Working Class Security

Expanding the US warfare state has made the working class less secure. Prioritising everyday security over military expansion is a better electoral strategy for progressives.

16 Dec 2025 • Stephen Semler

Introduction

The political elite in the United States has largely erased the distinction between military spending and security. President Joe Biden called military budgets "investments in our national security", perpetuating the myth that more military spending means more security. The US military budget now exceeds $1 trillion, in excess of average annual military spending during World War Two. [1] The Trump administration is now exporting this definition of security by pressuring countries to peg military spending to a percentage of their GDP — a recipe for indefinite, unconditional increases worldwide, regardless of actual defensive need. To help offset the cost of this militarism, social welfare and climate programmes face cuts.

None of this is good news for the working class, whose wellbeing is acutely compromised when governments promote warfare over the general welfare. The most urgent threats facing workers fall outside the narrow, state-centric scope of national security, which elites imagine is advanced through military force. By contrast, human security shifts the focus to the people and the wide range of threats to their livelihoods, including economic hardship and hunger. In the US, pervasive human insecurity — particularly among the working class — appears to be the new normal.

Human security has an extraordinary political relevance; the Democratic Party's failure to take it seriously helped lead to Donald Trump's second term. For a brief moment in 2021, the Biden administration had improved human security, gesturing toward the left's longstanding call for a stronger welfare state and slimmer warfare state. However, Biden worked to reverse this over the next three years, abandoning his social welfare agenda and pushing a

militarised industrial policy instead, with disastrous consequences. An alternative approach to security, one grounded in addressing human insecurity and a smaller warfare state, is not just in the interest of the working class but also of electoral success.

Why Human Security Matters

While the focus of national security is on the state, the focus of human security is the people living in it. Security on a human level means freedom from fear, want, and indignity. How secure someone is depends on several factors. The 1994 UN Human Development Report outlined seven dimensions of human security: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political.

The first of these defined the result of the 2024 US presidential election. The economy was widely reported as voters' top concern, but it was actually economic security — defined as a person's ability to sustainably cover their essential needs — that topped voter concerns. A month before the election, polling company YouGov asked US voters which measure best defined the health of the economy. By far the most popular response was "the prices of goods and services you buy" (52 per cent), followed by "the unemployment rate and job reports" (18 per cent). The least popular was "the stock market index" (4 per cent). Voters evaluated "the economy" largely in terms of the economic (in)security they experienced, not by referencing macroeconomic indicators. Economic concerns were largely at the human, rather than the national, level.

The chart below shows voters' top five concerns ahead of the 2024 elections. Midway through 2022, voters typically ranked "jobs and the economy" as their top concern. That changed when YouGov began listing "inflation/prices" as an option in its 19 July 2022 survey. This enabled respondents to indicate economic insecurity as their top concern — after all, rapidly increasing prices of essential goods and services directly undermine economic security. Inflation and prices were immediately ranked as voters' most important issue at 24 per cent, while the national economy dropped from 19 per cent to 12 per cent. For 115 of the next 116 surveys before the election, voters ranked economic insecurity as their top concern. [2]

