



**AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE**

**ADDRESSING THE MILITARY READINESS CRISIS:  
A CONVERSATION WITH REP. JOE WILSON (R-SC)**

**DISCUSSION PARTICIPANTS:**

**THOMAS DONNELLY, AEI**

**JOE WILSON, US HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**9:00 AM – 10:00 AM  
THURSDAY, MARCH 2, 2017**

**EVENT PAGE: <http://www.aei.org/events/addressing-the-military-readiness-crisis-a-conversation-with-rep-joe-wilson-r-sc/>**

**TRANSCRIPT PROVIDED BY  
DC TRANSCRIPTION – [WWW.DCTMR.COM](http://WWW.DCTMR.COM)**

THOMAS DONNELLY: Good morning, everybody. My name is Tom Donnelly. I work here at AEI. I'm the codirector of the Marilyn Ware Center for Security Studies. We're going to try to get rolling here a little bit early and actually break a little bit earlier than originally planned. A vote's called at 10:00 a.m. or 10:15 a.m., including the vote on the sup for 2017 for the defense appropriations. We wouldn't want to have Mr. Wilson miss that vote. So in the interest of national security, we're going to try move ourselves forward a little bit.

I'm just going to give a brief introduction. We're going to have an informal conversation, and then we'll open it up to you all for questions.

Mr. Wilson is the chair of the Readiness Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee; was personnel chair before and also Emerging Threats, OK? He comes from South Carolina. We had a long talk about former Chairman Floyd Spence in the anteroom, who was chairman when I served on the committee, so we had a good, old South Carolina catchup there for a few minutes.

So we're going to talk a good deal about the readiness problems that the services face today. We've been working a lot on that and so has the congressman. I'm going to try to sort of have a conversation about where we think the services stand at the moment and what he's seen in his recent trips to the field. He just waved goodbye to our National Guard unit from South Carolina that's going over to Europe as a part of the European Reassurance Initiative, so he's really quite recently in touch with the state of play on the ground.

And then maybe we'll conclude with a little bit of a discussion about the politics of the defense budget, particularly after Tuesday night's speech by the president, where he reiterated what has been one of his main concerns throughout the course of his campaign — to try to rebuild the military. He set a very high bar for that, at least rhetorically speaking.

So with that, it's my pleasure to introduce Joe Wilson. Welcome to AEI, sir.

REPRESENTATIVE JOE WILSON (R-SC): And, Tom, thank you very much. And, ladies and gentlemen, it's an honor for me to be here.

AEI means so much to me. What a history, since 1938. But those of us serving in Congress, when we have scholars from AEI appear before our committees, from my perspective, every time, Tom, it's just been so instructive, so helpful. It's really added to the dimension of our ability to serve in Congress. And so whether for me on the Armed Services Committee, serving on the Foreign Affairs Committee, on the Education Workforce Committee, I'm always very encouraged when I notice the background of who's from AEI. So thank you.

And thank you for your service with the Armed Services Committee, working with my predecessor, the late Chairman Congressman Floyd Spence. And I'm just grateful to be having the opportunity to work with Chairman Mac Thornberry, now as chairman of the Readiness Subcommittee. We've got a great team. Hey, lightning will strike, it's bipartisan. I get to work very closely with Congresswoman Madeleine Bordallo of Guam, who has been a dear friend of mine and also a person who is utterly devoted to the American military. And this follows — I previously worked with Ranking Members Jim Langevin, Susan Davis.

Again, it doesn't get proper attention, but actually on defense issues there's a great deal of bipartisanship— not as much as I would like, but more than you would ever imagine. So, again, I'm grateful to be serving, grateful to be here, and look forward to the program.

MR. DONNELLY: Very good. Well, let's talk readiness a bit. You've been out a lot recently. You also have a couple of sons in uniform, so you must be very closely in touch with what — when we talk in Washington about readiness needs, it's always very generalized and the chiefs when they come up and talk, it's we're on the borderline of the ragged edge of the cliff of the abyss. And it's very hard to translate that, particularly for people here, into really material, tangible terms. Just tell me what you see.

REP. WILSON: Well, actually, it's so appropriate that you would bring this question up because James Cunningham is here, in the back, OK?

