

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH SENATOR JIM WEBB (D-VA)

MODERATOR: JERRY ZREMSKI

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MR. ZREMSKI: (Sounds gavel.)

Good afternoon, and welcome to the National Press Club. My name is Jerry Zremski, and I'm Washington bureau chief for the Buffalo News and president of the National Press Club. I'd like to welcome club members and their guests in the audience today, as well as those watching on C-SPAN.

We're looking forward to today's speech, and afterwards I will ask as many questions as time permits. Please hold your applause during the speech so we have as much time for questions as possible. For our broadcast audience, I'd like to explain that if you hear applause, it may be from the guests and members of the general public and not necessarily from the working press. (Laughter.)

I'd now like to introduce our head table guests and ask them to stand briefly while their names are called. From your right, Melissa

Charbonneau of CBN News and vice chair of the National Press Club speakers committee; Don North, director of Northstar Productions; Rick Dunham, White House correspondent for Business Week, a former National Press Club president, and president of the Eric Friedheim National Journalism Library here at the club; Tom Vanden Brook, Pentagon correspondent for USA Today; Lowell Feld of the Raising Cain blog and a former Webb campaign staffer -- (applause) -- and a very popular

guy; Sean Bullard (sp) of the Duetto (sp) Group and a member of the speakers committee; Hong Le Webb, the wife of the senator.  
(Applause.)

Skipping over the podium, Angela Greiling Keane of Bloomberg and the chair of the National Press Club speakers committee; skipping over our speaker, Bob Cardin (sp), president of PoliticalTube.net and the speakers committee member who organized today's event; Catherine M. Skiva (sp), Washington correspondent for the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel; Melinda Henneberger, reporter for Huffington Post; Mark Hamrick, business correspondent for AP Broadcast and the National Press Club's membership secretary; Eleanor Clift, columnist for Newsweek magazine; and John Fales, also known as Sergeant Shaft, member of the speakers committee and writer for the Washington Times.  
(Applause.)

In 2004, our guest today published a book called "Born Fighting." And while it wasn't an autobiography, its title seemed to fit his life story. Jim Webb has been fighting, and usually winning, for his entire life. At the Naval Academy, he was a boxer. Serving as a Marine in Vietnam, he won the Navy Cross, the Silver Star, two Bronze Stars and two Purple Hearts. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for his first novel, "Fields of Fire." And he won an Emmy for his PBS television coverage from Lebanon in 1983.

And last year, using "Born Fighting" as a campaign slogan, Webb won his most famous fight of all. He defeated Virginia Senator George Allen. (Applause.) And in that narrow election, he helped swing control of the Senate to the Democrats. (Applause.)

Senator Webb is now a member in good standing of the world's greatest deliberative body, but there are no signs that he has lost his fighting spirit. Day after day he fights the escalation of the war in Iraq, a war he's opposed since long before the first bullets flew. And in the process, this Vietnam War hero has become a hero again to the people who want the troops out now.

In fact, after Webb exchanged words with President Bush over the Iraq war during a visit to the White House, one liberal blogger called Webb part of, and I'll quote, "that select group of Democratic vertebrates who speak from the heart." (Laughter.)

But Webb is no conventional Democrat. He's a former Republican who served as Navy secretary under President Ronald Reagan. He's a strong supporter of the rights of gun owners and a critic of open borders. And he certainly isn't the type of politician who would ever be swiftboated.

In one key way, though, Webb is a big "D" Democrat of the old school. He's an economic populist whose passionate opposition to the war is paralleled by a passion for the rights of the common man. That parallel led the Democratic Party to choose Webb to deliver its response to President Bush's State of the Union address.

Citing President Eisenhower's efforts to end the Korean War and President Theodore Roosevelt's efforts to bridge America's economic divide, Webb challenged Bush to follow in their footsteps. "If he

does, we will join him," the freshman senator said. "If he does not, we will be showing him the way."

Here today, perhaps to update us on which it's going to be, and to tell us more on his views on the war and on America's economic divide, please join me in welcoming Senator Jim Webb. (Applause.)

SEN. WEBB: Thank you very, very much, Jeremy. And also I'd like to thank Bob Cardin (sp) for all the work that he did coordinating with our staff in preparing for today. And I'd also like to say a special hello to John Fales at the end of the table here -- long-time friend of mine who served our country with great esteem and dignity as a Marine in Vietnam. (Applause.)

I realize I just slid under the bell here in terms making it in time for my own party. But we are now in my first round of what they call the vote-a-rama in the Senate. Every year when the Budget Committee comes up, there's a whole string of votes that ties the Senate up for several days. And we finished at 20 to 1:00, and I think we start again at 3:00, so I'm thankful that I have the break here to be able to come over and be with you.

It is a great honor for me to join you here at the National Press Club. This is actually the second time that I have done this. I was a guest 19 years ago when I was secretary of the Navy, and I got into a little bit of trouble then -- surprise, surprise.

