

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB HEADLINERS LUNCHEON WITH THE HONORABLE ROBERT WILKIE, SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

SUBJECT: MR. WILKIE, WHO WAS NOMINATED FOR THE POSITION BY PRESIDENT TRUMP AND SWORN INTO OFFICE ON JULY 30, 2018, WILL ASSESS THE PERFORMANCE OF HIS DEPARTMENT AND OUTLINE HIS GOALS FOR THE CARE OF OUR NATION'S VETERANS JUST BEFORE THE VETERANS DAY HOLIDAY

MODERATOR: DEREK WALLBANK, CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD OF THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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DEREK WALLBANK: Ladies and gentlemen – [gavel] This is great. I have a gavel. This isn't nearly as big as my regular gavel for the board. They're much more out of line. Welcome to the National Press Club. This is the place where news happens. My name is Derek Wallbank. I am the Chairman of the board of the National Press Club and the team leader of Bloomberg's First Word Breaking News Desk here in D.C. Before we begin, I'd like to ask you to please silence all cell phones. If you're on Twitter, we encourage you to tweet during the program and use the hashtag #NPCLive. For our CSPAN and public radio audiences, please be aware that in the audience today are members of the general public. So any applause or reaction you might hear, not necessarily those of the working press.

Now I'd like to introduce our head table. And please hold your applause until all have been introduced. All right. Starting on my left, Jim Noone, Commander of the American Legion Post 20 here at the National Press Club. [applause] What part of "hold your applause..." [laughter] Ms. Megan Wilkie, the daughter of Secretary Wilkie. The Honorable Jim Byrne, Acting Deputy Secretary of Veterans' Affairs. Bill Lord, a Vietnam veteran, author, and NPC Headliners Team member. The Honorable Elizabeth Dole, former US Senator, Secretary of Transportation under President Reagan, Secretary of Labor under President George H.W. Bush, founder of the Dole Foundation for Military Families. [applause]. Kevin Wensing, Captain, Navy, retired, and the National Press Club Headliners member who arranged today's event.

Skipping over the Secretary for a second, Josh Rogin, columnist for the Global Opinions Section of *The Washington Post*. Ms. Pamela Powers, Chief of Staff to the Secretary of Veterans' Affairs. Max Lederer, the publisher at Stars & Stripes. John "Sergeant Shaft" Fales, USMC Vietnam Veteran and President of the Blinded American Veterans Foundation. And Shawn Bullard, President at Duetto Group.

[applause]

Before I get into the introduction, I need to acknowledge some other folks real quick. Let me acknowledge members of the Headliners Team responsible for organizing today's event. If you're here, please stand and be recognized. Betsy Fisher Martin, Lisa Matthews, Laurie Russo, Tamara Hinton, Bill Lord, Danny Selnick, and the Press Club staff, especially Lindsay Underwood, Laura Cocker, and Executive Director Bill McCarron[?].

[applause]

I also want to say a special thank you to the members of American Legion Post 20, which is based right here at the National Press Club. We are so proud to have them based here. Thank you so much for coming today.

[applause]

So as our nation prepares to celebrate Veterans Day and observe the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I, today's guest will discuss the state of the department charged with providing patient care and benefits for more than 20 million US military veterans, and their families. VA Secretary Robert Wilkie will share with us the progress he has made since taking office on July 30, 2018, I think 100 days ago, and his goals for the future. Mr. Wilkie has a very personal connection to our nation's armed forces. He is an Officer in the US Air Force Reserve, assigned to the Office of the Chief of Staff. Before joining the Air Force, he served in the US Navy Reserve with the Joint Forces Intelligence Command, Naval Special Warfare Group 2, and the Office of Naval Intelligence.

He grew up an Army brat, the son of an Artillery Commander, who fought in Vietnam, and recovered from war injuries in Army hospitals. His great-grandfather served in World War I. In his short time as VA Secretary he has begun to tackle the very public challenges facing the Department, including personnel infighting at Headquarters, continued problems for veterans seeking medical care across the country, and questions about influence over veterans' policies.

