



REAGAN NATIONAL DEFENSE FORUM

PEACE THROUGH STRENGTH IN AN ERA OF COMPETITION

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LUNCHEON & DISCUSSION: A VIEW FROM CONGRESS

**A conversation with the Chairman and Ranking Member
of the House Armed Services Committee.**

Panelists:

- Congressman Mac Thornberry, Chairman, HASC; Texas
- Congressman Adam Smith, Ranking Member, HASC; Washington

Moderator: Mr. Roger Zakheim, Ronald Reagan Institute

Video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=InMGZhZJ31A&index=7&list=PLHNOi2zcxo7sBxM7HfhmB_tf6QXeqj48K

Zakheim: The fun continues here at the Reagan National Defense Forum. All of you can continue enjoying your lunch except for the two gentlemen to my right, they need to work for their lunch. They just got their salad and we'll see if we'll give them the rest of their meal. It is my distinct honor and pleasure to welcome the Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, Mac Thornberry and the ranking member of the Armed Services Committee, Adam Smith. Great supporters of the forum, the chairman of the [steering committee, 00:00:31] member of the [inaudible 00:00:31] committee, and we have, really a unique opportunity today, to have a little conversation, from, get a view from the Congress. And uh, let's just jump right into it. We had a fantastic speech, interview with the Secretary of Defense, and kinda thinking about it, let's just pretend that was the Secretary's opening statement before the Armed Services Committee. Chairman, ranking member, what would be your first question to the Secretary after listening to his remarks?

Thornberry: My first statement would be, thank you Mr. Secretary for serving, the country is very lucky to have you, and I was thinking that all the way through his remarks, by the way. I guess secondly, I would say okay, Mr. Secretary you have, you have outlined for us a number of threats and challenges around the world. What we really haven't got, and you said we can beat Russia, China, what we really haven't gotten to is the state of the U.S. military to meet those threats. And, and that gets more into, as he said, our

constitutional responsibility to have the military that then he has to employ in various ways. And so, the state of the military. Where are we, against these sorts of challenges. I guess that'd be what I would [inaudible 00:01:53]

Zakheim: Congressman Smith?

Smith: Fortunately I'd echo Mac's comments. I think we are incredibly well-served by Secretary Mattis and really appreciate his leadership and also his interactions with Congress. DOD does not always love Congress.

Zakheim: He said he loved you.

Smith: Yeah I know, he did. That's what I'm saying, not always but he does, so, he works with us. And then I think Mac hit the nail on the head in terms of what we ought to find out. When we're trying to meet these threats, sort of drill down to what it means. And I always think back to a conversation I had with a prior Commandant of the Marine Corps about what does it mean to contain North Korea? And this is during the Budget Control Act. And, the tight times on readiness, and he said basically our war plan if North Korea invades the South right now would require us to send every single Marine that we have to that war-fighting area. So, how many ships do we need to contain China? How many planes? What are the specific things we need to have the deterrence, the Secretary so, great, ya know, specifically outlined. And that's what we have to do. And then we have to make those choices on what are we trying to deter, militarily what is required for us to have to deter it.

Zakheim: So let's follow up that. In your oversight role, and you sit through more hearings than you probably ever want to, is the military big enough? Do you have a sense of what the military needs to deal with the top five the Secretary talks about. The National Defense Strategy Commission, which I had a chance to serve on, I don't think that answer was ever clear to the commissioners. Ya know, is, are we built and prepared to deal with all the different threats and challenges face today, current force.

Thornberry: I would say no, the military is not big enough. Um, I don't know if we have to grow everything, but we clearly need more ships. For example, as China is being more aggressive, not only in the South China Sea, but in a variety of places around the Pacific and Indian Ocean, we simply don't have enough ships to have the sort of presence to deter their aggression. And, and, so we could go category by category, um, I don't think we have the analytical capability to say, OK, this is exactly the right number of whatever that we need, but I do believe that we are not adequate [crosstalk 00:04:13], for the panoply of threats, again, all at the same time facing us.

Zakheim: Congressman, if you can answer that question as well, do you think also the Department of Defense has the analytic capability and know-how to tell us what kind of force we need to deal with all of it.

Smith: Well I think we have a logical problem here because the answer to your question isn't just, no we don't have enough troops to meet, I mean, it's the four countries plus transnational terrorism. Um, that, ya know that national security framework is basically what we've been working off of for some time. And if you imagine every scenario, if you imagine what Iran could do, what North Korea could do, what Russia, what China could do, what ISIS, Al-Qaeda, no we do not have adequate resources [inaudible 00:04:52].

