

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB HEADLINERS LUNCHEON WITH SENATOR JEFF FLAKE (R-AZ)

SUBJECT: TRUTH, FALSEHOODS, AND THE DANGEROUS STATE OF OUR POLITICS

MODERATOR: ANDREA EDNEY OF THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

LOCATION: NATIONAL PRESS CLUB HOLEMAN LOUNGE, WASHINGTON, D.C.

TIME: 1:00 P.M.

DATE: THURSDAY, MARCH 15, 2018

(C) COPYRIGHT 2008, NATIONAL PRESS CLUB, 529 14TH STREET, WASHINGTON, DC - 20045, USA. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. ANY REPRODUCTION, REDISTRIBUTION OR RETRANSMISSION IS EXPRESSLY PROHIBITED.

UNAUTHORIZED REPRODUCTION, REDISTRIBUTION OR RETRANSMISSION CONSTITUTES A MISAPPROPRIATION UNDER APPLICABLE UNFAIR COMPETITION LAW, AND THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB RESERVES THE RIGHT TO PURSUE ALL REMEDIES AVAILABLE TO IT IN RESPECT TO SUCH MISAPPROPRIATION.

FOR INFORMATION ON BECOMING A MEMBER OF THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB, PLEASE CALL 202-662-7505.

ANDREA EDNEY: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the National Press Club, the place where news happens. My name is Andrea Edney. I am the Club's 111th president. And I am an editor on Bloomberg's breaking news desk. Before we get started, I'd like to remind our in-house audience to silence your phones. For our viewing and listening audience, please feel free to follow the program on Twitter, using the hashtag #PressClubDC.

I'd like to acknowledge members of the Headliners Team responsible for organizing today's event: Betsy Fischer Martin, Lisa Matthews, Danny Selnick, Bill Lord, Tamara Hinton, Lori Russo, and Press Club staff, specifically Lindsay Underwood, and executive director William McCarren.

Sitting at the head table – and please hold your applause until we've introduced everyone – we have: Heather Forsgren Weaver, freelance journalist and member of the NPC Headliners Team. We have Thomas Burr, Washington bureau chief for the *Salt Lake Tribune*, and a past president of the National President Club. We have Wesley Lowery, national reporter at the *Washington Post*. We have Austin Flake, Senator Flake's son, and a student at Brigham Young. We have Hunter Walker, White House correspondent at Yahoo News. And we have Mrs. Cheryl Flake, Senator Flake's wife.

Coming from this end, we have Courtney Norris, assistant producer at PBS NewsHour. We have Bridget Bowman, politics reporter at Roll Call. We have Dallin Flake, Senator Flake's son, a senior in high school who has just been accepted to Brigham Young. We have Danny Selnick, senior vice president of strategic markets at Business Wire, and the NPC Headliners member who organized today's luncheon. We have Kieran Murray, Washington bureau chief at Reuters. Skipping over our honored guest for a moment, we have

Betsy Fischer Martin, executive in residence at American University and co-chair of the NPC Headliners team.

Thank you all for coming. [applause]

For our C-SPAN and Public Radio audiences, please be aware that in this audience here today are members of the general public. So any applause or reaction that you may hear is not necessarily from the working press. [laughter] For example. [laughter]

Today's speaker has a reputation for standing up for his convictions and making news. From the speech he gave on the Senate floor rebuking President Donald Trump's repeated attacks on the media, to the op-ed he wrote for the *Washington Post*, in which he criticized Congress for its failure to approve protections for young immigrants with DACA status, Arizona Republican Senator Jeff Flake has earned his reputation.

More recently, Senator Flake announced in the wake of the Parkland, Florida, shooting that he's backing a bipartisan bill to raise the minimum age required to buy a semiautomatic rifle.

Last June, when shots rang out during practice for the annual Congressional baseball game, Senator Flake was on the field. When the shooting stopped, he ran to help House Majority Whip Steve Scalise, and even called the Congressman's wife so that she would know what was happening.

In September 2014, Senator Flake and New Mexico Democratic Senator Martin Heinrich were featured on a Discovery Channel reality TV show called *Rival Survival*. [laughter] The two stayed on a small Micronesian island for six days. Senator Flake later joked during an appearance here at the National Press Club that perhaps then-Democratic Leader Harry Reid and Majority Leader Mitch McConnell should also spend time on that remote island. [laughter] We should ask him later whether he still thinks this would be a good idea. [laughter]

In August, Senator Flake published a book, *Conscience of a Conservative: A Rejection of Destructive Politics and a Return to Principle*. In October, he announced he would not seek reelection. He is a fiscal conservative and a privacy advocate, chairing the Senate Judiciary Privacy, Technology, and Law Subcommittee. He also serves on the Energy and Foreign Relations Committees. Before his election to the Senate in 2012, he served in the House for more than a decade.

