

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH ROBERT WILKIE
SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

SUBJECT: THE PERFORMANCE OF THE VA AND ITS GOALS

MODERATOR: ANDREA EDNEY, NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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ANDREA EDNEY: Good afternoon, and welcome to the National Press Club, the place where news happens. I'm Andrea Edney. I'm the immediate past president of the National Press Club, and I serve on the board of both the Club and of our Journalism Institute.

We have a really, really great program ahead, and we invite you to listen, watch or follow along on Twitter, using #NPCLive. For our C-SPAN and Public Radio audiences, please be aware that in the audience today are members of the general public so any applause or reaction that you may hear is not necessarily from the working press.

So let me begin by introducing the head table. And I'd like to ask you to please hold your applause until all of the head table guests are introduced. From my left and from your right, we have Shuan Butcher, communications manager at Disabled Sports USA and editor of Challenge Magazine. We have retired Navy Captain Jim Noone, commander of the American Legion Post 20 here at the National Press Club. Next to Captain Noone, we have retired US Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel Brooks Tucker, the Assistant Secretary for the VA's Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs. We have Lori Russo, the president of Stanton Communications and co-chair of the National Press Club Headliners Team. We have Max Lederer, publisher of Stars and Stripes. We have retired US Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel Jim Byrne, the Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

Coming from my right and your left, we have retired US Army Lieutenant Colonel Luke Knittig, a director at the McCain Institute. We have Jerry Zremski, Washington bureau chief of *The Buffalo News* and former president of the National Press Club. We have retired US Air Force Colonel Pamela Powers, the Chief of Staff of the Department of Veterans Affairs. We have John Hughes, editor at Bloomberg News and a former president of the National Press Club. We have retired US Navy Captain Kevin Wensing, the National Press Club Headliners member who arranged today's event.

Skipping over our guest just for one moment, we have Donna Leinwand Leger, president at DC Media Strategies, and she is also a former National Press Club president and she is the co-chair of the National Press Club Headliners Team.

I would like to also acknowledge a few additional members of the Headliners Team responsible for organizing today's luncheon: Lori Russo; Donna Leinwand, whom we just mentioned; Kevin; and Press Club staff liaison Lindsay Underwood; membership engagement manager Laura Coker; chef Susan Delbert who prepared your lunch today; and National Press Club executive director Bill McCarren. Thank you all. [applause]

I'd also like to give a shoutout to American Legion Post 20, which celebrates its 100th anniversary this month. It has been meeting at the Club since its inception in 1919. We are so proud of have you here. [applause]

And now, let me tell you just a little bit about Secretary Robert Wilkie. Robert Wilkie is not a doctor, but he responsible for the healthcare of about 20 million US veterans. And that is just the beginning. As Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Secretary Wilkie is also in charge of administering veterans' benefits, including health insurance, the GI Bill, and even home loans. His agency employs about 375,000 people who care for millions. And healthcare is the most important benefit, as well as the biggest challenge.

Five years ago, it was reported that some veterans were waiting months for care, and that some may have died because of those delays. Some members of Congress proposed privatizing the VA, while others have sought major, major reform. Secretary Wilkie today is overseeing a major shift in how healthcare for veterans is delivered, given those who serve our country more access to care outside of the VA system.

Before being sworn in as VA Secretary in July of 2018, Wilkie served as Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. He's the son of an Army artillery commander and he spent his youth at Fort Bragg. He has more than 20 years of federal service at the national and international level, and today he remains an officer in the US Air Force Reserve with the rank of Colonel. Before he joined the Air Force, he served in the US Navy Reserve with the Joint Forces Intelligence Command and the Office of Naval Intelligence.

So on the even of Veterans' Day weekend, please join me in welcoming to the National Press Club VA Secretary Robert Wilkie.

SECRETARY ROBERT WILKIE: Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you so much for having me back for an encore. I said last year that I wanted to be one of you, that I was, like some of you, a high school newspaper editor. I learned how to cut out column inches on my easel in Fayetteville, North Carolina, at Reid Ross High School. I had a dog-eared copy of Dan Rather's, *The Camera Never Blinks*, and the collected broadcasts of Edward R. Murrow. I was taught an early age by my father, who was an incredibly decorated combat soldier, that Edward R. Murrow represented other people who were on the front line of freedom, on the front line of history. In my father's time, he saw many of your colleagues give the ultimate sacrifice in Vietnam.

