

Rep. Adam Smith
Chairman, House Armed Services Committee

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DWG: Welcome to the Defense Writers Group conversation on June 30, 2020 with the Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Congressman Adam Smith.

Congressman, I understand that you've just come out of a White House meeting and I think our listeners would probably like me to ask you first about that meeting. Why don't you just tell us what you feel you can about that.

Chairman Smith: Sure. That's always difficult to navigate, but yeah, the White House reached out to a group of about 10 Democrats. They briefed some Republicans yesterday. To give their take on the Russia bounty story.

It's still evolving, obviously. I think the most concerning part about it is that the White House did not have very clear answers in response to the New York Times story that came out. And initially very concerning to me was that their initial response was they just wanted to make sure that we knew that the President didn't know anything.

That's actually not normal. All right? I realize that in the Trump era we've sort of suspended our idea of what's normal. But stories have broken, and this is only my fourth President, but stories have broken like this in every -- but I cannot recall under Bush, Obama, Clinton, them wanting to come out and say look the President didn't know anything. The President knew a little bit. There is conflicting intelligence in terms of exactly what happened here. But I guess what I can say is there's certainly evidence of Russian involvement and I think we should do more to pursue that and do more to hold the Russians

accountable for their activity in Afghanistan.

DWG: Mr. Chairman are you still there?

[Pause.]

Chairman Smith: Sorry, I have to close the blind behind me. I tried to do this on WiFi as opposed to a hard line. It didn't work. Just a second. If I plug into the hard line I have to be seated over here, and then I have to close the blind so I was trying to avoid that.

Anyway, let me start over.

Mark Meadows led the brief. DNI Radcliff was there. National Security Advisor O'Brien and several others. And their basic position is that there was conflicting [opinions] on this and therefore they took some actions but not as many as some of us think that they should. It's still troubling. And it's troubling that so much of this swirls around what the President knew or didn't know instead of just coming out and addressing the issue. Instead of trying to make it clear that the President didn't know anything about it.

We're still trying to follow the story, but it is disturbing, and I do think we should figure out what's happening and put pressure on the Russians to stop doing what the intel indicates that they may well have been doing. So a lot more information is needed.

DWG: If it's true that the President knew absolutely nothing about this, is it your view that people weren't doing their jobs? That they should have been informing him about this or not?

Chairman Smith: Yeah. I have to sort of sift through here what's classified and what's not. And even though stuff shows up in newspaper stories, I like to adhere to the fact that we

don't confirm them because it does -- if people know where we're getting our information from that undermines our ability to have the intel that we need to meet our national security objectives.

But I think it is unacceptable to have come out and said the President knows nothing about this. I think clearly, based on what we heard today, was information that A, the President should have known about; and B, based on what we were told today, he did, it seems to me like he did know about it. I mean obviously he knew about a lot of other stuff. It wasn't a focus. He wasn't told about it every day. But from the way that it was presented to us, it would be hard for me to imagine that he wasn't at least aware of the allegation. Now maybe he was aware of the allegation, looked at it and said ah, there's nothing to this. It's hard for me to believe based on the way it was presented that the President knew nothing about it as he stated. Under the circumstances he should have at least known the basics of it. So regardless of which one of those is true, it's troubling.

DWG: I better move on to other questions. I've got a list here in the order they signed up. I'm going to go down, if that's okay with everyone. If you don't have a question just say so, but otherwise I'll recognize you.

John Harper of National Defense Magazine?

DWG: Thank you. Thanks for doing this call, Mr. Chairman.

There were a couple of items where there appears to be a difference between your mark for the NDAA and the Senate version. One is the Indo-Pacific Reassurance Fund. There seems to be some differences in proposed funding there. And then also for the R&D for the Space Development Agency. I believe your mark has a significant cut compared to the staff's version.

Can you just comment on that? Do you see any potential there when you go into conference for some reconciliation on that?

And also, why did you make that cut for the SDA? Thanks.

Chairman Smith: Obviously within a \$741 billion defense budget we're not going to perfectly match up what we're talking about doing here.

On the Indo-Pacific Defense Initiative, I mean we both support it. I think whatever is done there obviously ought to come out of the base budget, and we balance it against other needs.

I'll confess, I don't know the in's and out's of why we have less in the Defense Space Agency than the Senate. I don't know. I don't recall it being an item of specific focus. So I don't have a clear answer for why we have less, and I'm really very confident that we can reconcile that.

DWG: Tony Bertuca of Inside Defense. You're next. Followed by Eric Schmidt.

DWG: Thank you, Mr. Chairman for being with us.

My question goes to a statement Ellen Lord made before your committee a couple of weeks ago. She is saying that the Defense Department really needs supplemental money to help reimburse defense contractors because of COVID-19. You said in the past that DoD has already got a lot of money, money they haven't spent. Maybe they could use that.

