

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell
Floor Speech on DHS Appropriations

January 28, 2026

Sen. Cantwell Opening Remarks

[\[VIDEO\]](#)

Sen. Cantwell: Mr. President, I come to the floor to join my colleagues today to talk about the events of the last several days, and to say to my colleagues here in the United States Senate on both sides of the aisle: I've talked to many Washingtonians, and they're very worried about what's transpired in Minnesota.

They're very worried about what's transpired in Minnesota because they think that someone has lost their life that didn't need to lose their life, and they think that the President of the United States, instead of basically creating a system where that kind of overreach of power would be investigated, instead he is basically accusing the victim here. And basically, really, even attacking Second Amendment rights.

So, I'm here to join my colleagues to say, what are we going to do to fix this system? What are we going to do to make sure that tragedies like this don't happen and that we investigate the truth—not make up something about the situation minutes after it's happened?

I say this because my state has struggled with these issues of justice, particularly civil liberties and the civil rights of individuals. We had two tragic cases in our state. One, a Native American was just carving on a corner, basically whittling away, didn't understand, as he got up to move to another corner, that a policeman in the neighborhood thought, "What is he doing?" and accidentally—basically when the Native American failed to stop from just moving from one corner to another to continue his whittling, was shot dead.

We had a case in Spokane where a disabled man basically went to his daily ritual of going over to get a soft drink at a supermarket, and on the way there, somebody said, "I think he's acting a little strange," and called the police. And the police showed up, and as he was reaching for a soda in the bottom compartment of the freezer, the police told him to stop. And he didn't really understand what they were even saying to him. What was he doing? He was just coming to get his daily soda! And they [beat] Otto Zehm and killed him. [...]

So yes, in the United States of America since 1957 we have had [a] civil rights [division] and we have had a Department of Justice that has enforced the civil liberties of Americans by having oversight of police departments that overreached and basically did something, like they did in the Seattle case against the Native American Carver, John T. Williams, and in the Spokane case against Otto Zehm.

Yes, the Department of Justice had an oversight division and a consent decree [with] both the Seattle Police Department and the Spokane Police Department [to] get your act together and do training so that you are not killing people that don't deserve to be killed.

And that's the same situation with Mr. Pretti. Mr. Pretti didn't deserve to be killed in this situation, but let's at least have an investigation. Let's at least have a Department of Justice to do something about this. But that is not what the Trump Administration is doing.

The first Trump Administration tried to roll back the requirements, in fact, the then Attorney General basically said, 'I don't even want to use this consent decree power, because it's one of the most dangerous things, and it's an exercise of raw power.'

Well, the reason why the Department of Justice has this responsibility is because it's their responsibility to make sure somebody doesn't abuse power, particularly in a law enforcement situation like this, and intervene on the civil liberties of Americans. So that Department of Justice, literally in the first Trump administration, basically did not do its job and tried to basically subvert the responsibilities.

Now, here we are today in the second Trump Administration, and what are they doing instead of really trying to look at patterns of abuse and patterns of malpractice or states [in] which law enforcement agencies aren't properly using force in these instances? What are they doing about this misconduct? Well, the second Trump administration makes the first Trump administration look like it was going easy on this situation.

Not only are they taking the money away from the Civil Rights Division, they're basically saying, 'Look, we don't even want you to do that job. We want you to go out and prioritize protecting other issues instead.'

And basically, we've had most of the agency and individuals who were there doing the civil liberties work and doing this oversight work—they're gone. So now, what we're seeing is that lawsuits are being dismissed. Settlement agreements, you know, issues that really would have been brought to light are just being dismissed.

So the reason I'm asking this is because my colleagues now have a chance to say whether they really believe in this function of the Department of Justice and the rights of Mr. Prety and Otto Zehm and John T. Williams, and whether you want to do something about it.

Now, I personally think that Department of Homeland Security and ICE should be, in this instance, investigated. I think they should be investigated. And we should know the answers, and we should know that we are upholding the civil liberties of Americans, particularly in the right to express themselves and have free speech, and go to a rally without being—or go to express their views, in this case in Minnesota, without being killed.

So the question is, what are we going to do about this use of force? So my colleagues are out here saying, it's a tragedy. I agree it is a tragedy. They're out here saying, you know that this, this situation, you know, shouldn't have happened. I agree. I don't think ICE should be in Minnesota. I guarantee the Obama administration rounded up a lot of people and deported them. I know because I had constituents who complained about that.

But the Obama Administration didn't go out and just try to make quotas on people. The Obama Administration didn't go out there and say, We're not going after the violent people. We're just going to go after anybody to make up the numbers. The Obama Administration didn't use force against peaceful protesters. They didn't do any of that, and so now we're acting like that's the mission, and yet, the Biden Administration and the Obama Administration did deport violent people out of the United States. Yes, they did.

So what's different here is that we've crossed a line. We've crossed a line, and we have allowed ICE to go here and prey on US citizens, and basically, in this case, use this power of force. And my only question

now is whether my colleagues on the other side of the aisle are going to stand up for the role and responsibility the federal government plays in oversight, in investigation and upholding the civil liberties of Americans in the United States of America when these incidents happen.

The rest of this is just debate. The rest of this about how ICE operates, about how [the Department of] Homeland [Security] operates, about what you want to do about immigration, whether you want immigration reform. The rest of it is just debate.

The real question is, do you believe in these civil liberties of Americans or not, and when police or power by the federal government is used in an excessive way and it means the loss of life, do you believe in having an authority that investigates that and is transparent with the American people and holds that system accountable?

I know this: the Seattle Police Department is a better police department because of those consent decrees, and so is Spokane. And the incidents that happened in those two individuals losing their life may not happen again because we went through that process.

The question is whether there's going to be another [Alex] Petti sometime soon, where another US citizen loses their life because of this overreach of power, because we're not investigating, we're not protecting these civil liberties, and we're not understanding that we have an administration that is diminishing the very agency whose roles and responsibilities are to oversee this.

So I want to know, do my colleagues believe in this? Do they believe in this role or responsibility, or do they not? Because I can tell you, that's the only way we're going to move forward in the information age.

The information age has laid this bare. We might have had people shot and killed by overuse of power, in many instances, in the 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s and beyond, but you didn't see it. Now you're seeing it now. You've got to deal with the reality. You've got to deal with reality that is right in front of us.

So the only question is, do my colleagues really believe in enforcing the civil liberties and civil rights of Americans by investigating this situation, having [an] aggressive investigation and holding people accountable. I thank the president and I yield the floor.