

# [***How the White House convinced Mike Johnson to back Ukraine aid***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BW5-0JG1-DY7V-G0Y7-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

Washington (CNN) &#8212; The [*Senate's vote on Tuesday to approve*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/23/politics/senate-vote-foreign-aid/index.html) new aid for [*Ukraine*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/22/europe/ukraine-awaits-us-military-aid-intl-cmd/index.html) capped off six months of public pressure and private overtures by the White House to build support, including the not-insignificant task of winning over House Speaker Mike Johnson.

For months, President Joe Biden and his team pressed the case for additional aid both publicly and privately, leaning into courting Johnson - whose young speakership was under pressure from his right flank - behind the scenes through White House meetings, phone calls and detailed briefings on the battlefield impacts, administration officials said.

Grappling with the leadership dynamics in a House GOP conference increasingly resistant to more aid, Biden directed his team to use every opportunity possible to lay out the consequences of inaction directly to Johnson. That included warnings of what it would mean not just for Ukraine, but also Europe and the US, if Russian President Vladimir Putin were to succeed, administration officials said.

The president specifically urged his team to lean into providing a full intelligence picture of Ukraine's battlefield situation in their conversations with the speaker and his staff as well as discussing the national security implications for the US, officials said. That push played out over the next six months - starting with a Situation Room briefing one day after Johnson became speaker.

National security adviser Jake Sullivan and Office of Management and Budget Director Shalanda Young briefed the speaker and other key lawmakers on how aid for Ukraine was running out, putting the country's efforts to fight off Russia in jeopardy. Biden stopped by the meeting and met with Johnson on the side to convey a similar message. Sullivan followed up four days later with a call to Johnson to highlight the measures in place to track aid in Ukraine.

But Johnson quickly made clear aid for Ukraine and Israel would need to be separated - an approach the White House opposed and one that would be tested time and time again in the coming months.

The ordeal ended on Tuesday when the Senate [*passed the $95 billion foreign aid package,*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/23/politics/us-ukraine-military-aid-package/index.html) with nearly $61 billion for Ukraine, marking a long-sought foreign policy win for Biden, who has spent the past two years rallying Western support for the war-torn country in its fight against Russia. At the same time, the president has been grappling with his own battle back home to get more aid approved amid resistance from some Republicans. Biden signed that legislation - which also provides over $26 billion for Israel and humanitarian assistance and more than $8 billion for the Indo-Pacific, including Taiwan - on Wednesday morning.

He alluded to the long process to get the aid passed in a speech marking the bill becoming law, saying, "I'm grateful for all those in Congress - Democrats, Republican, independents - who voted for this bill. Its path to my desk - it was a difficult path. It should have been easier and it should have gotten there sooner. But in the end, we did what America always does: We rose to the moment, we came together and we got it done."

Biden sought to make the case for a robust aid package early on, using a primetime Oval Office address in mid-October to tie Ukraine's battle against Russia to Israel's nascent war with Hamas as he prepared to make a new funding request to Congress.

"Hamas and Putin represent different threats, but they share this in common: They both want to completely annihilate a neighboring democracy, completely annihilate it," Biden said in that speech "We can't let petty partisan, angry ***politics*** get in the way of our responsibilities as a great nation. We cannot and will not let terrorists like Hamas and tyrants like Putin win."

Biden tells his team not to attack Johnson

Less than a week after that speech, the White House faced the task of working with a new House speaker who was relatively unknown to them and had previously voted against assistance for Ukraine as a rank-and-file member.

The president tasked his team with staying in regular contact with Johnson, House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, a staunch supporter of more aid for Ukraine.

Another early directive from the president to his team - try to refrain from targeted attacks against Johnson as much as possible and instead focus on the greater need for Republicans to act, hoping to give more space for productive conversations.

"He just kept saying, 'Keep talking. Keep working.' You know, keep finding ways to resolve differences. And that was his direction," said Steve Ricchetti, counselor to the president.

Richetti and Shuwanza Goff, director of legislative affairs, served as the main conduits between the White House and Johnson and his team. Ricchetti spoke regularly with Johnson over the past four weeks and traveled up to Capitol Hill with Goff to meet with Johnson and his team in December and March. They spoke often with Johnson's staff, including meetings at the White House and on Capitol Hill.

Meanwhile, White House chief of staff Jeff Zients, Ricchetti and Goff spoke with Schumer and Jeffries and their staff almost daily to strategize on how to push Ukraine aid forward. Zients, Ricchetti, Goff and Young also stayed in regular contact with McConnell, who was eager to push the effort along in the Senate.

