

Catherine Herridge ([00:04](#)):

Good morning and welcome to the Reagan National Defense Forum. I'm Catherine Herridge. I'm a senior investigative correspondent with CBS News in Washington. And our first slide is about the perceptions of the greatest threat to the United States. And if you look at that side, what you'll see is that, for the first time, China has eclipsed all other nations and all other threats. Look at 2019 when there was parity with Russia. That now has been eclipsed. General McConville, is China on track to supplant the US as the global superpower?

General McConville ([00:46](#)):

Well, I think, as far as China surpassing us, it's only if we let them. And what I mean by that is, as we talked about with President Reagan, peace through strength. I think we have a opportunity to do that as a nation with a strong, whole government effort. That we need to pick up the pace. We talk of China of being a pacing challenge, and we need to pick up the pace in all our areas of statesmanship: from diplomacy, from information, from economics, and the military. And then, very strong relationships with our allies and partners, so we're in a position to deter their activities in the future.

Catherine Herridge ([01:31](#)):

Reading in between the lines, are we in some ways handicapping ourself with China? And if so, how so?

General McConville ([01:38](#)):

Well, when I take a look at what's going to deter them, it's certainly strong allies and partners in the region. We need to work very, very closely with them to establish their capacities and capabilities. It's a strong economic relationships with all our allies and partners. And we can't forget, the world order and values we share, is extremely important to the globe. We need to be willing, if necessary, to fight for that.

Catherine Herridge ([02:06](#)):

Senators, this is an issue where there is rare bipartisan support. You see it break down: Republicans, Democrats, and independents. And, in fact, if you dig down into the data, all of you have booklets at your tables, what you see is that the most pronounced shift has been with Democrats to the China issue in the last couple of years. So, Senator Duckworth, what can be accomplished on a bipartisan basis to blunt the advance of China?

Senator Tammy Duckworth ([02:35](#)):

Well, quite a lot. And I think what we need to do is a multi-prong approach. It is about national security. It's about the United States being in the Indo-Pacific region as a significant actor to uphold the international rules-based order, the freedom of navigation in the seas. We need to be there. 50% of the world's container cargo capacity goes through the Indo-Pacific region. So we need to be there as a presence, as an alternative to the PRC. But we also have to engage economically as well. As the general was saying, it's all of society. It's, yes, the military strength, and we have to revisit and strengthen those alliances and those friendships. And we have to do that by being there. The AUKUS caucus with Australia and Britain was a great example of the kind of work we should be doing. But we have to engage economically with organizations like ASEAN and international trade agreements and alike. Because strength is not just military strength, we need economic strength to back that up. And the more we engage in the region, the more we both have more friends in the region, but we also make life difficult

for them to make choices between us or the Chinese. Let's make their choices difficult. And it keeps other nations from being able to go rogue if we're there in every aspect.

Catherine Herridge ([03:57](#)):

Senator Ernst.

Senator Joni Ernst ([03:58](#)):

Yes. And this really has been heightened, I think, over pass of the course of two years, where we saw the COVID pandemic sweep around the globe. And so, you do see the American public shifting towards China, as we recognize that this is the likely source of the COVID-19 pandemic, which killed 5 million people around the world, killed 770,000 Americans. And so, we've been able to coalesce together as parties to understand that, wow... With the lack of transparency coming from China, this has furthered our resolve to find out what happened together within Congress. We see a number of bipartisan initiatives towards that end. And I do think, Senator Duckworth as well is right, in that we have a number of triggers we can use as Congress that we agree on in a bipartisan manner: economically, diplomatically, most certain what General McConville just stated about allies and partners coming together. All of this has allowed us to come together, not only as a nation, but with our partners to push back against China. We absolutely need to do this. And you see the results right here. We are recognizing that China is our pacing threat, and we have to stand up and show strength against them.

Catherine Herridge ([05:24](#)):

Senators, are you getting the leadership you need from the White House on this issue?

Senator Tammy Duckworth ([05:29](#)):

Yeah, very much. I mean, before, I would say February or March, I was at the White House in the Oval Office with the President, five Democrats, five Republicans, talking about supply chain, manufacturing, and securing our supply chain, and the logistical supply chain as well. And very much our focus was talking about not just rebuilding American manufacturing, but also moving some of that critical investing in manufacturing into friendly nations or third nations in the region as well, on top of his very strong commitment militarily.

Senator Joni Ernst ([06:07](#)):

And I, of course, will have a little different opinion. I think that our administration, especially President Biden, needs to be much more aggressive. And we saw a lost opportunity when he met and had a dialogue with President Xi Jinping of China, where he could have drilled down into COVID-19, demanding more answers and transparency. He could have drilled down more into trade. We see China renegeing on a number of obligations to the China phase one trade deal. All of those issues need to be addressed. And they need to be addressed forcefully. And I understand we need to be diplomatic in certain areas. But, certainly, we need to show strength. And that's not what I'm seeing at this particular moment in time.

