

multinational debating societies; I mean the hard power of America's military alliances and partnerships. The strength of these alliances rests on the credibility of the commitments we make to our friends.

The second lesson is peace through strength. Those who wish us harm speak the language of power, and we have to be able to speak it as well. In other words, our deterrent capabilities here have to be as credible to our adversaries as our commitments are to our allies.

Congress's most fundamental constitutional obligation is to provide for the common defense. That is why I urged the Senate so forcefully to pass a national security supplemental and why I believe passing full-year defense appropriations is absolutely critical.

When America is strongest, Congress provides sufficient funding to preserve America's military primacy. And our adversaries and allies alike actually trust that the Commander in Chief is prepared to use force decisively.

The last lesson is the importance of clear strategy. Even the most capable force—the most formidable hard power—is only as effective as the strategy it serves. Understanding our interests is a prerequisite to actually advancing our interests.

The challenges we face today test whether and how well America understands these lessons. The threats to our personnel, our interests, and our allies in the Middle East are particularly illustrative.

Since October 7, America's closest ally in that region has been engaged in a serious fight to rescue its people and restore its security against Iran-backed terror. As I said repeatedly since that day, we owe it to Israel—a fellow democracy under assault by savage terrorists—to provide the time, the space, and the support necessary for them to destroy the threat posed by Hamas.

To prioritize a cease-fire at all costs is to actually ignore that the terrorists exploited precisely such a cease-fire to slaughter innocent Israelis on October 7. To blame Israel for conducting operations to free hostages and kill terrorists in hospitals and schools is to excuse Hamas for violating laws of war and exploiting civilians by militarizing such civilian infrastructure in the first place.

As negotiators work on further hostage releases, it is critical that Israel operates from a position of strength backed by a rock-solid ally whose policies are driven by our Nation's interests, not influenced by one party's perceived political interest.

I hope that President Biden will demonstrate enough political courage to stand up to those in his party who want him to tie Israel's hands or put his own hands on the scales of Israel's domestic politics.

Meanwhile, the chief architect of chaos in the Middle East—the world's most active state sponsor of ter-

rorism—speaks the language of power. Plain and simple, America has to invest in rebuilding our arsenal, but we also have to show Iran that we are not afraid to actually use it. Flattening a few warehouses in response to hundreds of Iran-backed attacks on U.S. personnel in Iraq and Syria, frankly, is not a meaningful exercise of strength. Nor is wasting expensive precision weapons to intercept expendable drones launched by Iran's expendable proxies.

The commander of the U.S. task force contending with Houthi terrorism in the Red Sea acknowledged recently that even though his forces were succeeding tactically, the Houthis and their Iranian patrons were simply not deterred. Frankly, tactical proficiency and hitting Houthi targets with F-35s and Tomahawk missiles should be a low bar of the world's most advanced military. It is also beside the point.

In reality, unless these tactics are nested in an effective strategy to change an adversary's calculus to sufficiently degrade his ability to threaten our interest, it doesn't matter how tactically proficient our efforts are.

So this isn't a matter of dense, academic theories of international relations. The questions we need to ask ourselves are really quite basic: Are we being reliable allies to our friends? Do we credibly strike fear into the hearts of our enemies? Are our tactics aligned with a coherent strategy? If not, what are we doing here?

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. LUJÁN). The Republican whip.

#### TRIBUTE TO MITCH MCCONNELL

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, yesterday, we learned that Leader MCCONNELL, the longest serving party leader in Senate history, will be stepping down from his leadership role next January. There will be time later for a fuller discussion of all his contributions to our party and to this institution, but for today, I just want to express my gratitude for his service.

Had he done nothing else, his successful efforts to build up the judiciary with judges who are committed to the rule of law and to the Constitution would secure his place in the history books.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to serve with him.

#### ECONOMY

Mr. President, 3 years ago around this time, the Senate was considering Democrats' so-called American Rescue Plan Act. With a \$1.9 trillion pricetag, this reckless spending bill was packed with liberal priorities and progressive giveaways.

Before it even passed, Democrats were warned that it was too big. They were warned even by liberal economists that that kind of spending risked setting off an inflation crisis, but they chose to go ahead anyway. Inflation almost immediately—immediately—began accelerating, and 3 years later, we are still dealing with the crisis the Democrats helped create.

