

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH CONGRESSMAN HOWARD “BUCK” MCKEON

SUBJECT: THE U.S. EFFORT IN AFGHANISTAN

MODERATOR: MYRON BELKIND, PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

LOCATION: NATIONAL PRESS CLUB BALLROOM, WASHINGTON, D.C.

TIME: 12:30 P.M. EDT

DATE: MONDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2014

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MYRON BELKIND: (Sounds gavel.) Good afternoon, and welcome. My name is Myron Belkind. I'm an adjunct professor at the George Washington University School of Media and Public Affairs, a former International Bureau Chief for the Associated Press, and the 107th President of the National Press Club. The National Press Club is the world's leading professional organization for journalists committed to our profession's future through our programming with events such as this while fostering a free press worldwide. For more information about the National Press Club, please visit our website at www.press.org. To donate to programs offered to the public through our National Press Club Journalism Institute, please visit www.press.org/institute.

On behalf of our members worldwide, I'd like to welcome our speaker and those of you attending today's event. Our head table includes guests of our speaker as well as working journalists who are Club members. If you hear applause in our audience, I'd note that members of the general public are also attending, so it's not necessarily evidence of a lack of journalistic objectivity.

I'd also like to welcome our C-SPAN and Public Radio audiences. You can follow the action on Twitter using the hashtag NPCLunch. After our guest's speech concludes, we'll have a question and answer period. I will ask as many questions as time permits. Now it's time to introduce our head tables. I'd ask each of you to stand briefly as your name is announced.

From your right, Marc Schanz, Senior Editor, *Air Force Magazine*; Ellen Mitchell, Associate Editor, *Inside the Army*; Rachel Oswald, reporter, Global Security

Newswire; John Noonan, Deputy Communications Director, House Armed Services Committee, and a guest of the speaker; Jonathan Salant, reporter, Bloomberg News and a past President of the National Press Club; Patricia McKeon, wife of Chairman McKeon; Jerry Zremski, with the *Buffalo News* and Chairman of the NPC Speakers Committee and a past President of the National Press Club.

Skipping over the speaker for a moment, Pat Host, *Defense Daily*, and Speakers Committee member who organized today's event; Bob Simmons, Staff Director of the House Armed Services Committee, and guest of the speaker; Max Lederer, Publisher of *Stars and Stripes*; Kevin Wensing, United States Navy, retired; John Donnelly, Editor of CQ Roll Call's Executive Briefing Defense, and Chair of the National Press Club's Freedom of the Press committee. (Applause)

Congressman Buck McKeon, Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, is our guest today to discuss the U.S. effort in Afghanistan. A recent Gallup poll says that for the first time in the nearly 13 year old war, more Americans think the 2001 invasion was a mistake than think it was the right action. But McKeon says the United States' duties in Afghanistan are far from complete. He says President Obama has not disclosed his true plans for Afghanistan and has turned his focus elsewhere.

He's also been critical of President Obama's role as Commander in Chief, saying that a President must better communicate with the troops and the public than Obama has. Chairman McKeon, a California Republican, has announced he will not seek a 12th term in Congress. He cited, in part, gridlock, on Capitol Hill. During his 21 years in Congress, McKeon has been an advocate for increased spending for the Pentagon. At a recent Armed Services Committee meeting, McKeon said Defense Department budget pressures have hamstrung the military, forcing leaders to cut end strength, readiness and capabilities when they can least afford it. Please join me in welcoming to the National Press Club, Chairman Buck McKeon. (Applause)

CONGRESSMAN MCKEON: Well, thank you very much. Thank you for having me, thank you for being here this afternoon and I'm glad to have my wife here with me. She was introduced as my wife, she's also a mother of six and a grandmother of 30 and a great-grandmother of one. (Applause)

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to say a few things today that I think need to be said and I think are very important. For nearly 13 years now, the United States has been at war in Afghanistan. We're there because Afghanistan was used as a launch pad for attacks that killed Americans. We have a responsibility for the safety and security of our citizens. We have a responsibility and we will not abandon that responsibility, no matter how tough the fight is.

If you read polls, you'll hear, as was said, that the American support for Afghanistan has dropped below 20 percent. If you listen to the news, you'll hear about a hopeless campaign to win the unwinnable. That's if you hear about it at all. Looking at those barometers, the American people know two things: they know that the war is going

badly and they know that their neighbors oppose us being there. However, I'm sure you've heard it said, just because I know it doesn't make it so. Neither polls nor the press paint the full picture. They never tell the full story. That story is a hopeful one; not blindly so, but hopeful nonetheless.