Senator Tammy Duckworth ([06:56](#)):

I mean, I would have to say, I'm not countering what Joni is saying, but I think what I was trying to focus on is building up of relationships with the other nations in the region. Yes, we need to oppose China, absolutely, and the PRC. But a way to oppose them and to stand up to them is actually to engage with

the rest of the Indo-Pacific region, to have more and greater relationships with all of these nations. To get places like Indonesia someplace to turn. To give places like Vietnam, who are on the front lines of standing up to PRC influence, somewhere to turn. And that, I think, is critically important.

Catherine Herridge ([07:27](#)):

I want to bring in Brad Smith. Your evolving of the Microsoft Exchange compromise has changed over time. What would you say today was the objective of that hack?

Brad Smith ([07:38](#)):

Well, I think it's hard to know exactly what the objective was. One possible explanation is that it was a test to see what was possible.

Catherine Herridge ([07:50](#)):

A probing event.

Brad Smith ([07:51](#)):

Yeah, yeah. And I do think, as we step back and look at the cybersecurity landscape at the end of 2021, and we look at that and other attacks, a few things are clear in terms of learning. One is, I think, we're seeing more than one government become much more sophisticated, not just the theft of large amounts of data, but the federation of data sets. And now the use of machine learning to actually develop much more sophisticated targeting. Together with more aggressive work to cumulate zero-day vulnerabilities, to outsource more work from a government to contractors. It's a more dangerous world.

Brad Smith ([08:29](#)):

But I think there's two other lessons that have emerged from it as well. One is just where we can and are doing better. I would say, especially in threat detection. That's just fundamental. It's been a really important year for the government bringing together data capabilities, data across the government, doing more in collaboration with the tech sector. Our own efforts to strengthen threat detection. And defenses by not just the private sector, but, I think, the executive order this year.

Brad Smith ([08:59](#)):

But I would say there's one other thing to think about. The great hole that we have right now is actually in people. It's in our workforce. There's 462,000 open cybersecurity jobs in the United States this morning. Or to put it another way, for every two cybersecurity jobs that are filled, there's a third one that's empty. And until we do more to enlist our community colleges to help fill that whole, I think we're going to be playing catch-up.

Catherine Herridge ([09:30](#)):

The Chinese government has been a tremendous collector of data. Did you see evidence in the Microsoft compromise that they are now aggregating that data and building profiles for targeting purposes?

Brad Smith ([09:44](#)):

I think both in that attack and in others, both by that government and by others, but especially in a country that has more AI and machine learning capability, we are seeing that take place. For years,

we've been watching the large accumulation of data sets, large thefts of data. And an open question has been, "Would people be able to actually weaponize the data?" And I think that with a large pool of engineering talent, better capabilities that they have to federate data, and world-competitive artificial intelligence, we are seeing that put to work. And yes, we did see that put to work.

Catherine Herridge ([10:27](#)):

I want to pick up on a point from Senator Ernst. One of the intriguing things in the data is when you drill down on the COVID-19 section, what you'll see is that the majority of Americans, again, across party lines, think it's likely the virus came out of a Chinese lab. The Chinese government lied about that evidence. And that if it were the case, they would like to see reparations. They want to see action. Karl, I want to bring you in. What do you say is the significance of that finding?

Karl Rove ([10:59](#)):

Well, we're supposed to be a disunited country, but apparently we agree on one thing: that Chinese are behind it, and by god, they are going to pay for it. Republicans, 86%, say very likely or somewhat likely that the Chinese lied about it, leaked it, and lied. 66% of independents, 60% of Democrats. The only difference between them, it tends to be intensity. The Republicans, 60% of them think it's very likely that the Chinese did it, 37% of the independents, and 27% of the Democrats. But, nonetheless, by margins approaching 2 to 1 among independents and Democrats, and almost 9 to 1 among Republicans, they believe that the Chinese are responsible for it. Of course, 76% say if it was proven the Chinese hid the virus leak and lied about it, they should pay reparations. 76% say yes, 13% say no, 11% say don't know. And I suspect 90% would say, "No chance in hell we're ever going to get the reparations."

Karl Rove ([12:01](#)):

I was interested in the cross-tabs. There's really no real difference in the cross-tabs on this. The West and the South are a little bit more likely to believe it than the Midwest and the East, but everybody believes it. I was hoping there'd be sort of an ethnic cross-tab, because I wanted to test a theory. I was in Rome in July, there was no cross-tab in the poll for Italian Americans, unfortunately. But, our Italian guide was commenting on the absence of Chinese tourists in Rome, it was probably for the better. He said, "After all, what are we going to say to them? Thank you for the virus?" But we obviously think that.

Catherine Herridge ([12:41](#)):

Senators, does this remain a leadership opportunity for the United States? We're two years into this pandemic. Can we step up further to really lead on the issue?