MR. DONNELLY: I don't want him to know that he's the expert, OK?

REP. WILSON: No. I want to thank — hey, AEI has provided for members of Congress and for the public the readiness trader. And this actually — tracker — which actually makes it really clear. As you said, it's much obfuscation that's provided. It's not clear. But I appreciate, again, that AEI has provided interpretations, which truly makes it clear that our country's at risk.

And then, it is personal. I served 31 years in the Army Guard and Reserve, and it was — the people that I served with actually — my son saw that the most capable, competent, and patriotic persons they saw as I was going through the community would be fellow Guard members. They saw a bond, and that's why all four of my sons have served.

My oldest served as field artillery in Iraq. Actually received a CAB due to his service in Mosul. I'm grateful my second son is somewhat off track. He's a doctor in the Navy, orthopedic surgeon, but we still claim him. He served with the SEALs and the Rangers in Iraq. My third son served with Bright Star in Egypt as a signal officer. And my youngest son has been an engineer who's served in Afghanistan. And so it's very personal to me.

And, additionally, the district I represent includes Fort Jackson, so it's really inspiring to me to see the young people coming for training. And so the air flights as I go into Colombia today, half the people on the flight will have brown manila envelopes on their way to be greeted by drill instructors there at the airport. And I'm also adjacent to Fort Gordon, which

with my service on the Emerging Threats Subcommittee, we're so grateful that Cyber Command's going to be located there and how America is trying to be proactive on the issue of cyber.

I did represent previously Parris Island. And it's just extraordinary, again, to see the opportunities for young people to serve. And the Marine Corps Air Station, and I'm grateful for the F-35s that are going to be located there. And so over and over, I've seen from my service and the communities I represent extraordinary people, but with a great concern about their training, about their equipment, about readiness.

MR. DONNELLY: Well, you don't have to do anything but fall out of the bed to run into — to keep pulse on what's happening in the services.

As we were talking in the anteroom, James and I have been working on kind of a long-term case study of a brigade from Fort Riley, Kansas, that will be the centerpiece of the next rotation in the European Reassurance Initiative. And one of the things that really struck us is how really difficult it is to keep a unit cohesive and well-trained over the course of time.

The personnel churn is just so rapid and so convulsive that, you know, if you're a tank company commander or a mechanized infantry company commander, you almost — and maybe you're commanding 100, 120 guys, men and women, you know, at any one moment, maybe a third of them are people you just met or never met before. Do you see that across, you know, the other services?

REP. WILSON: Well, I've actually lived that. Prior to coming to Congress, the 218th Mechanized Infantry Brigade that I served with, we had an extraordinary deployment to Fort Irwin, California, to the National Training Center. And that really has given me an understanding how we were not prepared.

Maybe it was intentional, but the JAG officers would be driving through with a pickup truck through the middle of the desert. We now determined that's not the safe way to travel in a combat area. But how far we've come, and with the communications advances that we've had. But it was a great training exercise.

And, ultimately, the 218th Brigade, after I came to Congress, they were deployed to Afghanistan. And because of that initial training at Fort Irwin and then other training led by General Bob Livingston, our adjutant general, it turned out to be one of the greatest experiences of my colleagues of identifying what they call Afghan brothers. It was just really an uplifting experience of their helping provide security for that country.

But it took a great deal of training that we — and we learned every time, and that's why I'm inspired by the leadership of our country. And then, jumping ahead, I'm particularly inspired that President Trump has been prescient enough to name General James Mattis as our secretary of defense. With his background, this could be good for the American people.

MR. DONNELLY: Well, you're the one who raised the subject. I mean, again, the president, from the beginning of his campaign and especially since the election, has made a constant point of the need to rebuild the force, yet the budget outline that we saw from OMB earlier this week, you know, as both your chairman and his counterpart in the Senate have pointed out, were a bit of a head-fake when it came to paying for the reconstruction of our military power. What are your thoughts about that?

REP. WILSON: Well, of course, I support Chairman Mac Thornberry. And, additionally, Senator John McCain, who I've gotten to know quite well. And I — both of them are urging that there be a budget at \$640 billion. The president's request, by 2018 by the OMB, is \$603 billion. We'll be voting next week on 584, but the tide is turning.

