

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH SENATOR JIM WEBB

SUBJECT: ECONOMIC FAIRNESS, FOREIGN POLICY AND THE BALANCE OF POWER

MODERATOR: MYRON BELKIND, PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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**MYRON BELKIND:** (Sounds gavel.) Good afternoon, and welcome. My name is Myron Belkind. I'm an adjunct professor at the George Washington University School of Media and Public Affairs, a former international bureau chief with the Associated Press, and the 107<sup>th</sup> President of the National Press Club. The National Press Club is the world's leading professional organization for journalists committed to our profession's future through our programming with events such as this while fostering a free press worldwide. For more information about the National Press Club, please visit our website at [press.org](http://press.org).

On behalf of our members worldwide, I'd like to welcome our speaker and those of you attending today's event. Our head table includes guests of our speaker as well as working journalists who are Club members. And so if you hear applause in our audience, I'd note that members of the general public are attending and so it's not necessarily evidence of a lack of journalism objectivity. I'd also like to welcome our C-SPAN and Public Radio audiences. You can follow the action on Twitter using the hashtag NPCLunch. After our guest's speech concludes, we'll have a question and answer period. I will ask as many questions as time permits.

Now, it's time to introduce our head table guests. I'd like each of you to stand briefly as your name is announced. From your right, John Domen, reporter for WNEW; Jill Lawrence, syndicated columnist; Eleanor Clift, Washington correspondent for *The Daily Beast* and McLaughlin Group panelist; James R. Webb, son of the speaker; Mark Shields, political analyst, PBS NewsHour; Hong Le Webb, wife of the speaker; Jerry Zremski, *Buffalo News* Washington bureau chief, Chairman of the NPC Speakers

Committee and former President of the National Press Club; Angela Greiling Keane, White House correspondent for Bloomberg News and former President of the National Press Club; Amy Webb, daughter of the speaker; Rachel Smolkin, executive editor, CNN Politics Digital; John Fales, columnist for Military.com known throughout the country as Sergeant Shaft; Mike Diegel, principal Primo Partners Public Affairs. A round of applause for our head table. (Applause)

Here's what we know about Jim Webb, our speaker today. He's a former one-term Democratic Senator from Virginia, a decorated marine who served in Vietnam, a Secretary of the Navy in the Reagan Administration, an Emmy Award-winning journalist, a filmmaker and the author of ten books. What we don't know is whether he'll be a candidate for the Democratic nomination for President. But there have been some hints.

Webb visited Iowa last month and is planning a trip to New Hampshire. While not everyone who goes to Iowa and New Hampshire becomes a presidential contender, no one who hopes to be in the race ignores those early primary states. And two weeks ago, he Tweeted a link to a *New York Times* article with the headline "Populist Could Derail Clinton Train." As he told a labor audience in Iowa, "I'm comfortable to say I'm the only Senator elected with a union card, three tattoos and two Purple Hearts." (Applause)

While in the Senate, Webb served on the foreign relations, armed services, veteran affairs and the joint economic committees. His legislation, the post-9/11 GI bill is the most significant veterans' legislation since World War II. (Applause) As chairman of the Foreign Relation Committees Asia Pacific subcommittee, Webb called for the U.S. to reengage in east Asia. In 2009, he went to Burma becoming the first American leader to visit that country in ten years, though the trip was criticized by some as a pro-democracy movement, subsequently relations between the two countries were resumed.

Webb graduated from the Naval Academy in 1968. When he returned from Vietnam, he got a law degree from Georgetown. Webb was a staffer on the House Veterans Affairs Committee before being appointed an Assistant Secretary of Defense, and then Secretary of the Navy. In addition to his public service, Webb has had a varied career as a journalist, winning an Emmy for his PBS coverage of the U.S. marines in Beirut in 1983. He wrote the original story and was executive producer of the film, "Rules of Engagement."

Webb's books include a history of the Scots Irish culture, a novel set in the Vietnam War, and *I Heard My Country Calling*, a memoir of his early life published this year. Webb has been to the National Press Club on several previous occasions and we are very happy to welcome him back to the National Press Club. (Applause)

**SENATOR WEBB:** Thank you very much. I appreciate all of you coming today to be with us and I've noticed-- I should put out here at the outset-- that Jerry Zremski has enough questions, I think, to last for about an hour and a half after I'm done and I hope he'll be kind in the questions that he chooses once I am done.