Senator Joni Ernst ([12:52](#)):

I believe we can, absolutely, Catherine. And again, it is a bipartisan issue in the Congress where, with the particular issue of COVID 19, we are trying to find what exactly happened in China. We have a bipartisan bill that's gone forward. Again, representation from the coasts on people that are cosponsoring, as well as across the Midwest. So, yes, there are great leadership opportunities here. But, America, as a whole, needs to step forward and show that we can be the partner of choice. We are the one that will lead in effort, whether it's with China and discovering the origins of COVID, whether it is pushing back against those pacing threats of China and Russia, we should be that partner of choice.

Catherine Herridge ([13:43](#)):

Are you saying we're not the partner of choice right now?

Senator Joni Ernst ([13:46](#)):

I would say that that has been jeopardized in the last year with the hasty and haphazard withdrawal of Afghanistan. I was in Halifax at their International Security Forum and many of our traditional allies and partners in pull-aside bilateral meetings were questioning what happened over the summer, why it happened the way it did, why they were caught off guard. They are not turning to us and seeing leadership at this moment in time. And we can't just continue to promise to be the partner of choice. We have to have action in this area and show the rest of the world that we are the partner of choice. So, we can lead in this area.

Catherine Herridge ([14:26](#)):

Senator Duckworth.

Senator Tammy Duckworth ([14:27](#)):

I think there's an opportunity there through vaccine diplomacy. And this is where we can come in and say, as we have already, donate vaccines around the world, that the PRC is doing the opposite. They're actually using their vaccine, the availability of the Sinovac and telling nations, "Buy from us," or, "Don't sell your vaccine." In the case of Taiwan, for example, earlier this year, I went to Taiwan with Senator Sullivan and Senator Coons. And we went in specifically to say that we, the United States, was donating vaccines to Taiwan because the PRC had actually essentially blockaded Taiwan from the vaccine by telling all of the other manufacturers around the worlds. Saying, "If you sell your vaccines to Taiwan, we will not economically engage with you." That's a blockade. So it's really important that we flew in, three senators, and said, "We're going to donate vaccines to you. Taiwan, not only will we stand with you should there be conflict, but we will stand with you now in a middle of a global pandemic."

Senator Tammy Duckworth ([15:28](#)):

And this is what I'm seeing all around the world, especially in Indo-Pacific region, they're looking to the US and seeing, "Are they going to be there?" One of the ways that we can be there with this pandemic is vaccines, to come in and say, "We're going to donate 6 million vaccines to Indonesia, no strings attached. We're going to donate a million to Thailand. We're going to donate vaccines around the world. Because we're the leaders in solving this problem. And then, now we're going to engage with you in all of these other ways as well."

Catherine Herridge ([15:56](#)):

I want to bring up the next slide, which is the perceptions of global engagement. And what you see in this slide is that Americans are more on the fence. They're more in the it depends category than we've seen in the past. General McConville, if President Reagan's principle was peace through security, how do we accomplish that at a time when the American people are more ambivalent about that engagement?

General McConville ([16:22](#)):

Well, I think it's really important that we work with our allies and partners. And we do it right now. And we talk about who's the partner of choice. Most of, at least the army chiefs of staff that I deal with, we're the security partner of choice. Maybe not necessarily the economic partner of choice because they have to deal in a different environment. But it's very, very important that we work close with our

allies and partners. Doesn't have to be large numbers, but advising, assisting them, and building their capacity and capabilities so they can contribute to the global security.

Catherine Herridge ([16:57](#)):

So you haven't seen a shift, US is still the partner of choice when it comes to?

General McConville ([17:02](#)):

I talk to the chiefs of staffs around me. So when I talk to them, very, very strong relationships, but that's a military to military relationship.

Catherine Herridge ([17:10](#)):

Karl, what do you make of this, this data, this ambivalence?

Karl Rove ([17:13](#)):

Yeah. When you look at this chart, which shows the difference between October 2019 and November 2021, we tend to focus on the extremes. More engaged and take the lead, less engaged and react to events. We ought to really take a look at the middle because it gives us an important clue about attitudes on foreign affairs and things like global engagement. That is to say, think about that, better than 1 out of every 5 Americans says, "I don't know." The one thing we know about public opinion on foreign affairs and questions like global engagement is, is that the American public doesn't have as definitive a set of opinions as they do about a lot of domestic affairs. Ask them about a tax cut, ask them about this, ask them about that, they got an opinion. But when it comes to world affairs and things like global engagement, there's a bias on the part of the American people to trust their leaders. So unless their leaders are talking about it, they tend to sort of go to the 22%, "It depends."

Karl Rove ([18:18](#)):

And the one thing we know about opinions about foreign affairs and questions like this is, is that ordinary Americans look at this through what political scientists call heuristics. These are sort of fundamental sentiments about how they think the world works. And those sentiments come into play when a leader touches them. That's why Reagan's peace through strength is such an enduring mantra because that sentiment inside ordinary Americans is, "I don't care whether it's dealing with the bully on the school yard or dealing in the world, it is better to be strong than to be weak."

