

that what President Trump is worried about is drug trafficking because if drug trafficking is bad, it is not only bad at the southern border; it is bad when somebody sets up an online drug trafficking market generating \$200 million in revenue from illicit drugs and leading to overdose deaths of individuals.

This is an action that is water under the bridge. There is nothing that can be done about it now. But if the only thing that can be done is to put it on the public record so that people can be aware that less than 24 hours after this emergency declaration, this drug trafficker was pardoned, I feel like that is an important thing that needs to be made visible to the American public.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Vermont.

ISRAEL

Mr. WELCH. Mr. President, like all of us, I was enormously relieved by the announcement of a ceasefire in Gaza, the gradual release of hostages, and a surge in humanitarian aid for the 2 million desperate Palestinians who are trapped inside Gaza.

Despite the daunting challenges ahead and the many factors that could derail negotiations to implement stage 2 of the agreement, I am cautiously hopeful that this could be the beginning of the end of a war that has traumatized millions of Palestinians and Israelis for more than 16 months.

There will come a time for the accounting of the conduct of the war, which has caused such appalling loss of Palestinian and Israeli lives, including tens of thousands of children, of health workers, aid workers, and journalists, and massive destruction of property, including practically every hospital and every school and university in Gaza. These things must not be forgotten, and that means investigating and holding people accountable under the laws of war.

But today I want to speak briefly on an issue that is key to the lasting peace between Palestinians and Israelis that we seek, and that is the creation of a viable, secure, independent, and demilitarized Palestinian state.

The war in Gaza was triggered, of course, by the merciless slaughter on October 7, 2023, of 1,200 innocent Israelis, Americans, and others and the abduction of some 250 hostages, many of whom have died. But, as we all know, the Middle East conflict began many decades earlier and some would say centuries ago. Ethnic hatred and religious intolerance passed down from one generation to the next have fueled seemingly endless violence perpetrated by extremists on both sides, and it has created a chronic state of insecurity for Israelis and insecurity, humiliation, poverty, and hopelessness for Palestinians.

In the West Bank, Israel's ever-expanding settlement construction, in violation of U.N. resolutions and contrary to U.S. policy, has created a

patchwork of separate and unequal enclaves and illegal outposts, provoking frequent acts of deadly violence by Israeli settlers and also by Palestinian extremists.

Gaza, with the overt support of the Netanyahu government, became an open-air prison for 2 million impoverished Palestinians dependent on international aid and under the ruthless control of Hamas.

Throughout this period, the wealthy Arab states have called for a Palestinian state, but they have expended minimal political capital or resources in furtherance of that goal—a lot of talk, very little action.

Successive Palestinian leaders have squandered opportunities to make necessary political and economic reforms, while Mr. Netanyahu has worked to create conditions on the ground that would actually make a Palestinian state impossible.

Despite this grim reality—and it is a grim reality—the attention focused on the remarkable life of President Jimmy Carter after his death on December 29 reminded us that even in the most difficult circumstances, peace is possible between longstanding enemies. It happened. But that possibility depends on the quality of the leadership.

If there were ever a time when the leaders of Israel, the Palestinian Authority, their Arab neighbors, and the United States should put the interests of regional peace and economic cooperation and development—including an independent Palestinian state—over personal and political ambition, it is now. It is now.

Gaza is in ruins. Hamas and Hezbollah, still a threat, pose less of a threat than at any time in recent history, and the horrific Assad regime is gone. Iran is also weaker. Most Israelis, Palestinians, Lebanese, and Syrians want peace. But given the absence of visionary and courageous leaders in Israel and the Palestinian Authority, the possibility that a path to a Palestinian state will emerge really does depend on the Trump administration using its diplomatic influence far more forcefully and effectively than previous U.S. administrations, including the first Trump administration, were willing to do. We have got to act.

And it will require the same of Congress, which in the past has restricted itself to enacting tighter and tighter sanctions on the Palestinians, causing increasing desperation and resentment for innocent Palestinians, while at the same time, opposing any incentives on Israel to stop settlement construction and settler violence.