First, let me say how proud I am that three of my family members are with me today up here at the head table. My oldest daughter, Amy, who as a small child used to ride on the lap of some of my disabled friends from Vietnam as they did wheelies in their wheelchairs and wheelchair races in the VA hospitals. And I think she found her calling at a very young age and now works with the Disabled American Veterans. (Applause)

My son Jim, who left Penn State during the height of the Iraq War and listed as an infantry rifleman and fought in some of the worst fighting of the war in Ramadi, a place which is now becoming, unfortunately again familiar to us. And my wife, Hong who in many ways represents what the American dream is all about. Her entire family, extended family, escaped from Vietnam on a fishing boat. Her father was a fisherman when the communists took over South Vietnam. They were rescued by the United States Navy at sea. She spent time in two different refugee camps. Neither of her parents ever spoke a word of English and through all that, she ended up as a graduate of Cornell Law School. That, folks, represents the best of what our country is all about. (Applause)

And also, I've said for many years, that the truest legacy of my time in public service will always come from the contributions of those who served either under my command in the Marine Corps or on my staff and our country has heard, and will continue to hear, from these talented men and women wherever they go and however they choose to serve. And a good number of them have made the trek over here during a busy work week to join us today. We did great things during those six years. They continue to show us that they are all stars in a multitude of endeavors and I'd be pleased if they would stand or wave and be recognized right now. (Applause)

There have been a lot of things going on in the last couple of days, and I'm sure I'm going to get questions about them. But what I'd really like to talk about today in my opening remarks is what's going on in our country and what we can do to make things better. And let me begin by stealing a quote from Gore Vidal. Gore Vidal, as many of you know, was one of the most irascible and brilliant minds of the post-World War II era. He once wrote, "You never know when you are happy. You only know when you were happy."

And the same holds true, I think, for the times in which we live. We seldom know when we are living through a period of true historic challenge. We only know after it's over that we did. The internal workings of national policy are not a part of most Americans' lives. You wake up every morning, you go to work, maybe you try to find a job, you take care of your family, you pay your taxes, you turn on the TV and watch commentators as they were behaving this morning, screaming at each other about how screwed up things are. Sometimes you agree with both of them, sometimes you agree with neither of them. But bad things happen in the world and that will never change.

At the same time, I think it has been rare in our history when our economy crashes at the same time we're at war, as has been the case in the past five or six years. Here in America, our multicultural society lives in a state of constant disagreement. This

is frustrating. It is also creative. But the discussions during recent years have taken on a different tone. The very character of America is being called into question. Who are we as a people? What is it that unites us rather than divides us? Where is our common ground when the centrifugal forces of social cohesion are spinning so out of control that the people at the very top exist in a distant outer orbit completely separated in their homes, schools and associations from those of us who are even in the middle and completely disconnected from those who exist paycheck to paycheck or those at the bottom who are often scorned as undeserving takers who simply want a free ride?

I think about that. How can we say we're fellow Americans when tens of millions of people are being quietly written off? Not only by our most wealthy, but even by many of our political leaders as hopeless, who will never be fully employed, and who would be, or should be, avoided on the street, feared rather than encouraged to enter the American mainstream. We live indisputably in the greatest country on earth. The premise of the American dream is that all of us have an equal opportunity to succeed.

But let's be honest. If you're ten years old and black and living in East Baltimore and going to the bathroom in a bucket because the landlord won't fix your plumbing and your schools are places of intimidation and violence and the only people on the street who seem to be making money are the ones who are selling drugs, no matter how hard you work, you do not have the same picture of the American dream as a kid your age who's being groomed for prep school and then to go off to the Ivy League.

Or if you're a kid growing up in the Appalachian Mountains of Clay County, Kentucky by most accounts the poorest county in America, which also happens to be 98 percent white, surrounded by poverty, drug abuse and joblessness, when you leave your home in order to succeed, and when you do you are welcomed with the cynical, unbelieving stares and whispers of an America that no longer understands your cultural journey and policies that can exclude you from a fair shot at education or employment with the false premise that if you're white, you by definition have some kind of socioeconomic advantage, what are you going to think about the so-called fairness of your own government?

If you're a man, a woman who just did your time in prison, as have so many millions of Americans in today's society, you paid the price for your mistake, which could be as simple as a sickness, a drug addiction, or a moment of absolute but culpable stupidity, and you want to reenter the community that you left behind when you were locked up, neglected, possibly abused and definitely marked for the rest of your life on every employment application that you ever fill out, how do you do that? When there are no clear programs of transition that can prepare you for the structured demands of the workforce or society itself, which is going to fear you because you spent time in prison, what do you do now? Do we as a government have an obligation to provide a structure that can assist you so that the rest of your life is not wasted? Or have you merely become just another throwaway like the kids in East Baltimore or Clay County, Kentucky?