Traditionally, it's right and proper that these stories come from the Commander in Chief. But he's talked about Afghanistan only a handful of times during his presidency. And each time, President Obama has praised his run for the exits or pitied our wounded instead of lauding the accomplishments of our troops and the importance of the mission that they were given to fight. So if the President of the United States won't give this speech, I will.

In 2001, after the worst attack on U.S. soil since Pearl Harbor, the United States invaded Afghanistan. The very act of toppling the Taliban regime was both strategically and technologically astounding. In three months' time, America and her allies knocked down a regime 7,000 miles away in landlocked, mountainous terrain. We dropped soldiers into a combat zone with a brutal climate, with no support other than by air, and a tough, determined enemy fighting on his home turf.

We asked them to establish supply lines that any logistics officer would call impossible. We asked them to fight a war they hadn't been trained for in a land that had buried the most powerful empires in the world. But not only did they succeed, they kicked the Taliban down in three months. That's less than a semester to their college friends back at home.

Then, we asked them to do something even harder. Make no mistake, an insurgency is the hardest type of war a democracy can fight. Holding a new country steady with insurgents hiding among innocents can take years. It took the British 12 years to put down the Malayan communists. The insurgency in Northern Ireland took decades to resolve. Last week, I visited our Colombian friends who have fought a narco-insurgency since the '60s. They're finally nearing the finish line. These fights can be won, but they take time, patience and treasure. And all those things usually come in short supply with voters.

I won't sugarcoat it. The American people are sick and tired of this war and it is their will, not the enemy's, that will determine Afghanistan's fate. It's the will of the American people that's the most important weapon in this fight, not million dollar smart bombs or aircraft carriers.

So here are the questions that we have to ask ourselves: is Afghanistan less of a threat to the United States than it was 13 years ago? Is it a better place than it was 13 years ago? Is America safer than it was on September 10th, 2001? Take a good, hard look at what's actually happening out there and each of those answers comes back a resounding yes. For the life of me, I can't figure out why the President hasn't taken credit for these victories. The gains since 2009 are threefold; strategic, diplomatic, and moral. Let's talk about strategy for a moment.

Now, I think it was the height of foolishness to announce a surge, and in the very same breath, the end date for the surge. I think the idea of military strategy being done by White House staffers rather than military planners, as some reports have suggested, is worthy of a head examination. I think that when our generation's sharpest counterinsurgency mind, General Petraeus, asks for more troops, then give him more troops. But even though the way that this White House has run this war has been outrageous, with White House staffers telling four star generals their business, there has been unmistakable progress. That progress has come on the backs of our troops.

Specialist Ty Carter woke up one night to find his outpost being overrun by 300 enemy fighters. He not only stood his ground, he ran over a hundred meters through enemy fire to save a wounded soldier, a hundred meters. That's longer than a football field. And when he reached his friend, Ty shouldered him and carried him back. He carried him back through over 300 feet of grenades and bullets, a man slung on his shoulders. You know, here we think it's a big deal when somebody returns a pigskin a hundred yards for a touchdown when 11 men are trying to tackle him. Compare that.

Sergeant Dakota Meyer was ambushed on patrol in southern Afghanistan. He learned that four Americans and Afghan soldiers were cut off. He joined with a fellow Marine and broke through the ambush, just the two of them, bringing his comrades back to safety and knocking down anyone who stood in their way.

Janis Shinwari, an Afghan interpreter, was walking down the road with an American intelligence officer. When two Taliban fighters snuck up on them, Janis acted quickly. He killed the two Taliban before they could kill his American friend. The Taliban marked him for death, but Janis was luckier than most. He survived and was reunited with his American friend at Reagan National Airport last October as one of America's newest residents. (Applause)

It's a national disgrace that a traitor like Edward Snowden is a household name and Ty Carter, Dakota Meyer, and Janis Shinwari, are not. Those men are the muscle and fiber of a strategy that is working. Those men did what some would consider impossible; their stories should be told and retold over and over again. Not just those heroes, but our troops as well. In 2009, coalition forces have lost entire sections of the map to a resurgent Taliban. Every day there were attacks, populated areas had become spawning pools of enemy activity. The Taliban were back, a deadly enemy that would burn their entire country to the ground if it meant keeping a woman out of school.

The Taliban came back, but so did our coalition. When the enemy's annual summer offensive kicked off in 2012, we were ready for them. They threw everything they had at us and we stopped them cold. The Taliban were dug into the cities like ticks, we booted them out. The enemy failed in every regard to achieve its military objectives during their last several offenses.