There are those who believe that because of Israel's construction of settlements, walls, fences, separate highways, factories, and farms in the West Bank, that the West Bank and Gaza can never be reconfigured into a viable Palestinian State. And having seen a current map of the West Bank, I can certainly understand that.

But others reject the very idea of a Palestinian State as incompatible with

Israel's security, without proposing any alternative that would preserve Israel as a democracy in which all its citizens, regardless of ethnicity or religion, have equal rights. Given Hamas's horrific attack on October 7, I can also easily understand that.

Then, on January 25, President Trump called for the "cleaning out" of Gaza, suggesting that a million and a half Palestinians should be resettled in Jordan and Egypt. And, you know, seriously, there are just so many things wrong and unrealistic with that reprehensible and unworkable idea, that it barely deserves a response beyond the predictable and immediate repudiation by all those who would be impacted. It is not serious.

But to me, as elusive as it may seem, there really is no solution that offers lasting peace and continued U.S. support other than two independent states: Israel and Palestine, side by side.

The Palestinian State will only be possible if both sides are pressured to make the difficult compromises both sides have so far refused to make. And only the United States and our heretofore reluctant Arab allies can exert the kind of pressure that is necessary to bring people to an agreement.

There have been far too many missed opportunities and disappointments since the Oslo and Camp David Accords, and far too much needless death and destruction resulting from the unchecked ambitions of leaders motivated by their worst instincts.

And history will judge us, whether we seize this moment to finally chart a different course—a course that does enable Israelis and Palestinians to finally accept that there is no turning back the clock, that both are here to stay, and that as many Palestinian and Israeli neighbors have shown throughout the years of conflict and loss, they have far more in common than their differences.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The senior Senator from Maryland.

TRUMP EXECUTIVE ORDERS

Mr. VAN HOLLEN. Mr. President, I think that Americans following what is happening over the last 48 hours recognize that we are seeing a great deal of chaos and turmoil around the country, and it is having a harmful impact across communities, across my State of Maryland, across the country.

On Monday night, the Trump administration issued an order to all Federal Agencies to freeze the disbursement of Federal funds until there was a review period, with the threat that much of those funds would be withheld. And what that did was trigger a lot of understandable panic across the country.

In my office, we heard from firefighters in many different parts of our State. These are firefighters who receive grants to help purchase equipment that they need to run into burning buildings to help save people in emergency circumstances and to hire more staff.

We have heard from people who work in Head Start programs to try to make sure that kids get an early help and lift up in life. We heard from folks in law enforcement, including people who were involved in preventing human trafficking and sex trafficking of minors. We heard from small businesses worried about their grants. We heard from people in all different walks of life and different communities who were very worried that the important Federal initiatives that they rely on to help provide support for people in their communities were being turned off.

And I want to make something crystal clear: This was avoidable. This did not happen by accident.

I did see comments by the President's deputy policy director, Steve Miller, saying: This was a very clear directive, and there has been a lot of fake news about it.

I would just urge people to take a look at that directive. It is extremely broad, and it is very ambiguous. And it was very foreseeable that Federal Agencies would essentially put an immediate halt to funds going to everybody from firefighters to those who are fighting sex trafficking.

So how did this happen? It happened because this is an administration—this Trump administration—that believes that it has the power to cherry-pick the law, to decide what parts of the laws that have been duly enacted by this Congress they like and want to implement and which ones they want to reject.

That is an unconstitutional power grab—pure and simple—because under article I, the Congress has the power of the purse, and when we pass a law, including an appropriations bill, to provide funding for important national and local priorities, and that is signed into law, that becomes the law of the land.

And Presidents can't treat that like it is an "a la carte" menu. They can't say: Well, I am going to implement this priority because I like that one, and I am going to reject this provision of the law because I don't like it. That is not how it works.

The Framers created checks and balances in our system to prevent Presidents from acting like Kings and ignoring laws that they don't like and only implementing the ones that they do.

This all came to a head many, many decades ago, when President Nixon exercised what was called the line item veto.

So Congress passes legislation, the product of back and forth and negotiation and compromise, signed by the President of the United States. That makes it law. That is the law of the land.