Karl Rove ([18:51](#)):

There's another interesting question here. Should we maintain bases? Talk about global engagement. One of the most powerful ways we engage in the world is to have deployment of our forces abroad. Q35 in the poll. 65% said that in October of 2019, 65% say it today. So we're looking at this saying, "Oh, support for global engagement is dropping." But, if you say to them, "Should we have American troops station abroad? Are we better off with that?" It's a concrete question that touches that sentiment, that heuristic, if you will, and people say, "Oh, yeah," 2 to 1, better than 2 to 1. Because, again, on that question you still have over 10% of the people saying, "I don't know." So, I look at this and say this is a reflection, less of where the American people are, and more on the failure of their leadership to be heard on these important questions. Like saying, "We need our allies, we need to be engaged in the world, we need to stand up and do this particular thing." If our leaders do it, the American people tend to grant them permission on things like global engagement.

Senator Tammy Duckworth ([20:07](#)):

We're from the Midwest. If you ask them, "Do we need to engage economically?" Well, listen, the top products coming out of Illinois are pork, soybean, and corn. You talk to my farmers, they'll say, "Yeah, we should be engaging economically, because the last four years have really hurt us when we engaged in trade wars with the PRC. Let's fix that problem." There they want engagement, whereas they might not think about it in other ways. So, we also have to really talk to the public about some of these issues as well, very specific ones.

Senator Joni Ernst ([20:35](#)):

And I would say as well, and I think many in this room would agree, that it should always be America first, but not America only. We need to look out for our own interests, most certainly. But we need those allies and partners, whether it's trade through diplomatic actions. We all need to engage. But, you're right. To Karl's point, we have to do a better job at expressing why America needs to engage globally. And we haven't seen that maybe for a few decades now where we're not out there stating that, like Afghanistan for an example, "We have a small number of stabilizing forces in the region. It's important because of X, Y, Z." We need to be able to explain that to our public. And I think if the public knew and we had more transparency under why we are in certain areas of the world, they would be a lot more supportive.

Catherine Herridge ([21:33](#)):

General McConville, what's been the fallout of the Afghan withdrawal for you?

General McConville ([21:37](#)):

Well, I think, we're certainly very disheartened about how it happened. Many of us spent years there. I have three kids that all spent combat tours there. And we have a lot of friends there with the Afghans. So we're all very disheartened how that end. But as I talk to our allies and partners, we still see strength. What I would say, and we talk about relationships, is we can't telecommute to these relationships. We got to be out there. We got to be with them. I think just the presence of American troops really makes a difference. It may not be the largest numbers, but the fact that we are there actually gives people, what I would say, sometimes backbone in very difficult situations. And when we leave, we tend to see some results that we don't like.

Catherine Herridge ([22:25](#)):

Well, the data said about half of Americans believe that it was right to get out. The problem was how we got out. And the ripple effect of that.

Karl Rove ([22:35](#)):

Well, let's be clear though. In this survey, 47% said, "Should have withdrawn." 40% said, "Should not have withdrawn." And 13% said, "We don't know." What would've happened if we had had a description over the last several years of what actually our mission was, that we'd ended the combat mission, that we were providing intelligence, and air support, and training. What if the focus had been put on that? What would've happened to that 13%? I think that would've diminished. And the 40% who said, "Should've stayed," would've grown. And the 47% who said, "Get out," would've said, "You know what? I'm willing to trust our leadership in this moment because they've explained to me what we're doing and why."

Catherine Herridge ([23:18](#)):

So, are you saying both administrations have not done an effective job with their words, communicating what the mission?

Karl Rove ([23:24](#)):

Absolutely. I mean, how many people know our combat mission ended in 2014? Not too many. But, if you explain it to them, it happens. I want to pick up on something the general said, I don't operate at the level that you do. But I was talking the other day to a former prime minister of one of our friends in Europe, who basically said, "Why? It is inexplicable to us that after doing what you did for 20 years, that you would do what you did and not tell us." This goes back again, our foreign allies are much like the American people, they want to know. And for us not to have consulted, I think is going to... at least with this fellow who's very active in European politics, who said, "This is going to leave a stain on America. We're wondering how reliable you are."

Catherine Herridge ([24:20](#)):

Brad, I want to bring you in because global engagement is going to be one of the most effective to deal with China. Have you seen a punishment or a sanction that has in any way modified China's behavior in the cyber arena?