Smith: But I think the other more interesting part of that answer is, it's utterly and completely impossible to have um, a large enough military, if all of those threats were to come together at the same time. So this is something that I, I don't want us to basically be chasing our tail here, alright say, this is what we have to have, its 10 times more than what we're ever going to be able to have, I think we're going to need to figure out, OK, how do we manage the risk? How do we manage the threats in a sensible way because if you go through the war plans, what we would need, if all of those bad scenarios happened at the same time? I don't think anyone would disagree with me, it's completely impossible.

Zakheim: Let me follow up with you, Congressman Smith. A critique of the national defense strategy with the Secretary of Defense touted today, is that it doesn't make enough choices. That it doesn't tell us, prioritize China or terrorism, and you're just going to have to take a hit in A, B, C, or D.

Smith: Well I . . .

Zakheim: Do you agree with that?

Smith: I agree with that up to a point. I mean I think it's true, but part of this also is, is having a surge capacity. Um, ya know, I always use to, how come we're never ready for an emergency? Well because it's an emergency, alright? Um, if we saw it coming it wouldn't be called an emergency. Um, we can't possibly be ready for all of this and I don't think it really helps us to tip our hand and say, okay Russia we're going to give you a pass because we're more focused on China.

Smith: I think we have to have enough to deter them, ya know, and also have a surge capacity. And ya know, certainly the North Korea story that the Secretary told is one that we well know at this forum, um, but how we weren't ready. But the other part of that was, we got ready like that. Um, we did in fact surge and move forward. Now what I would like to see us do is not have a situation where we send a force that isn't prepared to fight that specific thing. And that's where I get worried that if we try to spread ourselves so thin that we've gotta do everything, then nobody will be really prepared to do anything. So whatever it is we task them to do, make sure they're trained and equipped to do it. Now that's gonna leave some, some overflow that we're not ready for right then, and that's where we've got to be ready to surge when it comes.

Zakheim: So Chairman Thornberry, your op-ed's been touted a lot today, and it seems to me that the only choice people are willing to make here is to cut the budget but not to reduce the missions and your argument if I understand it was, the missions aren't changing they're increasing, the resources have to kind of grow proportionally with that.

Thornberry: Yes. And just to go back for just a second, I think what we have seen in recent years was, the missions did not increase. We expected those sailors on those destroyers to be on station ready to intercept a missile from North Korea. But because we didn't have enough destroyers, and because they had to be ever vigilant, they didn't have time to do the training that they needed in how to run their consoles, and we had two tragic accidents where too many sailors died.

Thornberry: So I think Adam's point is exactly right, if you spread yourself too thin pretending that you are ready for everything but you are not, you don't have the training, your

equipment doesn't function and so forth. Not only are you, are you not going to be successful your not doing the right thing for the men and women who are putting their lives on the line. And so that fundamental duty to the men and women who serve I think is really one of the drivers of what you've seen over the last two years. If you're going to send somebody out on a mission they deserve to have the best that this country can provide.

Zakheim: So I'm going to do my best Brett Baier here and do a little reaction to some of the global hotspots but if you listen to the Secretary's remarks, struck me that when he discussed China it sounded, emphasized more about cooperation than competition. Are we in a cold war with China? Congressman Thornberry, Congressman Smith.

Thornberry: Um, cold war described a particular relationship at a particular time. In some ways China is more challenging because we, they are competing, challenging, threatening us on economic level, as well as a number of other levels that the Russians really didn't, the Soviets really didn't. So in some ways I think this is a more difficult sort of challenge for our nation to deal with, um, when we deal with China.

Zakheim: Congressman?

Smith: No, we are not in a cold war with China. They are a rising power, we are an existing power. We still have an economy that's nearly twice the size of theirs. We still have a vastly superior military. But they are gonna grow and try to spread their influence. And I'll tell ya, one of the biggest things as I look out over 50 years and say, what type of world are we going to have, one of the biggest decisive factors is, can we figure out how to peacefully co-exist with China? If we can, we've got a lot more peaceful and prosperous world. And there's a lot of different ways to do that, certainly a sufficient deterrent is part of it, but as the Secretary said, diplomacy is the first step. I think there's no reason why we can't find a way to work with China despite all of the challenges.

Zakheim: Talking about deterrence it was notable that the Secretary focused on Russia, very strong words with respect to Putin, yet Russia doesn't seem to be deterred. Is our military doing enough, are we present enough in Europe to adequately deter Russia?