I had decided to talk about the future of our foreign policy and the force structure issues of all the military services, which a few people in the White House and the State Department and one or two in the Pentagon sort of thought was above my pay grade as someone who was responsible for the Navy and Marine Corps. So I did hear about it when I got back.

As Jeremy intimated, it's been a couple of months since I've been in trouble, and I'll try to stay out of trouble today -- (laughter) -- as I give this speech.

I have been very fortunate to have had a varied career. And I'd like to start by saying that of all the professional experiences that I have had that shaped my approach to life and to government, two stand out. The first is having commanded infantry Marines in combat. Nothing else I've ever done can match the sobering sense of

responsibility that comes from making daily decisions that directly affect the lives of others, including in the area that our regiment operated in Vietnam, not only Marines, on the one hand, but civilian noncombatants who populated much of our battlefield.

And the second has been the many years that I have spent as a writer. There's another type of accountability when one writes, as many people in this room fully understand. It's the accountability of having to marshal facts, to make judgments, and then to put one's name behind the words that go into the written page.

Writing is a tough business. It requires a self-discipline that brings to mind my many years that I spent as a boxer. The regimen is

solitary, and only you know how hard you're really pushing yourself. And then there comes a personal accountability for your product which you have to be judged for for the rest of your life.

So suffice it to say that one of the titles that I am proudest of is that of journalist. The work that I did for the NewsHour in Beirut, the reporting that I've done for various newspapers and magazines, and especially I'd like to mention Parade magazine -- for whom I have written from such places as Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam and Afghanistan -- is some of the most important work of my career. And I have a lot of friends and colleagues in this club, and I am proud of most of them. (Laughter.) I'll give you a full report after the Q&A. (Laughter.)

In the last few weeks, Americans have been reminded of the extraordinary importance of a free press to a democratic government. The reporting that Dana Priest and Anne Hull did on the outpatient situation at Walter Reed has made this government more accountable. And in the process, I think we're going to help ensure that our nation's veterans, wounded and otherwise, are going to receive better care. (Applause.)

And I know that usually the most interesting part of these lunches is the Q&A, and I'm going to leave plenty of time for that. So what I thought I'd do is share with you a few thoughts about the first months of the 110th Congress and my part in it. And actually, to do that, where I'd like to start is not with the actions of the Senate but with the beginning of my campaign last year.

A year ago today, I had literally no money. I had no political base whatsoever in either party. My opponent had just received the highest number of votes in a presidential poll taken during the Conservative Political Action Conference here in D.C. I was 33 points behind in the polls.

My political credentials were viewed with unease by both sides, quite frankly. On the one hand, I'd spent four years as a Republican committee counsel in the Congress and another four years in the Reagan administration, which did not exactly warm the hearts of many Democrats, particularly those who vote in primaries.

And on the other, I'd helped the United Mine Workers during the historic strike in 1989 against Pittston Coal Company. And I had been an early and vocal critic of this administration and of the policies of the Iraq war, which did not endear me to the hearts of many Republicans.

But what we did have was a very strong belief that it was time for the Reagan Democrats to return to their Jacksonian roots and a message that I care deeply about, which we conveyed with relentless discipline. It is a message that I believe should be a continuing part of the national debate and, in fact, should become the core message of a revitalized Democratic Party.

I've said many times that this nation is going through a sea change in terms of party politics and that the old labels simply don't work anymore. The political cards are being reshuffled all across

this country. Good, well-meaning people have watched their government flub things up from Iraq through Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. They want better leadership and they want new approaches.

And so in the campaign, I talked about deeper themes than mere political issues. We never talked simply about Iraq. Instead we spoke repeatedly and in depth about the need to reorient our nation's national security posture in a way that would allow us not only to withdraw our forces from Iraq but also to restore a measure of stability in that historically volatile region and to increase our ability to fight the war against international terrorism and to more properly address the wide range of strategic and foreign policy issues that have been dangerously overlooked over the past five to six years.

We didn't simply dwell on this bill or that regarding unemployment, lack of medical insurance, the need to increase the minimum wage. We talked about the larger need for economic fairness and social justice in an era where far too much power has gravitated to the very top in both economic and governmental terms. I took great pains to outline the dangers in what I have come to call the three Americas, a breakdown of our country along class lines, the likes of which we haven't seen for more than 100 years.

What are those three Americas? In the past 20 years we have seen a huge migration of wealth to the very top of our society. At the same time, we have calcified at the bottom into what could soon become a permanent underclass. And at the same time, a large group, that group in the middle, are receiving less and less of their fair share of the fruits of their labor.

And finally, in the wake of such seriously underexamined issues as the NSA wiretapping scandal, the failure of leadership during and after Hurricane Katrina, and the billions of dollars that we have wasted in reconstructing Iraq, we talked about the need to restore simple accountability in our government to make sure that the federal system works in the way that our forefathers conceived it, and to ensure also that our people were getting real value for the investment they were making in the taxes they were being asked to pay.

