

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB NEWSMAKER LUNCHEON WITH
GARY SINISE,
ACTOR, DIRECTOR, AND NATIONAL SPOKESMAN FOR THE
AMERICAN VETERANS DISABLED FOR LIFE MEMORIAL FOUNDATION

TOPIC:
CAMPAIGN TO RECOGNIZE THE SACRIFICES OF
AMERICAN MILITARY SERVICE MEMBERS AND VETERANS

MODERATOR: JERRY ZREMSKI, PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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MR. ZREMSKI: Good afternoon. 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 here today,
along with our audience 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 in the
audience, rather than the journalists.

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

Madigan, WTOP Radio's "Man About Town." (Scattered applause.)

Ramona Joyce, media relations manager for the American Legion, and an Army veteran; Beth Belton, news editor of the financial desk at the Associated Press, and an NPC member; John Fales, Washington Times columnist and a Press Club member whom everybody in Washington knows as Sergeant Shaft.

Q (Off mike.)

Q (Laughs.)

MR. ZREMSKI: (Chuckles.)

Congressman Mark Kirk of Illinois, a guest of the speaker; Bob Schieffer, chief Washington correspondent for CBS News, and an NPC member. (Applause.)

Congressman Dennis Moore of Kansas, a guest of the speaker; Angela Greiling Keane of Bloomberg News, and the chair of the National Press Club Speakers Committee.

Skipping over our guest for a moment, Melissa Charbonneau, White House correspondent for CBN News, vice chair of the Speakers Committee and the organizer of today's event.

Staff Sergeant Christian Bagge, spokesman for the Disabled Veterans for Life Memorial Foundation.

Kelly Wright, co-host of "Fox and Friends Weekend."

Robert Novak, syndicated columnist for the Chicago Sun Times and 49-year member of the National Press Club; Joe Davis, public affairs director for the Veterans of Foreign Wars; and Dave Autry, deputy national director of communications for Disabled American Veterans. (Applause.)

On stage and screen for the last two decades, our guest today has, in his own words, portrayed the guy with the weight of the world on his shoulders. He was the unlucky astronaut kicked off the "Apollo 13" space mission. He walked "The Green Mile" with prison guard Tom Hanks. And currently award-winning actor and director Gary Sinise is starring in the CBS crime drama "CSI: New York," one of prime time's top 10 shows.

Yet Sinise is also widely remembered for his portrayal of the tormented Lieutenant Dan Taylor, the war hero who lost his legs in Vietnam and later teamed up with Forrest Gump in the Bubba Gump Shrimp Company. (Laughter, laughs.)

That role brought Sinise an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor as well as the Disabled American Veterans National Commander's Award.

The passion that Sinise brought to that role came from the heart, and it should be no surprise. For more than two decades, he's been working with America's men and women in uniform as well as with

veterans groups.

For example, he is co-founder of Operation Iraqi Children, which has shipped 300,000 school supply kits to U.S. troops in Iraq to distribute to youngsters in need. And between "CSI" shoots, Sinise and his rock band, the Lt. Dan Band, travel the world with the USO, playing more than 40 concerts so far to entertain the troops on U.S. bases from Singapore to South Korea to Iraq.

And this weekend, he and the Lieutenant Dan Band will be performing a benefit for the Fisher House, a charity that provides homes away from home for the families of wounded troops. That's going to be taking place at 6:00 p.m. tomorrow at the Washington Auto Show at the Convention Center.

Likened to a modern-day Bob Hope, Sinise is now serving as spokesman for the foundation that's building the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial. He is here today with U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Christian Bagge of Eugene, Oregon, who lost both legs to a roadside bomb in Iraq, and later demonstrated the determination of an American hero by going running on the White House track with President George W. Bush.

Sgt. Bagge will say a few words a bit later. But first, Sinise will discuss his new mission: speaking out for the Disabled Veterans for Life Memorial Foundation. The foundation is building the nation's grandest tribute to the sacrifice that nearly 3 million American servicemen and women have made -- the sacrifice that left them permanently disabled.

Ladies and gentlemen, help me welcome Gary Sinise. (Applause.)

MR. SINISE: Thank you.

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I may repeat a few things that you said, so forgive me if I do. But I'm honored to be here today to recognize the men and women of the United States military. They share a dedication to the defense of freedom and the same spirit that for generations has defined America as the home of the brave. They're the valiant soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsmen of our nation's armed forces. They are our American veterans.

John Quincy Adams said, "You will never know how much it has cost my generation to preserve your freedom. I hope you will make good use of it."