Here is the tectonic shift that has happened since 2009. The blossoming Afghan National Security Forces, of the ANSF. When I went to Afghanistan in 2010, I had a long talk with the officer in charge of training Afghanistan's security forces. He told me a story. An American sergeant who was training his Afghan counterparts asked him to put four rounds into their weapon. The Afghan soldiers didn't know what four was. They weren't dumb, they were illiterate. They hadn't had the opportunity that we have to get an education. Education was just one of the infinite problems we faced standing up a new army and a new police force. Some of our instructors expressed outright hopelessness that the Afghans would survive their first contact with the enemy.

Well, what a difference a couple of years makes. That same year I visited, we educated 70,000 Afghans up to the third grade level. They know what four is. They now can communicate much better. They carry their schoolbooks, they're happy with the opportunity to get some education. And the ANSF has nearly doubled in size since 2009. Today, 95 percent of conventional operations and 98 percent of special operations, are done by the ANSF. They have nearly 370,000 people in uniform there to beat back an enemy that's smaller, geographically constrained and still smarting from the clobbering that our surge forces gave them.

During the 2013 fighting season, the ANSF took the combat lead. They made gains, they built on those gains and they secured those gains. These guys were taking their baby steps not five years ago. Today, they're holding onto territory that took a 50-nation coalition to win. I met with the Afghan commanders; they're capable. They can take the fight to our shared enemy and they're ready for that fight.

The Taliban can mount attacks, but that's about it. They're not trying to capture well-defended targets because they can't hold them. The Afghan Security Forces have a numerical edge. The Taliban doesn't try to hold on to territory for long periods anymore because the Afghans make it hurt when they try.

Here's what it all means: the biggest uncertainties we face in Afghanistan are no longer military. They're diplomatic and they are moral. It's hard to understate the diplomatic successes of the past several years. In May of 2012, President Obama and President Karzai signed a strategic partnership agreement. We declared them a major non-NATO ally and the Afghans ratified the agreement with both Houses of Parliament.

Also in May of 2012, the international community got behind the effort. In Chicago, NATO pledged to support Afghanistan through 2017. In July at the Tokyo Conference, the wider international community declared its support for Afghanistan with a promise of \$16 billion worth of assistance.

One of the tougher nuts to crack has been Pakistan. It's no secret that the Pakistanis and the Taliban have some shared history. There's no need for rose-colored glasses here. Relations between the U.S., Pakistan and Afghanistan are a Gordian knot. Yet, we're finally starting to shake some progress loose. Pakistan and Afghanistan had both acknowledged that stability in both their countries is symbiotic. Problems in one

means problems in the other. Relations between the two countries are thawing. That started with President Karzai's visit with Prime Minister Sharif last September. Official state visits are well and good. But what I'm really watching is the military to military relations. Pakistan and Afghanistan have gotten the ball rolling there, the relationship has improved but slowly.

I was happy to see the three-way talks between senior ISAF, Pakistani and Afghan leaders. And just as happy to see the same meetings held at lower levels. We have a long ways to go, but these baby steps have paved the way for giant leaps down the road.

With that progress in mind, we have a real problem heading our way with the bilateral security agreement. That agreement is the legal framework we need to continue the mission there until the mission is finished.

I told you that ANSF had made some incredible gains; that's true. But I also said this is a force that's only five years old. But plainly, without our support and that support includes presence and money, the Afghan Security Forces can't execute. The remaining gaps aren't unreasonable for a five year old force. They need help with the logistics, with administration, pay and leave, with air support, with intelligence. But filling these gaps doesn't mean that America's sons and daughters will be stuck on the front lines forever. President Karzai has refused to sign the agreement that allows us to provide that support. That's a problem.

The Afghan people have been amazing allies. President Karzai has not. But let's not pin our hopes on one man, especially one man who is packing his bags in a few months. The Loya Jirga, 2,500 leaders from all around the country, have overwhelmingly supported the BSA. Polls show that 70 percent of Afghans want us to stay. They haven't forgotten how quickly we left after the Soviet occupation and how that ended up.

There's also an election coming up, and most of the presidential candidates support a long-term agreement with the United States. You don't need to look past Baghdad to see how quickly gains can unravel. We went into Afghanistan to do a job. Americans don't like starting things we don't intend to finish no matter how hard it may be. Locking down that BSA is the last big diplomatic step towards getting that job done permanently. It's vital to keep the coalition going. I'm sure the lack of a BSA will be the subject of intense discussion at the NATO ministerials meeting this week.

Finally, we owe it to ourselves to have a frank discussion about America's moral responsibility to Afghanistan. The Taliban are brutal. They are a cruel, barbaric horde and their kind has no place in the 21st century. We abandoned Afghanistan to the Taliban once before and both the United States and the people of Afghanistan paid the price.