In the last 3 years, inflation reached levels not seen since the early 1980s.

While inflation may have descended from those stratospheric heights, we are still—and I say "still"—stuck with an inflation rate well above the Federal Reserve's target rate of 2 percent.

Three years of persistent price hikes have taken a serious toll on Americans' budgets. Working families have had to scrimp and save to stretch their dollars. Many Americans have had to turn to their credit cards to cope with higher and higher costs. Families have had to cut back on saving and investing for the future.

Today, it costs a 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. And it is no wonder. Energy costs are up 31.7 percent. Housing costs are up 19.4 percent. Car repairs are up 27.5 percent. And the list goes on.

Where inflation has really hit many Americans is at the grocery store. Grocery prices are up 21 percent under President Biden. 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.

Faced with higher prices, shoppers have had to adjust. Families are opting for cheaper alternatives. They are putting items back on the shelves, and they are hunting for deals at multiple stores. Tighter budgets have become a fact of life in the Biden economy.

As I said, many Americans have had to turn to credit cards to cope with higher prices, and with the Federal Reserve having to keep interest rates elevated to fight inflation, paying off that debt has gotten harder.

High interest rates have also put the American dream of owning your own home increasingly out of reach. The average mortgage rate has more than doubled since the President took office.

The Biden inflation crisis has made life harder for a lot of people. It is harder to save. It is harder to get ahead, harder to make ends meet. Yet President Biden still tries to claim his economic policies are working, that the economy somehow is doing well.

Well, Americans disagree. A January poll found that 63 percent of Americans believe economic conditions are getting worse. Another poll found that 54 percent of voters rate their personal economic situation as fair or poor, and 7 out of 10 voters in the same poll also said they expect that higher prices are here to stay.

For the last 3 years, the White House has attempted to disclaim responsibility for the inflation crisis that has done so much to harm family budgets. Despite economists agreeing that the President's reckless spending led to higher inflation, the White House has taken every opportunity to pin the blame somewhere else.

The latest strategy? Complaining about "shrinkflation," which refers to instances where goods have gotten smaller but the price has stayed the same.

The President even released a video on Super Bowl Sunday lambasting snack companies for shrinking their packaging and “ripping off” consumers. It is a tactic that fits well with the President’s previous attempts to blame price gouging for higher prices, but these arguments are political spin and not serious explanations.

Jason Furman, an economist who served in the Obama administration, previously “described the focus on price gouging as a distraction from the real causes and solutions” of inflation, to quote one article where he was quoted. And the New York Times referred to the President’s focus on shrinkflation as “a blame-shifting message.”

I expect we will get more blame shifting from President Biden in the State of Union Address next week, as well as more of the same reckless spending proposals that helped create the crisis in the first place. Meanwhile, the American people will continue to suffer.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Massachusetts.

#### ISRAEL

Ms. WARREN. Mr. President, I rise today in pursuit of peace in the Middle East. After nearly 5 months of war in Gaza, the human suffering must end. Just today, Americans woke up to the news that Israeli troops had opened fire on Palestinians desperate for humanitarian aid, killing dozens and adding to the more than 30,000 people in Gaza who have been killed during this conflict.

Hamas’s October 7 terrorist attack on Israel took more than a thousand lives. Israel, like every nation, has the right to defend itself and the right to prevent another terrorist attack like this one from ever occurring again.

Other rights are important as well. The people who live in the Middle East deserve a lasting peace and deserve to live their lives with dignity and self-determination.

For decades, the United States Government has supported a two-state solution to guarantee those rights for both Israelis and Palestinians—two states for two people. For years, I have spoken out against the diminishing prospects for a two-state solution. For years, Palestinians have been poorly served by their leaders, both in the West Bank and in Gaza. For years, even before October 7, Hamas’s governance of Gaza was a major impediment to peace. And also for years, I have believed that Israel’s long-term strategic interests were endangered by Prime Minister Netanyahu’s leadership.

Since October 7, it has only gotten worse. Prime Minister Netanyahu and his rightwing war cabinet have created a massive humanitarian disaster, pushing the region even further away from a two-state solution. Indiscriminate bombings in Gaza have killed tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians, wiping out entire families and leaving

thousands of children orphaned. Nearly 2 million people have been displaced, and 45 percent of the residential buildings in Gaza have been destroyed. The Israeli Government’s refusal to allow adequate humanitarian aid into Gaza has left hundreds of thousands of people on the brink of starvation.