During the invasion of Cambodia, he was in the sector when two NBC News correspondents and cameramen did not come back from doing the job that they had sworn to do. So whenever I speak to journalists as a group of journalists, I thank you for defending the ideals that I hope all of us in national security strive to uphold. Because without you, the rest of it wouldn't be worth very much. So thank you, all, very much. [applause]

The other item that I want to use as a point of personal privilege, I just came back from New Orleans from visiting the VA hospital there. I broke ground on a new Fisher House. My parents are New Orleanians, many generations. In our family's history, we were privileged to get to know one of New Orleans' most prominent families, a fellow who ended up being one of the great Majority Leaders of the United States House of Representatives, and his wife, who not only took his seat in the United States House, but went on to be our Ambassador to the Vatican. Of course, I'm talking about Hale and Lindy Boggs.

We lost a great American earlier this year, Cokie Roberts. I first met her when she would frequent my family's bakery on Toledano Avenue in New Orleans; she was a regular customer. I became reacquainted with her as I became an adult and then through her work in New Orleans helping Loyola University get back on its feet after Katrina. She had one piece of advice for me, and it came from her father. And it was about doing business in Washington, particularly in the Congress. She said, "The fellow that you are arguing with in the morning will probably be the fellow that you walk out of the chamber with your arm around in the evening."

I think we would all be much better as a people and a country if we stuck by Cokie Roberts' dictum. Thank you. [applause]

I will say I'm glad to be back at the Press Club celebrating the anniversary of American Legion Post 20 here, a post that was inaugurated by the only man who is below George Washington on our protocol chart, the first man below George Washington on the protocol chart, General Pershing, the general of the armies. General Pershing, a member of this club, and also the person who found the post here that is one of the oldest and now celebrating its 100th anniversary. [applause]

Since the first shots were fired at Lexington in April of 1775, more than 41 million Americans have put on the nation's uniform to defend freedom. Today, America's army is comprised only of citizen volunteers who have determined to defend this country. And our

history is filled with heroes who found a way to fight, even after being told they either weren't healthy enough, or young enough, or were not the right color or gender to walk on to the battlefield and defend those colors. So who were these Americans who were told that they could not serve?

One of them was a 33-year-old bookworm/farmer from Jackson County, Missouri. He lied and he cheated to get into the field artillery prior to World War I because he could not bear the thought of his friends and neighbors going to war and he not being there to support them. What he was saddled with was a battery called Battery D of the 29th Field Artillery of the Missouri National Guard. In France, they were known as the Dizzy Ds. The Dizzy Ds was the hardest-drinking group of Irishmen ever to stagger around the streets of Kansas City. And they were saddled with a bespectacled Baptist 33-year-old who had never commanded anything in his life, except a plow.

And before his first battle, he sent a note to his future wife, and he said, "I have my doubts about my bravery when the explosive shells begin to explode and the gas attacks start." But when Battery D came under fire for the first time in 1918, one private said of Captain Harry S. Truman, "I don't think he'd ever been under fire before. And I don't think it bothered him a damn."

At about the same time, thousands of young African American soldiers marched to the colors before they could vote in most parts of the country and before they were recognized for the foundational role that they played in the creation of our great Republic. The legendary 369th Infantry Regiment of Harlem, New York, signed up before anybody else in America. But they were not permitted to join the farewell parade down Fifth Avenue. But these dedicated Americans were attached to the French Army because there were parts of our Army that would not accept them.

They spent more time on the front lines. They suffered over 1500 casualties. They received 100 French Croix de Guerre. They were on the line longer, suffered more casualties and received more commendations than any other American infantry unit in World War I. And when they returned home in 1919, the city of New York insisted that they lead the parade down Fifth Avenue.

Just a few years ago, President Obama awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor to Needham Roberts and William Johnson, the two most decorated soldiers of the most decorated unit of the United States Army, almost 100 years after they so richly deserved it.

And there are some other characters. At the outset of World War II, there was a very small accountant from Chicago by the name of George Rumsfeld who wanted to join the Navy. He was told he was too light. He spent months drinking milkshakes and eating banana splits just so he could pass the weight requirement. He couldn't do anything about his age, but he could do something about his strength. And he spent months in the gym trying to build up his endurance, and the Navy finally allowed him to enter service.

But the Navy actually moved young Ensign Rumsfeld to a blimp base in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, much to the consternation of his young son, who told his daddy that he needed to start writing letters to President Roosevelt to convince him that he needed to go to the Pacific. Well, they wrote those letters and George Rumsfeld persevered and the Navy finally agreed to let him go serve in combat in the Pacific. "My father didn't want to spend the war in North Carolina," Donald Rumsfeld said, "and he did what every American was proud to do – go where the country sent them."