Freedom -- for much of the world, freedom is a luxury, the privilege of a few. For Americans, however, our many freedoms are so much a part of the fabric of our lives that many of us take them for granted, and the value and cost of preserving those freedoms are often overlooked. Freedom to participate in our own governance, to worship as we please, to disagree with those in power, to appear as equals before the law -- the list of our freedoms is long. We all know the value of freedom, and we look to the men and women who wear the nation's uniform to protect and defend it.

It is important to remember that of the 26 million American veterans living across the world today, 3 million are permanently disabled from injuries suffered in our nation's defense. For their sake, it is precisely this value and cost we seek to honor and uphold in our proposed design for the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial.

It cannot be stressed enough how important it is to recognize the sacrifices that our country's disabled veterans have made on behalf of us all. I was deeply moved to have been asked to participate in the building of this absolutely necessary memorial.

I'm honored to serve as the Disabled Veterans Life Memorial Foundation's national spokesperson, and can only hope that my participation will help draw attention to the cause and ensure its successful fruition as the nation's first and only such tribute built specifically to remember these courageous men and women.

There are many of our brave wounded warriors here today, and some of our service members. Can we please give them a warm round of applause for their service and their sacrifice. (Applause.)

As Jerry said, we also welcome two members of Congress, Mark Kirk, who is my hometown congressman from Highland Park, Illinois, and Dennis Moore from Kansas, who are leading the effort to secure passage of commemorative coin legislation in the House of Representatives that will have an important and lasting impact on the memorial. Thank you both for being here. (Applause.)

And as Jerry said again and finally, Christian Bagge, a young man who joined President Bush for a run at the White House after they met at Walter Reed during his rehabilitation. Christian will give voice to the disabled veterans when he shares his thoughts on building the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial later on.

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Now, I'd like to take a little moment to explain how I got actively involved with supporting our veterans and their issues. Over the years people have asked me if it had something to do with a certain film that I acted in -- (laughter) -- a while back. It actually predates my work as Lieutenant Dan Taylor, the disabled Vietnam veteran, in Forrest Gump. I have -- there's veterans in my family. My grandfather served in World War I, my father served in the Navy, my uncle was a navigator on a B-17 during World War II flying and surviving 30 missions over Europe. And there's military that runs on both my wife's side and my side of the family.

But in 1980 I had the privilege of seeing a group of Vietnam veterans perform a play they had written that was based on their experience during the war in Vietnam. It was an incredibly moving experience. It was a moving piece of theater, and it made me think back to what I'd been doing when I was 19 years old. While others were fighting in the jungles of Vietnam, I was not really paying much

attention. Although, as a freshman in high school I remember attending an anti-war rally without actually knowing what was going on. It was really just to get out of class. (Laughter.) That was a distant war to me and something that was happening over there, not here. Even though it was broadcast every night on the nightly news, it didn't seem to affect me. And crazy things were happening here at home, but I just went on being a kid living in a free country, enjoying the benefits of that.

But when I saw this play -- it was a play called "Tracers," and it was a play performed by the men who had fought and survived that war -- a tremendous feeling of guilt and sadness came over me. I thought back to what I was doing when I was their age and how unaware I was of what these young men were going through so far from home and how an ungrateful nation received them when they came home.

A fine piece of theater can truly rattle your senses and awaken the soul, and I knew, sitting stunned and silent in the empty theater afterwards, that I wanted to do something to help make more people aware of the experiences of our Vietnam heroes. They deserved our gratitude, and they never got it.

My wife Moira's two brothers both served in Vietnam; one was a helicopter pilot, the other an infantry officer. The officer, Boyd Harris, a West Point graduate, served two tours, first as a lieutenant and then he went back as a captain. The military was his career, and I was able to have many, many long discussions with him about his two tours in Vietnam, which was also great preparation for the work I had. And a few years later, I was fortunate enough to be able to produce and direct this play at Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago, the theater I founded with my friends back in the mid-'70s. Sadly, Boyd died of cancer as rehearsals began. He died a lieutenant colonel at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. And he was -- the military aspect of Lieutenant Dan was very much modeled on my wife's brother Mac. He was a very courageous, heroic, dedicated American servicemember, and I learned a lot from him. His death made me even more determined to honor these heroes with a great production of this play.