He is married with five children. He was born in Snowflake, Arizona, a town named, in part, for his great-great-grandfather.

Now, having survived reality TV, speaking before the National Press Club should be a breeze. So please join me in welcoming to the National Press Club Senator Jeff Flake. [applause]

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: Thank you so much, Andrea. Thank you, all, for this invitation to be here. Thank you for not serving fish after that island adventure. I think I had my fill of it for a while. And coconut water? That craze has come and gone for me. [laughter]

When Martin Heinrich and I returned, nobody knew that we'd gone to this island for a week and survived with just a machete between us. We got back and did a little publicity tour for it, went on David Letterman and many of the other shows. Stephen Colbert ran a clip of us spearing fish and he said, "Flake and Heinrich proved once and for all Republicans and Democrats can get along when death is the only option." [laughter] For what it's worth, we've empirically proven that.

But I am grateful to be here at the National Press Club at a time when the free press enjoys such universal acclaim and appreciation from those who occupy power seats. [laughter] I mean, really, all the fawning from the White House must get old after a while. [laughter] I only regret that there's not much of interest happening in the world today to talk about.

But be that as it may, I appreciate mostly having my wife Cheryl here, and two of our four sons. And we have a daughter as well, and four grandchildren. And I come from a large family of 11 kids; I'm one of 11. Sixty-nine first cousins on my father's side alone in Snowflake. That's how I got elected, so far. [laughter]

But I appreciate it. It's always nice to have family here. Cheryl checked my hair as I went in, saw if I had anything in my teeth. I usually don't get that when she's in Arizona, so I do appreciate the fact that she's here.

Let me just say I'm sorry that it gives me no pleasure to talk this afternoon about the state of our politics, about the damage that is being done, and my party's seeming amnesia in the face and what we as a country must do in response to the relentless threats to our democratic institutions to see our way clear in the daily maelstrom of the current administration. It requires perspective, which of course is more easily said than done.

I've always thought that perspective – and this may reflect some geographical bias – perspective is most easily attained for a Westerner. I grew up as a kid on the F Bar Ranch in rural Arizona. If we needed to gauge the condition of the range, to find out where the cattle were feeding, to determine whether the stock tanks had water, or to measure the damage to roads and fences after a flood, we would find the highest hill or butte and ride up it on our horse. From such a vista, we could dispatch cowboys to gather the cattle, machinery to shore up the roads, workers to repair fences, to restore some semblance of order.

There are no tall buttes in these parts. No vista offering a clear, panoramic view. But it's nonetheless our obligation to assess the condition of our politics, to then mitigate and repair the damage because, as we are discovering, and as we will discover for years to come, there is no damage like the damage a President can do.

This is not a normal political speech, for these are not normal political times. Wishing it were otherwise so will not make it so, and pretending that the state of our politics is not dire will not save us from its consequences. This is not a time for pretending. This is a time for defending our democratic institutions and for resisting the resurgent authoritarian impulse the world over.

Now, defending democratic institutions ought not be a controversial idea. And it hasn't been so until very recently. But recognizing that our institutions are under threat from within, with clarity, seems to be the most basic obligation of the Article I branch of government, the Congress, whose power is, in theory, equal to that of the President's.

Conservatives in Congress used to be very clear about their institutional prerogatives and their obligations under the Constitution. I should emphasize "used to be." Over the past several months, I've had occasion to take to the Senate floor to describe with alarm the state of our democracy as I see it. Simple acts of conscience have never seemed more important. Of course, it seems at times that speaking in measured tones in the face of the routine vandalism to our democratic norms is about the same as whispering into a hurricane.

But we must speak out, for a politics that keeps us silent when we should speak is worthless in the defense of the things that we hold most dear. As an article of faith, I believe that if one voice can do such profound damage to our values and to our civic life, then one voice can also repair the damage. One voice can call us to a higher idea of America. One voice can act as a beacon to help us find ourselves once again after this terrible fever breaks. And it will break.

We will get through this. And when we do, there will be much work to repair the damage. There will have to be an accounting for how we got here, so that we might not find ourselves here again. There will have to be an American restoration. And for the sake of the common good and for basic human decency, we will have to create a new politics. This will be the obligation of all of us, those of us in elected office, those of us who will soon not be, and those of us too smart to ever engage in politics in the first place. [laughter]

Just as happens after a great storm leaves ruin in its wake, we will come together to rebuild, to shore up the foundations of our institutions that have seen such a gale lately from the unpredictable storm that is in the White House. We will throw our backs into reinforcing the beams of the American system of justice to make sure that never again will the independence of the judiciary be so threatened and the tenets of justice be so abused.