I was wondering if your position has changed on this issue, or whether or not you think DoD needs to take this out of hide? She said it's the low double digit billions they're going to need.

Chairman Smith: First of all, they have not given us a specific dollar figure.

Second of all, in a \$741 billion budget, and there are, I mean

fuel costs have come down dramatically and that drives a lot of what's going on in terms of cost. I believe they can meet those requirements within the budget that we have given them, and we don't need to give them any more money.

We did allocate in I believe the original Cares package around \$10 billion for COVID-related activity, that the last time I looked they had not yet spent even half of that.

So I believe there is money available and I think they ought to be able to figure it out. Now it's going to be difficult, but Josh, everybody, every state, every locality, every federal agency, certainly every business has had to adjust in light of COVID-19 and the impact that it has had.

I've yet to see evidence that DoD cannot adjust within their existing budget stream. And I would suggest, by the way, that if they're looking for low double digit billions, that maybe some of that unallocated money that's going to build the Wall can be reallocated to where it should be within DoD. I don't know exactly what that number is, but it's in the high single digit billions at least of money that they have taken out of MilCon, that they've taken out of the drug interdiction account after reprogramming it from other places, that has not yet been expended for the Wall.

So I think there is plenty of money within DoD to meet the needs that they have.

DWG: And to just quickly follow, Mr. Chairman, you mentioned the Wall. Do you see that becoming an issue in conference now that a Court has ruled that the President, that it was illegal for him to move the money? There's something a little bit in your bill I think for the MilCon funds, but nothing stops the taking of the weapons funding and the funding from the National Guard. Is that going to come up this time or no?

Chairman Smith: This is the FY21, obviously, NDAA and FY21

budget. The administration does not or has not at the moment announced an intention to take any FY21 money for the Wall, and they had announced their intention in FY20. So it's not going to be as big an issue because they're not trying to take FY21 money.

We do not make an effort to try to grab back the FY20 money that they've taken in all those accounts that you listed, the Guard account and the other stuff, was money that they reappropriated. That's the wrong word. Shifted into the drug interdiction account so that they could then take it out of the drug interdiction account for this purpose.

We do not go back and try to recapture that money and get engaged in that fight.

The one thing that we do do, that you alluded to, is we place a cap on the amount of MilCon money that can be taken for emergency spending. We cap it at \$100 million domestic; \$500 million foreign. And if you go back under the history of the 1976 Emergency Act, no President has ever come close to taking either of those amounts. We do that not so much because of the Wall in this case, but to protect MilCon. I don't want this President or future Presidents to again look at MilCon as a piggy bank for any purpose. Because I think the money that has been taken out of MilCon in the last two budget cycles has been harmful to our readiness and harmful to a number of military construction projects. And if you want to declare an emergency, fine, but we're not going to have you using MilCon as a piggy bank for any purpose.

DWG: Thank you.

DWG: Thank you. Eric Schmidt of the New York Times, and Rebecca Kheel, you'll be next.

He might have his mute button on or maybe he's not with us. Eric Schmidt?

Rebecca Kheel of TheHill.

DWG: Good morning.

I wanted to ask in addition to this briefing you got at the White House this morning, you have asked the Pentagon for a briefing for the committee. So I was wondering, one, if you could give any updates on those efforts; and two, more generally, about your ability to bring in Pentagon officials for oversight. You still haven't gotten the hearing from Esper and Milley that you wanted on the protest. Now you're trying to arrange this briefing on the Russian bounties issue.

What tools are at your disposal to force the Pentagon to cooperate with you? And are you considering any of those tools?

Chairman Smith: First of all, we got a note back from DoD that said they are aware of the allegations about the Russians and bounties. They have taken appropriate action in terms of informing for force protection purposes. They said they did not find it credible but that they are aware of it.

We are working to get a briefing hopefully next week from some Pentagon folks just to see -- this is primarily an intel thing, so primarily more in [HPC's] jurisdiction in terms of where they got the information.

We are interested in how DoD and Afghanistan responded to this in terms of force protection and how they evaluated the information, so we're still trying to get them to come in next week.

We do have the Esper and Milley hearing set and noticed for Thursday, July 9th. So that we did get. Not as rapidly as we would have liked, but we will have that hearing next week on Thursday, July 9th.

The larger issue, how we do it. Every Pentagon that I've dealt with has been, well, difficult. That's not the right word. There's always a back and forth between the Pentagon and Congress over when they come over and for what purposes and under what circumstances. I will say that at the moment I believe that Secretary Esper and Chairman Milley have been relatively forthcoming with us. It is harmful that we don't have Under Secretary for Policy or some of the other spots. We've not been able to get them. And then obviously with COVID, that's created it. But the Pentagon throughout the shutdown here has provided us with witnesses no a wide range of subjects in a reasonably cooperative way.

DWG: Thank you.

DWG: Michael Gordon of the Wall Street Journal, you're next, and then Leon Shane.