Well, let's say you're 30 years old without a high school diploma. Maybe you hit a rebellious streak when you were 17. You went out and got a dead end job or got pregnant and became a single mom and now you're looking at the rest of your life and you feel hopeless. The big debate between the two political parties seems to be whether you should get a higher minimum wage, or whether the government should start universal programs to put kids into school from pre-kindergarten. What do you need more than a minimum wage? And even if your kids attend pre-K, what happens when they come home? Is your life already over at the age of 30? Would it change if we had a second chance program where you could finish school and show your kids your own diploma and tell them to stay in school and study and be an example and aspire to a real job that pays more than minimum wage? What would it take to turn those things around, or is it impossible? Or should we just decide that it's something that's beyond the role of government?

This societal dislocation has been happening at a time when America's place on the international stage has become increasingly unclear, both in terms of our position as the economic beacon of the global community and our vital role as the military guarantor of international stability? For more than two decades, since the end of the Cold War, our country has been adrift in its foreign policy. The greatest military power on earth has lacked a clearly defined set of principles that would communicate our national security objectives to our allies, to our potential adversaries, and most importantly to our own people.

Over that same period, our debates over domestic policies and fairness at home have become even more polarized, driving our people further and further apart rather than bringing them together. In many cases, deliberately exaggerating divisions based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation and geography. Not surprisingly, the American people have grown ever more cynical about their national leadership in both parties and increasingly more pessimistic about the future.

So make no mistake; how we resolve these two formidable questions is going to determine what America looks like 10, 20 or 30 years from now in the not too distant future depending on how we resolve these questions, we will look back and judge ourselves. Did we have the courage to face the hard issues, to make the difficult decisions, to prove we were worthy of the sacrifices of the generations that went before us? Or did we fail watching passively as the greatest nation on earth descended slowly into mediocrity because it burned itself out through bad choices, heady debates, trivial party politics and the inability of our leaders to come to grips with these sorts of challenges and to work together to actually solve them.

And so we have reached an unavoidable and historic crossroads. The way we choose to address the conditions that now so deeply divide us over the next few years will define who we really are as a people and what our future will look like. What are the responsibilities of our government? Here's a list; provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, maintain order and public safety for all whether you're in East Baltimore or North Arlington, erect standards of fairness. When it comes to the

opportunity to succeed, don't pick favorites based on special access to the corridors of power.

Despite any of the barriers that have too often divided us, I'm naïve enough to believe that those of us who love our country can come together to rebuild our infrastructure and to repair the torn, divided fabric of our national spirit. True fairness is not an impossible dream, nor is the notion that we can return to a time when we can look at a fellow citizen and feel a moment of camaraderie rather than a feeling of mistrust, dislike or fear.

We need the energy and the talent of every American trained and put to use in ways that will make them more productive, their neighborhoods more vibrant and our country stronger. More than that, every one of us should view this as a duty, as a citizen if nothing else, and participate in the national discussion.

So let me mention a few areas where I believe we can make a difference. First, we must develop a clear statement of national security and foreign policy. An understandable statement of our national security interest is the basis of any great nation's foreign policy; clearly understood principles and the determination to stand by them are essential to stability and also public support. Our allies will be able to adjust to our clarity, our adversaries will know that we're serious, and our people will understand the logic of our place in the world. We do not have that now.

Our foreign policy has become a tangled mess, in many cases, of what can only be called situational ethics. What does the United States stand for in the global arena? Under what conditions should we risk our national treasure, our credibility, and more importantly the lives of our military people? Here's a quick bottom line. Tell me what our national interest is, how we're going to defend it and how we will know we have accomplished our mission? Unless you can do that, you don't have a strategy.

Once the Cold War ended, strategically we lost our way and we have yet to regain it. In the area of international relations, it's not a healthy thing when the world's dominant military and economic power has a policy based on vagueness. And so we ended up, and continue to be trapped, in the never-ending, ever changing entanglements of the Middle East beginning with the Pandora's Box that was opened with the invasion of Iraq and continuing through the still fermenting nightmare of the Arab Spring, particularly our inadvisable actions in Libya.