So one of our strongest bonds as Americans are those stories that we share about military service and how we come together as a nation to protect individual freedoms we love and enjoy. This year, I was reminded of my own childhood at Fort Sill and Fort Bragg when I was visited by a classmate and a friend. In the 1960s and 1970s, when a child was called to the principal's office either in kindergarten or elementary school where I grew up, there was always a chance that that child wasn't going to a doctor's appointment, that there was bad news from Southeast Asia. My own father was so badly wounded in the invasion of Cambodia, it took him three years to recover. It was a year after he was wounded before we saw him, and he came back weighing half of what he did when he left.

But that wasn't the end of the story for those times. When he recovered, he joined the most decorated combat division in all of the military of the United States, the All-Americans, the 82nd Airborne Division. And in that time, and in that place, he was not allowed to wear his uniform off post for fear of the reaction from his fellow citizens. Ladies and gentlemen, that was not Berkeley, California, or Cambridge, Massachusetts. That was southeastern North Carolina, the heart of Richard Nixon country.

But people still stepped forward. One of those who did in the 1970s was Master Sergeant Denning Cicero Johnson of Harnett County, North Carolina. He was an Air Force medic. And in April of 1975, Donald Rumsfeld and Gerald Ford decided to evacuate all the orphanages in Saigon ahead of the advance of the North Vietnamese army. They called it Operation Baby Lift.

Sergeant Johnson volunteered for that mission. And on April 5, 1975, as the guns of the North Vietnamese could be heard, he boarded a C-5 with 178 Vietnamese orphans. The C-5 did not make it to the end of the runway at Tan Son Nhut Air Base. One hundred and thirty eight children lost their lives, and 11 airmen; one of them was Master Sergeant Denning Johnson. This year, 44 years later, I accompanied my classmate, Denise, to Panel 1W of the Vietnam Wall, where she was able to touch the name of her father, one of the last from that conflict.

And if you look just under his name, on that same panel, there's the name of one of the eight women officers of the United States Air Force, nurses and doctors who lost their lives in Vietnam, Captain Mary Therese Klinker, who was on that plane when Sergeant Johnson went down; it was the name right below his.

So next week, we start our second century of remembering America's heroes on what used to be called Armistice Day, the 11th day, the 11th month, the 11th hour that marked the

end of the forlornly named War to End All Wars. In the mid-1950s, after more wars demanded more from the American people, America began celebrating not the stopping of the guns, but the men and women who made them stop. And under General Eisenhower, Armistice Day became Veterans' Day.

We rightfully call our veterans heroes, but I can think of an even higher compliment than that. These men and women rise to the defense of this nation because I think they see more clearly than most of us that our way of life is not guaranteed. It must be fought for, as members of this profession have done throughout its history.

Alvin York started life in the Army as a conscientious objector, but soon became the greatest American hero of the Great War. And by the time World War II came around, he had been sounding the alarm as to what he saw happening in the place that he had fought in in 1917 and 1918. And he went around the country reminding America that America is the last best hope on the planet. He said of those who wanted to avoid fighting Nazi Germany, "The thing that we forget is that liberty and freedom and democracy are so very precious that you do not fight to win them once and then stop. Liberty and freedom and democracy are prizes awarded only to those people who fight to win them and to keep fighting them eternally to hold on to them."

I am privileged to be part of an organization that stands with men and women who talk like that. And that is why I appreciated Richard Nixon's grand gesture to veterans when America withdrew from Vietnam. In those days, the counterculture was rampant, something I saw as a young boy when my father, as I mentioned, could not wear his uniform off of Fort Bragg. But Nixon actually saw clearly that we had to value our soldiers, no matter what the outcome. He signed legislation boosting education and work training as a way of reaffirming our respect and gratitude toward all of those who'd borne the battle. He praised them when they came back for the job they did in Vietnam, which he said was honorably undertaken and honorably ended. And he said that, "Our American soldiers are the strongest hope for America's future."

I am very fortunate to be in this position, to be in a position where we care for our veterans, we care for their families, and we remind people every day that they are sleeping soundly at night because of the sacrifices of their fellow citizens who have experienced the incommunicable experience of war.

A few years ago, VA was not in a very good place. There was scandal after scandal, as many in this department and this place have noted. I believe we have turned the corner. This year, I was able, on behalf of the President, to present the largest budget in the history of Veterans Affairs – \$220 billion calling for 400,000 employees over 172 hospitals. Our patient satisfaction rates are at the greatest in our history – 89.7%. We have embarked on the most transformational period in our history with the MISSION Act. We finally put the veteran at the center of his care, not put VA institutional prerogatives at the center of that veteran's care. We are giving veterans the option to choose the healthcare that they want.