Today he'll discuss these issues and more as well as his vision for the VA. Join me, please, in welcoming the Honorable Robert Wilkie to the National Press Club.

[applause]

ROBERT WILKIE: Well thank you, Derek. For those of you who don't know, Derek's father was a warrior. And his mother devoted 30 years—30 years of her life—21 to the VA as a nurse. That is a wonderful testimony.

[applause]

I also want to acknowledge someone that you have already—who you've already cheered, and that is Senator Dole from my home state of North Carolina. There is no finer family of patriots than the Doles. And it is always an honor for me to be in your presence, ma'am.

[applause]

So I have to tell the members of the press, I finally made it to the Press Club. [laughter] Winston Churchill, when he came to the Congress to deliver his first address to the Joint Session after we had declared war on Japan, and Germany had declared war on us, he pulled Speaker Rayburn aside, and he said, "Mr. Speaker, my mother was American, and my father was English. If it had been the other way around, I would have made it here on my own accord." [laughter]

I think I started as many of you in the press did, I was a high school newspaper editor, spending hours cutting out column inches on boards. But I did keep at my desk, in my high school in Fayetteville, North Carolina, a dog-eared copy of Dan Rather's book, *The Camera Never Blinks*. And the collected broadcasts of Edward R. Murrow, put together by probably the greatest American raconteur of the 20th century, the great Bennett Cerf, the founder of Random House. And in my upbringing, I wanted to be one of Murrow's Boys, Cronkite, Seavareid, Richard C. Hottelet, and make true what Cronkite said, that the members of this profession are on the front lines of history. So it is an honor for me to be here.

Some of you have heard me speak before. And I've said that I am privileged—I have been privileged to see this military life from many angles, as a dependent, as the son of a gravely wounded combat soldier, as an Officer, and as a senior leader in the Pentagon. I have spent my entire life watching those who have born the battle. And I have tragically seen this business through the eyes of classmates and friends at Fort Sill and Fort Bragg, whose fathers did not come back from Vietnam. And it is those experiences as to why I am humbled and proud to be part of the VA team.

And given that background, it may seem a little odd for somebody like me to constantly contemplate the meaning of service, and what it means to be a veteran. I had the great privilege, when I started off in this business, to get to know a fellow named Ned Beach, Captain United States Navy, you all know him as the author of *Run Silent, Run Deep*. For many years, he was President Eisenhower's Naval Aide before he ran the Senate Armed Services Committee staff for many years on Capitol Hill.

And he told me about a story from General Eisenhower's first year as President. He had thought to scrap the Presidential yacht Williamsburg, because he thought that it was an

extravagance unworthy of a democracy at war. But the one person whose orders the General could not countermand, maybe, said, “No. Take it out, but only take warriors on it.” So the first time he took it out, there were 40 Korean War soldiers, some missing limbs, and others horribly disfigured. And you know the Washington kabuki dance. As soon as the President arrived at the pier, the Secret Service launched to separate the President from his troops. And as only a five-star General of the Army could do, Eisenhower yelled, “Halt! Get behind me. I know these men.”

And he walked up on the deck of that ship, and he asked those who could to stand at attention. And when he addressed them, he said, “You have one charge from me. You never put away your uniform. You live to remind your fellow citizens, every day, that the cost of freedom is never free. And they sleep soundly at night because of your sacrifices.” I can think of no better way to describe the mission of the Department of Veterans Affairs than to say that we exist to provide America’s veterans with the means to remind their fellow citizens why they sleep soundly at night. And that is why it is such an honor for me to be a part of that team.

[Applause]

This weekend will mark the 100th anniversary of the sadly named War to End All Wars. On the 11th day, the 11th hour, of the 11th month, millions of men emerged from the trenches that had cut across Europe like scars to breathe the smell of peace for the first time. In my family, it was a personal adventure. My great-grandfather left a small town law practice in the Mississippi Delta and a part-time teaching job at Ole’ Miss to join the Army assembling at Camp Gordon, Georgia.