I was one who warned before the invasion of Iraq that our entanglement would destabilize the region, empower Iran, and weaken our influence in other places. Let me quote from an article I wrote in the *Washington Post* on September the 4<sup>th</sup>, 2002, five months before we invaded Iraq. I quote, "America's best military leaders know they are accountable to history not only for how they fight wars, but also how they prevent them. The greatest military victory of our time, bringing an expansionist Soviet Union in from the cold while averting a nuclear holocaust was accomplished not by an invasion but through decades of maneuvering and continuous operations. With respect to the situation

in Iraq, our military leaders know two realities that seem to have been lost in the narrow debate about Saddam Hussein himself. The first is that wars often have unintended consequences.

“The second is that a long-term occupation of Iraq would beyond doubt require an adjustment of force levels elsewhere and could eventually diminish American influence in other parts of the world.” And then later, “In Japan, American occupation forces quickly became 50,000 friends. In Iraq, they would quickly become 50,000 terrorist targets.”

So what should our governing principles be? First, if a president wishes to conduct offensive military operations he or she should be able to explain clearly the threat, the specific objections of the operations and the end result. Second, we should honor all our treaty commitments, but we are not obligated to join a treaty partner if the elect to use force outside direct boundaries of our commitment as in Libya, for example.

Third, we will maintain superiority in our strategic systems. This includes not only nuclear weapons but also such areas as technology, space and cyber warfare. Fourth, we will preserve and exercise the right of self defense as guaranteed under international law and the United Nations charter. Fifth, we have important allies around the world, especially in Asia and the Middle East whom we will continue to support in many ways. This will not cease. In fact, as we clarify other commitments, these relationships will be strengthened.

With respect to the war against terrorism, we should act vigorously against terrorist organizations if they're international in nature and are a direct threat to our national security. This includes the right to conduct military operations in foreign countries if that country is unwilling or unable to address the threat. We had this right through international law and specifically through Article 51 of the United Nations charter.

But there's an important caveat to how our country should fight international terrorism and having ignored this principle has caused us a lot of trouble since 9/11. I can do no better than quote from an article I wrote on September the 12<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the day after 9/11. “Do not occupy territory. The terrorists’ armies make no claim to be members of any nation state. Similarly, it would be militarily and politically dangerous for our military to operate from bases permanent or semi-permanent or to declare we are defending specific pieces of terrain in the regions where the terrorist armies live and train.”

And finally, with respect to national security, a warning spurred by the actions of this administration in Libya. There is no such thing as the right of any president to unilaterally decide to use force and combat operations based on the vague concept of humanitarian intervention. If a treaty doesn't obligate us, if American forces are not under attack or under threat of imminent attack, if no Americans are at risk, the president should come to the Congress.

Second point for consideration as we look into the future is we need to give our people some hope on issues of economic fairness and social justice. Our working people have struggled following the collapse of the economy in the final months of the Bush Administration while those at the very top have continued to separate themselves from the rest of our society.

If you take a look at the stock market since March of 2009 when this recession bottomed out, it has moved from 6,443 to more than 17,000 as of today. The stock market has almost tripled as we've come out of this recession. At the same time, study after study shows that real income levels among working people have suffered a steady decline since January of 2009. And not only for our workers, according to the *Wall Street Journal* loans to small business who traditionally have been the backbone of the American success story, have decreased by 18 percent since 2008 while overall business loans have increased by 9 percent.

The growth in our economy has been increasingly reflected in capital gains rather than in the salaries of our working people. In many cases, corporate headquarters and financial sectors are here while the workers are overseas. Many of our younger workers in this country right now are subject to complicated hiring arrangements that in many cases don't even pay healthcare or retirement. Corporate success is measured by the increase in the value of a stock. Corporate leaders are paid accordingly. When I graduated from the Naval Academy, the average corporate CEO made 20 times the average worker's pay. Today that multiple is about 350 and it's not a global phenomenon. In Germany, which has the highest balance of trade in the world, the average CEO makes about 11 times what a worker makes.

Many of our brightest economic analysts, high among them Ralph Gomory, who's here today, Ralph, where are you-- point out that this disparity came about not because of globalization but because executive compensation became linked with the value of a stock rather than the company's actual earnings. Investors will not complain, they invest in stocks. But our workers, the most productive workforce in the world, are the ones who've been left behind. I would agree that we cannot tax ourselves into prosperity, but we do need to reconfigure the tax code so that taxes fall in a fair way.