Economic Insecurity: US Voters' Top Concern in 2024
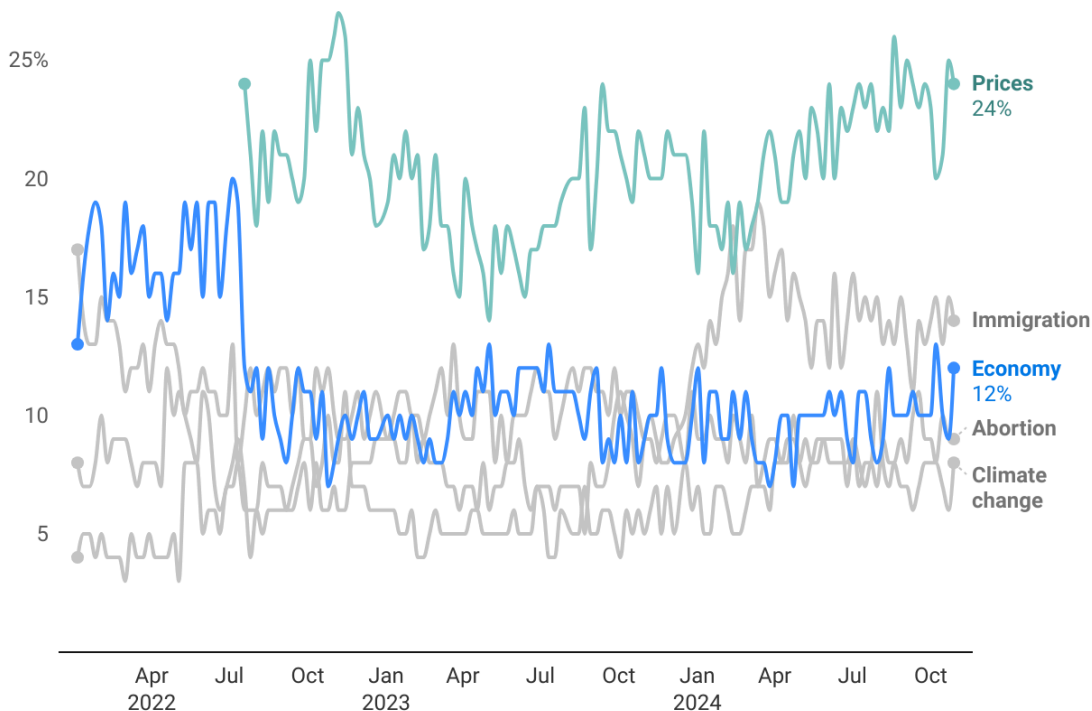
Most important issue for voters, Jan 2022–Oct 2024 (%)

Chart: Stephen Semler (@stephensemler | stephensemler.com) • Source: YouGov. • Created with Datawrapper

Democrats capitalised on workers' economic insecurity in 2020 and lost because of it in 2024. In 2020, 50 per cent of voters rated the economy as not good or poor, and 80 per cent of this group voted for Democratic candidate Joe Biden. In 2024, 68 per cent rated the economy as not good or poor, but only 28 per cent of this group voted for Democratic candidate Kamala Harris. While the share of US voters unhappy with economic conditions increased by 18 percentage points from 2020 to 2024, the percentage of those who backed the Democratic candidate fell by 52 points.

Democrats lost the most ground among the working class and economically insecure demographics. In 2020, 56 per cent of people with incomes under $100,000 voted for Biden and 43 per cent for Trump. In 2024, Harris secured only 47 per cent of those votes — a 9-percentage point drop from 2020 — while Trump got 51 per cent (+8). In 2020, among those with incomes under $50,000, Biden won 55 per cent and Trump 44 per cent. However, in 2024, Harris earned just 48 per cent (–7) of those votes while Trump received 50 per cent (+6) — a 13-percentage point shift. It was the first time since the 1960s that the majority of lower-income voters backed the Republican candidate.

These results were not because the Republican candidate performed better in 2024 than in 2020; but rather because the Democratic candidate performed much worse. In 2020, 34 per cent of eligible voters voted Democrat and 31 per cent Republican. In 2024, the Republican candidate's share of the eligible vote increased by just 0.6 percentage points compared to 2020, while support for the Democratic candidate fell by 3.3 points. Overall voter turnout fell from 65 per cent to 62 per cent.

Leading up to the election, Democratic Party leaders and pundits dismissed widespread reports of economic insecurity. Negative sentiments were merely bad "vibes", a product of voters' dishonesty, stupidity or low self-esteem. But the main reason so many Americans believed they were worse off compared to before Biden took office is because they actually were. From 2019 to 2024, human security deteriorated. The share of Americans with low financial wellbeing increased by 30 per cent, while the share with an unstable income grew by 29 per cent. While working class Americans suffered and temporary welfare support was removed, the military budget increased by 33 per cent, from $719 billion to $954 billion. [3] In 2024, US homelessness reached a record high. The same year, the US spent more on its military than the next 12 highest-spending countries combined. This duality didn't go unnoticed: as one pollster remarked before the 2024 elections, voters "do not look at our politics and see any good guys. They see a dying empire led by bad people".