It is a measure of how far we have fallen when we must fight for the basic ideas of American liberty and for the preservation of basic norms such as that the Attorney General is not the President's personal lawyer, and the FBI Director does not owe the President personal loyalty, but rather loyalty to the Constitution, to name but two.

In the wake of this storm, we will once again make clear to our allies that we are allies, and we will never again be afraid to remind friend and foe alike that it is our values that make America America. We will not wink and nod at dictators; nor will we congratulate

them for the good job they're doing in their programs of extrajudicial killings; nor will we host them in the Oval Office; nor will we hesitate to punish them for attacking our elections; nor, when this period is behind us, when the Congress passes Russia sanctions with a sense of urgency, then we can be sure that we will implement those sanctions immediately, no excuses, no waiting. We will be crystal clear and unambiguous in our defense of this country against the rogue ambitions of the likes of Vladimir Putin. There can be no passivity regarding the demonstrated Russia threat.

If the President saw it as his mandate to come in and turn the system upside down, to break the logjam and get things done, then it strains comprehension how going easy on dictators and how undermining the independence of our justice system are part of the solution to breaking Washington's partisan logjam. They are not part of the solution, of course; rather, they are among the bizarre features of an anomalous presidency. And it is our duty going forward that they remain anomalous, that they never become thought of as normal.

How anomalous is this behavior? At a Pennsylvania rally just a couple of days ago, the President sought to quiet the crowd from booing the mention of North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un just as he encouraged and reveled in a chorus of jeers for the US news media. This was the same speech, of course, in which he taunted a member of Congress for having a low IQ. Referring to the media as the enemy of the people is not normal or acceptable. It's hard to say whether the President is aware of that phrase's ignoble pedigree, or whether the impulse just comes naturally. Either way, dictators around the world are borrowing the President's usage of the term "false news" or "fake news" to silence legitimate criticism and opposition. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, there are a record number of journalists now being jailed worldwide, with 21 of that number being held on false news charges, gravely echoing the President's language.

We are told, mostly by people in my party, to ignore the President's words. "Pay attention to what he does, not what he says," they say. These calls, of course, ignore the entirety of American history, not to mention the undeniable power of the words of a President, and exhort us to adopt a new norm, to accommodate undignified public behavior for just this one President. In the sweep of history, have we ever been urged not to listen to what a President says? Of course not, as such admonitions are preposterous now. Accommodating the unacceptable, willingly adding deafness to an already stunning blindness. This gives a whole new meaning to Senator Moynihan's felicitous phrase, "defining deviancy down."

We will get through this. And when we do, perhaps what will be most remembered will be this war on objective reality and the reflexive impulse to speak falsely. This is a problematic trait in business. It's a serious problem in personal relationships. But as a defining character trait, it is absolutely devastating in an American President. If one's word is one's bond, then the bonds that bind Americans to each other and to the world are truly imperiled.

There is nothing that will be more vital than to expunge from the American record than this frenzied attack on the truth. There are few jobs that will be more difficult than putting that particular horse back in the barn. Such is the power of a President to either build or destroy. And the irony should not escape here – that someone whose name has become known as a builder would have such a penchant for destruction. But as he was renowned at branding his name and putting his name on many buildings and products, as many as possible, in his wake we would do well to similarly affix his name to many reforms as well. In that way, the President may just end up reforming Washington after all. Just not perhaps in the way he would have imagined.

And yet, there are those in my party who continue to marvel at the strategic underpinnings of the daily chaos coming out of the White House. You just have to shake your head. That which is strategic must first be thought, then thought through. Then a true leader has the confidence to have people more experienced than he tell him why it might be a terrible idea. Subject area experts become involved. Maybe an astute lawyer can give advice on whether something you want to do is lawful or constitutional. White papers are drafted. Staffing happens. Key people are read in. Policy is made. The time it takes for a notion to tickle the cerebellum, send a signal to your fingers to pick up a phone and thumb-type a tweet is not a comparable process. [laughter]

We should know by now that there is no strategic brilliance to marvel at here. No, by now we know that this is chaos for its own sake projected onto the world. But the norming of this behavior by my party proceeds apace. In my recent book, I wrote about Richard Nixon's madman theory in which the strategic projection of the appearance of stability can force a desired outcome from a fearful foe. But for that theory to have coherence, you must first actually think strategically. And if you don't, once that theory is taken away, all that remains is the madman.

We must be able to at least describe honestly what we are seeing with our own eyes. That is the least we can do and the least we owe to the people that we represent. Not to describe that as we wish it would be, or to enable further confusion with the oh, so familiar "what the President meant to say," no, the President is far too powerful an institution for the presidency to be so enabled. But then never has a party abandoned, fled its principles and deeply held beliefs so quickly as my party did in the face of the nativist juggernaut.