America leads the world. Leadership has responsibilities. There are times when democracies must take a look inward. There are times when we must come to terms with the burden of our values. Afghanistan is one of those moments. Do we step back and

abandon Afghanistan to the wolves? Do we still have a moral responsibility to the people there? Does our humanity still compel us to help people who have known nothing but war for four decades? The American people are prudent people. They know we have problems here at home. They know we're buried under a mountain of debt. But they are also a compassionate people. We haven't just made strategic and diplomatic gains, but moral gains as well.

It's worth asking: is there anything in Afghanistan that gives us hope? You're darn right there is. (Applause) The improvements in social development made over the past decade have finally given these good people a chance. Afghanistan has made the largest percentage gain of any country in the world in basic health and development indicators. For example, in the year 2000, male life expectancy was 37 years. Today, it's 56.

In 2000, fewer than 5 percent of Afghans had cell phones. Now, over 60 percent do including 48 percent of the women. In 2003, there were just 450 health facilities in all of Afghanistan including hospitals. Now, there are more than 1,800. Only the privileged few had internet a decade ago. Today, over 65 percent of the population has access to an internet connection. Nearly half a million of them have Facebook accounts.

When the Taliban ruled, only two international airlines dared to fly into Kabul. Today, there are 12 that service most of Afghanistan's major cities. I visited Afghanistan many years ago before the surge fully kicked in. I couldn't go to the city of Marjah in the south. It was a Taliban stronghold. I went back after the surge and the city was in friendly hands. The Marines had done their job. While we were there, we helped open a school, not a school like our kids get to go to here, a school built out of adobe with a couple of classrooms and some tents with 10 teachers and 500 excited young children, about a third of them girls. That is a memory that I will hold onto for the rest of my life.

The Afghan Ministry of Education estimates that nearly eight million children are attending school. That's up from one million when we went in. The number includes three million girls. Today, there are over 13,000 general education schools over Afghanistan's 35 provinces. The Taliban's beliefs always depended on low education, particularly in the rural areas. The old Afghanistan, the one the Taliban ruled, is crumbling. In 2002, there were only 32 miles of paved road. Now there's around 7,500 miles.

Around the same time, there were a quarter of a million electricity connections. That number has since tripled. In 2001, Voice of Sharia was the only news source. Today, there are some 70 TV stations with most of the population within broadcast range. Illiteracy, isolation, and poverty are the chains the Taliban uses to bond the Afghan people into submission. But Afghanistan is starting to break those chains.

Extraction of oil and precious metals could account for 45 percent of their GDP within a decade. The rural populations gaining access to roads, electricity and irrigation networks. What's changing slowly is Afghanistan itself. Afghans don't want what the

Taliban is selling. Their ineptitude at governance, their heavy hand, their brutal treatment of the Afghan people only quickens their slow arc to the grave.

One ray of hope is progress made towards women's rights. A young lady named Bibi Aisha can attest to how things used to be. She was forced to marry at 14. She fled that marriage so the Taliban made an example of her. Bibi's nose and ears were cut off. She was left in the mountains to die but was later rescued by the Army. Today, she's a grim reminder of what these men do when they run things.

The Taliban threw women out of schools and out of work. Around a quarter of government employees were women in 1996. That was until the Taliban decreed it was immoral for women to work. Today, there are constitutionally protected seats for women in the Afghan parliament. Many presidential appointees are required to be female, and women have crept back up to 20 percent of the government's workforce.

There are now 40,000 young women attending public and private universities or technical institutes with more enrolling each year. We've had women from our Congress, most of them from our Armed Services Committee, that have gone to Afghanistan for the last several years and they have met with the same women each time. They've seen the progress that's happened with these women and they've heard the stories that these women are scared to death of the Taliban coming back because they will be the first ones killed.

Now look. There's still huge cultural challenges here. Afghanistan is not going to turn into Sweden over night. When I visited recently, General Dunford made a point that stuck with me. He said that it's essential, absolutely essential, that we make the Taliban carry the baggage of their history. You cannot bridge the gap between the Taliban and a civil society. That civil society is just now starting to bear fruit. The Taliban are running out of time.

Mullah Omar used to say that the Americans have a clock, but he has the time. Now the Afghans are the ones with the time and that's why you're now seeing a desperate Taliban flirting with political settlement. At some point, a decade of opportunity in Afghanistan is going to catch up with the Taliban. It will catch them, it will blow right past them, and the Taliban will be left in the dust.

There is a moral charge here and the American people have answered it. And we should be proud that we answered it. I don't want to sound like I'm just painting silver linings especially when they are unwarranted. There's no question that Afghanistan is still a monumental challenge. But what I find astounding is that the President won't acknowledge these victories. I'm astounded he won't give this speech. Why on Earth will he not take credit for his own strategy, for his own success stories?