Third, we should rebuild our national infrastructure. The technology revolution has pushed a lot of lower skilled people into unemployment and yet everywhere around us, we see roads that need to be widened or repaired, bridges that are beginning to crumble, others that need to be built, traffic jams from clogged highways, schools that need to be built, expanded or repaired. Inner city neighborhoods with cracked sidewalks, broken windows and people on the street. Franklin Roosevelt mobilized a national whose unemployment rate was at 25 percent. The civilian conservation corps went out and planted trees and cleared land. We built roads, we put people to work, we cleaned things up.



Dwight D. Eisenhower's vision brought us the interstate highway system and the jobs that it took to build it. There are people who need jobs and there is work to be done. And along the way, I believe it's possible to meld such a program with another one featuring adult education for those who did lose their way when they were 17 and now know how important it is as a worker and as a parent to get that diploma, earn some money and be a role model to your kid.

Fourth, we need to reform our criminal justice system. This is not a political issue, it is a leadership issue and it has dramatic manifestations throughout our society. The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. Since I doubt we are the most evil people in the world, many now agree that maybe we're doing something wrong. Millions of our citizens are either in prison or under the supervision of the criminal justice system. During my time in the Senate, we worked exhaustively to examine every component of this process from point of apprehension to length of sentencing to the elements of life in prison including prison administration, and to the challenge of reentering society and hopefully living productive lives.

When one applies for a job, the stigma of having been in prison is like a tattoo on your forehead. In many cases, prison life creates scars and impediments that can only be remedied through structured reentry programs. Millions of Americans are now in this situation, many of them nonviolent offenders who went to prison due to drug use and drug dependence. To those who wonder whether we can or should put such programs in place, my answer is this: do you want to see these former offenders back on the street coming after your money or your life? Or do you want them in a job making money and having a life?

Finally, let's find a way to return to good governance. It'll take time, but it's possible to rebalance the relationship between the executive and legislative branches and to carefully manage the federal government, which is surely the most complex bureaucracy in the world. Lot of people running for president and a lot of people covering those who are running for president, seem to skip past the realities of governing into the circus of the political debate. The federal bureaucracy is huge and Byzantine. I've seen many people come to public service from highly successful careers in the business world only to be devoured and humiliated by the demands of moving policy through the bureaucracy and then the Congress.

The very administration of our government needs to be fixed and with the right leadership and the right sense of priorities it can be. I spent four years as a marine, four more as a full committee counsel in the Congress, five years in the Pentagon, one as a marine and four as a defense executive sitting on the Defense Resources Board, six years as a member of the United States Senate. I'm well aware and appreciate that there are a lot of highly talented, dedicated people in our federal workforce. And I know they would be among the first to agree that we would benefit by taking a deep breath and basically auditing the entire federal government in order to re-justify the functioning of every program and every office. (Applause)

The way to solve these challenges, and others, is the way that other such challenges have always been solved in the past: find good leaders. Tell them where the country needs to go, free them up to use their own creative energies. Trust their integrity, supervise, hold them accountable just as they should hold our own people accountable, their own people accountable and just as the American people should hold every national leader accountable. Have the courage of your convictions. Have the humility to listen to others. Remember the greatness of our country and the sacrifices that have gone before us and never forget that history should, and will, judge all of us if we ever let the American dream die. Thank you. (Applause)

**MR. BELKIND:** Thank you. We will now go into our Q&A session and as I said to the Senator beforehand, we'll try to make it rapid fire to get as much as we can in this next few minutes. Sir, are you considering pursuing the Democratic nomination for President? Would you consider running as an independent?

**SENATOR WEBB:** I would say we've had a lot of discussions among people that I respect and trust about the future of the country. And we are going to continue having these discussions over the next four or five months and I'm seriously looking at the possibility of running for President. But we want to see if there's a support base from people who would support the programs that we're interested in pursuing with the leadership. So the answer is I'm a Democrat, I have strong reasons for being a Democrat. Basically, if you want true fairness in this society, you want to give a voice in the corridors of power to people who otherwise would not have it, I believe that will come from the Democratic Party and we're taking a hard look and we'll get back to you in a few months. (Applause)

**MR. BELKIND:** What trait is most important in a person wanting to become our President, and what is your best trait? (Laughter)

**SENATOR WEBB:** How many questions do you have on that stack before you pull that one out? You know, I think trust and integrity and vision, but-- and loyalty. You cannot run or lead unless you have that and unless you have that in the people who are with you, too. It's one thing I used to tell my staff when I was in the Senate, is that I met every day with Cap Weinberger when he was Secretary of Defense. I met with him every day for four years. And you will never see one word that was ever said in that meeting when the door is closed. I owe that to him and to good governance.