So what President Nixon said was: Well, I am going to sign this, but there are certain provisions here that I don't like. I don't want to be spending any money on Head Start, for example, or I don't want to spend money on law enforcement and police, for example. And

so I am going to veto those provisions, but I am going to accept the rest of the law, even though Congress passed all of it in totality.

And the Supreme Court said: You can't do that. Presidents are not Kings. They don't have the power to selectively implement parts of the law they like and reject the others.

And then Congress passed what is known as the Impoundment Control Act. This is legislation that says Presidents cannot impound. In other words, they can't withdraw or put aside funds that have been duly enacted by Congress, just because they don't like the purposes for which Congress passed those provisions.

But this President and this administration believe that the Impoundment Control Act doesn't apply to them. And we don't have to guess at this question. All we have to do is look at the testimony of somebody called Russ Vought.

So who is Russ Vought? Russ Vought is President Trump's nominee to head the Office of Management and Budget.

What is the Office of Management and Budget? It is an office within the White House that directs the budget control over all the other Federal Agencies. They are like the central command center for all of the other Agencies, whether it is Health and Human Services or EPA. Whatever Federal Agency it is, they all feed their budget requests up to the Office of Management and Budget in the Executive Office of the President. And Russ Vought was nominated to head that position.

In fact, tomorrow, in the Senate Budget Committee, we will have a vote on Russ Vought. We had his hearing a little while ago. At that hearing, I asked him point-blank, as did Senator MURRAY, whether he and the Trump administration would comply with the Impoundment Control Act. You have to look at the videotape. He refused to confirm that he would apply the law. He wouldn't say yes. In fact, what he said was that President Trump has issues with the Impoundment Control Act; he doesn't think it is constitutional. So he refused to commit to applying the law here. He said that they may want to change that.

The obvious answer is: OK, President Trump, if you want to change the Impoundment Control Act, let's seek an amendment to it. It will go through the congressional process, and you can try to amend the law. But for now, the law is as it is written, and you can't ignore it. Yet Russ Vought said: We refuse to commit to comply to this thing.

We have actually seen this movie before in the first Trump administration because Russ Vought was in charge of OMB for part of that first Trump term. People may recall that we had quite a discussion when President Trump, in his first term, wanted to withhold military assistance from Ukraine, even though Congress—the House and the Senate—had passed that into law and

it had been signed into law. But President Trump just decided he didn't want to implement that policy, so they withheld funds.

I wrote to the GAO—that is Congress's watchdog—and I asked them a very simple question. I asked them whether this withholding of military assistance to Ukraine constituted an illegal withholding. In other words, could President Trump hold onto and not disburse those funds that had been enacted by Congress to help the people of Ukraine? GAO looked into it, and they sent me back a letter, crystal clear, that the Trump administration had violated the Impoundment Control Act and Russ Vought, as the head of OMB at the time, violated the Impoundment Control Act.

Now we are here today. Russ Vought is up again, nominated to be in charge of OMB. At the hearing the other day, as I said, he refused to commit to complying with the Impoundment Control Act. That is what we are seeing here in this freeze on the funds and the claim that they can look at these and decide: Congress may have passed this, it may have been signed into law, but we are not going to disburse them because we disagree with the purposes.

You can't do that.

Now, the President is going to submit the President's budget to Congress, and we will have an opportunity to look at his proposals, and we will act on it. But the President can't take a law that has already been put into effect and decide: I am only going to help the people I want and not the other people that I don't want to help.

The real concern just—what—10 days into this administration is this is part and parcel of a much larger effort and strategy. I can tell you for certain this is not about making the Federal Government more efficient. If my colleagues on the other side of the aisle want to sit down and seriously find ways to make the Federal Government more efficient, I am all in.

But that is not what this DOGE committee headed by Elon Musk is all about, at least none of the early indications suggest that is what it is about. And the reason we know that is because one of the main initiatives being taken on by this new administration is something called Schedule F.

Schedule F, that is sort of an innocuous-sounding thing. What could that mean? Schedule F is a concerted effort to throw out the merit-based civil service structure that we have in this country, the merit-based system where people are hired based on their qualifications and their experience and their knowledge, and replace it with a political cronyism-based system.