In short, we offered voters a context in a time when far too much political energy is being used and wasted on contrived, emotionally divisive issues such as flag-burning, gay marriage and focus-group test phrases such as "cut and run."

We did something else that was a bit different. It was guided by my own sense of values and political instincts rather than polls and focus groups. And I think the voters understood that. We did our best to keep our message consistent, even when this gave our political advisers serious heartburn.

I spoke directly about corporate responsibility to corporate leaders. I became the first statewide candidate in Virginia history to walk a union picket line during a campaign, even though Virginia is 48th in the country in terms of union membership. (Scattered applause.)

I spoke openly on the Tim Russert show and during televised debates about my views that affirmative action was originally intended to help African-Americans remove the badges of slavery and that many of its present policies tend to hurt not only poor blacks but poor whites as well.

A lot of commentators were saying that I was naive. Others were saying that I was a one-issue candidate. In fact, I have to say, about two weeks ago a prominent Republican in Virginia was at an event in Tyson's Corner and mentioned to a reporter that I was a one-issue candidate and still a one-issue politician. And I was asked about that and I said, "Well, I probably do spend a little bit too much time on economic fairness -- (laughter) -- but I don't simply dwell on that issue."

Others were saying that my opponent made such serious errors that he was responsible for his own defeat. Allow me to respond first that one-issue candidates do not defeat strong incumbents. And I think the experience in Connecticut demonstrates that. And second, while it might have been risky, I do not consider it naive to have recognized that our voters have become disgusted with the cynicism of modern-day politics.

We gambled on the likelihood that people in this country truly desire a clear and unambiguous approach to governing and to leadership, and we won. And I'm committed to doing my best to bring about that reality.

I've had a very busy two-and-a-half months since taking office, particularly given my assignments on both the Foreign Relations Committee and the Armed Services Committee, which have, in tandem, held exhaustive hearings to examine the way forward in Iraq and in the region writ large.

Nearly all the expert testimony concluded that a sustained, meaningful diplomatic engagement was necessary to resolve this crisis. I've been advocating this approach for three years, since well before I ever decided to run for the Senate.

I believe the weight of this testimony in these hearings, plus the reality of a Congress now controlled by the Democratic Party, has been a prime reason that the administration is now beginning to pursue stronger diplomacy in the region rather than continuing its previous one-dimensional military approach.

I've long believed that an integral part of our strategy in Iraq must include engagement with all of Iraq's neighbors, including Iran and Syria. As Iraq's neighbors, they're stakeholders in both the future of Iraq and in the need for stability in the region.

We began to see this approach come to fruition earlier this month with meetings in Baghdad. And the minister-level meeting scheduled for next month is a hopeful sign that I and others will be watching closely.

On another note, I don't believe one can speak of our responsibility on these immediate issues without stating clearly our

concerns about the entire region, and especially the administration's position regarding its constitutional authority to use military force outside of Iraq.

I've authored a bill in the Senate that would prohibit the use of funds for commencing a wider war against Iran without congressional authorization. This legislation is carefully drawn, with exceptions that will allow our military to defend itself against attacks based in Iran, including directly preempting these kinds of attacks, and including hot pursuit into Iranian territory if our military is attacked by forces that might withdraw into Iran.

It takes no options off the table with respect to our long-held positions regarding Iran's nuclear program or our demand that Iran recognize Israel. Its major function is to prevent this administration from commencing a broad range of unprovoked military activities without the approval of the Congress. I believe it is important for the good of our federal system that this legislation be approved. (Scattered applause.)

We have other tools available. Sanctions are clearly working to isolate Iran's present leadership from the outside world. There was a very strong article in The Economist magazine two weeks ago that outlined some of the ways in which sanctions are working.

I would support even stronger sanctions with the goal of isolating Iran's present leadership not only from the outside world but from its own people, many of whom desire a better type of future. And unilateral military activity should only be undertaken as a true last resort. The unfortunate situation in Iraq is clear testimony to the consequences of careless aggression.

Properly balanced, robust diplomacy will enable us to bring greater stability to the region, to remove the American military from Iraq, to increase our ability to defeat international terrorism writ large, and, finally, to focus on the true strategic challenges that face us around the world.

With the democratic majorities in Congress, we've also seen a renewal of the kind of healthy oversight that is critical to accountability in government -- and I may say parenthetically, the kind of oversight that was present when I was a committee counsel in government in the late '70s and the early '80s.