And the American people need to know this and that is that since 2010, there's been almost a 21 percent reduction of military expenditures and defense expenditures. This is at the same time that threats are increasing around the world. But it's virtually inconceivable, but there were false assumptions that — or maybe hopeful assumptions that have not come to fulfillment.

And so the overall reduction — and it's astronomical numbers of reductions, whether it be \$484 billion here and \$100 billion there and whatever, and this is before we get to sequestration, and what a nightmare that's been under the Budget Control Act, 2010. Indeed, it was intended to be catastrophic to defense so that it would be addressed. Well, it hasn't been addressed. But the consequence has been catastrophic for planning by our military, particularly for training and equipment readiness.

MR. DONNELLY: Just to unravel the sequestration thread a bit, again, if you sort of look at the problem from the perspective of what do I need to do to reconstruct our armed forces, sure, you know, the worst thing was sequestration, but beyond that, and, you know, what really made sequestration bite so much was the initial cuts to the BCA itself implemented. Of course, that came on top of equal cuts earlier in the Obama administration.

And if you really, you know, want to look at the history, we've been on a downward slope really since the end of the Cold War without any — you know, other than emergency supplemental spending and the occasional reversal, of course, such as the expansion of the force during the surge, for example. We have not been able to come up with kind of an anchor or a long-term explanation of the needs of the force.

So, again, avoiding sequestration would be a great start but only a start, don't you think?

REP. WILSON: It is. And, unfortunately, just the word sequestration has been so confusing to the American public and particularly for our constituents. When they hear "sequestration," they're thinking reduction in spending. That's good. But then you have to explain that, indeed, 50 percent of the reductions in expenditures are on one department, the Department of Defense. The American public is really not aware of that.

Additionally, they need to know that the reduction in spending is a shifting of spending. It's not a reduction of spending. The money has been shifted to other programs.

And so there's so many different levels that we've got to explain to finally get to the point of trying to address it. That's why, again, Tuesday night I was so pleased that the president raised this issue that it should be addressed.

MR. DONNELLY: But, remarkably, for all the pain it's caused, the basic structure of the budget law has remained in place. It sort of seems to weirdly suit the base of both parties. It protects entitlements and allows conservatives to claim that they're, you know, reducing federal — or constraining federal spending. And nobody is more of that prototype than your own South Carolina colleague, Mick Mulvaney, who's now OMB director. It did seem to me that the Trump budget had his fingerprints all over it, so to speak.

REP. WILSON: Well, I was grateful to be at the swearing-in at the Executive Office Building with the vice president for Director Mulvaney two weeks ago. And so he — I'm just confident that the leadership of Secretary General Mattis — they'll be working together. They'll be working with the president, and they will be — if there's one thing I've been impressed about the new president, he has a commitment to the promises that he's made and the promises to rebuild the military, the promises to address sequestration.

And so working together with the White House team, I'm confident that there will be changes. And then with the input by Chairman Thornberry, Chairman McCain, the net result, the downward slide will be reversed, but there will be significant recognition of the threats to the American people because there has just been an overlooking of a change of circumstance in the last 10 years.

MR. DONNELLY: Yeah. You know, a final sort of political question. Again, we were talking before we started about how this may be an opportunity for the Congress to kind of reassert its traditional role, sort of, you know, Article One, Section Eight responsibilities. Can you imagine that happening? And if so, how do you see that playing out?

REP. WILSON: Yes, I can. And I'm looking forward to it. And I believe that with the leadership that we have — Paul Ryan is just a — from my perspective, just a person of the highest integrity and capability. And so beginning there and then working with Chairman Thornberry, and I know that the speaker is equally concerned about readiness and national defense and facing and having resolve in the face of threats to the American people. So I see a real turnaround.

Hey, we'll be able to pass legislation that has a chance in the US Senate, which is good. And then, then we know that if it does pass, it will be signed. Sadly, we knew that whatever we were doing would be vetoed, and there was always a veto threat even before we started the discussion.

MR. DONNELLY: Whenever you're thinking about it, I'll veto it.