But one of the things that I'm happy to say in an unfiltered environment is that veterans are choosing with their feet. This year, veterans have shown so much confidence in this department that we have already taken care of three million more appointments than we did in all of last year. [applause]

We have a department that is where veterans can come because we understand the culture and we speak the language. And that is why I've said in many fora, including today in front of the White House Press Corps, that if anybody accuses us of privatizing the system when we have a \$220 billion budget, 400,000 employees, 172 hospitals, and a patient satisfaction rate of 89.7%, only in Washington, DC, would people say that that is an argument that others are trying to privatize an institution.

So what are my personal reflections as the leader of this wonderful department? I mentioned that we have turned a great corner. Customer experience, not customer experience as the way you would think about it, but customer experience within the Veterans Department, amongst our employees, our satisfaction rates are at an all-time high. Underneath the headlines, we are embarking on the changes that will make our supply chain a modern 21st century supply chain. We are reforming our personnel system. And in memory of people like my father, for the very first time, even though generations have talked about this, administrations have spent barrels of ink on it, next year we will begin to roll out the electronic health record, the electronic health record that will be built the moment that young American walks in to a military entrance processing station and is handed off to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

No longer will people like my father, after 30 years of jumping out of airplanes, being shot to pieces in Vietnam, have to spend the rest of his post-service life carrying around an 800-page paper record. Those days will be over. [applause]

But we are on the frontline in the middle of two crises that are devastating this nation. The first is the opioid crisis. In the last year or so, this department has reduced opioid prescriptions by 51%. And we've done it in a very simple way: Instead of treating this, we have made a corporate decision to treat the sources of pain. We are substituting opioids with simple things like Tylenol and aspirin, ibuprofen and aspirin. But we are augmenting that with alternative therapies.

Alternative therapies, what does that mean? In my father's day, if I had told him, "Colonel, we're going to make you feel better by doing tai chi and yoga," this nose would have been flat against my face. It was not part of the ethos. We are setting the standard for offering our veterans a multitude of ways to address the pain that came as a result of their military service.

But the saddest thing that we encounter is veteran suicide. I have been accused of being an amateur historian, so I think I will plead guilty to that and talk to you a minute about history. Now, some of you may not know who Benjamin Harrison was. His only mark in the history books is that he served in between two non-consecutive presidential terms of Grover Cleveland.

Benjamin Harrison had been a major general in the Civil War. He had seen death on a massive scale. And one of the things that troubled him most in his four short years in the White House was the avalanche of suicide notices he was receiving on his desk from the War Department. Suicide was devastating the frontier army. And Harrison ordered the War Department to begin taking count of how many American soldiers took their lives with their own hands.

This is a problem that has been with us for that long. We saw a massive ramp-up in suicides prior to the attack in Pearl Harbor. We saw a massive jump in the days after Vietnam. But this is a national problem. One of the days I testified in front of the Senate Appropriations Committee, the *New York Times* and National Public Radio ran stories about a 30% increase in teen suicides amongst those teenagers who'd watched a Netflix show called *13 Reasons Why*. Today, suicide is the number one cause of death for American youth. The New York City Police Department, the finest in the world, is now being hit with an epidemic of suicides.

In our own veterans' world, 20 a day take their lives. Of those 20, 60% have no contact with VA. The majority of those who take their lives are from my father's generation from Vietnam. Ladies and gentlemen, Lyndon Johnson left Washington, DC, 50 years ago in January. That is how long many of these problems have been brewing with so many of our warriors.

So for the first time, we are making a national call to combat this scourge. The PREVENTS Task Force from the President is the first attempt to bring a whole of government, whole health approach to the issue of suicide by bringing Indian Health, HHS, DoD, HUD and the National Institutes for Health to come together and find ways to reach Americans.

Now, I have said— and it's been pointed out I am not a medical professional, but I do know soldiers. It has been said that most federal commissions write reports that the day after become doorstops. I had a great fear for this one because if we just focused on the last tragic act in a veteran's life, this would be another report that serves as a doorstop for those doors over there.

So I have asked us to take a deep dive into mental health, into addiction, and into homelessness, that tragic continuum that leads to so many tragedies. I am confident that we will have a new direction come March. And I thank the administration for bringing the resources together to do that.

So I will conclude and then we can have questions, but if I had one message for all of you, for the country, on Veterans' Day, it would be to remind everyone that none of our great leaders of the past or present ever wanted caring for veterans to be an activity for one day. When it comes to veterans, some of our biggest successes as a nation have come from realizing that we have a special responsibility, and that we can never go back to those days of the 1970s when those who put on those uniforms were shunned by the nation as a whole.