DWG: Sir, I have two questions for you. You said at the very start of the call that you thought from your perspective and your analysis, from what you heard today, there was indications of Russian involvement, and then we sort of restarted the call, so I'd just like to ask you to explain that a little more.

And secondarily, Representative Thornberry and others have said they're moving for a resolution to prevent the administration from removing troops from Europe. I was wondering if you could talk about what steps you're taking in that area. Thank you.

Chairman Smith: Sure. I think the clear messages that we got at the White House meeting this morning was that there is conflicting intelligence and there are conflicting opinions within the intel community and within White House senior staff about how accurate the reporting that was in the New York Times about Russian bounties is.

They do not dispute that there is some intelligence that supports the conclusion. They believe there is also some

intelligence that disputes the conclusion. So that's kind of where we're at on that. It's a matter of interpreting the information to determine what is exactly accurate.

So that's the message that came out. I don't think the White House would say there's no information to support this, there are just some in the White House that feel that information is contradicted in other ways.

DWG: What would you say? What's your impression, sir?

Chairman Smith: I think there was certainly enough there to pursue it further. And I think there was certainly enough there for it to factor into the relationship with Putin and Russia, to have it be a topic of concern. And I have not yet seen enough to tell me whether or not the Trump administration responded in what I think would be an appropriate way to this initial intelligence. I am concerned that they did not pursue it as aggressively or comprehensively as perhaps they should have.

And your second?

DWG: German troops.

Chairman Smith: I think the issue we're trying to sort through here, and this is part of the problem with the way President Trump likes to announce decisions. And again, I think we have to understand this is not normal. Normally, if you were to decide you're going to move troops, you would consult with obviously our allies, but certainly with DoD and when a decision was made there would be a joint announcement with DoD, with the President, saying here's what we're going to do. Or here's what we're talking about doing. I mean sometimes these things get announced and people go ah, that's crazy, we can't do that, and it gets held up.

But the President has a way of simply unilaterally saying we're pulling them out. Then they backfill the plan. I think that is

very problematic.

Part of this came up at our briefing this morning when concerns were raised about our relationship with Russia, and is pulling the troops out of Germany a favor to Russia at the same time that they've got this bounty thing going on? And the White House very strenuously pushed back on that. The way they pitched it to us was that we're not taking troops out of Europe. We wish to reposition them to more forward positions. The President has talked about Poland. There were a couple of other countries that were mentioned as well.

So we need to know what they're talking about doing and I think it is appropriate for the moment to say yeah, hold up until we know where you're going and what you're doing on this. We don't think it's a good idea.

It is possible that there is a scenario where repositioning troops out of Germany is in our national security interest. The President has not made that case to date. The DoD has not made that case. And they're doing it, the President is doing it in a very haphazard manner. So until we get clearer answers as to exactly what the plan is and how it supports our national security strategy, yeah, I think it would be appropriate to say give us those answers before you move forward.

DWG: Leo Shane, Military Times. Then Teresa Hitchens of Breaking Defense. Leo, are you on?

DWG: I am. Thanks for doing the call here.

Chairman, Congressman Banks had a similar intelligence briefing yesterday, that was the Republican one. He came out of that saying that we'll likely never know the truth. And that's because the media has made some information available and there's no way to get to the bottom of it and finish this investigation now.

Could you just, now that you've seen the same intelligence as him, can you comment on whether or not you think this is something that you can find more information about?

Chairman Smith: Let me just say that I did not see Congressman Banks' remarks and so I don't wish to comment directly on your characterization of those remarks in a way that reflects on him, so let's be clear about that. I will say that I disagree with the premise, wherever it came from, that we can't get to the bottom of this.

Well, can we 100 percent prove whether or not it happened? I can't guarantee that. But there is certainly more information that we can get about the voracity of this. Whether or not it happened, whether or not it is ongoing, and also more importantly, we can get and should get clearer answers about how the President and his administration responded to this information and why they responded in the way that they did.

Again, I know not many people are focused on this aspect of it. It's what I led with, but it really is troubling to me that when presented with a piece of information like this the public stance of the White House was let's just make it clear that the President had nothing to do with this. That should not be your priority on an issue like this. It sort of goes to the general theme of -- well, I think the quote that best defines the trump presidency, and I realize that's a tough sentence to back up but I'll take a stab at it, was in response to a COVID question several months ago at a press briefing he said I take responsibility for nothing. I think that sort of sums up the way he looks at his job. If anything goes bad, first and most importantly, I had nothing to do with it. That's not my vision of leadership, so I'm troubled that that was the initial press approach, instead of look, we've looked at this, we don't think this is verifiable information. Yes, the President was aware of it but we didn't think it was credible enough to -- you know, something like that. Instead of nope, you guys are just trying to blame the President. Not his fault. Moving on.

So yeah, I think we can get better answers to all of those questions.