Brad Smith ([24:37](#)):

I don't think, to date, we've seen sanctions have that effect. I do think that we are seeing more focus on the need for a common alliance between the United States and, I'll say, especially Europe. And I think we've long felt that the only real ingredient for long-term success is to build an alliance of the world's democracies. And we're seeing, obviously, progress with the QUAD and, I think, especially when I look at the technology issues. Where we need to make more progress is across the Atlantic. I just came back from two weeks in five locations across Europe. And we're still grappling in major European capitals, especially in Paris and Berlin, with public strategies that frankly are more focused on protecting their data from the Americans than the Chinese, the Russians, the Iranians, and the North Koreans. And until we really root out that problem and rebuild trust across the Atlantic, I think we're going to be weaker than we need to be, looking across the Pacific.

Catherine Herridge ([25:45](#)):

So, you haven't seen to date a penalty or a punishment that's really modified their behavior in this space?

Brad Smith ([25:52](#)):

No, different techniques work in different ways with different governments, is what I would say. What we have seen in recent years, more generally in the sanction space, is targeted sanctions against specific individuals tend to have some impact in governments where there are specific individuals that want to get their money out of the country. And that has basically been Russia where that's had more impact. We haven't seen it work in the other countries we've been most worried about. Doesn't mean there's not other approaches. And there's a lot that we don't see. I mean, we all know, there's deterrent activity every day that's of enormous importance. And the last thing the private sector should do is really be a part of that.

Catherine Herridge ([26:39](#)):

I don't think we can leave this topic, General McConville, without addressing Russia and Ukraine. What do you think Russia's intentions are? Is it to go into Ukraine early next year?

General McConville ([26:52](#)):

Yeah, I don't know what they're going to do. But I am very, very concerned about their posture. It's in the news that somewhere around 95,000 to 100,000 Russian soldiers are on the border of Ukraine. That gives a lot of options to the Russians. I'm not quite sure what they're going to do, but to me, that is going to have a terrible impact on the stability and security of our European friends. And so, I have serious concerns about that.

Catherine Herridge ([27:25](#)):

Senators.

Senator Tammy Duckworth ([27:27](#)):

Well, I do think that Russia is moving in that direction. I will tell you, Illinois has been in a state Partnership for Peace relationship with Poland now for almost 30 years. That's the first NATO country on the other side that will hold the line. And I will tell you that whatever happens with Russia and Ukraine is very much going to impact our nation. Because you've got all the members of the Illinois National Guard are the ones... it's our adjunct general who gets the first call from the Polish military that says, "Hey, they're going to Ukraine. They've annexed Crimea. What do we do?" I mean, their first calls was through our National Guard commanders. And so, we have to stand by those alliances. We can't give up on them. And I do think that those alliances actually make us stronger in many ways, all across the globe, not just in places like Poland and Ukraine, but also in Asia as well.

Senator Joni Ernst ([28:18](#)):

Yes, we need to be very engaged at this particular moment against Vladimir Putin and the Russian aggression we see in Eastern Europe. One of the simple things that we could have done was to work on sanctions for Nord Stream 2. And unfortunately, efforts were blocked in the Senate to vote on an amendment that would do that. There are a number of preemptive sanctions that we can do against the Russians. We need to be aggressive. And again, this is a moment in time where we need to show leadership and we need to push back and say, "Putin, you can't do this." We allowed them to move into Georgia. We've seen them take Crimea. And now we see them amassing on the Ukrainian border once again. We need to show that, "You do this, there are going to be of repercussions."

Catherine Herridge ([29:07](#)):

General, how do we deter Russia at this moment, if that's the objective?

General McConville ([29:14](#)):

Well, again, there's probably people that are above my level that would be better. But, I mean, it's a policy decision. It's leadership, it's a whole government effort. Just like we talked about, it's peace through strength. And the way you deter is you impose some type of cost to make sure the cost is worth more than the benefit. And that's a whole of government effort, but it's really a whole of Europe effort. And maybe even a global effort, making sure people understand you just can't go into another sovereign

country and conduct malign activities without having some type of cost. So, that's what I would recommend for deterrence.

Catherine Herridge ([29:47](#)):

And senators, what do you see as the worst-case scenario here? That Russia goes into Ukraine, and then there's a ripple effect for the Baltic nations? Is that what it looks like?

Senator Joni Ernst ([29:57](#)):

Yeah, I believe so. And I think, for Ukraine, this would be forever damaging. I do. They struggle, of course, with their independence and the pressures that are coming from Russia. But then, to Tammy's point, what's to stop them next? Other nations, as they progress. NATO is very concerned about this. They're very concerned about this. And so, again, separating out the military from the diplomatic actions, our military does a phenomenal job. I don't want to walk away from this stage without saying that. Our military is absolutely prepared. We know that they will do what they need to do when the policy makers make those decisions. But it's up to us to push back before we ever have to engage the men and women in uniform. And we need to do that.

Catherine Herridge ([30:49](#)):

I'd like to pull up the next slide, which is trust and confidence in US institutions. And on the senator's point, the US military continues to enjoy the highest levels of confidence. General, what do you put that down to?

