State Sen. Tom O'Mara, R-Big Flats, represents New York's 58th Senate District, which includes Steuben, Chemung, Schuyler and Yates counties, and part of Tompkins County.

ANOTHER VIEW



OTHER VIEW | KANSAS CITY STAR

Important step toward equality

People in politics often speak of "an idea whose time has come," and so it was with the Pentagon decision this week to lift the 1994 Defense Department restriction on women in direct combat.

The rule had already slid into obsolescence somewhat in Iraq and Afghanistan, where zones of combat and zones of safety could not be clearly delineated. Women in jobs such as military police

found themselves embroiled in fights just as any infantry unit. In those wars, more than 20,000 women served, with 130 killed in action and an additional 800 wounded.

The impetus for the change came from within the military itself. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta lifted the ban after a letter from the Joint Chiefs of Staff concluded that "the time had come to rescind the direct combat exclusion role for women."

The change won't automatically open up all military jobs for women. Rather, it shifts the presumption and expands opportunities for women to advance their military careers.

Panetta said each service branch would decide which jobs should be closed to women and provide support for that decision. Jobs will be considered open, not closed, unless otherwise designated.

The Army and Marine Corps might still argue that women shouldn't be part of some rifle companies or special operations teams. Maintaining combat effectiveness must remain the overriding priority.

About 75 percent of military jobs are already open to women, and the change has generally been handled well. The latest move represents another important step toward fairness and equality.