Americans are yearning for a government that inspires confidence and achieves results. They deserve oversight and accountability on a wide host of issues, from the exorbitant cost of this war, including billions of dollars' worth of no-bid contracts; the evolution of a quasi-military Praetorian Guard filled with 100,000 civilian contractors now in Iraq who are accountable largely to no one; to the arrogance of this administration on such issues as the NSA wiretapping and selective dismissals of U.S. attorneys; and finally, to the lamentable inattention given to those who are still waiting along the Gulf Coast for a revitalization in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. (Applause.)

I've already mentioned my concern about the care that our veterans receive and the story that was first broken not through congressional oversight but through the media. And I have no doubt now that aggressive oversight by the Armed Services Committee and the Veterans' Committee, both of which I am on, will hasten the kind of corrective measures we need to take in the coming months.

As someone who has spent most of his adult life working with and helping veterans, I'm also hoping that Congress will pass a meaningful GI bill for those who have served since 9/11. (Applause.) The first bill that I was privileged to introduce as a United States senator, S. 22, is a GI bill that will give our Iraq and Afghanistan veterans the same educational benefits as those who returned home from World War II -- pay their tuition, buy their books, give them a monthly stipend. I believe they have earned it.

(Applause.)

And finally, I'd like to say a word about fundamental fairness -- the anxiety that many Americans now feel about their economic future. Last month, I spent three days traveling in the far southwestern part of Virginia. It was my first visit back to southwest Virginia since the campaign. In fact, it was my first trip outside of this area since the Congress had convened, and what struck me during that visit was how the worries of families in these small towns seem actually to have deepened since last fall. We visited with coal miners, defense industry workers, high technology workers and retirees throughout the region. People in many parts of my state are seeing an economy in which more and more manufacturing jobs are moving overseas, where the purchasing power of families has declined or stayed flat, where heating and electric bills have suddenly skyrocketed, and where more and more of our people lack health insurance.

Even in an area like Hampton Roads, which has traditionally been strong partly because of defense industries, last year saw the decision to close a major Ford truck plant in Norfolk, where thousands of good high-paying jobs are now headed overseas. These kinds of concerns have caused many Americans to question the basic fairness of our economic system. Many of you are familiar with the warning signs, and I've spoken about them but I think they're worth repeating. The top 1 percent now takes in an astounding 16 percent of our national income, up from 8 percent in 1980.

Corporate profits in this country are at an all-time high as a percentage of our national wealth, while wages and salaries are at an all-time low as a percentage of our national wealth. Today's CEOs in larger corporations make 400 times what the average worker makes. When I graduated from college, they made 20 times what the average worker makes. Forty-seven million Americans lack health insurance in the wealthiest country in the world. Fewer and fewer people own stocks. One statistic that I have seen is that 53 percent of the stocks in this country are owned by 1 percent of the people.

And almost equally important, there are many leaders in this country who are seemingly indifferent to these trends. Some even maintain that this growth in income inequality is a form of economic Darwinism and that it should not be a major source of governmental



concern. I do not believe that.

Our nation shows other serious strains. This is something that doesn't fit into political campaigns today, but I have long been

concerned about the staggering prison incarceration rate in the United States, which is higher than any nation in the world. (Applause.) And speaking of reporting, 23 years ago I was the first American journalist allowed inside the Japanese prison system. And even then, 23 years ago, I wrote of my concern that the incarceration rate in this country was the highest in what we then called the free world. Twenty-three years ago, there were nearly 700,000 Americans in prison. Today, our country has more than 2 million people in prison, and more than 7 million under some form of correctional supervision when you consider parole on the one hand and probation on the other.

A black male who does not finish high school, by the statistics that I have been shown, has a 60 percent chance of going to prison. A black male who has finished high school has a 30 percent chance of going to prison. You know, we need to keep bad people off our streets. We want to break the backs of gangs, and we want to cut down on violent behavior, but there is something else going on when we're locking up such a high percentage of our people, making them marked individuals at an early age, and in many cases eliminating their chances for a productive life as full citizens.

This is what I call a trajectory issue, and what I mean by that is it's going to take years to sort this out. But I'm committed to working on a solution that is both responsive to our needs for law and order and fairer to those who have become entangled in the system. (Applause.)

I believe it's a matter of self-interest for all Americans from the top to the bottom in our economic system to recognize the dangers of this present course. It's simply not healthy for a democracy such as ours to have such a wide gulf between the rich, the poor and the vast majority of hard working productive people in between. Many commentators have pointed out that if this is left unchecked, the division of our society along class lines threatens to usher in an era of protectionism in our economy and an issue of political and social unrest. I'm determined to do everything I can to advance a progressive agenda that addresses the issues surrounding economic fairness and social justice. I believe we can work towards solutions that, on the one hand, keep the United States' economy strong and engaged in the rest of the world, but on the other, safeguard the rights of workers and the environment.

The passage of legislation to increase the minimum wage was a good first start. We were able to get the first increase in the minimum wage in ten years early in this Congress, but we clearly will have more opportunities as, for instance, during the consideration of tax, trade legislation, budget -- which is going on now -- and educational reform.