Thornberry: Well it's not just about Europe. Uh, given what's happened in the last week. So that, that again goes to your initial question, do you have enough force to adequately and credibly deter Russia. I think obviously for obvious reasons, it's much on the Secretary's mind. My guess is Putin is testing, this is way that not only he but Russians before him have used. You probe, you see what the reaction is, if nobody fusses too much you can go another couple of steps and so I think that we are somewhat being tested here. And maybe it's a prelude to a bigger testing to come, we don't know.

Smith: Yeah I don't actually agree that they're not being deterred, they're not being completely deterred from everything. Um . . .

Zakheim: Their appetites bigger?

Smith: Right. They haven't invaded anybody recently, so we've got that going for us. But no, I seriously do think a lot of our actions, and the way NATO has responded, what we've done in Eastern Europe has deterred some Russian aggression but given the way Putin is looking at the world right now, I think Mac describes it perfectly. He's poking and

prodding for whatever vulnerability, whatever he, whatever line he can step across. It entered my mind to compare him to a three-year old, which wouldn't be fair. Ah and I know you know. . .

Zakheim: To a three-year old.

Smith: And I know you know what that's all about. They will test those boundaries and I think right now we are deterring Russia just not as much as we would like.

Zakheim: Okay, let's turn to the battle in Washington D.C. One of the things that's so notable and evident here with both of you on the stage is that in an era of heightened partisanship there is bipartisanship on Capitol Hill and that is the rule in the Armed Services Committee. I'd love for each of you to talk for a moment or two about, do we take that for granted? Is it hard? Do you have to fight for that every day? What is it take to maintain a bipartisanship that allows for a defense authorization bill to get 60-plus votes every year through the Armed Services Committee? Chairman.

Thornberry: I would say we have two advantages at least. One, is our purpose in supporting the men and women who have volunteered to defend our country. And because we try to keep that purpose in the forefront of our mind it helps people overcome other differences. The second advantage we have is our nation has a tradition, a bipartisan tradition, certainly since the end of World War Two, to support an approach to national security. And there, ya know, there have been, I don't mean to sugarcoat it, there have been significant differences on certain issues and there are members of both parties who don't necessarily subscribe to this bipartisan [inaudible 00:13:04]. But by and large, for the last 75 years Republicans and Democrats have taken a similar approach to defending the country and we are the beneficiaries of that tradition. And so I do think that plays, plays a role as well. Adam and I have differences. We have certainly differences with some senators from time to time.

Zakheim: The real enemy.

Thornberry: But, but again we work our way through them because of that higher purpose, I think.

Zakheim: Congressman?

Smith: No, I would agree I think its two things. One, it starts with leadership and I've been privileged to serve as ranking member under two chairman, Buck McKeon and Mac. And they set the tone from the very beginning. That we're going to be bipartisan, we're going to get our bill done and we're going to work together. And there were others that came before on both the chair and ranking position, and the house and the senate, who had that focus, this is what we're going to do. And if you start from that premise it helps. But second, it is not easy. Um, and in a way that should give us comfort. This year was weird, I don't want to say it was easy this year, but I used to be able to say there has never been a year in all my time on the committee where there wasn't some point at which we said, um, we're not going to get a bill. We're just not going to get there, we just can't solve this. This past year we didn't actually have that moment so I don't know what that means for the future.

Smith: But there are always several moments throughout the process where you're like, alright, we just, we're not going to agree that's just the way it is. And then you find a way because of that leadership.

Thornberry: Well, and I, the other part of your question is, I do think it's getting harder. Um, so I've been on the committee for 24 years, Adam I guess 22. Um, it is harder now because of the partisanship, because of the difficulties that our colleagues have on other committees on other issues. There are stresses and strains but I do think that if we're committed to working together, if we remember what that higher purpose is, we can absolutely, and will absolutely continue to try to approach these things not only on a bipartisan way but in a non-partisan way.

Smith: And I do, if I may . . .

Thornberry: No, go ahead.

Smith: I do want to say a word about the Senate.

Zakheim: Just to remind you, we do have five senators in the room here.

Smith: Well, let them be the judge.

Zakheim: And we want them to come back to the Reagan Forum.

Smith: I actually think we work better with the Senate. And again it's not that we don't have disagreements. I think it was three or four years ago at this forum if you had seen the panel that John McCain and I served on you would've walked out and said, well those two guys are never talking to each other again.

Zakheim: We call that highlight material.

Smith: But we worked very well together, and let me just say, we miss John McCain in a big way. And as much as I, ya know, argued with him in a wide variety of forums, I admired the man greatly. And we found a way to work together. So don't read too much into, ya know, if we get into an argument about something. That's politics, that's policy. But what makes our committee different is that fundamental core belief that Mac talked about. We got a bill to pass, we got a job to do. And we're not gonna leave until we get it done. Whatever leads up to it, we're gonna find a way to get along and make it work.