We have become strangers to ourselves, even as we pretend that everything is fine and it is working as if it has always worked. To that I say, nonsense. If my party is going to try to pass off the degradation of the United States and her values from the White House as normal, if we're going to cloister ourselves in the alternative truth of an erratic leader, if we are going to refuse to live in the world that everyone else lives in and reckon with the daily reality that they face, including their very real and understandable anxiety that they feel, then my party might not deserve to lead.

It has been a twisted road to this point, but we must see our way out of it. That, of course, requires a recognition of the danger that we've put ourselves in. It requires accountable leadership and it requires good, old American will power. We will get through

this. And when we do, how refreshing it will be to once again have leaders who can take criticism and not succumb to the impulse to attack the critic and the criticism, reflexively calling everything that doesn't suit him fake news or un-American or treasonous, how refreshing it will be again, once again, to know where the buck stops. That poor buck, lost out there [laughter], looking for someone, somewhere to take responsibility.

F. Scott Fitzgerald near the beginning of one of the greatest American novels, *The Great Gatsby*, had his main character Nick Carraway, after a period of trauma and disillusionment, waiting for the world to stand at moral attention forever, no longer interested in riotous excursions. The United States, after this riotous excursion, would do well to stand at moral attention for a spell. I don't know about forever, Mr. Fitzgerald, though I admire the ambition, but after the past couple of years, I'd settle for the world standing at moral attention for a day or two. That would be a good start.

We could all stand to be chastened for our part in this. It's been a long, tortured process that has gotten us here, and it will take a lot of will and work to get us out of here:

To once again put the interest of the people that elect us ahead of the prerogatives of power. It shouldn't be hard because it is basic. But it will be hard.

To restore leadership that is aware of and cherishes our constitutional framework, which by design is meant to force compromise. It shouldn't be hard because it is basic. But it will be hard.

To once again have a leader that assumes that Democrats and Republicans are not intractable enemies, but competing friends, leadership that recognizes the once seminal American notion of the common good. It shouldn't be hard because it is basic. But it will be hard.

To swing the pendulum away from the toxicity of our current moment, we must recognize the good in our opponents. These days, administrations are designed to vanquish opponents, and the axiom "elections have consequences" has become nothing short of a threat. We must turn away from this poisonous brand of politics, the kind of poison that has a President slinging insults like a bad comic at a cheap roast.

Yes, the pendulum swings. Thank goodness. And the people themselves will show us the way out of here. If this sounds like a new call to politics, it is. But it is just as much a call to the politics that is not new at all, to the best traditions of America, of true leadership and vision, of Lincoln's "malice toward none and charity for all."

We will get through this. And when we do, our institutions will have been severely tested. Sometimes I tell myself hopefully that the pillars of our democracy have seen worse than this and survived. Perhaps I flatter us. But it is a story of America, and we will be better for the hard lessons of this experience.

We are a better and more decent people than Washington shows us to be. We are a good people, and we are a deeply resourceful and resilient nation. And our greatness is based on no one man, no one man who alone can fix it but, rather, on enduring ideas of self-governance and the rule of law that have been the model for the world for centuries, ideas that can be mocked, but not marred.

There are no high buttes in this town, but if there were, we could gain the high ground and survey the damage. But one thing about gaining the high ground is from up there you can see beyond the damage; you can see everything. That is the job before us, to get through this and beyond.

Thank you for having me here. I look forward to your questions. [applause]

ANDREA EDNEY: Thank you so much, Senator. You have said – I think this question is on the minds of a lot of people here today – you have said that President Trump should be challenged by a conservative, like you. Will you be running for President in 2020? [laughter]

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: Next question. [laughter]

ANDREA EDNEY: Are you considering running for President in 2020?

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: I am not running for reelection to the Senate. Running for President is not in my plans. But I have not ruled anything out. I do think that there should be a conservative challenge. I think if, for no other reason, Republicans want to be reminded, I think, of what conservatism really means – limited government, economic freedom, free trade, reverence for the free press, immigration. And I hope that somebody reminds Republicans of that. I think they're willing and waiting to be reminded. [applause]

ANDREA EDNEY: So in light of that, what do you think it would take for a Republican challenger to have a real shot? And do you think the donor support would be there?

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: Make no mistake, the Republican Party right now is President Trump's party. I think that that's reflected in polling that you'll take out there. Let me put it this way – those who vote in Republican primaries are overwhelmingly supportive of the President. I don't think that will always be the case. I think that could turn. And will turn. And must turn. But that is the case right now. So it would be a tough challenge for anyone to take. I just hope someone does it.

ANDREA EDNEY: For the Senate race, will you be supporting Mitt Romney?

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: Sure. Mitt Romney is a good man. I'm glad that he's decided to run for the Senate. We need Mitt Romney in the Senate. We need an independent voice, somebody who will enter the Senate chamber with immediate gravitas and someone

who can work across the aisle and actually I think create a whole new power center in the Senate. I think that's desperately needed.