US Economic Insecurity Worsened from 2019 to 2024

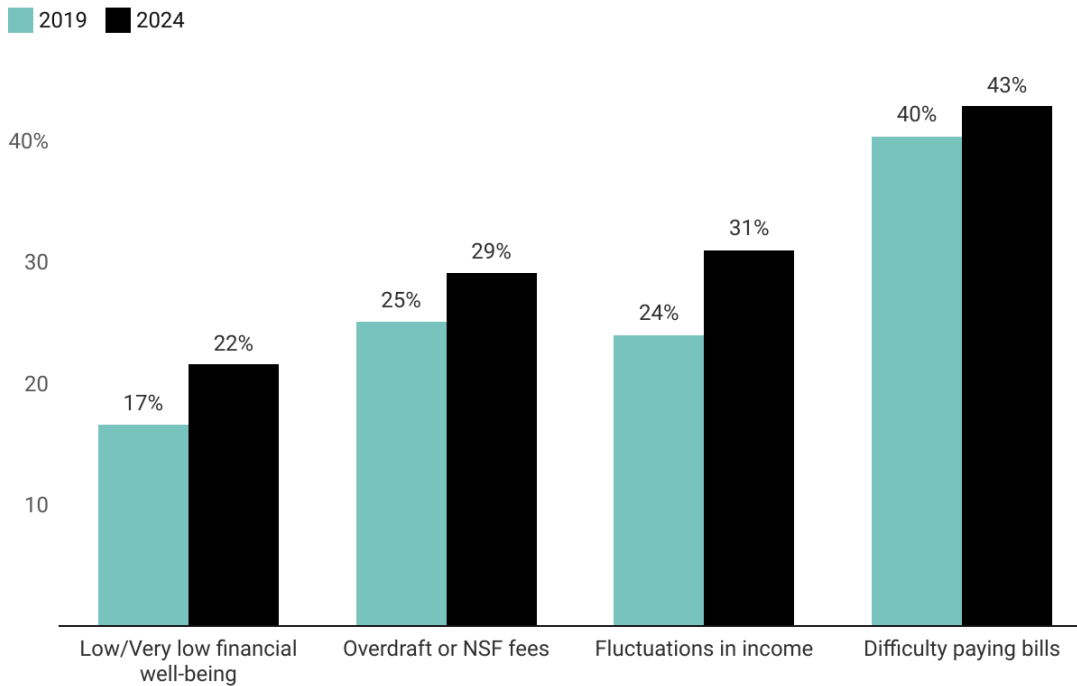% of US households experiencing forms of economic insecurity, 2019-2024

■ 2019 ■ 2024

Chart: Stephen Semler (@stephensemler | stephensemler.com) • Source: Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. • Created with Datawrapper

How to Improve Human Security

The deterioration in human security from 2019 to 2024 was not continuous. In 2020 and 2021, the tenor of political discourse was that the US had grossly overinvested in national security and badly underinvested in human security, resulting in the country being caught badly off-guard by COVID-19. Even quintessential establishment figures like Hillary Clinton argued that the pandemic should bring a "national security reckoning" where non-military threats would finally be taken as seriously as military ones, and budgeted for accordingly.

The US gestured toward the left's longstanding call for more welfare and less warfare in 2021. Military spending fell for the first time since 2015, while the welfare state peaked: between March 2020 and March 2021, a slew of emergency social welfare programmes accumulated through legislation and executive actions responding to COVID-19. The graph below displays the timing of several key pandemic aid policies.