During the course of our work on this play, my cast and I spent many, many hours with local Vietnam Veterans who were struggling with posttraumatic stress disorder. We spent hours and hours at the VA listening to some of these veterans pour their tragic experiences onto the floor for us to see. So vividly they talked about it -- not at first, but eventually they trusted us and knew that we would try our best to honor them with our performances. So they helped us to understand their pain, and the play became sort of a healing device for them. Each night the audience would be filled with dozens and dozens of veterans, many of them coming back night after night, to relive their experiences through the actors and participate in the very, very emotional post-show discussions after the play. It was extremely powerful and one of the great experiences of my creative life. I'll never, ever forget it.

The time spent with these veterans along with my wife's two brothers and a brother-in-law who is also a Vietnam Veteran left a lasting impression on me, and I have stayed involved with veterans ever since.

This was early '80s.

Ten years after directing the play, I was lucky enough to land the role of Lieutenant Dan in "Forrest Gump." Having spent so much time with Vietnam veterans, I knew I was well prepared for the role. And as Lieutenant Dan might say, it almost felt like it was my destiny to play this part. These moments are rare for an actor.

So many good things came from this film. But I'll never forget getting a call from the Disabled American Veterans offering to honor me for my portrayal at their national convention. I'll never forget the emotions I felt when I received that award, standing in front of thousands of these veterans, some on one leg, some in wheelchairs, all standing, those that could, and applauding me for playing a disabled veteran.

I wasn't prepared for the emotion that I felt when I walked out onto the stage. I actually came down through the kitchen from a hotel room up above. I was standing behind some doors and I heard my voice loudly on the video screen. They were playing scenes from "Forrest Gump." I didn't know what was out there. And then they announced my name and I walked out onto the stage and got this massive ovation and could hardly speak. I'll never forget that. Winning an Oscar could not have meant more than that.

From that moment on, I've stayed in touch with members of the DAV, helped to raise money, done PSAs and even gone back to their national conventions with my band, the Lieutenant Dan Band. (Applause.) (Laughter.) In fact, I'll remind you, if you get a chance tomorrow night, we are playing a benefit concert for the Fisher Houses at the Washington Convention Center at the Auto Show. We're there at 6 p.m. Proceeds from the tickets go to benefit the Fisher House. So if you can, come on by, spread the word.

The Fisher Houses are tremendous for our wounded, and the Fisher family has done extraordinary work in building these homes. I've been supportive of their work ever since I did my first tour to Iraq and got involved with them.

After September 11th, once our servicemembers began to deploy, I knew I had to do something to support them and their families. Having known so many Vietnam Veterans and remembering all too well how they were received when they returned from war, I wanted to do my part to make sure that that never happens again.

One of the many hard lessons we learned from our involvement in Vietnam is how not to treat our servicemembers. (Applause.) They served freely, and they should be shown appreciation and respect always. Their sacrifices are many, and they need our support.

In the last three years, I've been on over 20 USO tours with and without my band and have visited our wounded in the hospital several times. Each time I visit our wounded, I am struck by their humility, their courage, determination, their acceptance and their dedication to our country and their fellow warriors.

Lending a hand to these brave men and women is truly one of the most rewarding things that I have ever done. And I know that they don't have to do this work. And I'm grateful that we have people like them who want to volunteer to defend this great nation in military service. They don't ask much. Knowing they are not forgotten and that their sacrifice is appreciated can make a world of difference. And as these veterans face a life -- for which no one can prepare -- so must their families and friends.

And so you can see why, when the foundation asked me to sign on as their spokesperson, I was all too happy to accept. This memorial to honor all our disabled veterans from all wars will pay special tribute to those who have given so much of themselves and to the families who love and care for them. Their heroic devotion is a source of strength for those striving to heal. Freedom is so precious, and those who protect it and sacrifice for it deserve our highest praise and thanks. (Applause.)

For the first time in our nation's history, we will build a tribute to some of America's most courageous heroes -- our disabled veterans. The American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial will celebrate these men and women who may be broken in body, but never in spirit. The Disabled Veterans Life Memorial Foundation was created in 1998 through the combined efforts of philanthropist Lois Pope, foundation chairman; Arthur Wilson, national adjutant of the Disabled American Veterans; and the late Jesse Brown, former secretary of Veterans Affairs.

Formed as a 501(c)(3) non-profit, the foundation's sole objective is to raise the estimated \$65 million in private funds needed to design, build and permanently maintain the memorial.

