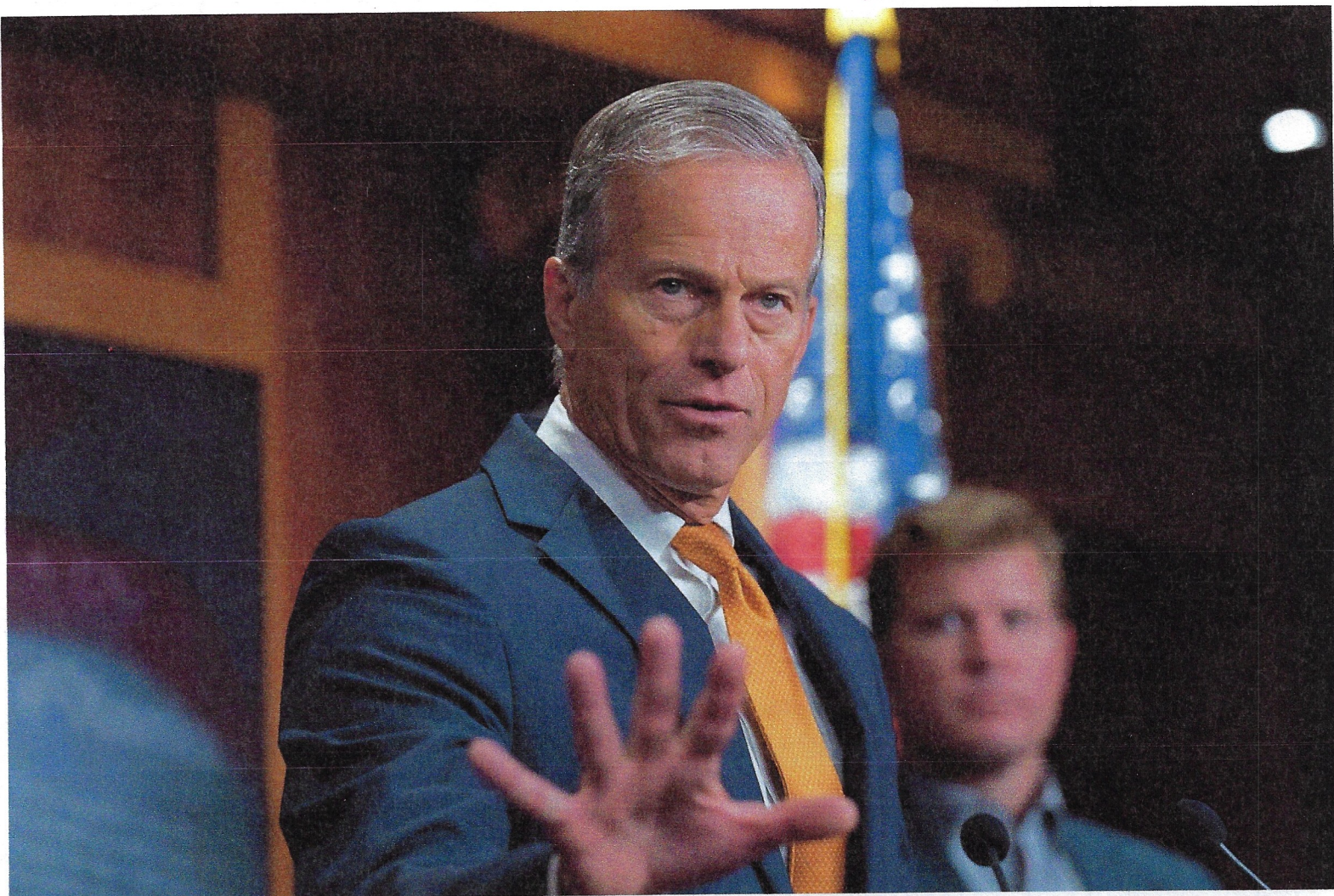


## Thune to Dems: Change demands



Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., speaks during a news conference on Capitol Hill in Washington on Sept. 19.  
JOSE LUIS MAGANA — THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BY MARY CLARE JALONICK

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON>> Senate Majority Leader John Thune is rejecting Democratic demands on health care as unserious but says a government shutdown is still “avoidable” despite sharp divisions before Wednesday’s funding deadline.

“I’m a big believer that there’s always a way out,” the South Dakota Republican said in an interview with The Associated Press on Thursday. “And I think there are off-ramps here, but I don’t think that the negotiating position, at least at the moment, that the Democrats are trying to exert here is going to get you there.”

Thune said Democrats are going to have to “dial back” their demands, which include immediately extending health insurance subsidies and reversing the health care policies in the massive tax bill that Republicans passed over the summer. Absent that, Thune said, “we’re probably plunging forward toward the shutdown.”

It’s just the latest standoff in Washington over government funding, stretching back through several administrations. President Donald Trump was the driving force behind the longest shutdown ever during his first term, as he sought money for a U.S.-

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Mexico border wall. This time it is Democrats who are making demands as they face intense pressure from their core supporters to stand up to the Republican president and his policies.

Democrats have shown little signs of relenting, just before spending runs out Wednesday. Their position remained the same even after the White House Office of Management and Budget on Wednesday released a memo that said agencies should consider a "reduction in force" for many federal programs if the government closes — meaning thousands of federal workers could be laid off permanently.

Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer of New York said the OMB memo was simply an "attempt at intimidation" and predicted the "unnecessary firings will either be overturned in court or the administration will end up hiring the workers back."

Thune stopped short of criticizing the White House threat of mass layoffs, saying the situation remains "a hypothetical." Still, he said no one should be surprised by the memo as "everyone knows Russ Vought," the head of the Office of Management and Budget, and his longtime advocacy for slashing government.

"But it's all avoidable," Thune said. "And so if they don't want to go down that path, there's a way to avoid going down that path."

One way to avoid a shutdown, Thune said, would be for enough Democrats to vote with Republicans for a stripped-down "clean" bill to keep the government open for the next seven weeks while negotiations on spending continue. That's how Republicans avoided a shutdown in March, when Schumer and several other Democrats decided at the last minute to vote with Republicans.

A seven-week funding bill already has passed the House.

"What would eight Democrats be willing to support?" Thune asked. "In terms of a path forward, or at least understanding what that path forward looks like."

Republicans in the 100-member Senate need at least seven Democrats to vote with them to get the 60 votes necessary for a short-term funding package, and they may lose up to two of their own — Republican Sens. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Rand Paul of Kentucky both opposed it in preliminary votes last week. A competing bill from Democrats also fell well short of 60 votes.

Thune suggested some individual bipartisan bills to fund parts of the government for the next year could be part of a compromise, "but that requires cooperation from both sides," he said.

Democrats say they are frustrated that Thune hasn't approached them to negotiate and that Trump abruptly canceled a meeting with Schumer and House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries of New York that had been scheduled for this week.

Thune said he "did have a conversation with the president" and offered his opinion on the meeting, which he declined to disclose.

By Monday, when the Senate returns to session, lawmakers will have slightly more than 24 hours to avoid federal closures.