



**Statement of
Senator Peter Welch
Remarks as Delivered
H.R.815 – Final Passage of the National Security Supplemental
*February 13, 2024***

Mr. President, this is indeed an historic day, the passage of the National Security Supplemental Appropriations Bill. I want to commend the extraordinary work of Leader Schumer, of Leader McConnell, of our Appropriations Chair and Vice Chair, Senator Murray and Senator Collins. And also, our colleagues who worked so hard on the bipartisan border agreement that was ultimately repudiated by the Republicans.

The supplemental includes important, additional military aid for Ukraine and Taiwan, and aid for Israel, and humanitarian aid for the Palestinians and other vulnerable populations. And I unequivocally support the additional aid for Ukraine. It's facing an existential threat.

We must pass that aid. I'm very pleased to see that Ukraine is going to be receiving the aid it desperately needs. Putin must be stopped.

The other provision in the supplemental I strongly support is funding for the humanitarian aid for Palestinians and for humanitarian catastrophes around the globe.

But the situation in Gaza is what is of great concern to me. It is horrific.

Two million Palestinians have been uprooted from their homes. Those homes have been reduced to rubble. Folks are desperately seeking to survive. They lack adequate food, safe water, or shelter. Many are injured without anything remotely resembling sufficient medical care or shelter.

I introduced a resolution cosponsored by 15 of my colleagues urging the administration to dramatically increase access and delivery of humanitarian aid for Palestinians in Gaza. And I am gratified that the supplemental does include several billions of dollars for that purpose.

But despite these provisions that I do support, I voted against the supplemental for one key reason: I cannot in good conscience, support sending billions of additional taxpayer dollars for Prime Minister Netanyahu's military campaign in Gaza.

It's a campaign that has killed and wounded a shocking number of civilians.

It's created a massive humanitarian crisis with no end in sight.

It's inflamed tensions in the Middle East, eroding support among Arab states that had been aligned with Israel.

And of course, it has severely compromised any remaining hope, almost all remaining hope for the two-state solution that we all know is ultimately essential for peace in the Middle East.

And this is an opinion that is not just my own, but it's expressed by a large majority of Vermonters who have contacted me and shared their dismay at the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza.

During my years in Congress, Mr. President, like you I have voted for tens of billions of dollars in aid for Israel. But I cannot send more taxpayer dollars to support Prime Minister Netanyahu's continued bombardment and the wholesale destruction of Gaza knowing that the calamity that more U.S. bombs and artillery shells will cause for countless more civilians who had nothing, nothing whatsoever to do with the atrocities that were committed by Hamas terrorists on October 7th.

As I made clear on November 28th when I called for an indefinite ceasefire in Gaza, really for the purpose of saving civilian lives, we all do want Hamas gone. They are terrorists. The depth and cruelty of Hamas perpetrated against innocent, defenseless people, many of them women and children was appalling. It was reminiscent of the brutality of ISIS.

The viciousness of the Hamas attack was intended to terrorize and traumatize all Israelis. And it goes without saying that Israel has a right and responsibility to pursue those who ordered and carried out the October 7th attacks.

But Israel's enemy is Hamas, not the Palestinian people. And neither Israel, nor any country, has the right to use lethal force in ways that violate the laws of armed conflict by inflicting egregious and disproportionate harm to civilians.

Palestinian civilians are, by definition, innocent. They're defenseless, as were Hamas' victims. And what has occurred in Gaza, using weapons and munitions provided by the United States, and what will continue to occur as long as Prime Minister Netanyahu pursues his current war strategy, is more of the same.

It's a strategy which I and many others believe is deeply flawed. It has cost more than 28,000 Palestinian lives.

Netanyahu's war plan has never been articulated beyond his oft-repeated refrain of pursuing 'nothing less than the complete destruction of Hamas' and the release of the hostages.

Like many of us, I have spoken with families of hostages who are desperately waiting for the safe return of their loved ones who are trapped in the vast network of Hamas tunnels. Narrow, cloistered, dark tunnels as Israeli bombs explode above. It's hard to imagine anything that's more terrifying for the hostages as well as for their families as the weeks turn into months with no end in sight.

Since Israel launched its invasion of Gaza, nearly four months ago, Prime Minister Netanyahu has said nothing about what Israel's strategy is for the future of Gaza, or the people of Gaza, after Gaza is in ruins and the war ends.

Obliterating civilian infrastructure, and that's happening now with demolitions set to take down homes and infrastructure, makes it impossible for people to have a place to return to.

Intentionally reducing to rubble hospitals, schools, mosques, and apartment buildings is not right—forcibly displacing two million people and creating a humanitarian catastrophe and looming famine.

This is not an acceptable strategy.

And the inescapable conclusion is that the Netanyahu government is not listening.

It's not listening to the White House and President Biden.

It's not listening to key Arab governments that are imploring Israel to change course.

Their belief, which I share, is that the way to prevent a wider war and to begin building a safer and ultimately more secure Middle East is to stop the killing and otherwise mistreating of the innocent Palestinians.