General McConville ([31:05](#)):

We just have extraordinary young men and women that continue to raise their right hands and say they want to serve. And very, very proud. We've been in conflict for 20 years. Amazing. So, young men and women have continued to join the military. But we really can't take that for granted, because we are seeing a change in trust in all of our institutions. And, as an American, that does concern me. That all our institutions, that the American people don't trust them. And I think it's really important now, especially when I look around in the world, there's a lot of our competitors or our pacing folks that we were looking at there, our pacing challengers, that are very pleased to see our institutions under attack. And we got to make sure we come together as a country and we come together with those who share our values and our goals. And make sure that we can focus on where the real threats are coming from.

Catherine Herridge ([32:03](#)):

There is a significant loss of trust and confidence in the US military, in this survey. What events explain it?

General McConville ([32:12](#)):

Well, I think it's a lot of events. At least, from where I sit, at least from the army, as chief of staff, we want to stay out of politics. We want to make sure that our troops are employed in the right way. And we probably haven't done that as well as we should, but that's what we're trying to do.

Catherine Herridge ([32:29](#)):

Senators.

Senator Tammy Duckworth ([32:31](#)):

I think when you deploy military helicopters on protestors in Lafayette Square with tear gas and rubber bullets to suppress peaceful protesters, Americans on American soil, that's damaging. When you have the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs follow a president to a photo op after having cleared peaceful demonstrators, that's damaging. He apologized for that, but that photo is damaging across the country. I think when you have people, wearing clearly recognizable military gear and insignia, ransack the United States Capitol on January 6th, that's damaging. There's any number of things. I think the issue in Afghanistan was damaging. And that's why I've called for a 20-year look, my commission, which is bipartisan, it's in the base bill of the NDAA, to look back over 20 years at the failures of leadership, both political and military in Afghanistan. I think, as a member of Congress, we are to blame because we never debated the AUMF.

Senator Tammy Duckworth ([33:38](#)):

Going back to what Karl was saying. We never debated what the new mission is, and we haven't done that. There's a lot of things that contributed to that. But, I do believe that that is something that can come back fairly easily. Because I think the American people love their military, love their men and women in uniform. And we can rebuild that confidence fairly quickly. You will note that Congress hasn't changed much.

Catherine Herridge ([34:04](#)):

It's still low.

Senator Tammy Duckworth ([34:05](#)):

It's still low. There was a Time magazine's poll that actually has cockroaches as being better regarded than members of Congress, and colonoscopies as well. I can understand colonoscopies, because that's for a good reason. But I can't understand why they think cockroaches are better than members of Congress.

Catherine Herridge ([34:27](#)):

But, on a more serious note. When I look at the data, what I see here is that there's an erosion of trust in the tools of democracy and the democratic institutions. It's a cancer that's dividing us and giving our adversaries the advantage.

Senator Joni Ernst ([34:47](#)):

Catherine, if I could address that as well. Because I totally do understand Congress's position here. And Tammy and I have both had the great honor of serving in the United States Congress, which is a great honor. But I think, for both of us as well, having served in our nation's uniformed services, for me at least, was probably the most significant honor of my life. So we have been on both ends of the spectrum. But our military has been used as props or tools politically. And we have to get to a point as leaders where we're separating our men and women in uniform away from our policy decisions. They cannot be props. They are there for our national defense. Certainly the most significant factor in our United States Constitution. Number one is securing our nation. We have to have apolitical players to do that.

Senator Joni Ernst ([35:50](#)):

With the withdrawal in Afghanistan, I would say that a lot of the anger has been misappropriated at the military and our military leaders who gave their best advice to our commander-in-chief. It wasn't taken. But a lot of the anger has been directed at those at the top of our military chain, and not directed in the right manner. So we have to separate them out. They're doing their job. They are using what they are given. They're giving their best advice. It's up to leadership within our Congress, within the White House, to make those right decisions there. So, let's separate out the military. They are apolitical. And if there's anger to be directed, direct it at us, as Congress. Or direct it at the White House, where it should go. Not at our military leaders.

Catherine Herridge ([36:45](#)):

Karl, what do you make of the data?

Karl Rove ([36:49](#)):

I understand the concern. I understand particularly the concern of the military, that it have the best possible image and the greatest possible confidence of the American people. But let a step back and put it a little bit in perspective. First of all, the military remains still the most trusted of the institutions that the Reagan Defense Forum poll garnered. What we see there is the number of people who say, "A great deal of confidence." If you take the people who have a positive view of the military, a great deal, or some confidence, we've gone from 93%, great or some, to 78%. In fact, of all of the institutions that are done here, if you look at the comparative decline of these institutions, Congress drops 23% of its support since November of 2018. Supreme Court, 22%. The media, 21%. Law enforcement, 20%. The military, 16%. And the presidency, 10%. So, we got probably specific things that people in the military need to worry about, but we have a broader problem here in the confidence of our institutions, of our entire country.