Just as a final point before I take your questions, I would like to say that I firmly believe that we have assembled an absolute world-class staff in my office. Paul Reagan, who's my chief of staff, and I

worked very carefully for a period of four months from the point right after the election results were in to carefully bring together a group of people who are representative of Virginia in every sense of the word in terms of personal background, in terms of geography, in terms of professional experiences, and we have a -- just an absolutely tremendous staff and we stand ready to serve the interests of our country, to take care of the needs of our constituents in Virginia, and to respond as best we can to the inquiries of the fourth estate, without which, as I well know for having worked on the other side of this podium, we would not be able to function properly as a fair society, as a free society and in the open air of fair debate.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Thank you very much, Senator. We have an awful lot of questions -- many, many of them about Iraq -- and we'll start with this one. What is your view of the supplemental spending bill that the House is considering this week, and the timeline that it proposes?

SEN. WEBB: Jerry just informed me his name is Jerry, not Jeremy, which is not a good way to start off a Q & A when he controls which questions were brought to the floor here. (Laughter.) My apologies on that.

I've been working with Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska -- a long-time friend of mine -- we came up in the veterans' programs together nearly 30 years ago -- to try to develop a reasonably bipartisan piece of legislation that we can bring to the floor on the supplemental next week that will incorporate some of the, I think, more workable provisions in this House bill, at the same time not unnecessarily tie the hands of the military, and without a specific endpoint and a timeline.

The difficulty that I've always had in a timeline when we lay out a reduction of forces to withdraw from Iraq based on an external schedule is that they are generally unworkable, and the best way to approach removing our troops from Iraq is to get a diplomatic solution that will provide the umbrella for which -- under which we can withdraw our troops. And if we do that, the timeline could happen relatively quickly. Without it, we're struggling against the notion that we are moving troops around without the diplomatic participation of the countries in the region. So Senator Hagel and I are trying to put together a kind of bill that will on the one hand address the diplomatic side, and on the other address readiness and deployment cycles and these sorts of things. And since we're still discussing it, I don't think I should go any further in explaining what's in the bill.

MR. ZREMSKI: If Congress is opposed to the war, shouldn't it cut off funding? Would President Bush really leave the troops in the lurch rather than withdraw?

SEN. WEBB: The difficulty on cutting off funding -- on funding issues for a war that is ongoing is that it's -- it -- it's very hard to target where the money actually would go and it does create an assumption among -- and a misunderstanding among people that those who

are cutting off fundings are undercutting the operations of troops in the field. I just don't think that's a good way to go. As opposed to the situation in Iran on the bill that I represented, which basically says, "You will expend no funds to commence a larger war." That's -- there's a clean line there, but when all of the funding bills that I have seen have been unworkable in terms of actually how they would play out -- for instance, some of them put troop caps. They'll say, "We won't fund more than the number of troops that were in Iraq as of January the 7th." This was -- there were a couple of bills like that at the beginning of the Congress.

And that does two things. One is it's difficult to figure out exactly which -- you know, which troops you're not going to fund, and the other thing that happens is you actually -- instead of getting a bill that will allow the United States to withdraw from Iraq, you've just given the administration the floor. You can say, "All right. If the funding level is for 130,000 troops as of January the 1st, then we're saying de facto that it's okay to have 130,000 troops in Iraq. So I think there are better ways to do this. Again, it's to get a diplomatic solution into place and then to press for full withdrawal. I do not believe that we are going to have true stability in Iraq as long as there are American troops in Iraq, period.

MR. ZREMSKI: What do you think would be the worst thing that could happen if we were to pull our troops out of Iraq now? And how would we deal with it? Would we deal with that as a separate issue, or would American forces have to perhaps respond again?

SEN. WEBB: Well, I think that's sort of the red herring that is being thrown into the debate. Through all of these hearings, one of the things that was continually mentioned by the people who support the administration's policies in Iraq is that if we withdraw all our troops, you're going to have the empowerment of Iran, greater instability in the region, greater presence of terrorism and a decrease in the respect for the United States. And the first thing I can say about that is no one is calling for a precipitous withdrawal.

We're talking about an orderly approach. But secondly, those four realities are exactly what people such as myself were warning about if we went into Iraq in the first place -- that you were going to empower Iran, we were going to increase terrorism in the region, we're going to destabilize the region and the United States' prestige around the world would be diminished. And clearly, all four of those things have happened right now.

MR. ZREMSKI: Would the division of Iraq be a viable solution to ending the conflict there?