DWG: Theresa Hitchens of Breaking Defense and then Connor O'Brien of Politico.

DWG: Hi -- Sidney Friedberg. I'm actually subbing in for Theresa this morning. You'll have to cope with me, my apologies.

Sir, I wanted to talk to the Pacific Deterrence or Reassurance Initiative, just even the name, the Senate has a very different name from you. They're talking about deterrence, they have a whole list of provisions about anti-ship missiles and very specific military functions. Your language in the bill is very much about building a relationship with allies and reassurance in the name, not deterrence. So there's clearly a very different approach.

So A, can you reconcile those philosophies? B, can you reconcile the money? And C, even if the Senate and the House can get on board, is the administration on board with actually effectively deterring or reassuring in the Indo-Pacific from what you've seen?

Chairman Smith: I think we can reconcile all of those things. I have not seen any evidence to believe we can't. House, Senate, the White House. There is a subtle, well not subtle actually. It's a pretty substantive difference. The way I view this is an opportunity to build partner capacity and to build relationships with partners that we have. Under the European Defense Initiative we did it with European nations. Here we can do it with nations in Asia.

I think it's crucially important. The stronger and more aligned our Asian allies are, like South Korea, Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines, India, you know, the more we can in that

case deter China from aggressive actions like what's happening along the Line of Control with India, or what has happened with a number of island chain disputes with South Korea, Philippines, Japan. If they are emboldened to think that they can roll over these territories without any adequate response from the areas, then they're more likely to do it.

So if we build that partner capacity and build the strength of the alliance, in that sense it will be a deterrent.

Now I don't know how much different that is from the language in the Senate, meaning if the Senate is contemplating we have to build up a sufficient military to win in a war with China, I'm troubled by that arms race approach. I think what we need to do is we need to have strong enough partnerships and build the alliances in the region to force China to play by the rules. I guess at the end of the day that is more of a subtle difference than a stark difference. And yes, I think we can reconcile it.

DWG: Thanks.

Connor O'Brien of Politico and then Katrina Manson of Financial Times will be next.

DWG: Thank you, Chairman. I just wanted to get your thoughts about the wider political dynamics at play in the NDAA. Your subcommittee marks and your chairman's mark did not have many of the kind of provisions, the controversial provisions that a lot of Republicans cited when they didn't vote for the bill last year. I'm just kind of curious, how are you kind of walking this political line? Are you optimistic that this is going to be a bipartisan bill? What's your sense of where Republicans are at on this? Are you doing anything different this year? Where are you at with progressives? They're demanding things like a 10 percent cut to the top line, stuff that would really turn off Republicans on your committee. So where do things stand?

Chairman Smith: First of all, Connor, I am always optimistic. It's just my nature. We will find a way.

Second of all, I think the big thing is when we talk about the issues that we fought over last year, by and large those have been resolved. Now not all of them have been resolved to my satisfaction, but nothing has changed in terms of the control of the Senate, the control of the White House or the House. We fought those battles, we see the outcome and so there is not the necessity to fight them again in many instances.

The top line is a good place to start. Last year the Republicans were trying to tack on another \$15 billion. This year we have a budget agreement and that budget agreement set it at 741. It was bipartisan. It was House, White House. And that's the number the budget committee gave us and the number that we're going to mark to.

I do understand and respect that progressives want to see that number cut. That's a conversation we will have in the future, but for this year that's the number we're marking to. We had differences of opinion on the low yield nuclear weapon. That battle has been lost and that system has gone forward, so we're off of that.

As I mentioned, there is no money for the Wall in FY21 so that fight did not present itself.

So it's not so much a conscious choice to say ah, let's just not fight. We fought it, we resolved most of those issues. So I think there's a greater possibility of getting a bipartisan bill.

Now I should stop there, but long term, we've passed the defense bill for about 59 straight years, going for 60. But there is going to be a problem here because the Republicans will want, and this is the problem with everything. Homeland Security, a bunch of different issues. You've got some Democrats, some

Republicans here, other Republicans there, and you've got folks further to the left in the Democratic party in another place. How do you add all of that up and get 218 votes? That's always going to be a challenge. There are a lot of policies in there, and as I completely respect, every single Member of Congress from the most conservative Republican to the most left-leaning Democrat has a vision of what they think the defense budget ought to be and those visions don't match up. So how do you piece it together in such a way that enough people can support enough of it to vote for it? That's always going to be a challenge, and we're working on it. We're trying to meet the priorities of individual Members and different caucuses as well.

But underlying all of that, there's a reason we pass the defense bill every year. It's because it's one of the basic duties of our country and our Congress and our legislative process is to provide for the common defense. We need to exercise oversight in authorizing what DoD and to a small degree DOE does on national security. It's important that we do that and it's important that we find a way to work together to get that done.