Karl Rove ([38:02](#)):

I try to put this in a bigger frame. Let's go back to 2000. Relative peace and prosperity, the only sort of major political controversy was left over from the failed Clinton impeachment and Monica Lewinsky. So the country wasn't worried about big things. Gallup has been charting 16 institutions for decades. Since 2000, only four institutions improved their standing. Number one institution in America, most respected, is small business, 57% in 2000, 70% today. Second most respected institution with 64% in 2000 and 69% today, the military. The only other institutions which grew in support since 2000 are our healthcare system and organized labor. The other institutions: Congress dropped 50% of its approval since 2000, newspapers 40%, big business 35%, banks 35%, churches and organized religion lost 35% of their support, Supreme Court 20%, criminal justice 15%, and the presidency 10%.

Karl Rove ([39:17](#)):

So, we got a bigger problem than just the military. And if we focus on the military only, we're missing the bet. Because we can solve problems with people's confidence in the military, but it's not going to necessarily flow over into the rest of our institutions. The good news is we've been through this before. We may not have had polling in the 1840's and 50's, but we were in trouble. We were in trouble in the Gilded Age. We were in trouble in the early 1930's. We know from polling that we had trouble in the confidence of people in our institutions in the late 1960's and throughout most of the 70's. Returned to confidence largely under the leadership of the guy whose memory we honor here today. But we do have a problem with institutions and government. The military's faring pretty damned good compared to the rest of them.

Catherine Herridge ([40:04](#)):

Well, to sort of punctuate that and to take the discussion to a different level. I mean, this is classic gray-zone warfare. These are influence operations that are dividing us, and they are undermining confidence in the tools of democracy. Brad, what role is big tech playing in that loss of trust? And what can be done to help regain that trust?

Brad Smith ([40:27](#)):

Well, I think that's an extraordinarily important question. I think you're right, Karl, to put it in a bigger frame. You look at the forest and you ask, "Wow, are the trees dying?" It does not look encouraging. And I think, fundamentally, it causes or should cause all of us to ask whether we can sustain trust if we lose the capacity to sustain a shared understanding of truth. And that's where I think big tech enters the picture. You're right, we've encountered this in the past. And often it has been when there would have been these technological leaps in communications. The New York Times asked whether communications was moving too fast for the truth, that was in 1858. The question was about the telegraph. The answer was yes. And the result was the Civil War. And today, we just see this onslaught. How can people trust government if they don't have confidence in what they're reading about anything? What happens when it is actually easier to invent a vaccine than it is to persuade people that it's safe to take it? That's the world we're grappling with.

Brad Smith ([41:39](#)):

So, for tech, I think it means two things. One, a domestic question for all of us in the industry and for the people who are in our government. And it's not just for the companies that have the social media names that are on the cover of Time magazine this week. It's us at Microsoft too. I worry about this every day, for LinkedIn, for Xbox, for our search service. What do we need to do differently? Have we reached a point where in many companies there may be architecture, there may be algorithms, there may be business models that are profiting from enraging anger and spreading misinformation? And if the answer is yes, and I believe in many places the answer is yes, then we've got to be prepared to look ourselves in the mirror and change. And if the industry's not prepared to change, then it will become, by necessity, the role of government to do that instead.

Brad Smith ([42:37](#)):

But there is a foreign element. And in contrast to the discussion and the sophistication we have about nation state cyber attacks, hacks, and the like, I don't think we're talking nearly enough about state-sponsored disinformation campaigns. Whether they're state-sponsored vaccine disinformation campaigns, or state-sponsored political disinformation campaigns. There are no group of government leaders that understand how to manipulate the truth better than people who work in governments that are authoritarian, because that is such a fundamental part of their toolkit.

Brad Smith ([43:17](#)):

And if you ask, "Do we have the same detection capability in the private sector, in collaboration with the public sector, to identify these kinds of state-sponsored disinformation campaigns? Do we have disruption strategies that are on a par with what we're doing for traditional cyber attacks?" I believe the answer today is no. And we're not going to get there until we start to have a conversation, privately and publicly, locally and nationally, about this part of the problem. So, I think that needs to be put on our list of things for 2022.

Catherine Herridge ([43:56](#)):

Okay. Thank you, Brad. Our last slide is perceptions of most important problems facing the United States. Senators, we're heading into the midterm elections and it's not surprising to you that these are the pocket book issues. So how do you strike that balance between those issues and the national security issues we've been talking about, about leadership and the threat from China?

Senator Tammy Duckworth ([44:24](#)):

Well, for my constituents, I connect the importance of our economy and jobs to those international issues. I have talked about corn, soybean, and pork. This is a big deal in Illinois. I have many family farms who, due to the Trump trade wars, are going to lose their family farms. And that betrayal to our farmers. What I say to them is, "We have to grow. We have to engage." And part of opposing the PRC and standing up to the PRC is actually economically engaging with them and other nations, in the Indo-Pacific region, so that we are an alternative, so that there are those connections, those ties. We have to grow. We have to see strength beyond tanks, guns, and helicopters. Listen, I am a sucker for a sexy helicopter as the next person. Just how I'm wired.