So every time a company hires a veteran or provides a flexible work schedule for family members to care for veterans, that company sets an example for America. Every time you donate money, every time you donate time or food, or work for causes like the Fisher House Foundation, which builds housing to keep families closer together when that veteran or that soldier is getting treatment, you are serving the cause.

And I am an example of what used to happen when a soldier came home, my mother was not even allowed to visit my father for the one year that he was recovering from his wounds because it was not part of the ethic. We now know that if a veteran or a soldier on active duty is to recover, those Americans need the care and comfort of their families close at hand.

So at VA, we are seeking more ways – more ways more often – to improve and to realize that the task is too big for any one federal department to organize a national thank-you for America's veterans. So we are working with the states and localities, the nonprofits and others that we see in the system to come together and finally say that the freedoms that we enjoy were carried on the shoulders of our fellow citizens.

I want to close before we begin questions with a little personal reflection because I'm going to commit a sacrilege. I am from a part of the country that has contributed a few great things to Western Civilization – Louis Armstrong, Elvis, Coca-Cola, and William Faulkner. Last year, I was a guest at Roanoke, the ancestral home of Mr. Faulkner in Oxford, Mississippi, and it was pointed out to me that my great-aunt – who ended up being the first woman, American woman to be the chief judge on the Court of Veterans Appeals during the Franklin Roosevelt administration – as a young student at Ole Miss, had convinced this rather eccentric gentleman who used to walk around Oxford, Mississippi, in the uniform of an officer of the Royal Canadian Flying Corps with two big boxers – he was known as Count No Count – she convinced him to use some of that eccentric imagination in the service of literature. And he wrote six short plays for the Ole Miss Marionette Society. And I was privileged at Roanoke to talk about that.

But I wanted to reflect when I was there on what I thought William Faulkner always wanted to be, and that was a soldier. He came from a long line of soldiers, and he'd been a mechanic in the Canadian Air Force during World War I, but he always dreamed of being on the front lines. And the most profound speech I think any American gave in the 20th century was one dedicated to all of you in this room, to writers and journalists. It was Faulker's 1950 Nobel Prize acceptance speech. It's the shortest Nobel Prize acceptance in history, by the way, and the most powerful.

But he was talking to you, to writers, to journalists, but I think at his heart he was really talking to soldiers, the soldier that he wanted to be. So the sacrilege that I have committed is that I have substituted the word "writer" with the word "soldier" in the last two paragraphs of Faulkner's address. And he said, with my addition:

The soldier must teach himself that the basest of all things is to be afraid; and, teaching himself that, forget it forever, leaving no room for anything but the old verities, the old truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed. He writes of defeats in which nobody loses anything of value, of victories without hope and, worst of all, without pity or compassion. His griefs grieve on no universal bones, leaving no scars.

But until he relearns those things, he lives as though he stood among and watched the end of man. But I decline to accept the end of man. It is easy enough to say that man is immortal simply because he will endure and that when the last dingdong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening, that even then there will still be one more sound: that of the soldier's inexhaustible voice, still talking about hope.

I think that is what we are about. We are about hope. We're about fulfilling a pledge never to fail, nor forsake those who have borne the battle. And as I said at the beginning, it is always an honor for me to be here to pay my respects to a profession that knows so much about those sacrifices and a profession that those soldiers have sacrificed so much to keep vibrant and free.

Thank you all very much. [applause]

MS EDNEY: Secretary Wilkie, thank you so much for being here with us today. We have a lot of questions to get to.

SECRETARY WILKIE: No! Not in DC.

MS EDNEY: Not in DC. But there are so many great questions, especially from the audience. I'd really like to get to as many as we can, so I'm going to get started.

We know that healthcare requires innovation to help more patients. Can you talk to us a little bit about what the VA is doing to advance innovations for veterans and pushing those innovations to them? How are these things occurring?

SECRETARY WILKIE: So let me put my Forrest Gump hat on again, history. The Department of Veterans Affairs is one of the world's great medical innovators – the first pacemaker, the first liver transplant, the first electrical heart surgery, the first nicotine patch. Innovation is part of our DNA. I said today at the press conference at the White House that we are partnered with the greatest medical institutions in this country, one right up the road at Johns Hopkins, MD Anderson, Stanford, Harvard, Duke. As a Wake Forest man, I have to mention Duke.