Most of that isn't partisan. You'll have differences of opinion on what the Navy should be spending money on. What the Army should be spending it on. Reconcile those. And Congress exercises its oversight. As we've seen, power has become more and more concentrated into the executive. I think we don't routinely now pass a foreign affairs authorization act. So the State Department doesn't have that important oversight on it. I don't want to lose that in DoD. I want to find a way to make sure that Congress continues to express its opinion by passing this bill every year.

We have a difficult field to navigate in accomplishing that goal.

DWG: Katrina Manson of Financial Times, if you're on. And next will be Phil Stewart of Reuters.

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Katrina, are you on? Going once, going twice.

Phil Stewart of Reuters, are you on?

DWG: I am, thanks.

Chairman, you said before there was at least evidence that the administration was aware of the concern. Was it just a concern of Russian involvement in Afghanistan? Was it a concern about Russia paying bounties? Can you be a little bit more specific about what the President may have been aware of and what the administration is, with the information of involvement in Afghanistan that the administration should have been pursuing regardless of this --

Chairman Smith: I can be a little bit more specific. I can't be a lot more specific.

What there was evidence of was that the Russian government was paying bounties to Afghans to attack coalition partners, not just Americans. There is evidence of that. It's not just evidence of Russian involvement.

Look, Russia has been playing around in Afghanistan one way or another for a very long time, but there was specific evidence that said it went beyond that. There was evidence. Now how reliable was that information? Was there other information that contradicted it? Those are larger questions. But yes, there was clearly evidence that the Russians were paying the bounties as described.

DWG: Haley Britzky of Task & Purpose. If you're on, you're next. And Sandra Erwin will be after that.

Haley, are you on?

Sandra Erwin of Space News.

DWG: Good morning. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I have a question about the chairman mark on the National Security Space Launch Program. You have an increase of \$150 million for the phase three procurement, and the Senate bill has \$250 million over seven years, whereas you have the money in one year.

I guess the question is in terms of how you would compromise. Is it more important to have more money sooner? Or would you rather have more money if it's spread over more time? And do you think this type of program addresses your concerns about the industrial base that you've raised in the past? Thank you.

Chairman Smith: That's where we're trying to get to. It is my belief that we need to encourage more players to be involved in the space, in the national security space launch business to encourage competition and innovation. To get the price point down and get the launchability up.

Look, this has been established that we had ULA with a monopoly contract for a while and it worked to some degree but it was very expensive and there wasn't a ton of innovation. We wound up using a Russian rocket. We wound up getting to the point that the heavy launch vehicle could no longer perform its job. So that's why we did the phase two. Gosh, we need a new heavy launch vehicle and we need to get off of our dependency on a Russian engine.

Meanwhile, you had SpaceX sort of wedging their way in, even though the Air Force and a whole lot of other people were no, competition is impossible. SpaceX found a way and as a consequence they've brought the price down significantly. Now we've seen innovations out of both SpaceX and out of Blue Origin that they've got this whole thing, reusable rockets which most people would have told you even ten years ago, that's insane. You're not going to be able to launch it up and then land it. Well they did and that's going to save money. And that's the

type of innovation that comes from having competition.

In phase two we finally sort of stumbled into the point where we have at least two parties. Now they allocate the contract 60/40. So once the allocation is made in the next month or so there's going to be no competition there. You're going to get 60 percent of the launches, you're going to get 40. No matter what.

So going forward I want to make sure that there is competition. The concern is to keep that competition in the national security launch business. Because there will be a lot of people who do the commercial stuff. But national security requires some very specific different things to do. That's where I want economic support for the companies so they won't just say okay, I'm out of the national security launch business, I'm just going to do commercial. Okay, here's some money to help you do the things that you need to be ready to compete in phase three for national security launches. That's our goal. We think it's pretty important to have some money in FY21 so that, you know, whichever company winds up, or companies, two, will lose that contract. But if they want to stay in the national security launch business they get some economic support to do that.

I think this is a decades-long investment for the Air Force to make sure that competition is there, to make sure that these companies don't go off and not compete. It's a very small amount of money relative to what we're going to be spending on launch to maintain competition and encourage innovation. And I'm encouraged, the Senate has some language this year that they didn't last year and that we're evolving in that conversation. Yeah, I think we can reconcile and meet that goal.

DWG: Thank you very much.

DWG: Caitlin Kenney of Stars and Stripes, are you on?
Following will be Lauren Williams of FCW.

DWG: Hi. Mr. Chairman, your mark included funding for Stars and Stripes as well as a requirement for a business case analysis report. Do you have any comments about why you included this in your mark? And with the Senate draft not including the funding for Stripes, what do you think the conference will be like for this item? Thank you.

Chairman Smith: To be perfectly honest, I have absolutely no idea. I vaguely remember this conversation coming up but I don't know the specifics of that question. I'll have to get answers from my staff and get back to you.