Prime Minister Netanyahu, who has rejected out of hand the right of Palestinians to have a state of their own, is stubbornly pursuing what can only be called a scorched earth policy. It's difficult not to conclude that his enemy is not only Hamas, but the Palestinians.

And to make matters worse, he and other Israeli officials continue to deny there is a humanitarian crisis in Gaza despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

How much worse does the situation have to get in Gaza?

How much wider of a war in the Middle East will be accepted before we use the leverage America does have— including the withholding of additional lethal aid – to get Israel to stop that bombing campaign?

To negotiate a ceasefire and the release of the remaining hostages?

And to allow, to allow the dramatic increase in food, in water, and other humanitarian aid needed to prevent the widespread starvation, death, and disease the United Nations and other relief organizations warn is imminent?

And to negotiate an end to the war?

The massive destruction and loss of innocent life is not making Israel more secure.

To the contrary, it's eroded progress Israel has made with its neighboring Arab states, it's inflamed tensions in the Middle East, and it's incited attacks on American soldiers.

It has severely damaged Israel's reputation on the world stage and set back the cause of peace in the Middle East which we must continue to strive to achieve.

The possibility of a two-state solution, which Prime Minister Netanyahu has publicly rejected, is on life support.

Throughout the years, the United States has provided tens of billions of dollars in aid to the Netanyahu government, in effect consistently financing a government that implements policies that we support for a two-state solution but pursues policies that make it impossible for a viable, independent State of Palestine to emerge.

That's been endorsed, a two-state solution, by Republican and Democratic administrations.

We have to mean what we say.

This must end, and it must end now, by sparing innocent Palestinians in Israel's pursuit of Hamas and renewing vigorous efforts to create a viable Palestinian state, something the Biden Administration is doing energetically.

Mr. President, a majority of the Senate has voted to approve the additional military aid for Israel. I know that the White House will not treat that as a blank check.

We must increase pressure on the Netanyahu government to respect international humanitarian law, and I'm very encouraged by the White House's release on February 8th of an unprecedented National Security Memorandum, based on an amendment sponsored by Senator Van Hollen, cosponsored by many of us, including you, Mr. President.

It articulates a global policy and reporting requirements that puts Israel, and other recipients of U.S. military aid, on notice that our aid is contingent on their written commitment and adherence to U.S. and international laws of armed conflict and allowing the unimpeded delivery of humanitarian aid.

And I also urge the Secretary of State to apply the Leahy Law, passed by my predecessor, Patrick Leahy of Vermont. Apply that to Israel.

This has not been the practice. For far too long, successive administrations have failed to apply the Law to the Israeli Defense Forces, despite many incidents when the IDF was credibly implicated in violations of human rights of Palestinians.

The Leahy Law is the law of the United States. It should be enforced.

Finally, I do want to say a few words about the Southern border.

Our immigration system is broken.

Our Southern border is overwhelmed with thousands of would-be immigrants on a near-daily basis. Asylum-seekers can wait five years or more, planting roots in this country before learning their fate. They are forced to wait to join the workforce when they're here and face bureaucratic backlogs. Most potential immigrants have no meaningful way to enter the U.S. legally given the failure of Congress to improve the system for thirty years. And our systems; cities all around our country are dealing with the consequences are exhausted.

In essence, we don't have a functioning immigration system.

And I commend my colleagues, Senators Sinema, Langford, and Murphy for their extraordinary work and I'm very disappointed that that effort was rejected and repudiated by our Republican colleagues.

The agreement proposed reforms to improve border security that both Republicans and Democrats have long recognized that we need to significantly improve our operations at the border and have a secure border.

It provides, that agreement, for additional pathways for legal migration. And we need legal migration. Our rural communities – like those in Vermont – rely on immigrant and seasonal farmworkers and know how important improving our legal migration system is to our rural economy.

We need to address the limited number of family and employment-based visas, to address the backlog of Green Card applications that already exceeds 10 million people. And we need more worker visas and other alternatives for our employers to be able to get the job done.

I voted last week to proceed on that first version of that border agreement worked out by our colleagues in the hope that we could work and pass amendments, improve it, and pass it.

But Republicans, who first embraced that agreement, or that effort, turned their backs once Donald Trump insisted they take no action to secure the Southern border before the November election.

Donald Trump has a campaign. We have a responsibility: to govern. And that includes taking action on the Southern border.

That situation is the result of inaction over many years. Republican and Democrats can take credit for some of those failures.

But we have to do there what we have done in so many other places: work together. To get a secure border, find pathways for legal migration, and have safety and security at a border we control.

Mr. President, I'm going to end where I began. And that's thanking Leader Schumer and Leader McConnell for the extraordinary effort getting us to this vote and this important legislation. But I also want to say to the Senate staff and our Senate Pages who have been here all night: thank you. We are very grateful for the work that you do.

This was not just an important day. It's been an important several months where the business of the Senate debating the important issues of our time occurred, and you all have been part of history.

Mr. President, I yield back.

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