And we have spent incredible amounts of money on research, but research that is not only relevant for veterans, but it's relevant for the country. Let me give you an example. I had

an interesting meeting last year with my counterpart in Canada. I was proud to tell him that I have a closer relationship with the National Hockey League than he does. Why? The stories that you've been reading, stories that some of you have actually reported on the research into the concussive effects of professional football and professional hockey and college football are being done at the VA Hospital in Boston. Ann McKee, who's been on of *Time's* 100 Most Influential Americans, is doing that research in our Boston VA Hospital with the help of the NFL, the NHL, and the Department of Defense. As the Under Secretary of Defense, I looked to her to come up with more solutions so that we could make our soldiers and Marines in the front lines more survivable on the battlefield. So we are translating that innovation into real-world effect.

I will always advocate an increase in our research budget. And it's not just for the veterans, it's for the entire country. But a partnership that Omar Bradley set forth when he was VA administrator, after World War II, he said, "We want to be the hub of American medical innovation," and it was his goal, tangentially, to have every medical student and nursing student do residency in VA. We don't have 100% as General Bradley envisioned, but we do have 70%.

MS EDNEY: Can you give us a couple of examples of pilots that are in development within the new VA Innovation Center, and when you might be planning to release some of those?

SECRETARY WILKIE: Well, I can't because they are being trotted out for competition. But let me tell you about innovation and innovative ways of dealing with current problems. Mental health, the last great frontier in medicine. I've said we're not even at the Sputnik stage when it comes to getting our arms around what goes on inside here. We have shunned away from talking about it as a nation. Well, VA now has same-day mental health services. Every veteran who comes to us has a mental health screening. Just in this last fiscal year, we've screened more than one million veterans for mental health issues. We follow 3000 of those on a daily basis.

The other area, I can tell you about pilot programs in this area because we have already awarded some of them. When you go to University of Pittsburgh or you go to the VA Hospital in Minneapolis, you will see the leading edge of robotic technology. VA robots are now allowing veterans who would have died on the rice paddies of Vietnam, or even in the sands of Desert Storm, we're allowing them to walk. Our exoskeletons are something that George Lucas envisioned in the 1970s, and he made fiction out of it, but it's a reality.

We are awarding biomedical engineering pilot programs for robotic arms, robotic assistants, robotic legs. We are the world's leader in prosthetic devices all across the world. If you haven't had a chance to see them, those of you in the press, tell me. I will take you to see them. To see veterans who would have never been able to walk get up and walk across the room— and I saw some walk into Tampa Stadium. Why they would want to watch the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, I don't know. But they did. And it was a miraculous thing to see.

MS EDNEY: The third-party administrators for the new MISSION Act have reportedly said that they need an influx of millions of dollars and a larger network of care to accommodate veterans seeking services in the private sector. Is this new program not going to be able to meet veterans' needs? What are you doing to resolve this?

SECRETARY WILKIE: So let me tell you what MISSION Act has done. I don't know why the Congress picked June 6th. Does anybody know what that means? D-Day. They picked June 6th to begin our program. So let me tell you what has happened since MISSION Act kicked in.

We have had over almost two million Americans come to VA, use the decision support tool, and go out into the public to get their medical treatment. As I think I mentioned earlier, we have had 70,000 go into urgent care. We replaced a failing network of support. And what this is about is supporting our partners out in the field; meaning, paying our bills. We inherited a failing proposition.

In getting the new program online, we created a backstop. There is a company in place working, paying our people, paying the private sector that is doing that until the company that actually won the contract gets online. I will say that MISSION has probably been the most successful rollout of a program, the likes of which I can't remember when the federal government has rolled out something this big that has been this successful.

I will also point to the surveys that have been done by our veteran service organizations since MISSION rolled out. The Veterans of Foreign Wars, the second largest veterans service organization in the country, in response to MISSION they did their national survey. Ninety percent patient satisfaction rate. But more importantly, nine out of ten members of the VFW have said, "We want our veterans who are not using VA to use VA." As I said earlier, they're voting with their feet.

Since I've been a victim of the Jesuits in my lifetime – that's why this is flat in the back – I will use a good Jesuit word, inchoate, about that story. Inchoate, when there's a literal translation from the Latin sometimes means purposely incomplete.

MS EDNEY: Clearly, there have been many advances at the VA. You mentioned patient satisfaction rates are at the highest now with 89.7%, I think. And you've taken care of three million more appointments this year than in all of last year. These are laudatory figures. Obviously, there's still more to be done. One example is in West Virginia, Clarksburg, West Virginia. Law enforcement authorities are investigating at least ten patient deaths at the VA Hospital there, including two homicides, or categorized homicides, over a yearlong period.

So who is investigating what the hospital could have done differently to stem the death toll? And what is the VA learning from this investigation?