The Rise and Fall of the Pandemic Welfare State

A snapshot of US pandemic aid, 2020–23
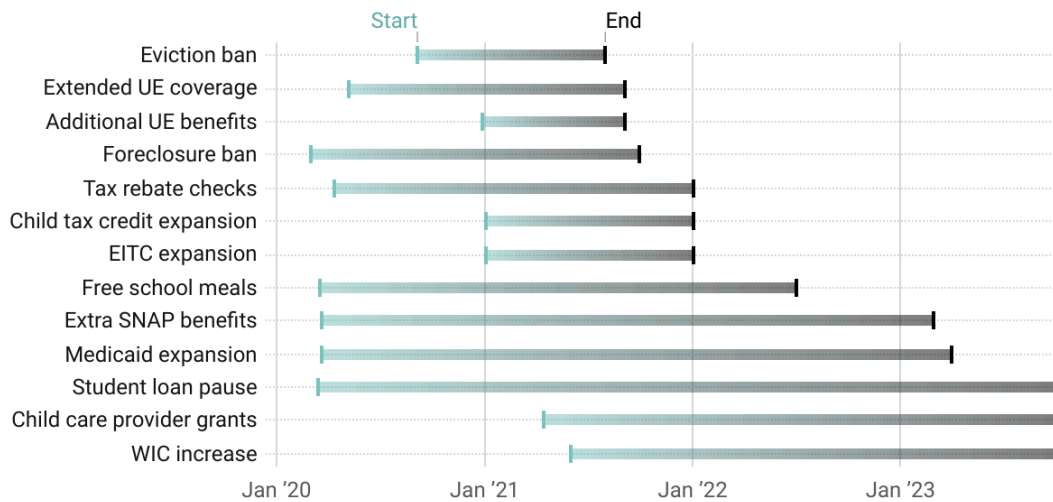
UE = unemployment, EITC = Earned Income Tax Credit, SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.

Chart: Stephen Semler (@stephensemler | stephensemler.com) • Created with Datawrapper

As the graph below illustrates, the pandemic welfare state led to an across-the-board improvement in economic (and food) security in 2021. The graph also shows the disastrous effects of dismantling it during a cost-of-living crisis. As social welfare sharply fell, it left the working class particularly exposed to an historic bout of inflation. From 2021 to 2022, the number of Americans in poverty grew by 60 per cent, from 26 million to 41 million — the largest documented year-to-year increase. Child poverty more than doubled from 5.2 per cent to 12.4 per cent — another record increase. Human security continued to deteriorate as more pandemic aid ended.

Ending Pandemic Aid Led to a Broad Surge in Insecurity

% experiencing forms of economic insecurity in the US, 2019–2024
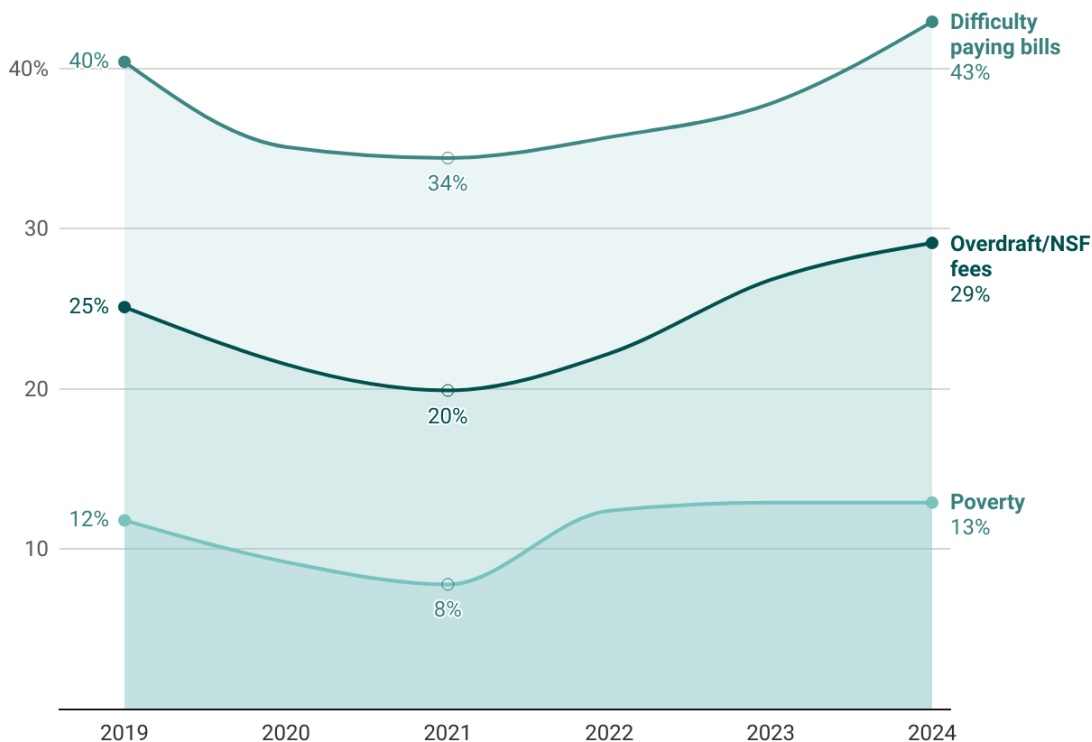
Data: Census Bureau, for share of total US population experiencing poverty (SPM); Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, for share of US households experiencing difficulty paying their bills and with overdraft or insufficient funds fees in the past 12 months. More: transitionsecurity.org