REP. WILSON: Whatever you propose. So it was a veto threat which was really debilitating and somewhat sad that, maybe, hey, let's look at least — at least pass it before you say no. But we will — the current environment, it will be good, ultimately, I believe for national defense and our military.

MR. DONNELLY: OK. Let's talk a little bit about the state of the world and let's begin with Europe, just because I know that's what you've been focusing on lately.

You know, the curious thing to me is that if you sort of read the headlines every day, you think that the administration is in Vladimir Putin's back pocket or something. But, in fact, and you mentioned General Mattis in particular, but really all the major appointees — Ambassador Haley, Secretary Tillerson — have all taken a very tough stance with their Russian counterparts.

And, again, just to bring it back to the military side, there's no indication that the European Reassurance Initiative is not going to go forward. Again, this is something you've concentrated a lot on. As you look at the ERI, what are your thoughts about it?

REP. WILSON: Well, I'm grateful that you brought up about Governor Nikki Haley, the governor of my home state.

MR. DONNELLY: South Carolina is all over the place.

REP. WILSON: Oh, my goodness, they are. But I'm really proud of Governor Haley. Her first speech, indeed, there at the United Nations was to reiterate our opposition to Russian incursion, invasion of Ukraine, the loss of life, 10,000 people have been killed in this conflict. The illegal annexation of Crimea. And so there's been no lack of resolve.

And then, I'm really pleased the president's made it very clear as his statements backed up by another superstar from my perspective, Vice President Mike Pence, that indeed Article Five means Article Five — that any incursion into a NATO nation will all come to self-defense.

And the European Reassurance Initiative is so encouraging to me. I've also had the extraordinary opportunity I mentioned to you. I've been an election observer in Bulgaria in 1990. It was a dream come true to me of peace through strength, Ronald Reagan, to see this country come to life. And I've been back a number of times, and it's so inspiring to be there at Novo Selo, a joint Bulgarian-American base, and to see young American troops with young Bulgarian troops at the cappuccino bar. In my lifetime, that was not prognosticated.

MR. DONNELLY: You'd never seen an American soldier drinking cappuccino.

REP. WILSON: No, that's what it is. The cappuccino. These are millennials. Anyway, this is — whatever — the next generation, but it's all good. And so I've also had the opportunity to in Romania visit the MK air base, and the troops that were being deployed on Sunday, half will ultimately be sent to Romania.

Again, this is a dream come true for those of us who lived during the Cold War to see progress that would have been unimaginable. And then I'm grateful that our troops will be from South Carolina in Poland, and then our NATO allies have contingents that are in the Baltic Republics of Estonia and Latvia and Lithuania. And so it's a clear indication that — it's really clear, peace through strength, and you show resolve and the consequence of that will be to deter aggression and deter conflict.

MR. DONNELLY: But, I mean, you do raise an interesting point just by — you know, you just spoke about what is essentially now, you know, the eastern frontier of freedom, to use all the Cold War-type terms, in Eastern Europe. The alliance expanded to make commitments to those Eastern and Central European nations, but has yet — and even allowing for the ERI — has yet to really match its defense posture to its treaty commitments. And, you know, ERI was a big step forward, but not nearly the same thing as the kind of constant presence that was such an effective deterrent for 75 years of Cold War.

Again, you've hung out with people who are going to be deployed. I'd be interested in what you could tell us about what their attitudes are. And then, just as a policy matter, whether you see what next steps make sense to you to back up those alliance and treaty commitments with, you know, a military posture that would be commensurate with it.

REP. WILSON: And it really is to reach the 2 percent goal of GDP expenditures on national defense. From the beginning, when President Trump was quoted that appeared to be in opposition to NATO, I interpreted it — and I think I was correct one time — and that is that it was not opposition to NATO. It was to really require and promote that all of our allies reach the 2 percent goal. It's almost inconceivable to me that Greece has reached the 2 percent threshold and Germany has not.

And, on another positive note that I think should be recognized, last year I had the opportunity, remarkably, to be in Stockholm. It was the day after the Swedish Parliament had voted for a partnership with NATO. So there are positives that are occurring. And then, with the relationship of Sweden and Finland, it creates a positive message that indeed there is the resolve of Western Europe to defend itself.