But I think the issues of character override even issues of intelligence. I hate to put it that way. But I'd rather have someone who's really loyal and who can be trusted than someone who is smart and couldn't be trusted. (Applause)

**MR. BELKIND:** Hillary Clinton, of course, is widely seen as the Democratic frontrunner for President in 2016. What do you see as her strengths and weaknesses?

**SENATOR WEBB:** Well, I've had the pleasure of working with Hillary Clinton when we were in the Senate and at times when she was Secretary of State and I must say she has a much broader forum than I do to answer that question.

**MR. BELKIND:** A follow-up regarding Mrs. Clinton. Hillary Clinton was Secretary of State for four years. How responsible is she for the tangled mess of U.S. foreign policy that you cited in your remarks?

**SENATOR WEBB:** Again, I think that's a question that really should be directed at Secretary Clinton. I'm not here to undermine her. I'm here just to explain where my concerns are as someone who's been involved in the military, in foreign policy, all of my life. It wasn't even a political comment when I made it. It's more a comment about leadership and how we need to be much clearer in terms of our national goals and our objectives around the world. (Applause)

**MR. BELKIND:** As someone who didn't really embrace the task of being a politician while serving in the Senate, why are you considering a run for President when that job demands so much politicking to be effective?

**SENATOR WEBB:** You know, I think a lot of people misunderstand the approach that we took during my time in the Senate and how much I valued being a part of the United States Senate. I look at these positions more as opportunities to lead rather than to conduct politics per se. And I was raised on the notion of what it takes to be a leader. And I think if you look at what we were able to do during our six year period in the Senate, it's pretty remarkable and we did it by bringing strong dedicated people into the staff, trusting them, giving them what the Marine Corps would be called mission-oriented orders and approaching issues such as criminal justice that a lot of other people in the country were afraid to touch and bringing them to a place where-- we bring these issues out of the shadows and into the public debate.

So it's a very tough thing to run for office, but it's also the way that the American people get to know you and to make their own decisions about whether they want to trust you and that's the process of a democracy.

**MR. BELKIND:** A related question: what's appealing about the job of President when partisanship and unwillingness in Congress to compromise and work together makes getting even little things done so hard?

**SENATOR WEBB:** I think with the right leadership, we can get a lot of things done in this country. And we've seen this over and over again. I was going to give you a bipartisan historical response to that. This country was completely in the doldrums when Franklin Roosevelt took over. People had a feeling of hopelessness, that things couldn't be done. He came in with vision and leadership, put programs into place all over the country. Things started to change.

By the way, many of us lived through the Carter Administration. And if you'll recall in 1979, 1980, there were a lot of people saying nothing can get done. Everything is so paralyzed. People were even writing that the presidency was now too big for any one person to handle. And Ronald Reagan came in, he was a leader. Some of my Democratic friends don't like it when I say that. Ronald Reagan was once a Democrat and he was still a leader. But he brought strong people around him, he had a vision where he wanted to take the country and things started moving again.

Leadership in this world requires that you sit down and talk to people and give them a clear vision of where you want to go and listen to them. I think we did this probably most clearly when we got the GI bill through the United States Congress. I wrote this bill with legislative counsel before I was sworn in to the Senate. We introduced it on my first day. We worked extremely hard across the aisle, we got two Republican sponsors, key sponsors, two Democrat sponsors, two World War II veterans, two Vietnam veterans. And in 16 months, we got a bill through a paralyzed Congress that now more than a million of the veterans, post-9/11 veterans, have been able to use and really change their lives. (Applause)

**MR. BELKIND:** You have opposed U.S. military intervention in Iraq and Libya previously. Please tell us your reaction to President Obama beginning air strikes in Syria last night. And perhaps you would also like to respond to the remarks that the President made three hours ago?

**SENATOR WEBB:** I would start, and Mark Shields will remember this, I would start with a comment that was given to me when I was in Beirut reporting for the McNeil Lehrer NewsHour 30 years ago. I was out on a marine outpost, marine platoon, that started taking fire from a Druse outpost because her was a Lebanese army position collocated with the marines. And then some unknown militia started joining in just because it was Beirut and then the Syrians came up over one ridge line and were firing 25 millimeter down into it. And a young marine turned around to me and he said, "Sir, never get involved in a five-sided argument." (Laughter)

And during the hearings when I was still in the Senate and they were considering doing something in Syria, that was one of the points that I would raise. That if you think Lebanon was bad, Syria is Lebanon on steroids. Just look at the situation that we now are in. ISIS, however you want to define that, and we need to be very careful to define what the membership of these entities really is because in that part of the world, people tend to drift in and out of different organizations depending on who they think's getting something done. We have ISIS who supposedly is anti-Assad and wants to create this caliphate up there and then now we're going to arm and train another Syrian opposition whose mission up until a couple of weeks ago was to help take out Assad. Now they're supposedly going to fight ISIS.