Across the cantonment from him was an infantry outfit that had a reluctant farmer, a reluctant farmer and a reluctant soldier, from Pall Mall, Tennessee, who would go on to become the greatest American hero of that war. In another part of Georgia was my wife’s grandfather, a teenager, who had never ventured much beyond two or three counties in North and South Carolina. But, by the time he was 18, he was marching up the Champs Elysees into the hell of the Meuse-Argonne.

Needham Roberts and William Henry Johnson were already there by the time my grandfather—my wife’s grandfather and my great-grandfather arrived. They were members of the legendary 369th Infantry Regiment from New York. It was a unit comprised of African-American warriors from New York and New Jersey. They were the first to launch from the American Expeditionary Force. 1,500 of them were casualties. They served in the lines longer than any other American regiment of that war. And just a few years ago, President Obama righted a great wrong by awarding them the Congressional Medal of Honor, almost 100 years after their gallantry.

Less celebrated on that front was a near-sighted farmer from Jackson County, Missouri. He lied and cheated to get into the field artillery, because he could not bear the thought of his friends and neighbors going to war without him being there to support them. And he would go on to become one of the greatest Presidents in our history. So there they

are, my great-grandfather, Captain Abram Somerville, Sergeant Alvin York, my wife's grandfather, Private Anslo[?] Bullard, Corporals Needham Roberts and William Johnson, and Captain Harry S. Truman. They are the testament to the millions of ordinary Americans called from every walk of life to perform extraordinary deeds. And from them, to allow the American nation to erupt onto the world stage in a place that we have never left since those dark days.

This day is for them. But it is also for the members of the press. In World War I, correspondents were called upon to achieve extraordinary things as well. But they were stopped from telling the truth by the impenetrable censorship of their government and the clutter of propaganda. It was only after the Armistice that they were allowed to come home to tell the real story of what happened to those valiant Americans during that time. Reporting what Dickie Chappelle once said, was the wreckage resulting from man's inhumanity to man. Now she was the one who covered Okinawa and Iwo Jima. And she always said, "When I die, I want to die in the company of United States Marines." She died in Vietnam, alongside those Marines. She was the first American female war correspondent to give her life in action. And during that war, 62 reporters, editors, and photographers gave the last full measure of devotion.

When Dickie Chappelle died, the Commandant of the United States Marine Corps said, "She died as one of us." Now she mentored many of your heroes. One of them was a UPI correspondent, who showed up at LZ Xray, by the name of Joe Galloway. Galloway told us that the Marines had a longstanding love affair with Dickie. She died with her head in the lap of an AP correspondent, and with the priest's hand on her head, giving her the last rites. Galloway learned of her death while he was fighting in LZ Xray, in an action for which he earned the Bronze Star. Four civilian reporters from the Vietnam War were decorated for their courage in combat. In each case, rescuing American warriors who were wounded. Galloway was one.

Charlie Moore, who once was said of, by Jimmy Carter, that "You knew the story was true when you saw Charlie Moore's byline, even though it criticized me." HDS Greenway of Time and Alvin Webb of UPI, all warriors in the service of their country. As I said, there were 63 of them. And more names are added to the War Correspondents Memorial every year. And so I say, on behalf of the Department of Veterans Affairs, to all of those correspondents who are on the front line of freedom, thank you for everything you do to keep our country safe, and keep truth at the front of all of our endeavors.

[applause]

So let me now turn to the state of the department of Veterans Affairs. As has been said, I have been at VA for 100 days. And as I said under oath to the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, the state of VA is better. It is better because of the bipartisan consensus in this town, that the one department that should be above partisan rancor, other than the Department of Defense, is the Department of Veterans Affairs. It is better because of the devotion of 370,000 Americans who have chosen to give their lives to the service of veterans. And, as such, are committed to the mission that I believe is the most noble in the

federal government. And it is better because we have a more experienced team in place, all with military experience, all who speak the language of service. And I will say, and it's a bit self-indulgent, that I do believe, as I have testified in Congress, that the turmoil of the first half of this year at the Department of Veterans Affairs is over.