At WhiteHouse.gov/Iraq, you'll get an interactive timeline praising the end of the Iraq War. They eagerly take credit for leaving Iraq. You can ask the Iraqis how that's been going for them. In startling contrast, there's nothing special or even prominent about

what our troops have achieved in Afghanistan, what the President once referred to as “the good war.”

Go to WhiteHouse.gov/Afghanistan and you'll find a photo of the Presidential seal hanging on a vacant podium. It reads, “Sorry, the page you're looking for can't be found.” Even the White House blog on their Afghan/Pakistan strategy hasn't been updated in a blue moon. Does the White House really think they can pretend a war isn't happening? At the beginning of the Obama Presidency, less than 30 percent of Americans thought the Afghanistan war was a mistake. Just last week, and for the first time ever, Gallup found the majority of Americans now believe the war was in error.

Counterinsurgencies have two fronts: the one out there, and the one right here. The troops have held their line out there, the President has not held the line here. By letting the public support for the war erode, the President has cost himself political capital that could have been used to solve a number of points. There were even times when the President openly campaigned against his own strategy. He floated trial balloons about abandoning Afghanistan and sent his political operatives out to stoke fatigue and hopelessness.

Our troops have sweat and bled to bring this fight to a finish. So has a multinational coalition. So have the Afghan people. Some have suffered, some have conquered, some have felt lost, some have felt victory, and some have beat incredible odds. It's not much to ask that every once in a while we hear about these accomplishments from our Commander in Chief.

We deserve to hear about the steps forward. We deserve to hear and understand why we fight. I've spent 20 years in Congress. I understand that politics can affect judgment, but placing politics above duty is tragic. It is tragic and it is unforgivable. The American people and our armed forces deserve better. If the troops fight for the mission abroad, the President better fight for their mission here at home. Anything less is a dereliction of duty. This country was built on the backs of great challenges, things we didn't want to experience, things we didn't want to do. Afghanistan is one of those challenges.

But let's look at the results. The President has sustained international support for this new democracy. He went out and found billions in aid to help lift them out of despair. He kept the coalition of countries willing to send troops to fight with us. And as a direct result of his military strategy, Afghanistan is freer and America is safer. That should be a source of pride, a piece of President Obama's legacy, not some shameful burden never to be spoken of.

Mr. President, you may have stumbled there, but a safe and secure Afghanistan is within our grasp. Don't let it slip away. (Applause) Thank you.

MR. BELKIND: If you'll just stand on the right, I'll ask a question and then I'll stand back.

CONGRESSMAN MCKEON: Sure.

MR. BELKIND: Thank you, Chairman McKeon. What can Congress do to insure that Afghanistan stays secure? What can you do legislatively to challenge the President's withdrawal plan?

CONGRESSMAN MCKEON: Well, those are things that we're working on. Every year, we pass a National Defense Authorization Act. We will be addressing those issues, I'm sure, in that bill this year. We have the Secretary of Defense going to the NATO meeting this week. He's going without a number of commitment troops that we would leave behind to continue on the mission of training and supporting the Afghan troops. I think it would have been much better if the President had made the decision and given that number.

I think I visit with a lot of our NATO allies. They've asked me, "Where do we go from here?" They've already made commitments. They need to have that number established. I think Congress can address that in our bill, and I think we can keep continuing to apply pressure. We want the same end, we want the same goal. We want a safe, secure, free Afghanistan. We're just kind of fighting over the strategies of how that happens, and we'll get there.

MR. BELKIND: Your speech doesn't advocate or describe a clear U.S. mission in Afghanistan post-2014. Do you call for a continued counterinsurgency mission, a larger U.S. military footprint or a smaller force to do the kind of narrow missions envisioned by President Obama?

CONGRESSMAN MCKEON: Well, the President is the Commander in Chief and it's up to him to make the final determination. But I have talked to General Dunford. There is a plan, there's a very clear plan, and all he's asking for is sufficient number of U.S. and NATO troops to remain behind to support in the areas that I mentioned in the speech; the intel, the logistics and things that the Afghans are not yet able to do for themselves for the next couple of years to provide those things so that when we leave, we don't do what happened in Iraq and leave the country to falter and have all of the problems that we see confronting them on a daily basis.

So it's just a matter of a limited number of troops behind to support and to sustain that effort. I think we have that all outlined and General Dunford has that, and I know he's talked to the President about that. And we'll hope that that is what we end up with.

MR. BELKIND: You mentioned White House staffers telling generals their business. Can you cite some examples that concern you?

CONGRESSMAN MCKEON: I said it has been reported, or stated, and I'm reading a book that mentions that by Secretary Gates.

MR. BELKIND: I guess Secretary Gates is a good source, you would say?

