

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Merkley
Senate Budget Committee Hearing: “The Nomination of the Honorable Russell T. Vought,
of Virginia, to be Director of the Office of Management and Budget”
January 22, 2025

Well thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and congratulations on your new role leading this Committee. I look forward to working with you, and welcome to the Committee. Senator Cornyn, Senator Ricketts – and new to the Senate and new to the Committee, Senator Moreno – welcome.

This Congress, the Senate Budget Committee is going to be deeply engaged in policies that emerge because reconciliation is going to play a central role, and reconciliation begins right here in this room.

We’ll be considering Trump’s budget requests.

And I must say, my deepest concern about the reconciliation bills is that they are going to betray working Americans – working Americans who President Trump appealed to in his campaign – working Americans who listened to the strategies that he laid out that he proposed.

But certainly, the actual plan isn’t to help working people; the actual plan is to help the wealthy get wealthier with massive tax giveaways with working families paying the bill.

Now how are these massive giveaways to the wealthiest families going to be paid for? Well, by slashing services to working families and to struggling families who are trying to get on their feet so they can thrive and get to the middle class. This is a great betrayal.

Today we’ll consider the President’s nomination of Russell Vought to lead the Office of Management and Budget, which is really the place where this campaign is coordinated. We’ll hear very different ideas on how to take our country forward.

For my friends across the aisle and from Mr. Vought, we’ll hear that we need to continue to give tax giveaways – massive tax giveaways – to the wealthiest Americans, and we’ll hear about how nonpartisan expertise that makes our country run smoothly should be replaced by those with blind political loyalty.

And you’ll hear how programs that assist with the environment or for unions organizing working people for public health should instead be replaced by programs that serve big corporations and the mega millionaires.

Our side of the aisle has a different vision: That we stand up for working families; that the wealthy need to pay their fair share of our taxes; that the government should serve everyone – not just the privileged and the powerful.

From my side of the aisle, you’ll hear about how we need to expand Medicare’s ability to negotiate the price of fifteen expensive drugs.

Those drugs were laid out by President Biden, according to the law, as he left – I'll submit this for the record, Mr. Chairman – and those drugs include, for example, the weight loss drugs that currently serve 2.3 million people.

Now, the first ten drugs that were negotiated cut the price some a third to two-thirds, or more – including 79 percent on one drug, and Americans are simply outraged that we spend more on R&D to develop these drugs than any other nation, that is our taxpayer dollars, and then we get the highest price among the developing countries instead of the best, which we deserve.

This vision as laid out is the great betrayal of America's working families.

And we'll continue to debate that, I'm sure, in the course of the hearings that are ahead.

And I have no doubt Mr. Vought that you have the intellectual expertise and the experience.

You were OMB Director before; you know all the ins and outs.

It's really a question of whether we are going to accomplish something that provides the foundation for American families to thrive or to simply to increase the wealth disparities that make this a government by and for the powerful rather than by and for the people.

The Washington Post reported that officials said the result of your last tenure underscored the tensions that come with having a deeply ideological operative thrust into position with complicated, often nonpartisan challenges.

And this turned out to be spot on.

You were responsible for the Fiscal Year 2021 Budget issued by the Trump Administration, and it had close to \$1 trillion cuts to health care for struggling Americans.

It had \$300 billion in cuts to social safety programs – things like nutrition assistance, the earned income tax credit, and the child tax credit.

\$170 billion cut by increasing the cost of college loans for those that are aspiring – you know I'm the first in my family to go to college. I think college should be affordable to everyone, not making it more expensive so only rich families can afford to have their kids go to college.

So, we certainly profoundly disagree.

You zeroed out programs like the Community Development Block Grants, which are used for housing all around this country.

Meanwhile you proposed over \$1 trillion in tax giveaways with over two-thirds going to the top 10 percent.

That is very, very troubling.

And Mr. Vought, you were at the center of the strategy of impounding funds.

Now we had this conversation in 1974 here in Congress. We passed the *Impoundment Control Act* because Congress said, “when we say this amount of money should be spent on this program, it isn’t up to the President to spend less.”

But you told me in your office that you are quite comfortable assuming that the law doesn’t matter and that you’ll just treat the money for a program as a ceiling rather than a required amount.

Well the courts have found otherwise, but the fact that you are willing to say this is exactly what you plan to do again should trouble every single member of the Senate.

And when you were at the center of the impoundment of the funds for Ukraine that resulted in the impeachment of President Trump in his former service, you blamed a staff subordinate.

That troubles me too, that something you were so involved in, when it goes awry, you say, “oh it wasn’t me. I gave that responsibility to someone else who works for me.”

That is not leadership.

And certainly, your views are deeply held. You continue to advocate for them at your think tank, the Center for Renewing America. So, we saw that.

There are other things that trouble many of us.

The fact that you were for the abolition of abortion rights and don’t believe in exceptions – not exceptions for rape, not exceptions for incest, not exceptions for the life of the mother.

And it’s troubling that you continue to participate in the big lie that the 2020 election was rigged.

This may be essential for your loyalty test to the President, but it’s a willingness to manipulate and deceive Americans that certainly bothers me.

I think we need a Director who respects the rule of law, not the rule of one man. That is guided by facts, not partisan ideology – who serves working families, not mega millionaires and billionaires.

So, I am disturbed that you are eager to lead the betrayal of America’s working families.

Mr. Chairman, I turn it back to you.