Senator Tammy Duckworth ([45:13](#)):

But, economic strength is critically important to our nation's international strength and strategic strength in the international arena as well. I've been really pushing very hard. This is sometimes a very tough conversation among many Democrat constituencies, is that we have to engage in international trade. We have to engage in international regimes. We have to be there. Because when we're not there, then you have China and the PRC seizing that opportunity to enter into those regimes. And that can't happen. And then that economic engagement helps with the economy and jobs.

Senator Joni Ernst ([45:51](#)):

Catherine, in Iowa, again, ag is extremely important. We're actually seeing a really booming year this year as far as agriculture and the commodities that we produce in Iowa. But, coming back to kitchen table economics, if you look at inflation and what it's doing to our families, it is killing our families in Iowa. Mid-American Energy came out just a month or so ago, I got my little statement in the mail, talking about how they were going to have to increase their costs over the winter heating months by at least 50%. In my neighborhood, which is the neighborhood I grew up in as a child, I live five miles from the farm where I was raised, this is a big deal. When they are going to the grocery store, my neighbors are paying so much more for groceries. They're paying a dollar more than a year ago for gas.

Senator Joni Ernst ([46:51](#)):

If you're not involved in agriculture, you're probably commuting quite a distance from Red Oak, Iowa, to get to your job. You're putting a lot more in your tank. While we have ratcheted down on energy production here in the United States, one of the most resource-rich nations out there, we are becoming increasingly devastating to our families. They care about those pocketbook issues. And yet, we're not stepping up and doing enough about it by ramping up energy production in the United States, by not taking a look at what are the reasons behind the inflation factors. That's what Americans care about, what affects their family on a day-to-day basis.

Senator Joni Ernst ([47:33](#)):

When it comes to national security, that's our job. As leaders, that's our job. Our American families shouldn't have to worry about if their nation is protected. It should come from our White House, and from our Congress, from our military leaders. I don't want lowans to be worried about Russia and China. They do worry, but I don't want them to be because that's our responsibility. I want them to focus on their families.

Senator Tammy Duckworth ([48:00](#)):

Karl, what's the magic mix then for Republicans and Democrats?

Karl Rove ([48:05](#)):

Well, once again, we got unanimity. If you look at those top three items, economy and jobs, politics and partisanship, and incompetent leaders, the Democrats, independents, and Republics, almost by the same numbers, agree with what you see there. They all think it's an issue. So, the question is, who do they blame? And that's why it's going to be a bad year for the Democrats, unfortunately. Because it's a midterm election and the leaders are Democrats, rightly or wrongly. We've only had two elections since the emergence of the Second Party System in 1818, first midterm elections where a White House party gained seats in the House, 2002 and 1934.

Karl Rove ([48:45](#)):

But Americans agree, those are the top three issues. Then we begin to disagree with coronavirus, and climate change, and systemic racism. Where Democrats think those are problems, and to a lesser extent, independents don't, and Republicans don't at all. And then, on immigration, inflation, and one more out of the list that does not appear on there, the border security, that's where Republicans care about them and Democrats don't. And on inflation in particular, independents look more like Republicans than they do Democrats. So, unanimity about the top three, but we disagree who's responsible. But then we begin to break down with a different agenda for each party.

Catherine Herridge ([49:26](#)):

General McConville, I'm going to give you the last word and just bring it back again to China. We're in the midst of what will be a very contentious election cycle. They are playing the long game. We've seen that with the Belt and Road Initiative. Can we also, on a military level, play that long game and separate out from the politics?

General McConville ([49:45](#)):

Well, I think that's what we have to do. I think that's what we all talked about. I think it's very, very challenging for military leaders at all levels because it's very quickly. Someone can take a picture, someone can take a video, everything that's done is done under severe scrutiny. But, we have to endeavor every single day to make sure that when we're looking at the most important problems, I don't see national security issues really as the most important problems. And I also don't see law enforcement as the most important problems. And I'm kind of understanding what we want to do. But, for me, for the military, we need 100% trust. 69%, that's a C or C minus. We need to be 95%, 98%. Stay out of politics, make sure everyone trusts their military. And we need extraordinary young men and women to continue to serve and their parents want them serve because they were in the world's greatest military.

Catherine Herridge ([50:39](#)):

This transcript was exported on Jan 13, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

Senator Duckworth, Senator Ernst, General McConville, Karl Rove, Brad Smith, thank you very much for a really engaging panel. I'd like to thank the Reagan National Defense Forum for the opportunity to moderate this year. It's my first time. And I really enjoyed it. I'd like to thank all of you for being engaged in our nation's national security. This concludes the breakfast portion and the first panel. The second and panel is upstairs. And the third panel is just across the road at the Annenberg site. Thank you very much.