DWG: Lauren Williams of FCW and the Nick Schiffrin. Lauren are you on?

DWG: Yes. Thank you, sir, for doing this.

I wanted to ask what your perspective was on the Chief Management Officer position. There's a Senate proposal to remove it and I'm interested in whether you would support such a provision and what are your general thoughts about the productivity of the CMO.

Chairman Smith: I'm still being educated on that point. But my initial take, and I confess this is primarily from talking to CMO, but I've also talked to Mr. Thornberry about it, we keep changing this. In, our, you're going to do it, you're going to do it. I would like to just sort of stick with this one. I know she has presented some good information about here's all the productivity we did. People said nah. Just, changing this up all the time I think makes it mover difficult. The CMO's I think only been around a couple of years.

My initial take is let's give them a chance to at least do their job before we rip the floor out from under them. But if someone thinks getting rid of the CMO puts us in a more efficient position I'm open to hearing that argument. It's just my initial take is let's at least give this time to see if it is

working.

My initial look at it, it doesn't seem like it's been such a disaster in two or three years that it warrants the radical step of elimination. But like I said, I'm open to being more educated.

DWG: Nick Schiffrin of PBS and then Jamie McIntyre. Nick, are you on?

Jamie McIntyre, are you on and do you have a question?

Patricia Kime of Military.com, are you on and do you have a question?

DWG: Yes, I am here. Thank you so much for taking my question.

Sir, what are your real priorities for the personnel issues that are in the bill? There are quite a few discrepancies between your bill and the Senate, especially regarding the changes that are going on in the Defense Health Agency. What do you feel are the top personnel priorities for the House when you go into conference?

Chairman Smith: It's hard because there's dozens of issues around personnel. I know that the -- one of my top priorities would be to get the health agencies right because there is a difference of opinion. Once again, we're trying to make significant changes. You know, getting rid of the individual service member Surgeon Generals, for instance. Trying to meld the systems together.

I would say that one of my top priorities would be to resolve that question. I see the merit of what they're talking about doing in merging it and bringing it together. On the other hand, we have gotten some pretty good, solid reliable information, certainly from the Air Force Surgeon General around COVID. So I need to better understand it. So reconciling that

would certainly be at the top of the list.

I think another emerging priority within personnel is dealing with racial inequality. There is considerable concern based on some early studies that were done that there is statistically disparate treatment of people of color with others within the military justice system, and also in terms of hiring and promotion. Are we doing enough there?

One of the things, there are several proposals in our bill relating to Historical Black Colleges and trying to strengthen the relationship between Historical Black Colleges and the military to build a pipeline, to take advantage of those human resources.

So I think those are sort of the two biggest priorities off the top.

DWG: Ellen Millheiser of Synopsis, and then Robert Coppinger. Ellen, do you have a question?

DWG: Yes, I do. Thank you so much, sir.

Your pandemic preparedness plan, this flows into what you were just telling Patricia. Do you have significant money in there for research and development on future pandemics? Do you see that as staying in the individual services for medical research such as the Army? Or do you see that going to [DHJ]?

Chairman Smith: Tough question. I don't know off the top. Well, off the top if it would be best if it went to a coordinated DHA so that, because this is service wide. It's not peculiar to one or the other. We'd like a consistent plan. So initially my thoughts would be coordinate it centrally around DA. This is everything from making sure we have our strategic stockpile in place to deal with healthcare crises, to really taking a look at how the Defense Production Act can be used more effectively. So I would guess that we would want to centralize

it but again, I'd have to hear arguments on how that goes forward. We do put a billion dollars in there specifically to focus on pandemic preparedness and building off of our experiences with COVID-19. I think it's really important we get that right.

DWG: Robert Coppinger of Combat Aircraft Journal. Then Roxana Tiron.

Robert, are you on the line?

DWG: I am on the line. Hello Congressman Smith. Thank you for doing this today.

A difference between the House and the Senate National Defense Authorization Act is the Senate gives the U.S. the F-35s that were ordered by Turkey. Do you support that?

Chairman Smith: At this time I don't. Again, we'll have to debate that. Either our sanctions mean something or they don't, and we made it very clear to Turkey that if they buy the S400 system and go forward with deploying it that we would not, we would cut these off. So I think we have to stick to our word until Turkey makes some adjustment to that.

DWG: So I think maybe you misunderstood my question. So I was asking if you supported the Senate's version of the act that gives the Turkish F-35s to the U.S. Air Force and your answer suggests you don't.

Chairman Smith: I'm sorry. I thought you were talking about giving them to Turkey.

DWG: No. And my second --

Chairman Smith: I think that is probably a reasonable solution, yes.

DWG: Thanks. And the second part of my question is if the Thune Amendment gets to the reconciliation part of [inaudible] process, will you support the U.S. purchase of Turkey's S400 system?