ANDREA EDNEY: How concerned are you that Republicans could lose your seat in November?

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: That is a concern. I think what happened in Pennsylvania just yesterday – is still happening, I guess – should be a big wakeup call for Republicans. I think once again, we're testing the limits of Trumpism. We're realizing that you can only drill down on the base so far, and that we have to appeal to a broader electorate. And if you can't win a race in a plus-20 Trump district, then it's really going to be touch to win in purple states.

ANDREA EDNEY: How was President Trump able to win over the Republican base so quickly, do you think? And what role did social media play in this?

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: It surprised me, as I've written and just talked about, the speed at which that happened. Populism is called populism for a reason. It can be popular and every country goes through spasms of it for a while, until we realize you have to govern, and govern effectively. But certainly social media aided considerably because he could go around the traditional media and traditional vetting that usually occurs. It just didn't occur. But I think it surprised all of us how quickly that happened.

ANDREA EDNEY: You just said there can be no passivity on the issue of election interference. Do you believe that your Republican colleagues in Congress have taken seriously enough the threat to our democracy posed by Russian interference in the 2016 election? And a follow-on that: Do you think enough has been done to date to prevent similar interference in 208 and 2020?

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: On the first part, has the Congress done enough, the Congress moved pretty swiftly and passed additional Russian sanctions nearly unanimously last year. We waited until today, this morning, for an announcement that some of those sanctions would be implemented. That's too long. We should have acted more quickly. That is mostly– Congress passed the sanctions. The administrative branch didn't follow through to do them.

But I think it is a real problem. I don't think that there was ever a doubt when the intelligence community came out and said that Russia was involved. They certainly favored one candidate. Whether that was dispositive or not is another question. But we know what they did. And we shouldn't let that go. I do think that other steps will need to be taken, but I'm glad that some of the sanctions at least – and we're still finding out which ones – were applied today.

ANDREA EDNEY: Do you agree with the House Intelligence Committee's report that there was no collusion? Are you willing to say, as Trey Gowdy has, that you disagree with these findings. And expand on why you do.

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: I think the disagreement between Trey Gowdy and the committee – and I certainly am more aligned with Trey Gowdy's position – is that the House Intelligence Committee, I believe, came out and said there wasn't evidence that Russia favored one candidate. I think the record is clear they did. Now, you can argue was that dispositive, did it change enough votes, or any votes, that's another question. But were they involved and did they favor one candidate, yes, they did.

ANDREA EDNEY: Thank you. Moving to policy a little bit, is there a place in the Republican Party right now for people who are willing to compromise on immigration issues? [laughter]

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: Oh, boy. That's a tough one to see. I've been in Congress 18 years. I have supported a number of efforts at immigration reform, efforts led by Democrats, efforts led by Republicans, bipartisan efforts. And we've been stymied. In the Senate, we passed, obviously, the bipartisan bill in 2013. That just wasn't taken up by the House. That was an exercise, a real exercise in how the Senate used to be. A group of Senators on a bipartisan basis got together, negotiated over a series of months an immigration bill where all sides protected that product as we went through the committee and then on the Senate floor. And I haven't seen that on a controversial issue for quite a while.

So not just on immigration reform, it's tough to find bipartisan agreement on a lot of things. But certainly on immigration reform it isn't there. That's why just recently I've proposed with regard to DACA to have what I call a three-for-three – three years of extension of DACA codification so it's constitutional, in exchange of three years of border security funding at the President's level. That, we're told, is now being considered, maybe to put as part of the omnibus spending bill.

But let's face it, that's just a half-measure, kicking the can down the road again. To solve this issue, we just don't have a bipartisan consensus.

ANDREA EDNEY: What should we do with the Dreamers?

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: I think that we should offer a path to citizenship. These kids came through no fault of their own. They are, with the exception of having the documentation, Americans. And we ought to offer that to them. What we do with a broader population obviously will be negotiated between the parties. But with the Dreamers– and I do commend the White House for coming forward and saying, for 1.8 million, that should be the path. And so, they did take a step there. We weren't able to fix the other issues.

And let me just mention on that one. The President came forward, as he offered the 1.8, he said there needs to be four pillars – the DACA part, border security, getting rid of the diversity visa lottery, and deal with chain migration. During that time, for those who argue that, as I mentioned in the speech, that the words of a President don't matter, just the actions do, I could tell you words matter a lot. In 2013, as part of the bipartisan bill, we had an agreement, Democrats and Republicans, to completely eliminate the diversity visa lottery.