I want to pause here for a moment just to make sure everybody understands the way things work now. Obviously, when you have a new President elected, the President can bring in lots of new people. We are debating right now advice and consent on some Cabinet officials. The President also can

hire the top echelon of people in Agencies across the Federal Government. In fact, there are about 4,000 political appointees today, people that the President puts into these positions. That is fine.

But what Schedule F would do and what President Trump and his nominee to be head of OMB want to do is to take about 50,000 to 60,000 additional Federal positions and convert them from merit-based systems to political cronyism systems.

So instead of being hired on the merits instead of being hired based on your qualifications and your experience and what you know, they want you to be hired based on who you know—a political test. And you can see, if you place about 50,000 to 60,000 political cronies across the Federal Government in these positions, you can get them to overlook the law, like the Impoundment Control Act; you can get them to overlook the Constitution. And I dare say, the American people don't want political hacks to be the people who are doing food safety inspections or are responsible for the air traffic control system or, really, any other part of our government where we rely on experience and qualifications, not a political test.

So this is a really important moment because the Trump administration is claiming this power, not only to violate the Impoundment Control Act and withhold funds from whatever they don't like and reward those who do, but they want to create a whole structure within the Federal Government to replace these merit-based civil servants with political cronies.

And what is another thing you would do if you were President to try to make sure you knocked down all the provisions we have for accountability? Hey, you would fire all the inspectors general. What are inspectors general? They are people in various Federal Departments whose job it is to root out fraud, waste, and abuse. Their job is to make sure that people in these Agencies don't ignore the law, don't waste taxpayer money. Yet President Trump fired the inspectors general in these Agencies. In other words, he fired the people who are supposed to provide accountability to protect the public against waste, fraud, and abuse.

So don't tell me you are for more government efficiency when you are firing the people whose job it is to keep a look out for fraud, waste, and abuse. What is really happening is you are firing the people who would be responsible for calling out any wrongdoing by these 60,000 additional political cronies that the President wants to put in place in these Departments to do his bidding.

I would hope colleagues on both sides of the aisle would see that this is really fraught with danger because when you open the door to this kind of political cronyism, you also open the door to corruption. And when you get rid of the inspectors general, that means more

people think that they can get away with that kind of corruption.

Schedule F is not the only ongoing effort, apparently, the President has to get rid of merit-based Federal employees. They just sent out this note within the last couple of days offering "early retirement to Federal employees." I think the idea is if you agree to retire in the next couple of weeks that you can continue to get your paycheck through September or something without working.

I have no idea if that is even legal.

What we do know is the memo that was sent out to these Federal employees was remarkably similar to something that Elon Musk sent out to employees in his company at one point. In fact, the title of the memo, "Fork in the Road," was exactly what was on Elon Musk's memo. And, in fact, apparently, Elon Musk is bringing in some computer systems and other things to the executive office buildings over there at the White House.

I would caution Federal employees that we don't even know if this is legal, and don't count on you getting the benefit of whatever bargain the President is, apparently, promising you because what this really is is an effort just to clear out more people from the merit-based system to create vacancies to bring in political cronies. That is what this is all about.

You implement a hiring freeze, which is what they have done. Then you get current Federal employees to retire early through something that could end up being a scam. I don't know. And then you implement Schedule F and bring in 50,000 to 60,000 people.

This is a really important consequential moment for all of us who care about a merit-based civil service.

And by the way, we have had a merit-based system since the late 1800s. We adopted this merit-based system after President James Garfield was assassinated by a disappointed job seeker—someone who had worked on his campaign and didn't get a job. At that point, the American people said: This spoil system where people are getting jobs just based on who they know, not what they know, this isn't delivering quality services for the American people. So they passed the Pendleton Act. What is happening now is a direct attack on that merit-based civil service.

What is the ultimate goal here? The ultimate goal is for President Trump to put in place these political loyalists who will do his bidding.

Bidding for who? In the last campaign, I think, many people who supported Candidate Trump believed that he was there to look out for working people, to look out for the forgotten Americans. That was sort of what he said on the campaign. But on Inauguration Day, just down the hall here a little bit, I think we got a better idea of exactly who it was and who it is that President Trump is looking out for, because he gave a speech talking about the "new golden age" for America. And

the people who had the best seats in the House, better than his Cabinet nominees, were the billionaire tech titans—Elon Musk and others. They were right there, right behind the President.