SECRETARY WILKIE: So Clarksburg is a national tragedy. There's no two ways about it. We've lost ten World War II warriors. But let me take a step back. I mentioned presenting an unfiltered account of what VA is. We are not immune from problems that

impact this nation. America has a shortage of mental health providers; we have a shortage of mental health providers. America has a shortage of internists; we have a shortage of internists. Suicide impacts everybody, not just veterans. And from time to time, in an organization of almost 400,000 with nine-and-a-half million patients, we can be the victims of a crime, crimes that are so unusual that they probably wouldn't be caught even in the private sector. Probably not.

In fact, some of you who were with me when I addressed the American Legion in Indianapolis, that day there was a story in the Indianapolis paper about a doctor in Chicago— I mean in Cincinnati – apologies to Chicago – who was probably responsible for the deaths of 23 of his patients. Malfeasance. Deliberate.

What we have done at Clarksburg, it's our people who discovered it and criminals are clever. This is in the hands of the independent inspector general. This investigation actually began before I was sworn in as Secretary. The US Attorney has it. I will tell you that my first call whenever I encounter things like this is to make sure the Justice Department is aware. Give you an example. There's probably a question in there about an incident that was reported in the *New York Times* at our DC VA. My first note, I think, and Jim Byrne over here knows, I heard about it and pushed it up the chain to the deputy attorney general.

When we come across these things, we treat them as vigorously as we can. And we have been reviewing our protocols strenuously. And my pledge is that we do everything we can to make it safe.

Let me tell you what else has happened at Clarksburg. Our veterans know that what I just said is real. Clarksburg has had a dramatic spike in terms of the number of veterans using that facility. It has one of the highest veterans approval rates of any hospital in the country. They know that what happened is an anomaly. And they also know that we do everything we can to make their lives whole.

I am hoping, and I have urged the inspector general to get this investigation done so that we know those final answers.

MS EDNEY: When you say you're reassessing protocols, can you tell us some of the things that you may be considering changing?

SECRETARY WILKIE: Well, we look at scheduling, we look at whether we have—

MS EDNEY: And you're thinking about changing scheduling, what types of—

SECRETARY WILKIE: We're reviewing how we monitor wards. Are there cameras there? Are there enough cameras? Were the proper checklists in place? This is something that we do in the military. I'll give you an example. It's called high reliability organization. We have now implemented it at VA. It was the brainchild of two geniuses, Curtis LeMay, the father of the nuclear air force, and Hyman Rickover, the father of the

nuclear navy. They implemented a system because— let me tell you why they revolutionized the way we do things like this.

They knew that a mistake in their world had the potential to be a global catastrophe. Nuclear navy, strategic air command. So what they put in place was a review process. So we meet as a squadron every day. You've got pilots, logistics, the navigators, the fuel men, the intel guys, and the food people. And we go over what happened the day before. Not what went right, but what went wrong. And that allows these people to have a say in the direction of the organization.

One of the reasons we have such high employee satisfaction rates right now is because of an organization like this that we've implemented across the country where people at the custodial level, the sterile processing level, the surgical level are going through the checklists every day.

So in Clarksburg, we're making sure that — and I think we have made sure — that everything is in place. But I will say this. And my father used to say it about soldiering. He said, if somebody is that dedicated to doing harm to you, sometimes you can't find it. And we're doing everything we can to make sure that we are as vigilant as possible.

MS EDNEY: I'm going to piggyback on a question that Derek Wallbank, my friend and colleague from Bloomberg News, asked you last year when you were here. Is the VA going to recommend to Congress to change the law and allow the VA to negotiate drug prices with industry?

SECRETARY WILKIE: Well, we already have. So I learned this. I've been there a year-and-three-months. We already have — Jim, correct me if I'm wrong — we already have special pricing arrangements for our drugs. Is that correct?

JIM BYRNE: That's correct.

SECRETARY WILKIE: We work with industry on those prices. We're different from the rest of the government.

MS EDNEY: Great, that's good to know. I'd like to ask a question—

SECRETARY WILKIE: But when you think about it, think about it from business's perspective. We have nine-and-a-half million patients.

MS EDNEY: Exactly, it's a—

SECRETARY WILKIE: And we may get more patients in the next few years.

MS EDNEY: Yes. I'd like to ask a question about Austin Tice, who's a Marine Corps vet turned journalist.

SECRETARY WILKIE: Yes, 2012?

MS EDNEY: Yes, went missing in Syria. What can veterans be doing to support the safe return of Austin Tice?