The memorial will command an impressive location adjacent to the National Mall and within full view of the Capitol Building. The memorial's proximity to the Capitol will serve as a constant reminder to America's representatives of the true cost of conflict. The National Capital Planning Commission recognized this when it noted that the memorial will serve as a reminder to legislators of the human costs of their decisions concerning military action, as well as the need for health and rehabilitation of those injured in defense of our country.

The memorial's powerful meditative design was conceived by Michael Vergason Landscape Architects. Michael is here with us today.

Michael? (Applause.)

There he is, right here.

Thank you, Michael, for your thoughtful and beautiful design.

The design concept was approved in 2004 by the Commission of Fine Arts and the National Capital Planning Commission. The focal point of the memorial will be a star-shaped reflecting pool, its surface broken only by a single eternal flame. I have heard Captain Leslie Smith (sp), a retired disabled veteran from the Bosnia conflict, often talk of the star representing the five service branches -- Army, Navy, Air

Force, Marines, and Coast Guard.

Dedicated to both the living and the deceased, a setting of unity or solitude, the memorial will hold a special place in the hearts of all Americans and will serve as a never-ending reminder to all of the cost of human conflict.

Transcending conflicts, service branches and generations, the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial will express America's lasting gratitude to the men and women whose lives were forever changed in service to our country and in the cause of freedom.

I'm honored to speak on behalf of the foundation's efforts to get this memorial built. These disabled veterans live with the scars of their wars every day. Paying tribute to their sacrifices is long overdue.

Thank you. (Applause.)

It is now my pleasure to introduce Christian Bagge. Christian was a member of the Oregon National Guard when his convoy was attacked near Kirkuk. The soldiers' mission was to check a road for explosives that might have been planted overnight when a bomb exploded. Christian lost both legs. He is no longer a member of the Oregon National Guard but has joined the active Army and is stationed at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, where he lives with his wife Melissa. Christian was promoted to staff sergeant and was awarded the Purple Heart.

Please welcome Christian Bagge. (Applause.)

CHRISTIAN BAGGE (Spokesman for the Disabled Veterans for Life Memorial Foundation): Thank you very much, and Gary, I still haven't seen CSI. (Laughter.)

MR. SINISE: I'll send you the box set. (Laughter.)

SGT. BAGGE: It's my privilege today and true honor to speak on behalf of all disabled veterans and the memorial, but first, I want to share with you my story.

It was 4:00-4:30 in the morning. We were coming back up the road, and Mendez (sp) and I were talking about what we were going to eat; and the rest of the day was to relax, we'd do some laundry. And that's when the first IED exploded. My lieutenant and his vehicle were severely injured, and as we came up to get them, that's when we were hit.

I knew it was bad, but I didn't know they'd take my legs. I was trapped for 90 minutes before the chopper came, and I was very close to losing my life. I woke up in Germany to a nurse and a team of doctors that grabbed my shoulder and my hand, and they said, "Christian, we had to amputate your legs to save your life."

And I instantly felt this feeling of hopelessness, my heart drop, my soul go down to the depths. And I thought, "What am I going to do now?"

So here I am, speaking on behalf of American Disabled Veterans. It's a high honor. I never saw myself doing something like this, participating with Gary Sinise and the other distinguished guests here today.

Captain Leslie Smith is here -- a disabled American veteran from Bosnia. Sgt. 1st Class Dana Bowman, who's like me, a double-amputee: one above the leg, one below -- or excuse me, one above the knee and one below -- where it was amputated. Sgt. 1st Class Mike McNaughton, who's also another guy that ran with the president. So we have some very distinguished guests here today.

I'm here today -- (applause.) Thank you. I want to make this memorial real. I want to inflict emotion in your hearts. And I want you to know it's something serious to me and to those of us who have served.

We have rightfully built memorials for those who have given the ultimate sacrifice. They deserve every single one. They deserve our respect and our appreciation.

Now it's time for America to thank those of us who were wounded, who were severely wounded in some cases, fighting for our country. Many of them go about their daily life disabled, self-images shattered. And people look at them, and they don't necessarily know that so-and-so maybe was a war hero. And that's what this memorial is for. It's for education. It's educating our current children, people in middle age. It's for educating future children. It's about taking my kids there some day and saying, "I fought, and this is the price I paid, and America thanked me." It's about educating current administrations, future administrations, about the cost of war, like Gary said. It's about giving something to those who gave 99 percent.

I'm retired now, but I was at Brooke Army Medical Center for a while -- the burn center for the United States. And there's a lot of guys who really just grabbed my heart. They're burned, some of them, 60, 90 percent, and sometimes it's hard to look at them. But they've earned respect and honor, and sometimes they think maybe they gave more. And this is, of course, my opinion -- maybe they gave more. Maybe every day when they wake up, they look in that mirror and realize that they're not who they used to be. And it's important for us to recognize and thank them.