Zakheim: I have two more minutes left, quick prediction that [inaudible 00:16:24] and leadership and we hope that both of you remain in that leadership role. Will we have over 60 votes? The overwhelming majority of the committee supporting the defense bill, like we've seen in the past years? Do you anticipate that happening?

Thornberry: The defense authorization bill?

Zakheim: Yes.

Thornberry: Yes.

Smith: Yes, absolutely.

Zakheim: Congressional reform. At the beginning of every congress, there's always people speculating on how we can reform the congress, change the rules, improve on those before you. Earmarks. Congress going in, and changing the President's budget request. Republicans ended that, Democrats in the House will now take the majority. Argument is, if the Congress can't do earmarks then there's merely rubber-stamping what the administration gives you. Valid critique, change we can anticipate, or will things remain the same? I'll start with Congressman Smith, for obvious reasons.

Smith: We've talked about this in Congress, and first of all it has to be bipartisan if it's going to happen. It's not going to happen because, bipartisan and bicameral. And in a just world, yes we would have earmarks. It is our job, as members of Congress, to spend the tax money. We're not supposed to just take the President's budget, and also as someone pointed out, if we want to get money for a certain project, we now have to go to the executive branch, which gives them a fair amount of leverage over us. I think there should be the ability to earmark. Now the way we used to do it, was corrupt, is a strong word. Although, there, well, there was a member of Congress who I think is out of jail now, who, ya know, basically just took bribes to put earmarks into the appropriations process . . .

Zakheim: Not good.

Smith: In the tens of millions of dollars. The policy was not transparent. Now we reformed the process several years ago so that it was transparent, alright. So number one, if you were getting an earmark you had to say who, who asked for it. And you couldn't ask for an earmark from a private industry, it had to be from public. It had to be transparent, it had to be voted on, it could not be air-dropped into a conference committee, it had to be transparent. And I think that is a very fair process that would better serve the country and better serve Congress. And I think it would be great if we were to make that change. I also think that there's a snowball's chance in hell of us making that change.

Zakheim: Okay.

Smith: Because I understand the politics of it. And ya know, someone said the other day, we have to stop calling them earmarks because earmarks have a bad connotation. And they're right, but good luck with that because the press is going to call them earmarks, for yeah know, ever. And politically, ya know, it's like asking us when we're going to get a pay raise again.

Zakheim: Chairman Thornberry. . .

Smith: I just don't think that's going to happen.

Thornberry: No, I, we won't, and we can't go back to abuses of the past. Maybe a trial period with very limited parameters, may be a way to build confidence back. But it is frustrating, I will say for us, to hand Secretary Wilson a pot of money and say here, go use this for military construction, rather than to suggest this base needs this, this base needs that.

Zakheim: The Secretary doesn't look frustrated though, she looks like she likes that. Alright, last question and we'll wrap up. One of your colleagues, and this is on the notion of reform

in the Congress, wrote an article making the following proposal and I'd love to get your reaction to it. And it says "one of the simplest ways to get members to burn more calories on their actual jobs would be to have committee members choose their own chairmen. This would change the entire [incentive? 00:19:58] in Congress. I know where Congressman Gallagher is, but eyes should be beaming at him. You think it's a good idea for members of the committee to elect a chairman of their committee or should we leave it to the steering committees of the leadership?"

Thornberry: In, in, in, a job as chairman, you, your duty is to the whole, not just the members of your committee. On the other hand I will mention to Congressman Gallagher that we have not yet made committee assignments for the next Congress and I do have a say in that, and that may play a role.

Zakheim: Oh man, he's so not getting on a panel next year. Congressman Smith?

Smith: Absent the veiled threat, I completely agree with what Mac just said, that's not my department. No, we represent the whole Congress. In fact that's one of the things that I think the members of the Armed Services Committee need to recognize is that, ya know, we're very tight-knit group, we're working as we described on a very important project, but everybody in Congress has a right to have a say in what goes in the defense bill and I know both Mac and I, sometimes to our chagrin, we work with our caucus, across all spectrums, and they have a voice and we try to respect that voice. So it's not just the members of the committee who are involved and invested in the outcome of our work, it's the entire caucus on both sides, they should choose.

Zakheim: Well we're gonna stop it there. Please join me in thanking chairman of the Armed Services Committee and ranking member of the Armed Services Committee for their participation today. Thank you.