CONGRESSMAN MCKEON: I wasn't in those meetings, but he was.

MR. BELKIND: Okay. I didn't know whether you wanted to elaborate with anything specific, but you'll leave it stand at that, I guess?

CONGRESSMAN MCKEON: I think-- read the book. (Laughter)

MR. BELKIND: What do you feel the United States learned most about warfare and about how to employ the might of the U.S. military in the service of national objectives from well over a decade fighting in Afghanistan?

CONGRESSMAN MCKEON: You know, somebody asked me-- I've been asked a few times-- what have we gotten for our money? What have we gotten for what we've done? And we've made tremendous advancements in many different ways. We've learned how to fight a counterinsurgency fight. We've made terrific gains in saving our wounded warriors' lives. In wars before this one, many people would have died that are now living. And we've made great gains in making their lives more full and complete. The country's really rallied around our wounded warriors and their families and their loved ones. And I think in many different ways, we've shown tremendous growth in the medical field.

Also, in intelligence gathering, in the ability to use drones to keep our people out of harm's way in many instances, we have drones in the air, we have them on the ground. They're able to discover and disable and dismantle IEDs. So a lot of things that have been very tough for us, we've made great gains in. And IEDs continue to be a problem around the world. It's a great source for terrorists and what we've learned during this time has been very beneficial and it helps us all around the world.

MR. BELKIND: You mentioned drones. The American reliance on battlefield drones has become highly controversial. What would you say to those that say the cost in civilian casualties has been so high that the over-reliance on drones has harmed U.S. national security by turning civilian populations against us?

CONGRESSMAN MCKEON: There's no question there have been civilians killed. But there have been civilians killed in every war that has ever been fought on this planet. And, I would say, probably fewer in this war. All you have to do is look at what's happening in Syria and Egypt and Libya and Ukraine and places where civilians are being killed.

But all of that focuses on one type of drone. There are many, many drones that are being used. There are small ones that troops can carry that help them see over the next hill what they can expect. There are some that even help to take out an enemy over on the next field. I think we would rather have our enemies die than our troops. And anything

that helps carry out that mission is something I think we should be happy that we have. I'd never want to send our troops into a fair fight, that doesn't make sense.

MR. BELKIND: As a backer of the Iraq War, do you think that conflict diverted attention away from Afghanistan and gave the Taliban a chance to regroup?

CONGRESSMAN MCKEON: I think it probably did. It's very difficult to fight two wars at the same time. But I think another thing that Secretary Gates mentions in his book is we probably should not concentrate so much on the negative but rather establish the fact we are where we are and what are we going to do about it going forward. I think Iraq was felt to be an important mission by the President. We carried out that mission. I believe that we won the war and we have not done very well with the peace.

I'm hopeful that we don't make the same mistakes in ending Iraq involvement that-- in Afghanistan that we made in Iraq.

MR. BELKIND: Why is it worth even one more U.S. service member dying in Afghanistan to stay there when we're working with a government that at times seems to be our enemy and fighting an insurgency that almost certainly won't be vanquished on the battlefield?

CONGRESSMAN MCKEON: I think I talked about that a little bit in the speech. And I think that is the problem, is our young people out there need to be told what their mission is, why they're fighting, why they're risking their lives over there. The cause is just and to think that we're doing all this for the Afghan government-- you know, we're talking about one guy. We're talking about President Karzai, really, let's just cut to the chase.

I said the Loya Jirga, who represents all of the people in that nation, strongly supports our presence there. They want us to be there. They appreciate what we're doing there. Karzai has political problems, or political ambitions or goals, or whatever. But we can't tie the whole-- everything to one man. This is a nation of many people and concentrate on the good things that we've been able to accomplish there. I don't want to see one person-- I attended three funerals in one week and I could tell you stories about each of those young men.

And I'll just say one thing: their families felt like what they were doing was worthwhile. If they heard some good things from our Commander in Chief, they'd feel a little better about the loss of their loved ones than never hearing anything about why we're there and what we're really there for. It's for our interests in addition to the Afghan people. Remember, I said at the outset, that was the launch pad where they attacked us in New York on 9-11.

MR. BELKIND: As we speak, Defense Secretary Hagel is unveiling a budget proposal that will shrink the Army to its smallest size since before World War II,

eliminate the A10 attack aircraft, and cut several other programs. What do you think about Secretary Hagel's budget proposal?