There's a lot of people who have pledged to help with the foundation, and who I want to thank.

Lois Pope is the co-founder and one of the chairwomen for the memorial. Gary Sinise, of course, accomplished actor, national spokesman for the memorial. Congressmen Dennis Moore and Mark Kirk, who have devoted hours and hours to their coin bill initiative. And I think that there are so many people doing a tremendous job who want to get this memorial through, they want to get it built, they want to get it paid for and we want to break ground.

And I thank you for your support to people like me, to those who have been to combat and maybe some who will go. And I just thank you

for this opportunity to share my feelings. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Thank you very much, Christian.

We have a lot of questions here, and I'm going to try to get through as many as I can. First of all, Mr. Sinise, if you would just tell us a little bit more about how much support you've gotten for the memorial so far and what the timetable looks like, when it may be completed.

MR. SINISE: We are hoping for 2010 that the memorial will be built and ready to show. We've got about half the money. We're looking to raise \$65 million, as I said. About half the money is there. Some very generous people have continued to support the effort. We're, you know, just getting out there. I've begun to do PSAs. This is a big event. We're starting to promote as much as we can. There's a website, www.disabledveteransmemorial.org. All the information is on this website, what the memorial's about and how you can help support the memorial.

MR. ZREMSKI: Tell us a little bit about the coin legislation that Congressmen Moore and Kirk introduced and how that will help raise funds.

MR. SINISE: (Off mike) -- Congressman Kirk or Congressman Moore? Why don't you -- you know a lot more about that than I do. (Laughter.)

REP. DENNIS MOORE (D-KS): This legislation, if it passes -- and frankly, I can't imagine it won't pass, and I can't imagine that Mark and I won't be able to get virtually every member, 435 members of Congress, on this bill -- but if it passes, would authorize the minting of 35,000 coins, one dollar silver coins, which have a nice show of the memorial on the coin, and there would be a \$10 surcharge

for each coin that would go to the administrative costs of the foundation that's putting this together.

And Mark has been instrumental in getting this thing going.

REP. MARK KIRK (R-IL): I'll just say Dennis is a Democrat, I'm a Republican, and unlike everything else happening in this town, we are together on it. (Cheers, applause.)

REP. MOORE: And we in Congress should be together on a lot more for the American people. (Applause.)

REP. KIRK: Just one other thing. I am here also on behalf of Bryan Anderson, a triple amputee from Rolling Meadows, Illinois, on the cover of Esquire magazine this month for what he went through.

Bryan went to visit the senior Republican on the Financial Services Committee, Congressman Spencer Bachus, who said, "Since I'm a leader of the committee, I don't cosponsor any legislation before us." And after Bryan had finished with him -- with some tears in his eyes -- Spencer took his chief of staff aside and came back with Dennis and I and said, "I'm breaking my rule. I'm backing the legislation. This

is going to happen." So, you know -- (applause) --

MR. ZREMSKI: Thank you very much, Congressman.

Gary, if you could just go into a little bit more detail describing your most memorable experiences at Walter Reed and with the veterans that you've met there.

MR. SINISE: Yeah, I've probably been the hospitals now since -- my first trip to one of the -- I mean, actually, my first trip was to Landstuhl when I was in Germany in '03, and then I've probably been to Walter Reed and Bethesda six or seven times in the last two or three years. Whenever I come here to Washington, I come by.

And I'll say that on my first trip, I was -- you know, I was never somebody who did well in hospitals. I remember when my grandmother passed away. I was very close to my grandmother. And I was young, and she was dying in the hospital and I went to see her, and I had a very hard time with it. And so I tried to avoid hospitals at all costs after that, and luckily never had to be in one.

But, you know, when I started doing USO tours, they said they wanted me to visit Landstuhl, and I said okay, I want to. Landstuhl is of course where our servicemembers first go before -- when they get out of Iraq or Afghanistan, they go to Landstuhl, so they're right off the battlefield there. And I went on that day pretty apprehensive about the visit. But -- and I saw some very, very difficult things. These are injuries that just, you know, happened within 24 hours, and -- but when I left there, I was struck by how I felt that by being there, by just showing up, by going, by visiting these folks, by showing my face there, something -- I could see an awareness and an appreciation on their faces, and I knew that this visit had done something; I'd left something behind that was positive for them.