Chart: Stephen Semler (@stephensemler | stephensemler.com) • Created with Datawrapper

Biden Led the Democrats' Turn Away from Human Security

An historic expansion in welfare led to an historic improvement in human security in 2021, the first dimension of which — economic security — was voters' top concern ahead of the 2024 election. Kamala Harris' decision not to campaign on resurrecting a permanent version of the pandemic welfare state was a product of Biden's decision to abandon it. Instead of running on human insecurity and economic insecurity in particular, Harris campaigned on national security, courting neoconservatives and establishing herself as the more hawkish candidate. This too represented a continuation of Biden.

Biden's successful 2020 campaign focused on human security — the issues his campaign mentioned most were the pandemic, healthcare and economic conditions, and he promised multitrillion-dollar investments in social welfare

and climate as well as a higher minimum wage. However, by 2024, Biden had dropped his social welfare agenda and was marketing himself all but in name as a wartime president. Ultimately, the trillion-dollar-plus government investments Biden promised in climate and social welfare went to military contractors instead.

Biden's transformation from a human security to national security president not only shaped Harris' losing campaign, but the identity of the Democratic Party as a whole. Reflecting the pivot taken by Biden, the Democratic Party platform of 2024 was significantly less ambitious on social welfare and more militaristic on foreign policy. For instance, the 2020 version condemned Trump's plan to increase nuclear weapons spending — "the Trump Administration's proposal to build new nuclear weapons is unnecessary, wasteful and indefensible" — and committed to "reducing our overreliance and excessive expenditure" on them. However, after nuclear weapons spending greatly increased under Biden, Democrats' platform boasted that "the Biden Administration is modernising each leg of our nuclear triad" and pledged to "continue to invest" in nuclear arms.

The militarisation of Biden's — and consequently the Democratic Party's — security policy has been marked through three key political moments in which Biden prioritised national security ideology at the expense of human security. Together, the following cases suggest that a human security agenda aligns with, and likely demands, an anti-war foreign policy.

Warfare over welfare

The disintegration of the pandemic welfare state was not supposed to happen, at least according to the president at the time. The main intent of Biden's "Build Back Better" agenda — the centrepiece of his domestic platform —was to preserve the expansion of welfare. White House documents outlining Biden's agenda explicitly proposed making several pandemic aid programmes permanent.

The agenda's social welfare policies were outlined in March 2021 and later formalised into legislation. The Build Back Better bill included robust investments in childcare, education, healthcare and housing. Having failed to get it enacted before the end of 2021, Biden pushed for the bill's passage well into the next year. However, after Russia invaded Ukraine in late February 2022,

Biden rebranded himself as a national security president. He abandoned his welfare agenda, embraced social spending cuts and prioritised bigger military budgets. This is evident in both his words and actions.

The chart below plots Biden's tweets mentioning Build Back Better from his personal and presidential accounts, as well as those from the White House account. The first tweet mentioning it was on 31 March 2021; the last was on 17 February 2022. [4] During that period, Biden tweeted about Build Back Better 570 times — nearly twice per day, on average. After Russia's invasion, he tweeted about it zero times. Meanwhile, Biden tweeted about the national deficit 16 times before Russia's invasion. Biden tweeted about it 20 times in March 2022 alone.

