Democrats back off demand to bar Iran war funding in spending bill, offer to work with Trump

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Nineteen days after winning both houses of Congress in a massive repudiation of US President Donald Trump and the Iran war, leading representatives of the Democratic Party have ruled out making use of the December 11 expiration of funding for federal government operations to stop, or even limit, the Iran war.

Senate Democratic leader Charles Schumer of New York declared on November 4 that "we are going to end the war," citing the "power of the purse" as one of the ways to do so. Yet the Democrats are now backing away from the most immediate tool at their disposal: refusing to pass a government spending bill that does not prohibit funds for the war.

The government is operating under a temporary spending law, known as a continuing resolution, that expires on December 11. Unless Congress passes and Trump signs a new spending bill by then, funding for the government will be stopped. A spending bill needs 60 votes in the Senate, more than the Republicans have, meaning that its passage or lack thereof is a choice made by the Democratic leadership.

A shutdown by itself would not stop the war. Active-duty troops remain on duty during a lapse in funding, and the Pentagon can draw on billions of dollars still unspent from the 2025 reconciliation bill, which Trump tapped to pay troops during last year's shutdown. The leverage lies in refusing to pass any bill without a prohibition on war funding. That is the demand several Democrats raised, insincerely, after the election, and it is what they are now abandoning.

Democrats have repeatedly used government shutdowns in the past, including in January 2018 over immigration, in the fall of 2025 over health insurance subsidies and at the Department of Homeland Security from February to April of this year over the conduct of immigration agents. All of those actions were symbolic, used to create the appearance of opposing the Trump administration's domestic policies while agreeing with significant portions of them. But so deep is the crisis triggered by the political debacle suffered by American imperialism in Iran that even a symbolic measure to limit the war has been declared out of bounds.

"My hope is that there is no shutdown and my hope is that we don't use the shutdown as leverage to end the war," said Representative Jim Himes of Connecticut, the ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, on "Fox News Sunday."

The leading voice cited in the media as seeking to use spending bills to stop the war is Democratic Representative Yassamin Ansari of Arizona, who declared in a joint statement with Democratic Representative Ro Khanna of California on November 18 that "the American people were loud and clear on November 3rd: they want an immediate end to Donald Trump's reckless war in Iran."

But just one day later, Ansari clarified, "Nobody wants a government shutdown. There's no question of that. I don't want there to be a government shutdown."

In the Senate, Democratic Senator Chris Van Hollen of Maryland and three other senators declared on November 12 that any temporary spending bill "must include language that restricts the Trump Administration from using appropriated funds to continue his war against Iran."

However, on NBC's "Meet the Press" on Sunday, host Kristen Welker asked Van Hollen: "Would you support shutting down the government to defund the war with Iran? Governor Wes Moore, your governor, says that's the wrong move."

"I'm never in favor of shutting down the government," Van Hollen answered. "I represent lots of federal employees. At the same time, we should not continue to fund an illegal war that's driving up prices."

Van Hollen, who is challenging Chuck Schumer for Senate Majority Leader, continued, "what Senator Kaine, Senator Bennet, Senator Duckworth and I have said is let's have an amendment on the Senate floor about not providing funding for offensive military operations against Iran." An amendment is a proposed change to a bill, and the Republicans, who control the Senate until January 3, can vote it down. The spending bill would then come to a final vote with the money for the war still in it, and Van Hollen left open how he would vote.

Welker put the same question to Democratic Senator-elect Abdul El-Sayed of Michigan. "It wouldn't be Democrats

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shutting down the government. It would be Donald Trump choosing his war over a functional government," El-Sayed said, adding that "Congress does not have a responsibility to fund an illegal, unjustified war."

"So, just to be very clear, you would be open to effectively the government shutting down if it meant defunding the war," Welker said. "You think that should be the top priority?"

"No, I don't want government to shut down," El-Sayed replied.

The Democrats made these statements just one day after the *Washington Post* declared in an editorial, directed at Van Hollen by name, "President Donald Trump should not be waging an open-ended war against Iran without congressional authorization, but Congress should not shut down the government to stop him."

The *Post* added: "While Congress should reassert its constitutional powers, another government shutdown would be the wrong instrument." It concluded, "Americans have endured enough instability from Washington. They expect Congress to restrain an overreaching president—and to keep the government running while doing so."

Four days earlier, on November 17, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, dubbed "the imperial messenger" in a 2011 book, explained the reasons behind the Democrats' refusal to use the leverage of the government funding bill to restrict the war. Friedman wrote of the "dread" that prevails among the allies of US imperialism, which "comes from the dawning awareness that this latest war with Iran, started by America and Israel, is going to end with Iran more dominant than ever over its neighbors."

For this reason, Friedman wrote, "I think it would be a mistake for Democrats to try to cut off funding for the war, just as I thought it was a mistake to talk about defunding the police." Friedman continued: "Democrats should do nothing to weaken U.S. leverage on the Iranians. It is a sick regime and a truly destabilizing, malign actor in the region and around the world, one that is now providing Russians with the advanced drone technology that Moscow is using to destroy Ukraine's energy infrastructure before winter."

Friedman advised the Democrats to hold investigations instead: "Democrats should play to their strength in Congress and insist on investigating every aspect of this war, enabling the American people to understand just how ill planned it was, just how much damage it has actually done to the U.S. military presence in the region (which Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth has tried to hide) and why the incompetents who directed it need to be fired. Those efforts will help strengthen America's hand over the long run and put more pressure on Iran."

In fact, the Democrats' central criticism of Trump's conduct of the war in Iran is that it has been a distraction from the escalation of the US war with Russia in Ukraine. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in a *New York Times* guest essay on November 19, objected that the war against Iran had used up air defense missiles needed in Ukraine. Clinton wrote that "the Trump administration has severely depleted America's own stockpile of Patriots in its ill-fated war with Iran."

Trump, whose party lost the November 3 midterm elections, threatened at a White House news conference on Friday to veto whatever the new Congress sent him until it accepted his terms. Trump is governing as though his party had won the elections and the Democrats had lost them.

Trump remains president and "commander-in-chief," in control of the vast US military apparatus. Rather than seek to remove Trump through impeachment, the Democratic leadership has blocked even impeaching his war-criminal Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth. And there has been no suggestion from any Democrat, including "lefts" like Bernie Sanders and Abdul El-Sayed, that legislative restrictions—which Trump would likely ignore—should be combined with mass political mobilizations against the war.

In addition to ruling out using the leverage given to them by the expiration of the continuing resolution, the Democrats offered on the Sunday programs to work with Trump. House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries of New York, the Democrats' nominee for speaker, told CBS's "Face the Nation" that the cost of living, healthcare and immigration were "three possible areas to explore whether we can work together with the president and our colleagues on the other side of the aisle."

Two Democratic senators-elect made similar offers on Sunday. El-Sayed, asked on "Meet the Press" whether he planned to meet Trump or Vice President JD Vance, replied: "Well, those plans are in the works." Democratic Senator-elect Peggy Flanagan of Minnesota told CNN's "State of the Union": "If Donald Trump is ready to fight for Medicare for all, we will call it Trumpcare. ... I'm happy to work with him on it."

In reality, any healthcare policy endorsed by the billionaire conman in the White House would be a sweeping attack on healthcare spending, aimed directly at enriching the oligarchy.

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