The administration also facilitated regular briefings for House members on Ukraine, working closely with the bipartisan national security committee chairs, including House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul and Chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence Michael Turner.

CIA Director Bill Burns hosted Johnson's staff in late March to talk through the dire situation in Ukraine on top of briefings for Republican chairs of the relevant national security committees.

The US Ambassador to Ukraine Bridget Brink met with Johnson, McConnell, and other GOP senators as well as House and Senate Republican staff. The Defense Department held briefings for House Republicans, and the administration also briefed Reps. Chip Roy of Texas and Ralph Norman of South Carolina at Johnson's request, administration officials said.

Over at the White House, Biden's senior team gathered at an oval table in Zients' office each morning to run through how to stress the need for more aid. Those meetings included Zients, Ricchetti, Goff, Young, senior adviser Anita Dunn, Sullivan and deputy national security adviser Jon Finer.

The border becomes a sticking point

Just after Thanksgiving, the president urged his advisers to make clear funding was drying up and Congress needed to act. Young, Sullivan and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin met with congressional leadership to convey that message. Young sent a sharply worded letter to lawmakers warning the US will [*"kneecap Ukraine on the battlefield" if funding was not approved.*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/04/politics/white-house-congress-ukraine-funding/index.html)

The White House even tapped Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to make a direct pitch to Johnson in a meeting just before Christmas in Washington, DC. But even Biden seemed to acknowledge [*the challenging road ahead for Ukraine*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/06/politics/biden-ukraine-aid/index.html) aid as he met with Zelensky at the White House, saying the US would continue to provide weapons and military equipment to the country for "as long as we can," a subtle shift from his previous pledge to support Ukraine "as long as it takes."

After entering the year without a deal in hand, the president invited Johnson, McConnell, Jeffries, Schumer and the national security committee chairs to the White House to make the case for aid to Ukraine. Sullivan and Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines outlined specific examples of the possible ramifications of not getting Ukraine additional US funding.

But those conversations further laid bare the need for action to address an influx of migrants at the US southern border that had become too big of a political problem for the president and his aides to ignore. Republican and Democratic senators had been working for months on a border security measure to couple with aid for Ukraine and Israel. A bipartisan group of senators eventually came [*together on a deal in early February*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/04/politics/senate-border-foreign-aid-bill/index.html) and the door appeared to be open.

[*At former President Donald Trump's urging*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/07/politics/senate-border-ukraine-israel-aid-vote/index.html), the door closed and the deal fell apart. Biden publicly blamed Republicans in Congress for the [*failed package.*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/17/politics/biden-zelensky-congress-ukraine-aid/index.html)

Foreign aid bill moves forward on its own

Senate leaders then moved forward with the bipartisan supplemental national security package without a border deal soon after, putting the ball back in Johnson's court in the House.

Biden hosted Johnson and congressional leaders again at the White House at the end of February to discuss efforts to avoid a partial government shutdown and push for greater aid for Ukraine. Burns was on hand to run through how Ukraine had been impacted as its troops dealt with low munitions with the aid bill languishing as the war hit the two year mark.

In the six weeks that followed, administration officials saw a sense of urgency pick up as lawmakers continued to receive more assessments and briefings on the battlefield landscape. But Iran's attack on Israel on April 13 also altered the dynamic, with momentum for getting assistance to Israel building in the days that followed.

One day after the attack, Johnson indicated to Jeffries that he was ready to support foreign aid, a move that infuriated his right flank and has put the future of his speakership in jeopardy. Biden and Johnson spoke by phone the next day as the speaker briefed him on his plan to move the aid package forward. The speaker told reporters he moved ahead with the aid votes due to "precipitating events around the globe."

Sources previously told CNN a briefing from Burns, who painted a dire picture of the situation on the battlefield for Ukraine and the global consequences of inaction, was part of Johnson's motivation in pushing the aid package forward, even as his own political future was up in the air.

The House ultimately passed the $95 billion aid package on Saturday - a moment Biden celebrated in separate calls with the speaker and Jeffries. The Ukraine aid measure passed with the support of 210 Democrats and 101 Republicans

Ahead of the final passage, Biden spoke with Zelensky on Monday, assuring him help was on the way after months of waiting.

"We discussed the contents of the next US military aid package," Zelensky said. "The president has assured me that the package will be approved quickly and that it will be powerful, strengthening our air defense as well as long-range and artillery capabilities."

By Arlette Saenz, CNN

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