SECRETARY WILKIE: Let me go back to what I said earlier today about my own family's experience, with what my father told me about correspondents that he saw; one he had to recover. I'm not saying this because I'm in front of you. Journalists are on the front lines of freedom. They put their lives in danger every day.

Austin Tice was captured, I believe, in, I think it was September of 2012. A Marine Corps veteran. An incredibly brave journalist. There have been times in this journey, this terrible journey, when we've known— we think we've known where he was. So let me tell you what I think we should continue to do.

We celebrate freedoms. We impress upon the culture that what you all do can be incredibly dangerous. We support Reporters Without Borders. We engage the Congress. And I've found in my career that awareness and constantly repeating a mantra is one of the most effective things that we can do. I lament the demise of the Newseum for that one reason, because it does serve to remind us that the first freedom in this country is you all.

So engagement, as with most things in American life, is the key. But I'm very happy to say that we need Austin Tice back. [applause]

MS EDNEY: We do. You mentioned that there would probably be an influx, more veterans coming into the system. So one example of this may be the Blue Water Vietnam veteran disability claims that the VA is going to start processing next year. Will an influx of claims slow down processing times for these disability claims? Why or why not?

SECRETARY WILKIE: That's an interesting question. I'm telling a journalist it's an interesting question. Let me tell you a little bit about a Washington quandary.

MS EDNEY: And we are down to two minutes. I'd like to ask one more question.

SECRETARY WILKIE: Real quick. We've been preparing. We're hiring more people. But real quick, we were moving out under a court order to begin paying claims earlier in this year. Then Congress passed a law that overrode the court decision and said we can't start paying claims until January 1st. I've got protestors outside of my building today demanding to know why I'm not paying those bills, even though Congress told us I can't do it till January 1st. So I made them a promise – we're going to be the one department in the federal government working on January 1st to process those claims in accord with the law.

MS EDNEY: One quick question, very quick, if I may, about cost overruns. There was a GAO report that came out on delays and cost overruns for new veteran cemeteries. Some projects have been delayed for years and estimates for the facilities have been off by as much as 200%. Why is this happening, and what are you doing to address it?

SECRETARY WILKIE: Well, let me tell you. Our veteran cemeteries are probably as important as anything we do. We're just opening one in western New York. I've just opened one in west Los Angeles, 90,00 spots, in west Los Angeles, in Hollywood. So what I've seen— I don't know how old that GAO report is.

MS EDNEY: September.

SECRETARY WILKIE: Is it September? But it probably stopped reporting a long time ago and that's the flow. No, we have an all-time budget for our cemeteries. One of our problems is federal acquisition regulations that prevent us from doing certain things. Give you a quick example. California, I couldn't build a clinic in Bakersfield because the federal acquisition regulations say that it was within eyesight of a liquor store. They need a clinic. The same thing is happening in many cases on the cemeteries, but we're opening cemeteries all over the country.

MS EDNEY: Thank you. So before I give the final question, I'd like to just mention a couple of upcoming events that we have here at the Club. We have a party for the 100th anniversary of American Legion Post 20 on Tuesday, November 19th. You're all welcome. And we have an upcoming Headliners Luncheon Friday, November 15th. It's with former Georgia House Democratic Leader Stacey Abrams.

Now, you know, I think, from last year that we also have a tradition of giving each esteemed speaker a National Press Club mug. So now you have a collection. I hope it grows. Thank you so much for being here today. We have one more final question. And that is, in your opinion, who is the greatest living veteran?

SECRETARY WILKIE: I would never say it. [laughter] You know what? You look at the average Medal of Honor winner. They fall into two categories primarily. One is the perennial misfit, the guy who was the troublemaker in high school, the guy who was in trouble with the law. And the other category is reflected in the person of Audie Leon Murphy. Too small to go to the Marine Corps. Too small to go to the Army Air Corps. By a freakish accident got into the United States Army. He was the most decorated soldier of World War II.

Service to me is service. I quote Oliver Wendell Holmes often, someone who experienced the hell of Antietam. Sixteen thousand gone. Four times as many people lost in that battle Holmes was wounded in than in the entire D-Day campaign. Ordinary people called upon to do extraordinary things.

So you can't put a price on it. You can't say who was the greatest. But it's great to reflect on everyone who's done the job.

MS EDNEY: Well, thank you very much for coming here and speaking with us today. It's a real honor. [applause]

SECRETARY WILKIE: Let me take my prize.

MS EDNEY: Take your prize, take your mug. And on behalf of the National Press Club, I would like to thank all veterans for their service. Thank you so very much. With that, we are adjourned. [sounds gavel] [applause]

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