We reallocated those visas elsewhere, mostly to employment-based sources. We had every Democrat in the Senate voted for that final product, to get rid of the diversity visa lottery. And then, during the course of events of the negotiations over this DACA fix, the President made the comment about African countries. And since that time, it's been impossible to get bipartisan consensus at all on diversity visa. It's been too tough politically to touch that just given what the President said. Not what he did, but what he said.

And so, that makes a difference, and it's been very difficult to come to a consensus.

ANDREA EDNEY: Do you believe, then, that the Trump administration has bettered or worsened racial tension in this country?

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: I certainly don't know that it's any better. I think that would be tough to argue. But I'm not an expert in that field.

ANDREA EDNEY: Do you personally support President Trump's proposed wall along the Arizona/Mexican border?

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: I do support additional border security. Coming from a border state, we've needed it for a while. But the image that's conjured by "wall," a concrete, opaque structure, it would be tough to find one mile of the border where that makes sense. Obviously we need better barriers in some places, surveillance, equipment or personnel in others. But a large, long wall that everybody conjures up when they hear "the wall," no, that's not needed. Border security, yes; a 2000-mile wall, no. And I do think the President has come around on that. He's referred to it now as a "see-through wall." [laughter] That's what in Arizona we call a fence. [laughter]

And we do, and we are replacing some things that approximate a wall, the old landing strip, the Vietnam era landing strips that we turn on end and put in cement. And we've had those for portions of the wall in some of the communities. The problem with that is, you can't see through it and people throw rocks over it onto border patrol cars, and people are getting hurt. So we've been taking those out and putting a bollard-style fence, a very secure fence. And that's what is needed in many of the areas along the border, is a more secure fence. But not a wall.

ANDREA EDNEY: Thank you. Let's turn to trade and the economy. You have railed against the President's plan for tariffs on aluminum and steel. Why do you think that's bad policy?

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: I think tariffs are just bad policy. I'm a free trader. It's tough to win a trade war; nobody wins trade wars. And when the President came up and said, no, it will be flexible tariffs, I think that that marries two poisonous things for the economy – one, tariffs; and two, flexible tariffs means uncertainty. And so, you can't wake up one day and say, I like Australia today so lower the tariff; they displease me tomorrow, I'll up the tariff. How in the world can we convince other nations to enter into trade agreements with us if we act like that?

And let me just say, my own feeling on trade, we are less than 5% of the world's population. We are just over 20% of the world's economic output. And shrinking. Not because our economy's shrinking, but the developing world is growing faster. If we don't trade, we don't grow. And the decision to not continue with Trans-Pacific Partnership will be devastating long term. Particularly for the geopolitics in Southeast Asia. Those countries want to be part of our trade orbit. But without multilateral trade deals, they'll find it difficult to do and they'll simply be in China's trade orbit.

ANDREA EDNEY: Speaking of, why do you worry that our current trade policy gives China the advantage?

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: Oh, that's easy. Because we're basically ceding territory to them with the TPP by not giving countries the option to be in our trade orbit. Then China fills the vacuum. Just after the election, I was down in Mexico City at that same time. In fact, when we were down there, the announcement came that we would exit the TPP. I think the president of China and the president of Russia were traveling around the country. Saw them in South America and Peru at a trade summit there, saying "if they won't deal with you, we will." So it very much emboldens and benefits China for us to pull back on trade deals.

ANDREA EDNEY: This question comes from an Arizona resident here today: Would you support a moratorium on uranium mining in the Grand Canyon until there's a guarantee against groundwater contamination and contamination of the Colorado River?

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: Oh, certainly. There's no uranium mining that's going on in the Grand Canyon. I think what they're probably referring to is in the Grand Canyon watershed or the larger area. Certainly uranium mining that can happen with the modern type of uranium mining can go on a long way away from the Canyon without harming our national treasure. I would never do anything that would harm Arizona's national treasures. But we obviously want to see economic development where we can have it as well, particularly for rural areas in Arizona.

ANDREA EDNEY: You have been a longtime foe of the farm bill; specifically farm policy. In this, we're talking about one-quarter of 1% of all federal spending. Right now, the current farm bill is on track to save about \$100 billion, which is four times more than originally estimated at the time of passage. So how can the farm bill and farm policy get you worked up when you voted for Trump's tax bill, which is expected to increase deficit spending by more than a trillion dollars over the next decade, according to the CBO.

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: Part of my problem with the farm bill is not just the waste and subsidies. We have a lot of programs where there's crop insurance as well as countercyclical payments and other things where you simply don't save money. And they also wreak havoc on our trade deals. We're currently paying Brazil, for example, so that they can subsidize their cotton farmers so we can continue to subsidize ours. Brazil successfully challenged us in the WTO because we were providing too many subsidies for our farmers.

And instead of backing off our own subsidies, we agreed to subsidize theirs. That's how ridiculous sometimes it gets.