CONGRESSMAN MCKEON: We had a meeting this morning and he went over those things. I'm surprised any of you are here. I thought you'd all be over listening to his speech. But, I have been talking about these cuts for several years now. There's no secret if you cut a trillion dollars out of Defense, you're going to start cutting manpower, you're going to cut programs, and these things are important. In the last few years, we have changed our strategy that has stood us well since World War II, that we should be able to be equipped, ready to go two major contingencies at a time. We have cut that back to fight one and hold one. You know, maybe people have kind of not heard that speech that the President gave where we cut our strategy back. Then we switch, another speech he gave, to a Pacific-- pivot to the Pacific.

Well, it didn't say in there, but we're also cutting the Navy back to the smallest it's been since World War I. Now, granted the ships are much more powerful, the armies are much more powerful. But we haven't learned yet how to have a ship in two places at the same time. And when you cut from a 600-ship Navy that we had just a few years ago under President Reagan to one that is fast approaching 300 and 200, I really question that.

So I think that what we're trying to do is solve our financial problems on the backs of our military. And that can't be done. If it could be done, it shouldn't be done, but it can't be done. If we cut the whole military budget, if we cut the whole discretionary budget, just everything that we vote on annually as a Congress, eliminate all that, we would still be running a deficit of a half trillion dollars a year.

The real problem, the-- I was going to say the elephant in the room, but I'll just say the big animal in the room, gorilla in the room, that everybody's avoiding, is the mandatory spending. And unless we address that, we're just going to keep digging ourselves further and further in the hole. And that is the real problem. And we're trying to, like I say, solve it on the backs of our military. It can't be done.

MR. BELKIND: What are your priorities for marking up the fiscal year 2015 Defense Authorization Bill?

CONGRESSMAN MCKEON: Getting it done by October 1st. That is my main-- and you're going to hear-- that's all I'm going to be talking about between now and October. Because I'm really concerned, and I brought that up in the meeting this morning with the Big 8 and with the Secretary and General Dempsey. It's incumbent upon us to get that done. Last year, we got the Defense Authorization Bill done on the last day the Senate was in session or we would have missed it.

Now, we have passed that bill every year for 51 years, and some people think we have to do it for 52 years because we've done it for 51 years. No, we have to do it because there are certain authorities in there that help the military and our defense contractors do their jobs. If we had not passed that bill when we did on January 1st, the

construction of our aircraft carrier that takes five year down in Virginia to build, would have come to a stop. That would have ended up putting a lot of people out of work, would have ended up costing us more money and it's just not a way to do business.

So it's very important that we get that bill done. We're on a timeline to finish our bill in the House through committee and on the floor, early in June. Last year, the Senate got theirs out of committee about the same day that we passed ours on the floor. We could have immediately-- if they could have gone to the floor, we could have had our bill done in July. As it was, they never did get their bill passed on the floor. We finally had to have a conference with the bill that they passed out of committee, and we finally, as I said, they got it done in the Senate the last day of the session.

If that happens this year, think of this scenario. Everybody goes home to come-- Not me. But everybody that's running for reelection goes home October 1st to campaign. They come back after the election and then here's what happens. Let's just assume some scenarios, Republicans win the Senate. What is the incentive to finish up anything? Last year, they wanted to push it off to January even with no change. And I thought, "Now, why could they do it in January when they can't do it in June, July, August, September, October, November, December? What's magical about January when you got people coming back starting a new Congress?" Not the way to do business.

So it's very important, and that's my number one priority, is get the bill done. And if we don't get it done by the time they leave in October, then it will be very, very difficult and there will be a lot of momentum to say, "Oh, you know, we can do it next year." Not everybody understands the consequences of not getting it done. And it's the only bill we-- you know, Congress doesn't do anything else anyway. That's the bill we get done every year. So we'll work to get that done October 1st.

MR. BELKIND: It has now been more than a year since the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell. What is your sense as to how well the transition has gone to a military where openly gay soldiers and sailors can now serve along their straight colleagues?

CONGRESSMAN MCKEON: Well, this is fun, they're so easy questions. I don't really know. I know that it's not something that when I go visit the troops that I ask questions about. Perhaps I should. And maybe I will as we go around-- we're going to do, hopefully, some more traveling this year. We haven't done so much in the last several years. When I was first on this committee, we used to travel around a lot to visit the troops and to visit leaders of other nations and that would be something that I should probably ask about.

I've asked the leadership. They seem to think that it's moving okay. I think in our bill, we put that there would be automatic reviews of this and reports back to us. I haven't seen one of those yet, so I really can't give you a solid answer based on any criteria or facts.

MR. BELKIND: Why do you support Representative Thornberry as your successor as Armed Services Chair?

CONGRESSMAN MCKEON: Did I write that one? (Laughter) That one is an easy question. Mr. Thornberry and I came on to the Armed Services Committee at the same time. He's from Texas. He was elected in '94, I was elected in '92, but I didn't get on the committee my first term. So we came on the committee at the same time. We've sat next to each other for many years now. I've had the opportunity to watch him, I've visited his district. I've seen how he relates to the people in his district. I've seen how he relates to the other members of the committee. He's very articulate, very smart guy. Has good leadership skills. Very serious.