Joe Biden Abandoned His Social Welfare Agenda, Embraced Austerity in Early 2022

Presidential mentions of Build Back Better and Deficit on Twitter, March 2021-June 2023
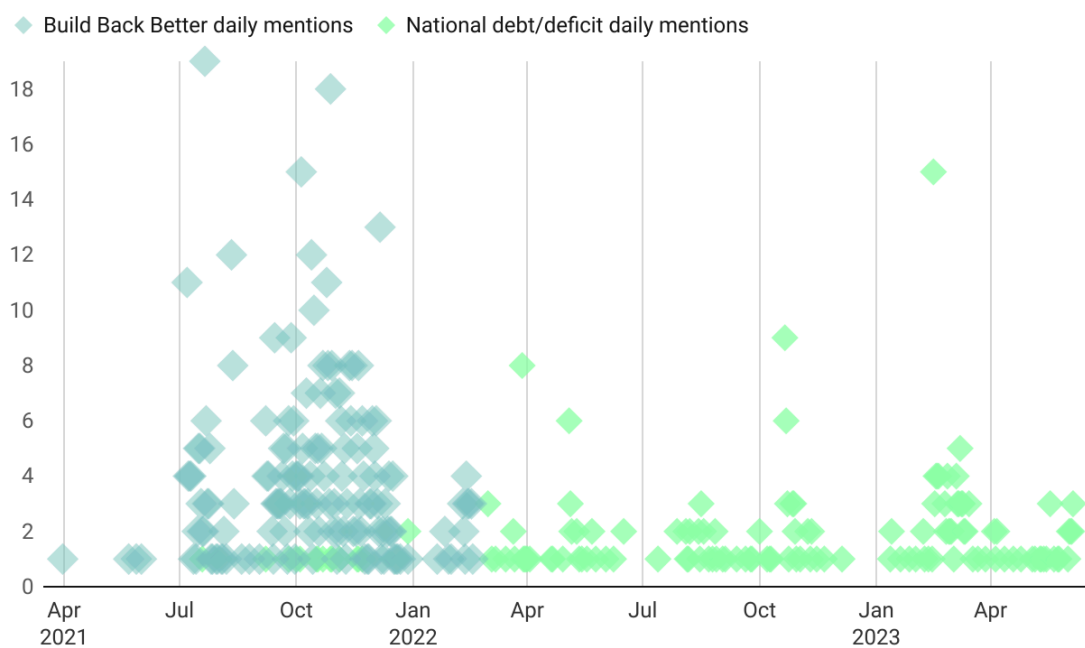

Chart: Stephen Semler (@stephensemler) • Source: Tweets from @joebiden, @potus, @whitehouse. • Created with Datawrapper

This discursive shift reflected a reversal of Biden's previously held policy priorities. In March 2022, Biden released his 2023 budget proposal. It omitted funding for Build Back Better's social programmes but included a significant increase in military spending. Biden said his proposal reflected his values. Of these values, he said:

> The first value is fiscal responsibility...This year we're on track to cut the deficit by more than 1 trillion 300 billion dollars...That would be the largest one-year reduction in the deficit in US history. The second value my budget reflects is security...This budget provides the resources we need to keep Americans safe, ensuring that our military remains the best-prepared, best-trained, best-equipped military in the world...this will be among the largest investments in our national security in history.

The increase was attributed to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but the military budget was already higher than at any point during the Cold War, and the US didn't fund its participation in the war using its regular military budget. Instead, Biden created a separate emergency fund for arming Ukraine and related expenses.

Meanwhile, despite an ongoing cost-of-living crisis, Biden insisted pandemic assistance should end. "Record economic and job growth has made it possible for us to...significantly cut back on emergency spending", he said. This departed significantly from the Biden of 2020 and 2021, who said that national economic recovery was not enough; economic recovery must happen on a human level, too. Per a 2021 statement: "It is not enough to restore where we were prior to the pandemic. We need to build a stronger economy that does not leave anyone behind — we need to build back better". Cruelly, Biden boasted about reducing the deficit as pandemic assistance expired.