We have a quiet agreement with the Syrian government at this time, one would assume from what I'm hearing, the same government that the President a couple of years ago said must go. We have a tacit participation by Iran on some level, the country that

many in the region believe we should be most concerned about. And it just shows you, that is this region. It has been this region for 2,000 years. And what I have been saying since I was Secretary of the Navy, not just before the Iraq War, is that the United States can assert its national security interests in that part of the world, but we should never become an occupying force in that part of the world.

So when I look at what the President, the strikes that the President ordered, I would say this: if he is ordering these strikes based on the notions of international terrorism, to borrow from the remarks that he made, if he's saying this is an international terrorist entity and the national security interests of the United States are directly threatened, and he is conducting limited strikes I would say that is legal. That is legal. The question of judgment will remain to be seen.

And I know he isn't going to stop right there. Folks, this is a very, very complicated part of the world and we have to deal with our national security in a way that makes sure that we do not get entangled on the ground again.

**MR. BELKIND:** President Obama's advisors are saying that attacking al-Qaeda affiliate Karzan last night is not an expansion of U.S. military mission because Congress authorized war against al-Qaeda over a decade ago. Do you agree with that reasoning?

**SENATOR WEBB:** I'd not heard them say that, but I would expect them to say that. And it goes to what the portion of my remarks were. I said that even without the congressional authorization they are mentioning, we have the right of self defense under international law and under the United Nations charter if there is an international terrorist organization that directly threatens our national security interests. So in that context, these types of limited raids are really no different than what we have been doing in places like Yemen.

**MR. BELKIND:** Do you think that the Obama Administration is handling-- how do you think the Obama Administration is handling the situation in Ukraine and how would you deal with Vladimir Putin if you were President?

**SENATOR WEBB:** I do believe that this administration has been taking the right approach with respect to the situation in Ukraine. First, the issue of the Russian involvement in Ukraine involves larger players in historic Europe, countries like Germany, which have an impact on the actions of the Russians. Second, it's possible, always possible, for the Russians to have overplayed their hand and we saw this actually with the Soviets in Afghanistan in 1979 where they went in, they overplayed their hand and over time, they had to adjust their policies. So I believe the policy of sanction and working with our European partners is the best way to go.

What we can be thankful for right now, by the way, is that Ukraine did not become a member of NATO as many people were advocating during the time that I was in the Senate. Because if they were members of NATO, we would be obligated to come

to their defense militarily in some of these situations. We need to preserve our options and to work with our European partners.

**MR. BELKIND:** Going domestically for a few questions, does it bother you that all the big financial firms and banks found responsible for the 2008 great recession have only had to pay fines? Are we monetizing felonies?

**SENATOR WEBB:** Let me just say this. I'm going to give you a little historical marker here. When we had to vote on whether to provide \$700 billion under what was called the TARP program, to appropriate \$700 billion to a lot of companies who had, I think, abused our economic system, I called a lot of people trying to get their thoughts on which way I should vote. And one of the pieces of advice that I appreciated most came from an individual named Barton Biggs, who was with Morgan Stanley for many years. He helped me when I was bringing companies, American companies into Vietnam many years ago. A very, very smart macroeconomic thinker. And someone who had made a lot of money in the financial sector.

And I said, "Which way do you think I should vote on this? It's a three-page handwritten memorandum that says give these people \$700 billion because of mistakes they made." He said, number one, you have to do this. If we do not stanch the bleeding within weeks the economic systems in the world economy will have a cataclysmic freefall. Number two, he said, we need to re-regulate. We need to get back to proper regulation of the financial sector. And he said that as a hedge fund guy. He said number three, you really ought to find a way to punish-- and that was his word-- you really ought to find a way to punish the people who created this situation, whose negligence and activities created this situation.

So, with that in mind, we worked from our office to pass a windfall profits tax. I'm not big on long-term taxes like that, but after reading an article by Martin Wolff in *The Financial Times*, actually, a very conservative economic newspaper, where he was recommending because these companies got bailed out through the money of the average working people in this country, the tax monies of the average working people in this country, they ought to pay. They ought to pay back in.