SEN. WEBB: There are people who have -- and people with strong foreign policy credentials who have recommended a partition of Iraq. I know Chairman Biden on the Foreign Relations Committee is one of those. I tend to believe that the most important thing that we can do is (a) to get the countries that are tangential to Iraq and other countries that have historic ties in the region and strategic interests in the region to the table diplomatically to cause countered that are tangential to Iraq that are playing under the table right now -- such as the Saudis on the Sunni side and the Iranians on the Shi'a

side -- to bring them overtly into the diplomatic process so that they can assume an ownership of the solution, and then to move forward in that way. And one of the issues that does tend to unite people in Iraq is the fact that the presence of American troops on the streets of Iraq is a destabilizing factor at this point, and we have to work to get our troops off the streets.

MR. ZREMSKI: Has the Iraq War increased or decreased the likelihood of another 9/11?

SEN. WEBB: I believe this -- that after 9/11, we had the -- fortunately, the entire world with us on the issue of international terrorism. There were bouquets of flowers being left on embassies all around the world. We had an historic moment where we could have brought the world with us in a totally different way in terms of how we address the issue of international terrorism. And I was one of those early on -- I think wrote the first piece in a major newspaper -- in the Washington Post six months before the invasion of Iraq who was warning that to invade and occupy Iraq, we would be empowering Iran, we would be negatively affecting our approach to terrorism around the world and we would be turning our troops into terrorist targets. And I think, unfortunately, that reality has occurred.

With respect to another 9/11, I think that separately from Iraq, our country got a lot smarter and a lot more focused on defensive issues here in the United States. I think our intelligence specifically related to attacks on the United States has probably increased. I'm not on the Intelligence Committee, but looking at the flow of things as an average citizen, I think I could agree with that concept. But in terms of the volatility and the anger around the world toward the United States, that certainly has increased.

MR. ZREMSKI: A Vietnam War veteran who had lost both of his legs in the fighting writes this. "I have had to this day some hard feelings for a Congress that voted to send us to war, and when public opinion went south decided to cut and run. While I acknowledge that you never supported the Iraq War, don't you see a parallel? And if we do abandon Iraq, what will happen?"

SEN. WEBB: With all due respect to the individual's service -- and I do respect his service, I don't believe that there are parallels between Vietnam and Iraq. I may be one of the few people in the Congress who still strongly supports the Vietnam War. I believe that the logic for the Vietnam War was sustainable and I believe the American people, in spite of the way we look back at Vietnam, also agreed that the logic -- the political logic for Vietnam was sustainable, even though the way that we fought the war was not sustainable. And one of the most striking statistics on that -- it was one I used in my last book -- where the Harris Survey in August of 1972 -- this is eight years after the Gulf of Tonkin reported that the American people still agreed by a margin of 74 to 11 percent that it was important that South Vietnam not fall to the Communists. So we had a basic understanding in this country that however bad the strategic operations in Iran -- in Vietnam went, that there was a larger issue in play.

With respect to the war in Iraq, there is no consensus. And

there were a lot of people with strong national security experience, including the two former commanding generals of CENTCOM -- General Zeny and General Hoare -- who basically were saying that strategically, this was not the way to go. So when you have made a strategic blunder, and I believe that Iraq was one of the most serious strategic blunders our national leadership has ever made, you need to correct your course because we do have another concern that we need to be addressing as Americans, and that is the concern against international terrorism. And what has happened for the good of the country, for the good of the United States military, what has happened in Iraq that needs to be corrected is that we have tied down a tremendous portion of our operational military in what I called years ago a strategic mouse trap. And for the good of the country, we need to correct that, and I don't think that is in any way abandoning the efforts of our troops.

And probably the best example of that are the polls from the troops themselves, which seem hardly ever to make it into this discussion. But a year ago right now, at the end of February -- a year ago -- 72 percent of the troops in Iraq, including 70 percent of the regular Army and 58 percent of the regular Marine Corps said that they wanted the United States to be out of Iraq by the end of last year.

At the end of last year, the Service Times, which are the most respected reporting entities as it relates to active duty military, did a poll of the active duty military -- this is a month after the election. And only 35 percent of the active duty military supported the Bush administration's policy in Iraq. And 41 percent -- only 41 percent -- believe that Iraq had been a worthwhile invasion to start off with.

So I don't see that, with all due respect, for the quality of the performance, which I have a high regard for, I don't see that continuing this course is going to help the wellbeing of anyone in the military.

MR. ZREMSKI: What's your opinion of the war in Afghanistan and how that's going these days?

SEN. WEBB: I was in Afghanistan as a journalist in '04. I was in nine different places -- I was embedded for part of the time with the Marine Corps in two different -- with two different Marine Corps units -- and anyone here who is a journalist knows the truth of what I'm going to say -- it's a lot easier to comprehend reality when you're on the ground in that kind of an environment, than it is when you're a Senator going in and looking at a dog-and-pony show that somebody's going to give you in Bagram.

And on the one hand, I think that the way that we handled Afghanistan from the beginning was much smarter than the way we handled Iraq. Part of that, by the way, was right after -- part of it was the use of what we would call the "multiplication of forces." We actually had Afghani units early on doing most of the fighting. And the second part of that was we configured a diplomatic solution right after the invasion where we did involve all the countries in the region tangential to Afghanistan, including Iran -- in a solution that

resulted in the Karzai government.