He's been also a member of the Intel. Committee for a long time. I think he would be an outstanding Chairman for the House Armed Services Committee, and I strongly support him. I could probably give you many, many more reasons. But I think if you know Mac, you know that he competed the last couple of times that this came open and I think I only beat him by-- it was very close. He's the one that's ready. He's been my Vice Chairman now for five years. Have I been Chairman five years? Time flies when you're having fun.

But, you know, we don't train Chairman. Just you compete for the job at the time and you find out you get that job and then you start trying to find out-- I mean, you're a Congressman, you know all the things you're doing in other areas. But you don't know about the budget and how that works and you put people on different committees. All the things that you have to learn when you become Chairman I've tried to make sure that Mac knows those things. And we work very closely together on everything we do. So he will be ready at the transition if he's selected, and I'm confident that he will be. It would be a seamless transition.

Not quite like what happened to me. I found out that I was going to be the new ranking member 15 minutes before we had a meeting to prepare for the next days mark up of our bill. It's not going to be that way, so thank you.

MR. BELKIND: We are almost out of time, but before asking the last question, we have a couple of housekeeping matters to take care of. First, I'd like to present our traditional NPC mug to our guest. We hope you will find it very useful in Congress and out of Congress. (Applause) And before we finish, I'd like to acknowledge his Excellency, Eklil Ahmad Hakimi, the Afghan Ambassador to the United States. Your Excellency. (Applause)

Thank you for coming today. I'd also like to thank National Press Club staff including its Journalism Institute and Broadcast Center for organizing today's event. (Applause) Well deserved applause.

Finally, here's a reminder that you can find more information about the National Press Club including upcoming luncheons that we are just now finalizing on our website.

Also, if you'd like to get a copy of today's program, please check out the website at www.press.org.

And we have time for a final question. Chairman, you are leaving Congress at the end of the year. What, in your opinion, can be done to make future Congresses less mired in gridlock and more successful in tending to the nation's affairs?

CONGRESSMAN MCKEON: Thank you, Ambassador. He's a good friend and grew up in California so he's a good guy. I wish I could wave a wand and make Congress very responsive. But I think our forbearers, when they fled from kingdoms and wanted to establish democracy did into want to see another kingdom and any one person have too much power. So, they did, I think, an inspired, outstanding job of making it difficult for us to do anything. But it has gotten worse the last few years. Partisanship has gotten deeper and more difficult to work together.

I think that campaign finance reform passed years ago that took basically kind of neutered the parties and gave the opportunities for outside groups to raise unlimited funds and to come into play in the process has had a very drastic result to the point where I was talking to a friend of mine, a Democrat, who had lost his election in the primary. Most members now, he said a Democrat can't work with a Republican anymore or they get taken out in the primary. And the same thing happens on the Republican side.

So what it's done, it's pushed the Republicans more to the right, Republicans (sic) more to the left and the opportunity for people to get together and have meaningful discussions and really try to come together on agreements to make things happen, it becomes very difficult.

So I think the fear that most members of Congress have isn't the other party, it's being taken out in a primary. And so that is very difficult. I've watched leadership struggle this year with trying to get something done. And it's just very difficult. And I don't really know the answer to that. One way would be to fix campaign finance reform again but because of what's happening and the-- I mean, I was being a little facetious when I said it, but really the only bill that passed last year was the National Defense Authorization Act. Early this year, we did get budget and we did get-- well, we got the budget passed last year at the end of the year. That was big. But then we got the spending bill passed this year, we got the farm bill passed this year.

So maybe, you know, maybe there's cause to be a little more optimistic that it will be a better year. We already have our budget number to work on this year. So the appropriators will be working and I think they want to get back in the game. They've been kind of irrelevant the last few years because of everybody's just waiting until the end of the year and how long the CR'S going to be and that kind of stuff. So I think if they get the appropriation bills done and we can get closer back to regular order-- we have many members of Congress that don't even know what regular order is. They've never seen a budget passed, the 12 or 13 appropriation bills passed, and the government funded by September 30th the way it's supposed to be.

And we need to get back to that and forget some of the stuff that we fight over that doesn't really matter much. Thank you. (Applause)

MR. BELKIND: Thank you, Chairman McKeon. I don't know if it's going to be a retirement, but we wish you all the best for the future.

CONGRESSMAN MCKEON: Thank you.

MR. BELKIND: Thank you for being here today. We are adjourned. (Sounds gavel.)

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