And still, more than 100 hostages are held by Hamas. The Israeli Government’s top priority should have been to bring those hostages home, but, instead, Prime Minister Netanyahu focused on revenge. He publicly invoked the plight of hostages to justify indiscriminate bombing that thwarts the negotiations that would bring them home. This is a betrayal of the families whose loved ones are still held hostage by Hamas.

Netanyahu’s opposition to a two-state solution is fierce and longstanding. For decades, he has undercut Palestinian independence. He has deliberately propped up Hamas to try to keep the Palestinian people divided. He approved Qatar’s payments to Hamas—payments that may have been used for Hamas’s military operations. He expanded settlements in the West Bank, turning the region into a patchwork of disconnected parts that undermine Palestinian hopes for a united homeland.

The result has been a vicious cycle of violence. That is why, for years, I have advocated that U.S. military aid should help Israel and Palestine move toward peace, not subsidize policies that move peace further out of reach.

Today, Netanyahu is doubling down on his opposition to peace. The Prime Minister has openly and directly rejected U.S. policy. He has promised he will not compromise and he will hold fast to his rejection of a Palestinian State.

Under his leadership, the Knesset has backed him to the hilt. The Prime Minister has also tried to pressure Egypt and other countries in the region to accept Gazan war refugees, raising the specter that his government is working toward permanently expelling Palestinians from their homes. He has insisted that Israel and Israel alone must control the entire area of the Jordan River, leaving no room for a Palestinian State.

And the fallout from his bombing campaigns is not limited to Gaza. He has given cover for Hezbollah, the Houthis, and other terrorist groups to expand the conflict.

The bottom line is clear: Netanyahu’s leadership in this war has been a moral and strategic failure that is in direct opposition to American policy and American values.

Netanyahu cannot bomb his way to the return of the hostages. Netanyahu cannot bomb his way to security in the region. Netanyahu cannot bomb his way to peace.

The only path to protect Israel’s long-term security and to ensure that Palestinians have equal rights, equal freedom, and the self-determination they deserve is a two-state solution—two states for two peoples.

This has been the stated policy of the U.S. Government dating back decades, and if this far-right Israeli Government does not share that goal, then it is our responsibility to make clear that the Netanyahu government does not get a blank check for U.S. aid.

That is why I have been fighting to condition aid to Israel and protect civilians in Gaza. Over the last few months, I have called for Israel to prevent harm to civilians and for accountability when U.S. weapons are used to target refugee camps and safe zones. I have challenged the administration’s decision to bypass Congress in approving arms transfers to Israel. I have worked with my colleagues, led by Senator VAN HOLLEN, on an amendment to condition aid to Israel.

Earlier this month, President Biden delivered a critical step, issuing a national security memorandum that makes clear that any country that receives aid from the United States must follow international law, including Israel. This is a good policy, but enforcement is crucial. Oversight of its implementation is necessary to ensure that it is a meaningful step and not just lip service.

Netanyahu has made clear he plans to launch a military offensive in Rafah, where more than a million Palestinians with nowhere safe to go are currently taking refuge. The administration has warned that expanding operations to Rafah would be a “disaster” that the U.S. Government does not support.

Meanwhile, humanitarian aid remains strangled and hunger and disease are sweeping Gaza.

Netanyahu is on dangerous ground. Every day that he continues, more innocent civilians in Gaza suffer and are killed, and thousands more Americans say “enough” and call on our government to end U.S. aid for such actions.

President Biden has indicated that we are on the verge of a cease-fire that would free the hostages and would allow desperately needed humanitarian aid in. I hope that is true, and it is a meaningful step toward an enduring peace.

But until then, the United States has a responsibility to ensure that our weapons aren’t used to target innocent children and families in Gaza. We also have a responsibility to ensure that our support is used to advance long-term peace and stability in the region.

We recognize that it takes two parties to negotiate a meaningful peace, and we should also urge the allies of the Palestinians to do the same. All nations should push in the same direction: Condition aid, return the hostages, resume the cease-fire, and advance peace through a two-state solution.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Hawaii.

Mr. SCHATZ. Mr. President, before I begin my remarks, in the Hawaii Legislature, there was a common custom to ask the presiding officer that the previous speaker’s remarks were adopted