We also know that one of the President's major goals is to put in place another big tax cut. Tax cut for who? A tax cut for the very wealthiest people in the country who will get a disproportionate share of any proposed tax cuts. We can expect to see that in round 2 because we saw that in Trump administration round 1. And big tax breaks for corporations who promised they would use the proceeds, by the way, to expand plant and equipment, to raise wages of their employees—that is not what happened. They used the extra money for stock buybacks that benefited very wealthy stockholders disproportionately. And the CEOs got bonuses. We didn't see wages for other employees.

So it is not just that the tax plan will benefit the very wealthy; it is that it will do that at the expense of working Americans.

Just take a peek at some of the proposals that are being put forward in the House Budget Committee by Republican leaders on that committee. They are going after very important programs that benefit the American people, whether in healthcare or nutrition. We will have to see when it finally comes out of there, but we know that most of the cuts they are proposing are going to be harmful to working Americans, to the people Candidate Trump claimed he wanted to help.

So this is a moment when everybody needs to focus very clearly on what their expectations were because it is shaping up to be a great betrayal. It is shaping up to be a situation where this new administration wants to get rid of merit-based civil servants, bring in a lot of political cronies, and then implement these huge tax cuts for very wealthy Americans and the biggest corporations at the expense of everybody else in America. I don't think that is what the people bargained for in this last election.

So I come to the floor today because we are seeing the Trump administration put in place some of these pieces that would be necessary in achieving these big tax breaks and benefits to the very wealthy. Whenever a President decides that he gets to cherry-pick the law and just provide resources to his political benefactors and ignore the rest of the law, that is a big danger signal. When the nominee to be the head of OMB refuses to commit to following the law, that is a big danger signal.

So I would just ask all of our colleagues to do our jobs as Members of Congress in the article I branch and make sure that we don't see this flagrant attack on the Constitution be successful.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. WARNER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. JUSTICE). Without objection, it is so ordered.

TRUMP EXECUTIVE ORDERS

Mr. WARNER. Mr. President, it is good to see you sitting up there.

As a recent former Governor—I say that as a former Governor myself—I won't ask you what you are hearing in West Virginia, but I have to tell you, I rise to the floor today amongst a huge amount of confusion.

Two days ago, the Trump administration, without warning to any States, to any Governors, without warning to Congress, late at night, put out an order freezing all Federal spending for 90 days.

Earlier today, less than 48 hours later, that order was formally rescinded. But hold it. The good news—entirely good news—lasted about 30 minutes, 45 minutes, because 45 minutes later, the Press Secretary in the White House says: No, the freeze will actually stay in place and be rigorously enforced.

So—I don't know—as a Governor, which one do you follow? Because, as the Presiding Officer knows, an awful lot of our State programs are actually Federal dollars passing through our capitals into these programs. So I ask, which one is it?

Unfortunately, I am not the only one asking the question, and I have an awful lot of stressed Virginians to prove it.

In Virginia, as in West Virginia or any other State, Federal funding supports countless programs that serve kids, seniors, community infrastructure, and a whole lot more. Yesterday alone, my office was literally flooded with outreach from organizations and local governments.

I heard from firefighters from Southwest Virginia. They are worried they won't be able to replace their tanker truck with Federal funding that was supposed to be coming pretty soon.

I heard from an affordable housing organization in Northern Virginia that if they go 90 days without Federal dollars, they might have to shut down their organization. People would have to find different jobs. That organization—you can't turn on or off the flow of these resources.

I heard from law enforcement in the Shenandoah Valley and from the greater Richmond area that a lot of these localities depend on Federal dollars to pay police officers. If they don't have those funds for the next 90 days, this will take cops off the street.

I heard from a number—not just one but a number—of domestic violence shelters across the Commonwealth that without this funding, because they don't have huge reserves, they will have to leave women and children without housing support.