And as soon as I walked in and met my first wounded soldiers there, I completely forgot about my own apprehension, my own self. You forget about -- because it's not about you at all, you know, it's about them and what they're up to and what you can do for them. And so -- and they don't even realize it, but how much they do for you, when you leave the hospital after visiting somebody who's going through rehabilitation, who's suffering, and their families who are suffering along with them. To see the courage, determination and the acceptance of how they have to move forward with their lives is very, very inspiring.

And I must say that out of all the visits -- and this is, you know, seven or eight visits to the hospitals now -- I have never heard any of our service members complain to me about their situation. They just suck it up and do what needs to be done. They've never complained about the war or anything. In fact, most of them -- I'd say 90 percent of them have told me that they would rather be back in the field with their buddies doing their job.

So, you know, I get a lot out of giving in that way, and as I said earlier, it is one of the great things that I do. These are volunteers. We've had a volunteer Army for service for over 30 years. We want to keep it that way. You know, it's better to have people

that want to serve in military service than trying to drag them by the hair in a draft. And so I appreciate the folks that go out there under these conditions, knowing the dangers, and yet they still volunteer. And as I said earlier, we want to make sure that they know that people out there are grateful that we have those kinds of individuals that want to defend the country and want to get out there. What would we do without them? (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Tell us a little bit about your experiences in Iraq and the kind of danger you might have felt while you were there.

MR. SINISE: Yeah, I've taken two trips to Iraq. These trips were both in '03. So it's been a while since I've been there. I was in Afghanistan in May, this past year.

But when I was in Iraq, it was fairly early on in the conflict. The first trip was the first big USO tour that went over. It was about 180 people on this trip. And Northwest Airlines donated a 747 and flew us all over there. There were rock stars and basketball players and, you know, comedians, and, you know, some actors. And it was quite the trip.

I got to go up into Baghdad and do a concert in a hangar at the Baghdad airport -- about 6,000 people in 140-degree weather in this hangar.

And we actually didn't know that we were supposed to put on a show, and I happened to be with Kid Rock. (Laughter.) And luckily, they had some equipment up on the stage. So Kid Rock jumped up there with a couple of his guys, and they put on a show. And it was one of the great moments just seeing these -- how excited they were to see us.

And then I got back to the hotel that night, and I got a call at 11:00. We flew back to Kuwait, and I was staying in a Sheraton, you know. And flew back to Kuwait, I get a call at 11:00 at night -- "General Franks is going to Baghdad tomorrow. He wants to take a small group of people. Do you want to go?" I said, "I just got back, but I'll go again." (Laughter.) And so we got on the plane the next day and I went back, and that's when we convoyed into Baghdad, and I got to visit troops right in downtown Baghdad and at some of the palaces there that we were occupying.

My second trip I was able to visit some schools and see the kids and see the troops interact with the kids and see the school that the troops had helped to rebuild. And it was a wonderful feeling of cooperation between the Iraqi teachers and the kids and the soldiers, and I wanted to support that good feeling, that good will, that feeling of, you know -- there was a lot of gratitude that day to our troops, and that was inspiring. And I wanted to do something to help the troops from home because I can't go on trips all the time.

So we started Operation Iraqi Children. I founded that with Laura Hillenbrand. Laura wrote "Seabiscuit," and I was connected to Laura by a woman in Iraq, a major. She thought Laura and I should meet. We met, we talked on the phone, and we founded Operation Iraqi Children. You can go to operationiraqichildren.org, and you can see what we've been doing in the last three years. We've sent hundreds of

thousands of school supplies over to the troops, and they take these supplies out, they give them to the kids all over the country. It's a very, very positive thing for the troops because when they can give something to a child and see the smile on that child's face, it's a very good day for them. It's a good day for the kids because in a lot of these areas they don't have access to pens and pencils and paper and colored pencils and erasers and things like that. These are just simple things.

And we build these kits, and people build -- go to the website, they build these kits all around the country. They ship them to us, and we send them over to our troops. And they take them out, and they give them to the kids. It's a very positive program.

MR. ZREMSKI: Do you have any plans to go back to Iraq anytime soon or does the security situation there make it difficult now for USO tours to go through there?

MR. SINISE: I'm taking my band to Belgium and Germany in May, my hiatus from "CSI: New York." (Laughter.) Top 10 show. (Laughter, applause.)

Bob, you're at CBS. (Laughter.)

Q (Off mike.) (Laughter.)

MR. SINISE: (Chuckles.)