Not all aid programmes expired automatically, some had to be manually eliminated. Biden's 2023 budget was enacted in late 2022 as the last major spending bill of the Democrat-controlled Congress. The bill eliminated two key pandemic welfare policies — an expansion of Medicaid (healthcare) and enhanced SNAP benefits (food assistance), the latter of which kept over 4 million people out of poverty — and increased the military budget by $76 billion. Two-thirds of the $1.7 trillion legislation went to military and policing programmes.

Military aid over public health

In April 2022, Biden proposed an emergency funding bill. One part was $23 billion for the pandemic response. "To avoid needless deaths in the United States and around the world", Biden wrote, "I urge the Congress to include this

much needed, life-saving COVID funding as part of this supplemental funding request". The White House outlined the "urgent need for additional COVID-19 response funding and the severe consequences of congressional inaction", having warned that "without additional resources, we won't be able to secure the treatments, vaccines, and tests Americans need". The second part of the bill was $33 billion for the war in Ukraine.

In May 2022, Biden issued a statement urging Congress to strip COVID-19 funding from the bill to expedite military aid to Ukraine:

> I had recommended that Congress take overdue action on much needed funding for COVID treatments, vaccines and tests, as part of the Ukraine Supplemental bill. However, I have been informed...that such an addition would slow down action on the urgently needed Ukrainian aid. We cannot afford delay in this vital war effort. Hence, I am prepared to accept that these two measures move separately, so that the Ukrainian aid bill can get to my desk right away.

The bill Biden signed into law contained $40 billion for the war in Ukraine and $0 for COVID-19. The pandemic funding was ultimately never enacted. Despite that, Biden continued pushing people to return to in-person work. During his 2022 State of the Union address, Biden said "it's time for Americans to get back to work...people working from home can feel safe and begin to return to the office".

Military aid for Israel over childcare

In October 2023, Biden released two funding proposals. The first included a record amount of military aid for Israel. Biden fought harder for it than he did for anything else. He delivered a rare Oval Office address specifically to market the plan — something he never did for Build Back Better or any other proposal — and designated it as an emergency request. In the months that followed, he personally ensured it remained at the top of Congress's agenda, even if this meant delaying other legislative business. When it got stuck in Congress, Biden emphasised its importance by re-requesting the funding in his next annual budget proposal (he never re-requested Build Back Better funding). His efforts paid off: the $95 billion foreign aid bill (originally named the National Security Act) passed in April 2024.

The second proposal included childcare funding. It was half the cost of the first and was not designated as an emergency request. While Biden repeatedly urged Congress to approve his foreign policy plan, there is not one recorded instance of him even mentioning the domestic proposal. The way it is written suggests Biden never meant it to be taken seriously: the foreign policy plan was a 69-page, formal legislative request addressed to the House Speaker; the domestic proposal was a two-page summary table. Biden never even formally submitted it to Congress. The proposal would have extended emergency grants to childcare providers that prevented the sector from collapsing during COVID-19. A provider described this funding to *The Intercept* as her "lifeline". The funding's expiration resulted in higher childcare costs and an atrophied workforce. Hardship among providers is now at a four-year high.

Conclusion

Economic insecurity accounts for the vast but often ignored hardship above the poverty line that is liable to harm everyone but the wealthy. It appears locked in at a crisis level: when Gallup asked US voters in 2025 about their financial situation, a record number said it was getting worse. The 53 per cent who said that surpasses the 49 per cent who said so during the 2008 financial crisis. Responses have come within five percentage points of that mark just five times, and all were in this decade.

Economic insecurity is the public's top concern, but conservatives have not offered a credible solution after campaigning on the spiralling cost of living, and liberals have not proved they care about it. Meanwhile, the left backs welfare expansion that has been shown to improve human security, and opposes reflexive increases in military spending that undermine both human and national security. A leftist security policy aligns with working-class interests. The left should invest in making this better known to expand its base.

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1. This is true when adjusted for inflation.

2. The only exception being one week in February 2024, where it was ranked as the second-most important issue.

3. Figures in current dollars. In constant dollars, this military spending increase amounts to a staggering 11 per cent increase above inflation. Here, military

spending refers to Function 050 ("National Defense") discretionary budget authority.

4. According to the White House press archives, the last time Biden publicly mentioned the Build Back Better plan outside of social media was on 2022, as of March 2024.