When I was arguing back in the House days, early on, I went to the floor and was arguing against some of these farm subsidies. And a Democrat from the South got up right after me and he said in a thick drawl, he said, "That young feller just spoke doesn't know a lick about farmin'" And I thought, I can't let that go. So I had somebody yield me time. I went back to the mic and I said, "I've forgotten a lot about farming over the years, but I left the end of my index finger on an alfalfa field at age five." I said, "I've forgotten a lot about farming, but I still know manure when it's shoveled." [laughter] I think that was one of my first lessons – be careful what you say. That was in the *Washington Post* the next day.

But I do, I've had a problem with farm subsidies, not just because of– and it is significant money when you add it all up, tens of billions of dollars. But it complicates our trading agreements as well. And it makes it less likely that we can enter into free trade agreements. And I think the American farmer, just as any American manufacturer, can compete with anyone if you have a conducive tax and regulatory environment.

Which brings me to the tax bill. We had to deal with our corporate tax structure. We had nearly the highest corporate tax rate in the world. I would have, had it been up to me, just done the corporate tax and left individual rates alone. And that would have had not as much impact on the deficit. But I do believe, I am a supply side guy, I do believe that increased economic growth with a better regulatory environment and a better tax environment can lead to economic growth, which will help in the area of revenues to government. And believe me, we have got to get back to higher growth. Because we have entitlement programs, other mandatory programs that are eating us alive, and will continue, and increasingly do so, in the years to come.

ANDREA EDNEY: So you recently said on Meet the Press that as a Republican who supports free trade, limited government, economic freedom, you couldn't be elected right now. Do you see a shift coming in the number of Republicans like yourself in Congress? Is there anybody like you in the GOP conference who will be in the Senate a few years from now?

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: I'll let them speak for themselves I think on that. But somebody like Mitt Romney. Mitt Romney is very much a free trader and believes in limited government and I believe will be part of a bipartisan immigration fix as well. I do think that we'll bring some more, but I am very concerned that we are ignoring that autopsy that we did after Mitt Romney's loss for the presidency. The party conducted an autopsy. Said that we've got to appeal to a broader base. We held to that for a couple of months, I think, until a populist came along and people followed him. So I am very concerned about that.

I'm not a very good Senator. I haven't filibustered enough. We're getting to too many of these questions. But proceed, anyway.

ANDREA EDNEY: It's great, thank you. Let's go to gun control for a moment. What is your prediction on federal gun control legislation, given the nationwide student protests demanding that Congress do something about school safety?

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: I had hoped that after Parkland that maybe we'd crossed the Rubicon, being able to do something on some of this. I have legislation with Senator Feinstein to say that, just as our laws prohibit someone younger than 21 from buying a handgun, if you're that same age you shouldn't buy an AR-15 either. I think that that makes sense. I don't think that that does violence to the Second Amendment. I think that's a commonsense thing that we can do.

Likewise, with bump stocks, after the shooting in Las Vegas, why in the world we didn't in Congress simply say the ATF can do what they want, but we're going to make sure, and let's prohibit any device that makes a semiautomatic gun act, for all intents and purposes, like an automatic weapon. That's something we should do. We should also say that if you are on a list that prohibits you from boarding a plane, you should also be prohibited from buying a firearm. I think that that makes sense.

So I'd hoped that we could get through these things, but if you want my prediction, I don't think we will get there. I think that we will pass maybe the School Violence Act, which provides additional monies and coordination, but no additional restrictions on gun ownership. I think that there are commonsense measures that we can take, and should.

ANDREA EDNEY: Thank you. Moving to the First Amendment for a moment, you've been an outspoken critic of President Trump's tendencies to attack a free press as fake and to sow divisions by demeaning reporters that cover him. Do you have any plans, either now or after your retirement – if there is a retirement [laughter] – to translate that criticism into action?

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: Well, I think that is a responsibility that all of us in elected office have, to speak out, and speak out in favor of the First Amendment. If we can't do that, who are we?

And now, let me just say, in defense of those who say "I can't respond to everything the President does or says," I am sympathetic to that, believe me. If you had to answer every tweet or every statement, it would consume your whole day. As soon as you leave the office, there's a gaggle of reporters asking you about the latest outrage coming out. And I'm sympathetic to those and I practice it myself a lot of the time, just say "I can't comment on that"; I've got a hearing to go to, or something else to comment on.

Having said that, when the President comes out and calls the press the enemy of the people, we all ought to speak out. We all ought to say that as President, you should be aware of that statement's ignoble pedigree. If you aren't aware, your staff ought to make you aware. That's not what we should do. And you shouldn't call real things fake, and fake things real. That has consequences worldwide, as mentioned. We have a record number of journalists being jailed, many on false news charges. And that's something that we ought to, as

legislators who sworn on oath to defend the Constitution, ought to stand up and say "we're going to defend the First Amendment."