Chairman Smith: I'm not actually 100 percent familiar with what the Thune Amendment does, so I would not be able to give an intelligent answer to that. Are you saying there's an amendment in there saying that the U.S. would purchase the S400 system so basically we could dump it in the ocean? That's what's being proposed?

DWG: And then Turkey could rejoin the F-35 program. Yeah.

Chairman Smith: Dumping was a metaphor, by the way. Just so we're clear.

Yeah, I don't know if money's really the issue here. I don't know that that would resolve it. I think this is more of an internal decision than Erdogan has made about his belief that he needs that system.

I would love to find a way to reconcile this. However problematic our relationship with Turkey may be, they are an incredibly important country, incredibly important partner for dealing with all manner of different issues. I would like to find a path back.

I'll put it to you this way. If in fact purchasing the S400 system from Turkey would get them out from under their reliance on Russian systems and get us back to where they could be part of the F-35 program, then I would be very much open to that idea. I'm just skeptical as to whether or not that would work.

DWG: Thank you very much.

DWG: Roxana Tiron of Bloomberg Government, and then Sean Naylor will be next.

DWG: Hi, good morning. Thank you so much for doing this.

I have a question about sort of the big topic of the defense authorization process. The pending amendments obviously that will be introduced to rename military bases that were named after confederate generals and remove symbols and other mementos of the confederacy, how do you see this playing out in the committee markup on Wednesday? Especially because I think the two sides are, you know, Democrats and Republicans are not exactly on the same page on how this should be going forward.

Chairman Smith: I think there's clearly strong support within the committee, and there are Republicans who support it as well, to make these name changes in a comprehensive way. To basing as well as buildings, installations, I forget the list, to move us off of this. So I think we will pass out of committee a very strong provision to require the renaming of those bases probably within a year. And I think that's perfectly appropriate that we should do that.

People really, and I think it's much more well documented now, but these places were named after confederate generals in large part, part of the effort in the turn of the 20th century, around that time frame, to reassert white supremacy as the culture. Statues went up, the bases were named, they were reasserting the confederacy at the same time the Ku Klux Klan and Jim Crow were coming along. We really need to look deeply at our history and understand the efforts that were made by a lot of people, not just before the Civil War, but after, to dehumanize black people and attempt to establish white supremacy, and obviously those ideas are abhorrent and corrosive in our society. And if we're going to get rid of them we're going to have to work at it in a comprehensive way. I think this is an important step. Certainly not the only step. It's not going to fix everything. But it's a recognition that, you know, recognizing white supremacist history hurts, obviously, effort at true racial equality in our country.

DWG: Thank you. And a very quick question.

There's also a pending amendment about making Pentagon reports unclassified and put online. Do you support that?

Chairman Smith: I don't know. I'd have to take a look at it.

DWG: Sean Naylor of Yahoo News, and Jeff Seldin, you'll be next.

Sean, are you on? Going once, going twice.

Jeff Seldin, are you on?

DWG: Hi. Thank you very much for doing this, sir. Two questions.

One, if the reporting is accurate in the Times and some of the other publications about when the information on the Russian bounties was included in the President's daily brief, it would put it at least at one point in late February. Which would have been shortly after President Trump had ousted his previous Acting Director of National Intelligence and shortly after Richard Grenell came in to serve in that role for a bit. Grenell has said on Twitter he knows nothing of the bounties.

How much do you think the constant changeover in the President's intelligence folks hurt the White House and hurt the U.S. response on what to do once this evidence came to light?

Then I also have a quick second question about the money in the NDAA for U.S. partners in Syria, especially given that there was news of another riot at an SDF-run prison just last night which was holding ISIS fighters.

Chairman Smith: On your first question, I think that is a huge problem, and as I was sitting in the brief something that came

up frequently was well I wasn't here then. You know. We had Mark Meadows who's been Chief of Staff I think for three months now, maybe four. And we had DNI Radcliffe who's been in that position I think confirmed again for a couple of months. National Security Advisor O'Brien who took over for Bolton, gosh, I want to say October/November time frame.

Basically the senior level leaders in this briefing, not a single one of them as we are in the fourth year of the Trump presidency, not a single one of them had been working in the administration -- forget in that particular position. Even in the administration for longer than six or nine months. And yeah, I think that inconsistency in top leadership positions with intel, within intel, harmed their ability to react to this in a coherent fashion. And you can lay over the top of that as well the President's consistently saying that he doesn't believe what the intel community tells him if he doesn't like what they're telling him. That's got to make it more difficult to do your job within the intel community. So yes, I think it's a huge problem.

And yeah, we still have a problem in Syria, unsurprisingly. There are a lot of ISIS fighters imprisoned that we need to keep control of and there are a lot of other ISIS fighters roving around Syria and Iraq plotting their comeback. Containment for the most part has now been left to Assad and Russia.

So reasserting the importance of protecting us from a resurgent ISIS in Syria is enormously important.