Listen to this one. We have a little town called West Point, VA. It was an old mill town. They have a very good Head Start Program. Head Start gets funded by the Federal Government. Their Head Start funding runs out on Friday, January 31. They had been told—they can't get any answer—that their next round of funding was in process and there would be no break in the action. What do the Head Start moms and dads who have kids in that program in West Point, VA, do starting next Monday?

Senator KAINE and I probably had 8 to 10 Head Start Programs here. As a matter of fact, there is a gag order put in place right now so that people can't talk about these things inside the administration, and the Head Start directors were trying to call their contact, kind of their resource person, and they got no response.

So whether you care about meals for low-income seniors, whether you care about Head Start for vulnerable kids, whether you care about teens who need that mental health support oftentimes coming from Federal dollars, that all is up in the air at this point. What do we tell these folks?

Many of these folks voted for President Trump because they thought he was going to bring grocery prices down.

Like the Presiding Officer, I have not only been a Governor, but I was a business guy. I can claim still that I was in business longer than in politics. This is not the way you run an operation. The truth is, this is unbelievable. I was so proud when I was Governor of Virginia. We got named the best managed State. This is management malpractice 101.

The most important enterprise in the world is the American Government, not only in terms of safety and security but in terms of how we treat our people.

The truth is, rescinded or not, these chaotic antics have real consequences. I know of an organization in Virginia that had to call an emergency board meeting yesterday to see if they should go out of business. I have heard from folks who are worried that they will have to lay off their employees. Without this Federal funding, they are just not going to be able to make payroll. One Virginian wrote to me and said that “the mental and physical damage is already immense.” It is not right to play with people's lives in such a grossly irresponsible way.

I have been doing this for a while. I have never heard of some kind of arbitrary freeze on all Federal spending. It was bad enough what happened when they put a freeze on Federal assistance to folks around the world.

I commend Secretary Rubio. One of the reasons why I was proud to support him was that he has actually tried to back off from that order, making sure that humanitarian aid is not going to disappear.

The story has been out. I have been very interested in the conflict in Sudan. There is a ship in Port Sudan

right now with American medicine on it. The aid group was going to take that out—the medicine—to save people's lives. That medicine will go to rot if those funds are not flowing.

It is bad enough, this issue of how we are treating Americans who depend on these Federal funds—these are real programs with real people—you take that and layer on the other whammy. In Virginia, we have a disproportionate number of Federal workers. You have quite a few in West Virginia I know as well due to great former West Virginia Senators. Suddenly, in an, again, unprecedented and I believe potentially illegal move, every Federal employee is offered this chance to quit and get paid for 6 months, until September 30, if you quit.

Now, nothing like this has ever been done before. Maybe this is the way you do business in the tech world, and I used to be in the tech world, but if you manage a good company, you don't go out and basically say to all your workers: Quit.

Of course, the problem is—and I urge my Federal workers to think about this—unfortunately, this President has a record of not only sticking it to Federal workers, but he has a record of sticking it to all the business contractors he did business with by not paying the bills.

So I worry because not only is there very much a legal question of whether the President can offer this buyout offer to all these Federal workers, but I can assure you, there is nothing in the budget—there is nothing in the budget—that we still haven't negotiated for the balance of this fiscal year that has got this X-billion-dollar number next to it that is going to pay for all of these buyouts.

We know where this comes from. It comes from the fellow that is being put up to be head of the OMB, Russell Vought, who wrote Project 2025, the very project that President Trump as a candidate said: Don't worry. I didn't read it. I don't know anything about it.

In that document, it goes on at length about how the goal of Project 2025 and Mr. Vought, who wants to be head of OMB, which kind of controls the management and budget of the Federal Government, was that he wanted to traumatize Federal workers. He wanted them not to go to work. He wanted to classify them as villains—his words, not mine.

I can tell you this: For a whole lot of Federal workers, they have already hit that goal. They are traumatized. And I worry like heck.

You say: Gosh, I don't know what I should do. Maybe I will take the offer.

But before you sign that and send it back—what may be an illegal offer that is not funded, that chances are you are not going to get paid—think a little bit about it. If this becomes another kind of passing fad where there is not any enforcement and not a payment, if you sign that and send it back, chances are you have made an indication that you