And, of course, to me it's so sad to see the Russian Federation, which should be part of the Western world and a very vital part of the Western world, to have withdrawn as it is and then become subject to a fanatical nationalism which is, to me, self-destructive of them. And one incredible time — and much of the defense policy was based on a reset with Russia that has simply not worked out.

MR. DONNELLY: That's very true, but, you know, while we've been hoping for a reset and drinking our cappuccinos, and then for all the difficulties that Russia's had economically and socially and so forth, they have been rearming, and in particular have developed very modern and effective air defense systems, longer-range artillery. They're starting to employ unmanned aerial vehicles, drones and so on and so forth. And, as you



well know, some of the engagements that they've had with Ukrainian forces were just devastating to the Ukrainians.

So we're entering an environment that's, again, just where the sort of tactical and technological advantages that we've taken for granted for so long are ebbing in a way that certainly, if you listen to the chief of staff of the Army or other Army commanders, is very intimidating.

REP. WILSON: Well, their modernization, also the People's Republic of China, their modernization, that's why, again, I just appreciate AEI raising the issue of readiness and the importance because we're facing potential adversaries that — the best way to maintain, as I believe, peace and security in the world is to match and be ahead of our efforts on modernization.

And indeed, I'm going to jump to a real concern I have, and that is in the South China Sea, China developing military facilities and bases on what had been rock formations, this is very serious to me and to — it should be to all of us. The sea lanes that are critical to the support of key allies such as Japan and Korea and Philippines.

Over and over, we see threats rising, and at the same time we saw the consequence of reduction in defense spending. Wishful thinking. And now we see and we know that we need to be prepared.

MR. DONNELLY: Well, again, this I think raises a very interesting sort of readiness and posture question. Serendipitously enough, we've just been doing some what I would call naval deployment exercises because, again, as sort of elsewhere, when there's no American presence there — you know, when the parents are away, the children will make mischief.

But when it comes to the South China Sea and these, you know, bases that the Chinese are constructing on islands or if they are bumping other people's fishing boats and, you know, sort of the whole gamut of tricks that they're up to, first of all, we only find out about it when we read about it in the papers, so to speak, and we just do not have the forces on station to do anything about it if we so chose.

I mean, again, we just are absent from the crisis point, for want of force size, for being so far distant, and for not being able to generate forces rapidly enough to be, again, on the scene to even have an option.

So, again, it seems to me that it raises a question about not merely immediate readiness — is this company fully manned and ready to carry out its essential tasks — but is the force able to do the various things that we really have counted on our force to do in the places that are critical.

And, you know, regions of the world that are only — that are connected by trade and commerce but it's not like there's, you know, the old Soviet Union controlling the

strings behind the curtain. Each one of these theaters and the Middle East being, you know, sort of special kaleidoscope on to itself, but our basic understanding of what we're trying to do in the world is not reflected in the force that we have available.

REP. WILSON: And that's why we're going to turn around, and that's why with the leadership of Mac Thornberry, John McCain, Paul Ryan, I look forward to working with the president to address the issues that you just identified, and that's on — before we even get to — today, we saw again that North Korea is announcing advances in their ICBM capabilities and in testing capabilities that truly put the West Coast of the United States at risk before you get to submarines, and also American territories like Guam, and then indeed the state of Hawaii within range. And then, adding to our issues to be prepared, Iran itself testing ICBMs.

And I'm really grateful. This, too, is an example of bipartisanship that people don't really see, but I'm very grateful. I've been working with Congressman Seth Moulton of Massachusetts to require analysis of the testing by Iran as these tests occur as to the implications on American security. It's a good bipartisan example.

And just before we get to indeed the threat of world terrorism, Islamic terrorist activity, extremist activity, over and over again there are challenges that I'm going to give AEI credit again by raising the necessity of readiness in plain English — thank you — where it could be understood by the American people, and I look forward with working with you as we face these challenges.

MR. DONNELLY: Sir, I have to confess that our success rate over the last 10 or 15 years has not been what we had hoped it would be.