So we put together a refined piece of legislation that basically said if you were one of-- I think there were 13 companies that got more than a certain amount, the very top amount from the TARP program, and you're an executive you get your full compensation and 400,000 of bonus on regular taxation. But anything above your 400,000 bonus, you split half and half, you split 50/50 with the people who bailed you out. I thought that was extremely reasonable. And the most interesting thing about it was when we got it to the Senate floor, it really was the Democrats who didn't want to vote on it, not the Republicans. Nobody wanted to touch it, and as a result we didn't get a vote on it.

**MR. BELKIND:** One more question before we go to some questions about veterans. Do you believe that Obamacare is a step forward toward creating economic fairness? Why or why not?

**SENATOR WEBB:** The whole issue of Obamacare, I think, was the most difficult issue that we faced during my time in the Senate, whether to eventually vote in favor of it or not. And first, I would say I believe the administration made an error, a strategic error, of calling for that legislation at the time that they did, which was the beginning of their administration. It was an issue that had been very popular during the election cycle, but you will remember two months before the election the economy crashed. And to bring something this vast and potentially costly as your flagship piece of legislation at a time when the economy was still suffering was not a strategically smart thing to do, quite frankly.

There were a lot of pieces in this legislation I did not like. I voted with the Republicans 18 times on different amendments trying to bring the legislation to a place I was more comfortable with. In the end, I did vote for it and I'll tell you what was in my mind when I did. Let's say this is 50.1 percent what you like and 49.9 percent what you don't. But my mother grew up in East Arkansas in some pretty difficult surroundings. She was one of eight children. Three of her siblings died in childhood; not childbirth, childhood, as did her father when she was ten. And there wasn't medical care in East Arkansas at the time.

And if you go back to that period, in the 1930s, even on issues like do we create social security, any program that was put up where the government was going to take a greater responsibility for the individuals, go back and look at it. They're all screaming. You know, this is socialism. You know, how you going to have social security for these people? 1960s, Medicare comes along. It's socialism, you know?

So, that really pushed me over, I think, to vote in favor of it and I don't regret voting I favor of it. But there's a lot in this program that could be tightened and adjusted. And I would hope that's where the Congress can come together after this election. It's not going to go away. Let's tighten it up and make it better.

**MR. BELKIND:** We have many veterans in the audience including yourself. I'd like to ask a general one and have you respond before we conclude. Many veterans are struggling to find work. Is there more we can do to insure that the men and women who serve are better prepared to enter the civilian workforce?

**SENATOR WEBB:** What I would like to see is a better understanding among potential employers about the value that a veteran can bring to the workplace. We've had discussions over the years on this issue. I was a counsel on the House Veterans Committee. When I finished law school after leaving the Marine Corps, I worked on this for many, many years. And if you're in the military today and you're an officer and have been able to-- not only have a college degree but have, in many cases, an advanced degree and you've got a skill set that people in the civilian world can understand, you

don't have a terribly difficult time selling yourself. If you're enlisted, particularly non-career enlisted, career-- I mean the citizen soldiers, the people that I designed this GI bill for, you interrupt your life, you go out and pull a pump or two in Iraq or Afghanistan, you come back and some of the best leaders in that environment are ones that are in the combat arms. But they come to an employer and they've got a DD 214 that doesn't have a degree or a computer school that says I was a squad leader, we need to have a better understanding among potential employers what that means. That means I had to get things done every day. I had to lead people, I had to motivate them, I had to work across ethnic and other lines. I learned how to lead and how to get things done.

And the more people understand that, then the easier it becomes to resolve the issues that you mentioned.

**MR. BELKIND:** Thank you. We are almost out of time, but before asking the last question, we have a couple of housekeeping matters to take care of. First of all, I'd like to remind you about our upcoming event and speakers. On October 15<sup>th</sup>, Deborah Rutter, the new President of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, will outline her plans for the center's future. October 20<sup>th</sup>, Thomas Perez, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Labor. On October 21<sup>st</sup>, Bob Bowsby, Commissioner of the Big 12 Conference.

Next, I'd like to present our guest with the traditional National Press Club mug. I trust you have a set at home and this you can add to it, okay? And our final question. Sir, two of our greatest Presidents, Teddy Roosevelt and FDR had backgrounds at the Department of the Navy. Do you sense a trend developing there? (Applause and Laughter)

**SENATOR WEBB:** Unfortunately, we're not cousins. Thank you very much, thank all of you.

**MR. BELKIND:** Thank you all, we are adjourned. (Sounds gavel.)

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