The Marine battalion that I was with in Afghanistan had a short-term mission. They went in for, I think, three months -- they were on the ground, they were going after the Taliban and then they were leaving. They were not, you know, occupying the country, on the streets of Afghanistan like our troops are doing in Iraq.

But the other truth-teller in Afghanistan? I sat through a Foreign Relations committee hearing totally frustrated three or four weeks ago because I didn't see this truth being addressed -- is that I

think we need a better accounting in Afghanistan of how much of this resurgence in violence -- recent resurgence in violence -- is actually Taliban or al-Qaeda, and how much of it is drug-related?

You know, Afghanistan's a narco state. And when people go in and say, "Well, we're going to eradicate the opium and we're going to tell the farmers to grow wheat," I don't see the -- I don't think they see the reality that this problem is a global problem. It is a -- it's not a demand-push problem -- it's a supply-pull problem. They're selling this stuff on the streets of Europe, and particularly, in the U.K. And I would say every village that I was in in Afghanistan had an opium patch and a marijuana patch. I don't claim to have been in every village, but every village that I was in, you could see that. One place I was with the Marines up on the Pakistan border was a Special Forces camp, Army Special Forces camp -- with the Marine unit, part of it security. This camp was being expanded -- the construction was being expanded. The commander of the camp had hired Afghani laborers from across this river who usually work for this -- you can put the front on the "lord" any way you want to work it, you know, the "drug" lord, "war" lord -- the most powerful person in that area. So inside this perimeter, there were Afghani workers who were being paid \$7 a day to do labor. Across the river, where the "boss" lived, as far as the eye could see, were opium fields. Looked like rice field in Vietnam.

And when you start turning the screws, tightening up on drug policy -- with people that you're dealing with, and whose support you need, then you end up with a situation that we're in in Afghanistan. And I think we need a truly honest discussion about how much of the violence we're seeing in Afghanistan is a push-back from the druglords.

(Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Elizabeth Holtzman, who was on the original Watergate Committee, argues that Bush has committed "high crimes and misdemeanors" and should be impeached. Your response?

(Laughter.)

SEN. WEBB: Last time I said something about President Bush, I got in real trouble.

(Laughter.)

SEN. WEBB: I think that there has been a constitutional imbalance since 9/11 in terms of the relationship between the Executive Branch and the Legislative Branch. It's very troubling to me. It's something that I spoke about often during the campaign. And what we need is accountability, and we need accountability across-the-board with the Executive Branch. I think that it would be very healthy for our society to see the people that are being subpoenaed from the White House come out and testify openly. I think that would be healthy for the system, and, as I mentioned in my remarks, there are a whole series of issues that involve aggressive oversight that I think we should pursue.

I don't know how -- in what specific areas that former Congresswoman Holtzman was making that comment, but I certainly would agree that we do have an imbalance and we need to correct it, in terms of the reassertion of power by the Legislative Branch.

MR. ZREMSKI: What are the most important things that Congress can do to address the economic divide in our country, and where does health care fit into all of that?

SEN. WEBB: This is another trajectory issue, and I start talking about trajectory issues with respect to our criminal justice system. In terms of economic fairness, I think that the early efforts here in the Congress should be toward fair taxation, specifically as it relates to corporate taxation. I think so many loopholes have been built into the corporate tax laws, that we need to examine benefits -- tax benefits that have been given to corporations that are not treating American workers in a fair way.

I'll give you one small example of that. There is a tax that's called the "runaway" -- there's a tax break that's called the "runaway factory tax credit," where, if you can take a plant -- for instance, the Norfolk plant, that's the Ford plant in Norfolk -- if a corporation takes an American plant and sends it overseas, the profits from that overseas plant are not taxable in the United States unless the money is repatriated back to the United States.

So here we have an American tax system that is rewarding a company for sending its work overseas and rewarding a company for abandoning American workers. What happens in that situation, obviously, is that corporation takes the profits from that plant, reinvests in other operations overseas, and we're seeing a dwindling of our resources. There are a number of areas like that in the corporate tax law that I think need to be tightened up.

Long-term, since health care was mentioned, our -- and this is in fairness to corporate America, our corporate structure was built on the idea that the employer would provide medical care. This puts us in a disadvantage when we are competing against companies that are outside the United States.

One good example of that that, I've used in the past, is the Chinese car. I got back from an Asia trip in January last year, and the Chinese were in Detroit saying that they're going to be selling a car. And let's -- let's notionally say that that's a \$20,000 dollar

car -- I think it's going to be cheaper than that, but if you look at what investment has to go into that Chinese car, it's totally different than what goes into the American car when they have to compete in the same market place.