REP. WILSON: It's been much better than you'll ever know, OK? And I think — Dr. Fred Kagan came before the Foreign Affairs Committee and actually presented that people need to be aware of the spread of al Qaeda, ISIS across North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia at a time where the official line was that they were on the run — that that was not accurate.

And so over and over again, AEI's had — I've lived the success of AEI, bringing to the attention of the American people in plain English what the real world is.

MR. DONNELLY: Well, I could use some advice about how to, you know, change more minds or — well, you know, change hearts. You've been — you know, you're a senior member of the committee and of Congress now. You've seen — you know, particularly within the Republican Caucus, your younger colleagues. How would you say we have failed to either communicate to them or sort of get them to connect the dots between all the bad stuff that everybody can see very plainly and what needs to be done about it.

REP. WILSON: Well, I wouldn't consider it a failure. It's an ever-learning experience. And we do have some really talented people in both parties now who have had military experience. And I'm really grateful. Duncan Hunter Jr. serving, Adam

Kinzinger, Mike Gallagher. We have really talented people who have had — somebody I'm going to miss. I can't believe he ran off — Congressman Ryan Zinke was a Navy SEAL serving in Congress. Now he's the secretary of interior based on being sworn in last night. But we do have persons with military experience. And I'm grateful that our colleagues respect this.

MR. DONNELLY: I'm going to try one more on you and sort of ask you to just, when you go home to the districts of — South Carolina is a hugely patriotic state, deep involvement with people in uniform and so on and so forth, but also, you know, political culture that's naturally cautious and concerned about, you know, the federal government's expanding power and so on and so forth and somewhat skeptical. I mean, this was also sort of reflected in the president's speech the other night, sort of endless overseas commitments that take a long time and don't always immediately result in gratification.

I'm just interested in, again, any advice you may have about how to sort of frame these questions and issues in ways that are understandable to, again, the people that you represent. But, again, we see sort of broadly reflected across both parties, sort of the ebbing of that traditional internationalism or at least a questioning of it.

REP. WILSON: And a way to address that is to restate the importance of our alliances, whether it be with NATO itself and then, as I think of our service in the Far East with Australia and New Zealand, we have extraordinary allies.

And the capabilities of the Republic of Korea, even with the phenomenal, bizarre, almost a threat of lunacy from the North, the people of South Korea — what a resource.

And then, I thought it was very instructive, the presence — the first foreign guest was the prime minister of Japan. And so it's the alliances that we have of where we can make a difference.

And then the American people need to see the success stories. I was recently, of all things, at a wedding in Colombia, South America, and the only reason I could go there was the success of Plan Colombia. And it was an exchange student who had lived with us, who couldn't go home for — came for three months, stayed for three years, could not go home a number of years ago due to the guerilla warfare and the narco-terrorist activities in Colombia. Well, now it's so secure that my wife and I could jet down to Bogota for a wedding. So the American people need to know that success story.

Another success story that I saw that I was quite surprised was Kosovo, to see a nation — a Muslim-majority nation in the middle of the Balkans existent and with no conflict of any significant level around it. So we've had so many positive success stories that the American people need to know.

And I'm happy to in every way try to explain that to my constituents, and obviously, I come from an environment where people are really supportive of the American military and want a strong national defense and understand peace through strength.

MR. DONNELLY: Sir, I want to make sure that you get back to the Hill in time to vote, but if we could take maybe 10 or 15 minutes to field some questions?

REP. WILSON: My honor. Please.

MR. DONNELLY: I would just like to remind everybody of the AEI ground rules. Wait for the microphone. Please identify yourself. And put your statement in the form of a question. And I'll tell you what, let's just generally work from this side to that side. So I'll start actually with this gentleman in the front row and then I'll get to you afterward. Please, let's try to keep it short too.

Q: Wolfgang Muno (ph), currently fellow at the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies here at John Hopkins University, Germany. So thank you very much for this interesting discussion. I have two questions. One question is you talked about a lot of threats. If I would ask you to rank the threats, what would be the most important one, so number one, two, three?

And, second, you already talked about NATO. For Europeans, there has been quite a lot of insecurity in recent weeks and months about the future of NATO. At the Munich Security Conference, Vice President Pence and Secretary Mattis have tried to calm down. How would you judge the current state of NATO as a congressman? Thank you.