You know, I have 11 weeks off on my hiatus, and I usually devote a certain portion of that to the USO. This last year I went to Afghanistan, and I also went on a bus tour with my band and played four or five bases in the Midwest.

This year I'm taking my band to Belgium and Germany for about a 12-day tour, and then I'll go to Iraq for about six or seven days toward the end of May.

And then I'll end up back here, and we're going to play at a concert in support of the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial. It's going to be a big gala, and we'll let you all know about it. (Soft laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Why aren't more Hollywood types doing the kind of work that you're doing to support the troops? (Laughter.)

MR. SINISE: You know, I don't -- there are people that do. That's -- you know, people have asked me that question before. I don't -- I know other people that go out there and do it. Some do it quietly. I mean, I'm -- because I promote a charity, Operation Iraqi Children, and I want people to be aware of it, and I want people to support the program because it's a way to help the troops, and because I'm a part of the America Supports You network, which -- you can go to AmericaSupportsYou.mil, and you can see how you can -- there are dozens and dozens of ways you can help support the troops. Because I'm involved in those efforts, I've maybe been a little more -- I've -- you know, my efforts have been more in the media, because I do try to promote those websites and those organizations, so that people out

there will know how they can support the troops.

But there are people that go on USO tours and, you know, lend a hand. You know, I can't -- you know, I'm not going to mention everybody I know that does that. Some people do it quietly, and they don't get any attention for it at all. I -- you know, and there are other people that don't do it. And you know, I -- why don't they do it? I don't know. To me, it just seems like the right thing to do, to help the troops out. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Now, some Hollywood figures have not been shy about their antiwar views. Have you experienced any kind of a backlash or negative reaction from people who oppose the war?

MR. SINISE: From people in --

MR. ZREMSKI: In Hollywood.

MR. SINISE: No. Mm-mm. (Negative.)

(Laughter, scattered applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: As the Iraq war becomes more unpopular, do you have any fears about how the veterans will be treated when they come home?

MR. SINISE: You know, what I found -- and the veterans could probably speak more about this -- but there are a lot of people out there that are aware that we -- no matter what the politics of the situation, that our troops need to be helped and supported. And I continue to find that. Even with the unpopularity of the war, you know, gaining momentum, and whatever, I don't seem to find any lack of support for the troops. There are people out there that say, "Well, I don't support the war, but I support the troops." And I think that's true, I think there are people that feel that way, and they are active about their support of the troops, regardless of how they feel about the politics of the situation.

You know, I'm inspired when I come to Washington or I go to these bases or I go here and there and meet different people, because there are -- like I said, there's a lot of people with grassroots efforts out there that are trying to make sure that the troops know that they are supported. And all you have to do is go to AmericaSupportsYou.mil to see just two dozen examples of what has been done around the country to just make sure the troops know that they're not forgotten, even in the midst of all the craziness and the division in our country, and all of that.

There are lots of people out there that are working hard that probably, like me, remember what happened to our Vietnam veterans and don't want that to happen again to our troops. So I continue to be hopeful about that, especially when you go to the hospitals. I don't think that our troops could have better care than -- and dedication from these doctors and nurses that care for them and take care of them when they come home from war. And I feel that there are a lot of people actively, actively involved just to make sure that the troops know they're not forgotten. Are there going to be times where they feel like, "Hey, I can't pay my bills, and I can't do this, and

something's not right about that" -- probably. But I know a lot of efforts out there that are supporting our wounded, that are helping our troops and trying to make sure that the nation is grateful.

MR. ZREMSKI: Someone in the audience writes: "As a mother of a son who recently lost both legs above the knee and had both of his hands wounded as well, thank you." And she continues, "Be aware that means more to me and family than you could know."

Have you gotten much feedback from the families like hers, or other families of service members?

MR. SINISE: You know, I do. I mean, that means a lot to me, you know, when a family member will come up and say, you know, "My son knows what you're doing, and he appreciates it." That means a whole lot to me because I want them to know. You know, it's not like I'm trying to be covert about it. I've been on television, I've been on radio, I've talked about it. I want the troops to know that people, you know, are supporting them.

And I don't talk about any of my politics. You know, I don't talk about that kind of thing. That's not what this is about for me because whether we like it or not, we're at war with a serious enemy that's bound and determined to do some bad stuff to this country.