ANDREA EDNEY: Hear, hear. As an outspoken critic of the Trump administration, do you believe there are grounds to begin impeachment proceedings?

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: I don't. If the House switches control, there's some on the Democratic side who have said they would start that. But if impeachment proceedings were brought forward, we can never say what would come up in those hearings. But I don't think that what the President has done rises to that level at this point.

ANDREA EDNEY: Do you believe that President Trump, who has fired many members of his administration in the past 14 months, will ultimately fire Special Counselor Robert Mueller?

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: I don't. I certainly hope not. There are obviously always rumors about it. And there are a lot of them right now about the next round. And let me just say, for a Secretary of State who has served the country the best he could in a very challenging environment, to be fired by tweet is not right, that's not normal. And he deserved more than that. And I think that, I hope that that kind of behavior changes. But I think that we're likely to see more rounds. I just hope that some of those coming into the administration are those who replace people who've not yet gone will stand up to the White House. I'm not saying the President has to assemble a team of rivals as Lincoln did, but at least we can have a different kind of team of rivals who rival each other at how much they can agree with the President at a Cabinet meeting or not challenge some of his actions or statements. So I hope that those coming to the administration will stand firm.

ANDREA EDNEY: You enjoyed a good relationship with Mike Pence when he was in the House. What do you think about the role he's playing in his administration? And what do you see as his strategy here?

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: Mike and I both ran think tanks in the 1990s, conservative think tanks, he in Indiana, me in Arizona. We were fast friends as soon as we got to Congress together. And remain good friends. I'm glad Mike is where he is. Obviously, we have differences on some of the policy coming out, but he remains a friend.

ANDREA EDNEY: Thank you. Has your Mormon faith played in to your criticism of President Trump or informed your decision to be vocal about your concerns?

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: Anybody who professes to be religious or to have a faith, I would think that that influences their actions; hopefully makes them a better person. I know my religion certainly has had that effect on me. It's to make bad men good, and good men better. But I don't know that— certainly nobody in my church ever says that "it's your responsibility to criticize the President." That's not how it works at all. But there have been a lot of articles written, I could tell you, that maybe a disproportionate number of Mormons

have maybe stood up or been more vocal during this administration. I'll let others be the judge of that.

But for me, I felt a responsibility to stand up. And obviously, an easy path, an easier path to reelection is to go along, get along, and okay, be okay with were the President is, to be okay with some of the policies, or condone the behavior. But for me, just speaking for me, I couldn't do that. And I would have enjoyed serving another term. I never had big plans to stay 40 years here, but maybe a second Senate term. But not at the cost of actually agreeing with the President's policies or condoning that behavior.

I think that it behooves some of us at least to stand up and say this is not normal, and that we will get beyond this, and we need to get beyond this because if we have politics like this, and it's this demeaning and this indecent, where do we go from here? Particularly with a media culture, particularly social media, that simply exacerbates or rewards the extremes. So I think that some of us need to stand up now.

ANDREA EDNEY: Thank you very much.

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: Thank you for having me here. [applause]

ANDREA EDNEY: I will have one more question, final question, for Senator Flake in just a moment. But before we ask him this question, I'd like to present Senator Flake with a mug from the National Press Club. We give it to all of our speakers. Senator Flake, thank you so much for being here today. Please accept this token of our gratitude. Use it in good health. [applause]

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: Thank you.

ANDREA EDNEY: Now to the last question, which I'm guessing, this may not be the first time that you've heard this question. It may be the first question that the audience has heard the response to this question. It comes from someone at the head table, the youngest head table member. [laughter] And that question is: Which son is your favorite? [laughter]

SENATOR JEFF FLAKE: I may not be very smart, but I'm smart enough not to answer that question. [laughter] Thank you.

ANDREA EDNEY: Thank you, thank you, again. [applause]

Everyone, before you leave, I'd just like to let you know about a few upcoming events. On March 26th, I'm very excited about this, we have a luncheon with five-time Olympic Gold Medalist Katie Ledecky.

March 27th, the very next day, we have a conversation with 60 Minutes executive producer Jeff Fager and correspondent Bill Whitaker on the 50 years of 60 Minutes. This is an anniversary for the 60 Minutes show, as many of you know.

On April 4th, we'll be hosting Sheila Tate, who will be speaking about her biography of former First Lady Nancy Reagan, *Lady in Red*.

On May 17th, we will be having a luncheon with SBA Administrator Linda McMahon.

And we hope that many of you can join us for these events.

I would just say before we wrap – and again, thank you so much for being here, Senator Flake – Senator Flake and his family have a flight to catch, so please, as we wrap up, remain seated and allow them to get out the door first so they can go catch their airplane.

I thank you so much. Please come again. And with that, we are concluded. [sounds gavel] [applause]

END