

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

**Floor Speech on Russel Vought's nomination for Director of Office and Management
Budget**

February 6, 2025

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Sen. Cantwell: I join my colleagues -- I thank the Senator from Nevada for her great comments in articulating why we want to have a budget process here that recognizes the United States Senate, the House of Representatives, and to say that a budget process that tries to exclude us is not what our forefathers had in mind.

That is one of the reasons I strongly oppose this nomination to be the Director of the Office of Management and Budget for Russell Vought. The administration, like everyone before it, has had the opportunity to propose a budget, set overall policy principles, and propose spending and policies, and this administration does not have the power to wave a wand and erase legally authorized and appropriated funds.

The constitution is very clear here, Congress and the administration, together, agree on appropriations. They agree together when we pass laws and what we want to do to govern. And people should be able to rely on current laws until those laws are changed.

That is how governing works, and we're here to represent the people who want to see the certainty and predictability of laws that we have passed. Regular review of programs and congressional oversight, as my colleague from Nevada just mentioned, those are valuable things, and we can continue to make reforms in thoughtful and transparent ways.

We should not allow unaccountable political actors, though, to be unfettered, have access to our constituents most sensitive data without safeguards to how that data is protected, their rights, and conflicts of interest, that how that data might even be used against them.

Mr. President, I am for a very strong national privacy law to protect our consumers, and one person I don't want spying on us is the U.S. government. So, I don't take lightly somebody getting access to accounts and information, storing it, moving it around, sharing it with other people. I don't care if they're 22 or 42 I'm not for the government doing this kind of thing without oversight.

Taxpayers, -- I'm not even for the government spying on U.S. citizens, just to be clear, I'm not for that. But this is just data collection. Data collection. Who's it going to? What are they doing with it? How much are they going to use it?

So, taxpayers, they rely on us for service, and they don't want to believe that somebody is looking around in these accounts. Even our own personnel management system got hacked by the Chinese. How do we know that there are safeguards for what these individuals are doing for our most personal information?

But the havoc that has been caused by this nominee's strategy is just absurd. Today, I met with a group of farmers who were talking about how they grow and process export products.

They told me, because USAID operations were shut down, their products were stuck on a dock in Houston, they don't think they're ever going to get delivered, and they sure as heck don't think they're going to get paid.

Is that what we want to do? Tell our farmers that they have a contract to grow a product, to have them delivered, and the shipment is on its way, and now you're going to leave it on a dock because you think you have a bright idea of way to shortcut Congress?

Over 1.8 million Washingtonians rely on Medicare, and they shouldn't have to be worried at any moment of the day that somehow that that's not going to be paid for. But that's what happened when Washington State Health Care Authority was frozen out of the Medicaid portal and the health care payments were not being made.

Okay, my colleague just addressed that. The portal eventually got turned on after the huge volume and outrage. Really, outrage by the public forced the administration to say, 'stop this silly attitude that you can stop payment yourself.' They forced them to turn the portable back on and pay the Medicaid bills.

But Washington state is also home to community health centers. They're non-profit entities that serve the medically underserved population. Part of me is thinking, this is really an attempt to steal money from our constituents, just to pay for a tax bill.

Literally, somebody thought they were going to come in here and make a very fast move and basically turn off payments to people who are really poor and in very challenging situations, and turn off their payments so they could take the money and put it into a tax break for the rich later on.

That is absurd. It's absurd. It's not even legal. We were told by some of these health care centers that they were blocked from transferring federal funds to those needed in their hospitals. In other words, cutting off funding that would be helpful to saving lives. These health centers provide care to more than 1 million people in our state, over 360,000 of them. And there's children, agriculture workers, and veterans, and the fact that these medical systems work to help all of us provide primary care is exactly why we shouldn't turn off a system.

I got a call from someone in Pierce County to tell me that her son, Tobias, who was 36 years old. He was recently diagnosed with multi myeloma and is one of the youngest people who has gotten the diagnosis. They are absolutely terrified about the risk of losing cancer research dollars. She said she, couldn't wrap her mind around it, quote,

'This insane and cruel road that we are all on now with this new administration,' end quote.

These are the stories from my constituents, they want to know what's going on in their lives. It's not a parlor game, it's not a think tank exercise. It is their lives.

For one of the hospitals in my state, Island Health in Anacortes, the funding freeze means they couldn't fill a contractual agreement to pay for surgical technology. They were under contract to pay no later than 30 days after the receipt of the equipment, which is currently being shipped to them. So the first time this community was going to realize the benefit of some technology that was going to help them provide better outcomes through less invasive procedures, lower the infection rate and shorten their recovery time. But they don't know -- the funds are frozen, the people of Anacortes could have to wait, and they may not even get the delivery of that care.

Because OMB created uncertainty. They created it about the funding, without thinking through the consequences. Multiple hospitals are worried about caring for their patients. Olympic Medical Center on the Peninsula serves about 80,000 patients. They said to me, even small changes in the federal grant spending will have detrimental impacts to their facility and to their community.

A federal funding freeze just exacerbates our ability to deliver care that has been authorized, appropriated and promised -- promised to the operation of our health care system. How could people be so heartless to try to turn that off?

Andrea Downs, the Executive Director for Citizens Against Domestic and Sexual Abuse, which is the only domestic violence and sexual assault agency for Whidbey Island said they operate a center and a shelter. She said the funding freeze impacts about half of their funding. Portals, not getting paid, no processing, no time. She said "not being able to access our grants for the remainder of this fiscal year would have a crippling impact on our organization." [One] Walla Walla/Tri Cities based non-profit, Blue Mountain Heart to Heart, is also concerned about federal grants that they receive that support housing needs of people who live within the region. And they are also worried about the accountability of care that comes with the Medicaid funds.

But probably nothing said it more clear to me than when I heard that Elon Musk and DOGE wanted to get their hands on the FAA. What should a man who is regulated by the FAA -- his launch facilities are under the FAA's authority to keep us safe. They need to know and coordinate launch rocket times and to not have people just launch a rocket whenever they want.

We already know the painful experience of these accidents on the Potomac, of not having a system overseen by [enough] air traffic controllers. But Mr. Musk was fined, and he didn't like the fine. He basically went after the FAA administrator, who decided to step down instead of serving with this administration. Now, Mr. Musk wants his hands on the FAA to tell them what to do, probably in retribution for the fact that they said it wasn't safe to launch at that moment. This is a clear conflict of interest.

Mr. President, we can do better than this. We're here to work together. We're here to work across the aisle. We're here to pass a budget. We're here to appropriate and, as an authorizer, to set those authorizations and work with our appropriators.

It is not for a nominee to set a game plan of how to take money out of the lives of individual families that are counting on that payment or structural organizations that are charged with serving our communities on something as important as health or law enforcement, and it sure

isn't turning the keys over to somebody who's already been fined by the agency to try to then undo the agency's oversight of his own personal business. There couldn't be a clearer answer here. Turn down this nomination. Let's get back to working together, working collaboratively.

There are lots of ideas that we have to work on government efficiency, lots of ideas that could produce billions of dollars in savings, produce better care for our constituents, and move our country forward. And oh, by the way, let's not also continue to cut funding for all the authorized programs that these nominees basically said that they supported. That's why we voted for some of them, because they said they supported current funding, whether that's the Department of Transportation or other places. But now the mastermind of how to short circuit, pull the plug out, pull out the safety blanket, give it to the rich is on [the] way for a vote here. Please vote no. I thank the President and I yield the floor.

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