Iraq is one situation, but clearly, there are wars -- there are fires burning all over the world, and our service members are going to be called upon, no matter who's in the White House, to defend this country. That's just the way it is. If there's a Democrat in the White House, you know, in two years, the problems continue, but the troops are the troops. And they will be called upon, and I will support them and let them know that the nation is grateful for their volunteer service no matter who's in the White House. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: What can our nation do to reduce the risks to our service men and women, and what more could be done to help them lead more fulfilling lives after they're wounded?

MR. SINISE: I don't know that that's a question that I'm capable of answering. As I said, I know that there are organizations out there that are bound and determined, in spite of a lack of government support, to make sure that service members understand how they can be helped once they come back from war.

For example, there's an organization I'm involved with called the Coalition to Salute America's Heroes. They take -- they are doing their damndest to help out our wounded. And you can go to their website, Coalition to Salute America's Heroes, and see what they're doing. I played -- my band has played two of their conventions. They have conventions once a year when they will bring 100 to 150 of our wounded to Orlando, to Disney World, and do all kinds of things with them for four days. And then we have a big, big bash, and my band plays, and their families are there in a big, giant ballroom, and everybody's having a great time. And these are people that are really, really banged up. But they're -- you know, they're out of the service. And what do you do, when you're burned from head to toe, after you leave?

So luckily, we have people that are dedicated to taking care of a lot of these folks. And I would -- again, I can't stress enough about going to AmericaSupportsYou.mil if you're looking for ways to help people that are getting out of the service, that are medically retired.

As far as the question about taking better care of our troops while they're in the field, I'm not qualified to answer that.

MR. ZREMSKI: Okay, we're almost out of time. But before I ask the last question, I've just got a couple of little housekeeping matters to attend to.

First of all, I wanted to remind our members of our future speakers. On January 30th, Marion Blakey, the administrator of the Federal Aviation Administration, will be here to talk about aviation safety in a changing world. On February 5th, Ted Leonsis, the vice chairman of AOL and the owner of the Washington Capitals, will be here to talk about the Internet. And on February 27th, the governor of Arizona, Janet Napolitano -- (chuckles) -- sorry about that -- will be here.

MR. ZREMSKI: Next, as is our tradition, we have a presentation.

MR. SINISE: Oh.

MR. ZREMSKI: Our plaque and the coveted National Press Club coffee mug. (Laughter.)

MR. SINISE: Excellent.

MR. ZREMSKI: And we'll get one for you, too.

MR. SINISE: Thank you. Thank you very much.

MR. ZREMSKI: Sure. (Applause.)

Now, I feel bad because we got so many questions about "Forrest Gump" -- (laughter) -- and "CSI," and we only have time for one more question, but I think it's -- it's off topic a little bit, but I think it's important to ask. Do you consider yourself a better actor or a better rock musician? (Laughter.)

MR. SINISE: You know, somebody asked me that today, and they said, you know, "How does it feel when you're up on stage playing in the band? And, you know, are you a different person when you're playing in the band than you are on stage?" I've been told that I am, that I smile a lot more when I'm playing the bass than I do -- (laughter) -- on "CSI: New York" -- very serious, very -- you know, it's all DNA and, you know, all that. (Laughter.) I'm a very serious science man.

When I'm playing the bass, it's a lot of fun. I do it for fun. I played music before I was an actor, got my first guitar in fourth grade and kept playing all the way through high school and into my early 20s. Then I founded a theater company in Chicago, got very busy

with acting, didn't play until about 1997 again, and have been playing ever since. And I'm glad to be back playing music, because it's a lot of fun. It's what I do for fun. Acting, I love doing; it is my living. Playing -- I'd say we do about 80 percent charity gigs throughout the years, 20 percent to make up for the 80 percent charity gigs. (Laughter.) You know, but every time I go on stage, it's a lot of fun. I hope people can come tomorrow night, 6 p.m. at the convention center and see what Lt. Dan does up there. (Laughter.)

Thank you. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Thank you very much. This was great. We appreciate it. Thank you.

A couple last announcements here.

I'd like to thank National Press Club staff members Melinda Cooke, Pat Nelson, Jo Anne Booze and Howard Rothman for organizing today's lunch. Also thanks to the NPC Library for its research.

The video archive of today's luncheon is provided by the National Press Club Broadcast Operations Center. Press Club members can also access free transcripts of our luncheons at our website, www.press.org, and nonmembers can purchase transcripts, audio and videotapes by calling 1-888-343-1940.

For more information about joining the Press Club, please contact us at (202) 662-7511.

Thank you. We're adjourned.

(Sounds gavel.)

(Applause.)

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