REP. WILSON: Thank you. And ranking threats, to me it's pretty clear. There are different types of threats. An existential threat, that's whether we survive as a civilization, and that would be peer countries — a nation like the Russian Federation. And that's why to me, peace through strength, for us to continue to exist.

And then, hey, I grew up in a period when it was inconceivable that there would be a unification of East and West Germany. And, in fact, many young people don't even know that there was a division of East and West Germany. And so how far we've come. And so I'm ever hopeful. That's actually existential.

And then, immediate, to me, I am not going to forget 9/11. We have — every day, without being fatalistic, I am grateful that the American people have not had another attack of some type. And so that's an everyday threat. And so I take very seriously the potential of terrorist attacks in our country. And then we've seen the terrorist attacks in Berlin. And I don't want to repeat. I'd rather be preventative of attacks in our nation. That's why I appreciate the president's initiatives. They are to be preventative.

And then, thank you for bringing it up about the Munich Security Conference. I was there. And so I was grateful to be here with Chancellor Merkel. I was there for the very reassuring speech by the vice president and then met with him later. Our delegation met with him later to reiterate our appreciation of his restatement of our support of NATO. NATO is obviously very important — the understatement of the morning — and we want to back it up.

And we also want the extraordinary nation of Germany to reach its 2 percent. That would have such a positive message to the Russian Federation that there is resolve by Western nations to protect themselves and to stand up for themselves and come to a mutual defense.

Q: Thank you, sir. Otto Kreisher with Seapower magazine. Mr. Chairman, you talk about the sequestration, what a disaster it's been. The president has called for it. You guys have all called for it. What are the chances of actually doing it in time to do something — obviously, you can't do it for the '17 but what about for '18? Chances of actually repealing or changing sequestration given the resistance within your own caucus, you know, to changing it, and the opposition of the Democrats?

And the other question is, if you do —

MR. DONNELLY: All right. No more two-part questions, OK?

Q: How do you pay for it?

REP. WILSON: You'll be happy to know that we're actually — I've been working with Congressman Mike Turner of Ohio, another senior member of the Armed Services Committee, and we are circulating a letter to the leadership to address sequestration, and it doesn't get the attention it should, but there were efforts by those of us who understand the negative consequence, catastrophic consequence of sequestration. So hope springs eternal, but we're not going to give up.

And then, a good — something that's very important is — for persons here who understand this issue, please be in touch with their members of Congress so that they understand how important it is that we address the issue.

But I was so pleased that the president even mentioned it on Tuesday because it would be — that would have been an easy issue to leap over and get to another one. So that's why I am hopeful. And I believe that we can address sequestration.

MR. DONNELLY: Let's go right here. Go and look from the back.

Q: Congressman, Hamid Ahmed (sp) from the Embassy of Bahrain. I have a question related to Iran and their hegemonic behavior in the region. At the beginning of the year, we saw that some of the statements from Iran threatening some of the countries in the region. They also stated that they can bring in a few minutes the Fifth Fleet base to the ground, which is in Bahrain. And we know that Iran are not crazy to go and do it conventionally. They would think twice before doing anything like that. But they have their proxies in the region that can do a lot of damage here and there.

My question here is that what can we do to deal with these proxies, number one? Number two, how can we enhance the readiness of the allies in the region there, like, for

example, joint exercise that would send a specific message to the Iranians? And lastly, how can we give assurance for the countries in the region that they have the back of the United States? Thank you.

REP. WILSON: And I particularly appreciate Bahrain. I visited there, and it was wonderful to learn that the American people do not know that our longtime association with the Fifth Fleet being located there since the 1950s. This is not new. How important that was in the Cold War and now in the conflicts we face.

And then it was exciting to me to find out that the people of Bahrain still remember that it was in 1895 that the first hospital was built in Bahrain by non-proselytizing missionaries. And so this is not new.

And then I try to explain to my constituents about the Persian Gulf States that they're the equivalent of Hilton Head Island on steroids. And the implications that the people of the Middle East want to go back to the 14th century, I say, you need to visit Bahrain. And the highest compliment to you. My second son is a Navy doctor, and I saw the US Naval hospital there in Bahrain. And so I called my daughter-in-law, I said, I have a place for you.