In China, the corporation doesn't pay for medical care, the corporation doesn't pay for retirement. These costs are outside the costs it takes to make the car -- and they obviously have an advantage with what's happened in our currency evaluations and all the rest. But even setting that aside, in the United States, the corporation -- medical costs go into the car, retirement costs go into the car, retirement and medical costs for retired workers also go into the car.

So the margin for an American car in terms of making a profit here is much slimmer. So on the one hand, I will not look myself well in the mirror if I don't spend a great deal of time over the next six years working to make sure that every American has some sort of preventive health care. We owe that to our people. (Applause.)

On the other, we really need to take -- it's very hard to do in a legislative environment where you're reacting to the issue of the day, but we need on this -- in this trajectory issue environment, we need to take some time and develop the right kind of economic strategy where we can make our companies and our -- more competitive and make sure our workers are more highly rewarded for the jobs that they're doing.

MR. ZREMSKI: You won in a squeaker but your party's candidate lost a close race in Tennessee, and the Republicans dominate other parts of the South. What kind of presidential candidate will Democrats have to put forward to win in Virginia and other parts of the South?

SEN. WEBB: Well, the first thing to be said about Virginia is it is a microcosm of the country demographically right now. If you look at the in-migration in Northern Virginia from other parts of the United States, particularly the Northeast but also ethnically from all different parts of the world. We have a very kind of a California-like environment in Northern Virginia -- high tech, multiethnic, high income rates, and you can go all the way down to far southwest and it is as red as any red state in America. So I think what you have in Virginia is, as I said, a microcosm of the country, which makes it a very interesting place to run in statewide and as well as presidential candidates.

The rest of the South is different -- I mean, different parts of the South are different. Florida's different from Georgia and North Carolina. But the message that I put out -- one of the reasons I decided to run was that I believe very strongly that the so-called Reagan Democrats -- you can put any label on them you want -- but the people who once were the backbone of the Democratic party when the Democratic party truly was the party of working people in this country need to come back. This is -- you know, if you look at the traditional strength of the Democratic party, the Democratic party needs to focus on the issues, I believe, that I was talking about here -- economic fairness, social justice, a strong but reasoned foreign policy, and if they do, you're going to see the people in red state



America start gravitating back to the party that takes care of their interests.

This is what Andrew Jackson was all about. I mentioned in the response to the State of the Union address that Jacksonian democracy says you measure the health of a society not at its apex but at its base. You measure the health of society not by how Wall Street's doing, but how the working people in the country are doing. If the Democratic party gets back on that message, I think they have a very strong chance in red state America.

(Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Have you decided which presidential candidate you'll be supporting? (Laughter.)

SEN. WEBB: Whichever one's nominated. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Okay. We're almost out of time, but before asking the last question I have a couple of other important matters to take care of. First of all, let me remind our members of future speakers. On January 26th, Terrence Jones, the president of the Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts, will be here along with special guest Mike Love of the Beach Boys. The next day, the 27th, Mark Everson, the IRS commissioner, will be here. On April 13th, Cal Ripken, Jr., the Baltimore Orioles superstar and Hall of Fame baseball player, will be here and there will be a book signing afterwards.

Next, we have a couple of traditions to attend to. You probably have one of those from 19 years ago -- they're nicer now, and so are the mugs. (Laughter.)

SEN. WEBB: Thank you very much.

MR. ZREMSKI: Thank you very much. (Applause.)

SEN. WEBB: Thank you.

MR. ZREMSKI: Okay. And our last question is a little bit off point but I have to ask it. Are you going to do a Capitol Hill novel? (Laughter.)

SEN. WEBB: You know, I've got eight years in government -- four years working in the Congress and four years working in the Pentagon -- and one of the things I'm proudest of is I worked for the ranking member on the House Veterans Committee for four years -- worked with him every day. I worked with Cap Weinberger for almost exactly four years -- worked with him every day. And you will never see anything in writing in terms of a private conversation that I've ever had with either one of them. I believe that's the only way that government can properly function.

However, I am going to write a book based on a lot of the themes that I was just talking about today. I was talking to my publisher after the State of the Union response, and so I'm going to try to put together a different kind of a book -- just a book on where I think

this country needs to go on these sorts of issues, and I'll be working on that. I -- you know, I mentioned during the campaign that if I had to pick a prototype for the Senate it would probably be Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who came out of an intellectual career mixed with a government career, and Pat Moynihan put out a book a year while he was in the Senate. I don't think I'm going to be able to hit that mark but I will always write. It's just a part of who I am.

Thank you very much for being here. I appreciate your attention.

(Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Thank you very much, Senator. Thank you for coming today. Thank you for coming, and I'd also like to thank National Press Club staff members Melinda Cooke, Pat Nelson, Jo Anne Booz and Howard Rothman for organizing today's lunch. Also, thanks to the NPC library for its research. Thank you.

We're adjourned. (Sounds gavel.)