DWG: Lauren Meier of the Washington Times, and Dmitry Kirsanov, you'll be next. Lauren, are you on?

DWG: I am. Thank you, Chairman, for joining us today.

My question's on the amendment about renaming military bases that honor confederate leaders. In the Senate there are obviously several opposing amendments to rename the military

bases. That has not yet been included in the House's version. But do you expect any sort of similar legislation to come up tomorrow? And do you anticipate any sort of similar partisan divide as we've seen in the Senate?

Chairman Smith: Yeah, we're going to offer an amendment. As I said earlier, our amendment requires the bases to be renamed by October 1 of next year, so the start of the fiscal year. It also sets other timelines. So it moves more quickly than the amendment that was in the Senate markup. I think it mirrors an amendment that the Senate wants to offer on the Floor. I think Senator Warren is offering that amendment. So yeah, I anticipate us doing that and there will be Republican support for that. How much, I don't know. And do they think well yours is too quick? You know, I don't know. I do know that there is Republican sympathy for doing this and there's a desire on their part to be able to vote in favor of it. So I know we'll have a good strong provision coming out of committee. I believe it will be with bipartisan support.

DWG: Dmitry Kirsanov of TASS, then Courtney. Dmitry, do you have a question?

DWG: Good morning, Mr. Chairman. I just wanted to take another stab at the Russia/Afghanistan issue with your permission.

The NSA released a statement earlier today which says, and I quote, "The allegations in recent press articles have not been verified or substantiated by the intelligence community."

The Pentagon said pretty much the same thing yesterday. "To date DoD has no corroborating evidence to validate the recent allegations found in open source reports."

So I just wanted to ask you how do you square those statements with saying that there is evidence of Russian involvement?

Chairman Smith: They're perfectly consistent. There is

evidence. It is debatable whether or not that evidence is conclusive. That is the debate that is going on within the intel community and has been going on since the initial reports apparently in February.

So, you know, there's evidence. Was it corroborated sufficiently to be considered 100 percent verified? There are differences of opinion on that. So that's the nature of the intel world. It is rarely black and white.

DWG: Thank you.

Courtney [Kube], are you on and do you have a question? And Sylvie Lanteaume, you'll be next.

Courtney? No.

Sylvie Lanteaume, Agence France-Presse? Are you on and do you have a question?

Failing that we'll go to Rachel Cohen.

DWG: Thanks for doing this. I wanted to follow up on, I think maybe it was Connor's question. I kind of just wanted some more details on how the top line worked out this year. Obviously there's some budget pressures that we didn't really expect with COVID and some other things like that. So I'm curious where the tug of war was with that this year. And what kind of stuff you wanted to see in it that didn't end up, that sort of thing.

Chairman Smith: There was no tug of war on the top line. The top line was resolved in the budget agreement last year, and the top line was the top line.

Now there was all manner of tug of war about how to spend within that top line. Where do you put the \$741 billion? But the top line itself, unlike last year, is not in dispute. Well, I should say this. It's not -- it was in the budget agreement.

The Republicans have agreed to it. I've agreed to it. As has been mentioned, there are some in the press of caucus who would advocate I think it's a 10 percent cut. But that's the battle of the top line.

DWG: Matthew Beinart of Defense Daily, are you on the line and do you have a question?

Lee Hudson of Aviation Week?

Chairman Smith: Whoever gets in next will probably have to be the last question. We're coming up on the hour.

DWG: Hi, this is Lee with Aviation Week.

I wanted to ask you now with Dr. Mike Griffin's departure as the head of Research and Engineering, how do you view the A&F and R&E in the E role? Are they performing as planned? And do you think it is right for the Pentagon now to shift its top research and development priority from hypersonics to micro-electronics? Thank you.

Chairman Smith: I think that's a very important question because we can all clearly say that new technology, it's always crucial in warfare. But now it is game-changing in a thousand different ways. And how we handle that, how we prioritize and then how we use what we learn is going to be incredibly important. And I personally think that the most important technological advance is AI. How we develop our AI technology and how we use it is going to be I think the number one priority. How do we attract the talent within R&D that can do that for us? I think it's crucially important that we do that.

Does that mean that hypersonics aren't important? Certainly not. That too was a game-changing weapon system.

So we've got to walk and chew gum R&D wise on both of those. I don't think it's a choice.

DWG: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, once again for spending an hour with us. It's been a pretty wide-ranging conversation and you have a lot of work on your hands. But thanks again for meeting with us in this way. I hope we can do it again soon.

Let me just also thank the folks on the line from Carnegie Corporation of New York, and from CAN who help support these conversations and keep them going. First amendment journalism, fact-based journalism is what we're about. It's never been more important.

Again, thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thanks everybody.

May I just mention there's an invitation that will be coming to you shortly for the 7th of July with the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Mr. Wilkie. Sign up for that if you're interested. Hope you will. Thank you.

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