Anyway, what a wonderful country, and however we can back it up, and whether it be by proxies or whatever, and joint military exercises, we need to address.

And you're right. Iran would not directly, but through the backdoor. So however we can be supportive. And I could speak for myself, and I know the American people appreciate our relationship with the kingdom and just — it's so mutually advantageous. Gee-whiz. And it's been so beneficial for now 130 years of association.

MR. DONNELLY: Let's skip around a little bit. Let's try the gentleman in the red tie right there. Yeah.

Q: Good morning. My name is Matthew Evans. I'm a student at the University of Notre Dame. The first thing I want to do is I want to thank you for your service.

REP. WILSON: Thank you.

Q: Because the country is a much safer place because of men like you and your sons. My question, well, earlier you brought up that we spend hundreds of billions of dollars on military spending and defense but we are trillions of dollars in debt. At what point does this kind of spending become fiscally irresponsible, and when will we prioritize the debt?

REP. WILSON: To me, the debt levels we've achieved obviously have to be — and I only regret that my predecessor, the late Congressman Floyd Spence, the first legislation he introduced, and I am a cosponsor every year, is for a balanced budget requirement. And so I will always try for that. And that's been picked up now by Congressman Bob Goodlatte of Virginia. We've got to — and it's prioritization.

And, to me, with the entitlement programs that we have that have truly gotten out of control, hey, I know how to — (inaudible) — controversy. We need to address the issues relative to Social Security. For people your age, we need to reform Social Security to provide where you have an option of a personal savings account with reduced Social Security benefits or remain in the system as it is.

But we've got to address through prioritization the spending programs that have just gotten out of control and are not sustainable. And then, ultimately, back on Social Security, if it's not changed, it won't be there for you.

And so it actually could be beneficial that we obviously prioritize. And I'm so grateful in the state senate in most states — of my state and most states, there is a balanced budget requirement. It's just gruesome that that hasn't been in place for the federal government, for your future.

MR. DONNELLY: Sir, I want to get you on your way, but I want to take one last pass myself before you're allowed to get out of jail free here.

REP. WILSON: Absolutely, Tom.

MR. DONNELLY: And I want to have a little sort of hypothetical for you. So both Mr. Thornberry and Senator McCain have sort of agreed that the number they're shooting for by way of a 2018 budget is \$640 billion and set aside the war-fighting overseas contingency account stuff.

Based on where we are now and given your knowledge of, you know, the threat environment on the Hill, so to speak, is there any way we can get there? And what would be a good strategy for achieving that kind of outcome?

REP. WILSON: Yes. Again, with the leadership of both Chairman McCain and Mac Thornberry, Chairman Thornberry, with the input from Secretary Jim Mattis, with the capabilities of President Donald Trump, I believe that we can achieve the 640. And, sadly, as people see threats around the world, you know, it will become clearer than ever before that this needs to be addressed.

MR. DONNELLY: So tell us how we get there part.

REP. WILSON: It's ever-pushing. And I am the eternal optimist. Again the thought that I would be here with the unified Germany, which was inconceivable, that I would have actually visited Bulgaria and seeing the relationship with that country. I did a resolution to commend 100 years of diplomatic relations between the United States and Bulgaria, and I recited all the extraordinary achievements together. But I had to leave out that we were at war in World War I, World War II, and the Cold War. So there's a reason why I'm optimistic.

And then, to have the opportunity to visit the Persian Gulf States and see. And then, I'm still, again, such an optimist because I've actually had the opportunity again to visit Colombia. That was utterly hopeless. That was never going to come together as a modern, positive nation of 40 million people.

And so, over and over again, I've seen good occur, with good people being involved with proper documentation by AEI scholars.

MR. DONNELLY: OK. Well, as an AEI scholar, I can't really bring myself to be optimistic. That would be slightly unscholarly. But you've made me hopeful, and I hope you'll settle for that. Thank you for joining us this morning.

REP. WILSON: Tom, thank you. I'm humbled to be here. Thank you for being here today. (Applause.)

(END)