[applause]

I mentioned my experiences both with Secretary Mattis and Secretary Rumsfeld, and now at VA. And now, more than ever, we are seeing the need for the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs to work together, to provide quality care for all of our active reserve and veterans, for the good of this country. Congress has done what no Congress has ever done. They have given us the roadmap for success. They have passed the Mission Act. They have passed the Accountability Act, which allows the leadership of our Department to shake up the complacency that has been written about so much. And they have strengthened our ability to make the right decisions on behalf of America's veterans.

[applause]

Over the past 100 days I have been in 19 VA medical centers, everywhere from Anchorage to Orlando to Las Vegas to Boston. I have visited our veterans' treatment centers, our veterans' treatment court in Baltimore. I have talked with our VSO small clubs across the country, and have I been amazed at the dedication and the fervor for which Americans think of veterans.

But it was apparent to me in those travels that the face of the American veteran is changing at a pace that we have not realized. For the first time, since the fall of Saigon in 1975, more than half of our veterans are under the age of 65. They are computer savvy. They expect quick service. And they expect that service to be given closer to home. They expect service that is available, accessible, and cost-effective. So it is an integrated VA, an integrated veterans benefits and healthcare system that is agile and adaptive, that will do what they need it to do. And that is my goal, to provide them with that service.

I have said, on many of my trips, that I have seen wonderful examples of VA accomplishments. Accomplishments that deserve more attention than they normally get. Not enough veterans or the American people know that the VA care system continues to outperform the private sector in the quality of care and patient care that we give to America's warriors. We are at the cutting edge of medical technology, rehabilitative services, prosthetics, traumatic brain injury, spinal cord treatment, opioid management, mental health care, telehealth, and community care. Community care is where one-third of our veterans' appointments reside. And for the first time in many years, as been reported by many of you, our overall VA customer satisfaction rate is finally on a steady rise.

So today, we are working to give veterans more choice in their healthcare decisions, because of the Mission Act. We are increasing accountability and protecting whistleblowers with the Whistleblower Act. We are improving transparency. VA is the first hospital system

in this country to post wait times, opioid prescription rates, accountability settlements, and more importantly, chief executive travel.

We're adopting the same electronic healthcare record as the DoD, so that there is finally a seamless transition from active and reserve service into the Department of Veterans Affairs. I will tell you, from a personal note, why that is important. My father was gravely wounded in Vietnam. After three years of recovery, he returned to the 82nd Airborne Division. After 30 years in the service, he retired. But after a lifetime of physical punishment, he came out of the service needing two new knees, two new hips, had a bad back, and had lead in his body leftover from the Invasion of Cambodia. For the rest of my father's life, he carried around an 800 page paper record. If it has anything to do with me and to the team that I am proud to lead, those warriors will no longer have that burden. And we will finally have an interoperable medical record for them to carry forth for their benefit.

[applause]

So in my view, we are on the cusp of the greatest transformative period in the history of VA, at least since Omar Bradley sat in the chair that I now occupy. And when people come up to me and say, with a scowl or a look of amazement, "Why did you take VA? And aren't the problems intractable?" I think about General Bradley. Think about this. Eight weeks after he became the Head of the Veterans Administration, 11 million Americans demobilized. Omar Bradley had to create a system to take care of not only those who had survived World War I, but 11 million Americans who were coming off of the active rolls, coming home, needing a place for their medical care, needing a place to implement the GI Bill. And he did it without computers. He did it with carbon paper and a telephone. And that is why I am so honored to be part of an organization that he created. And that is why no problem is insurmountable today.

[applause]

So let me describe my four priorities for VA and the veterans that we serve. My number one priority is customer service. First, not necessarily in the way that you think of it, customer service within the VA, cutting across compartments and cross-pollinating ideas and people, so there's no longer homesteading in one office. We have to share our ideas with each other. And instead of talking at each other, talking with and to each other. That is the first, first commandment.

But also, for the customer service that you are acquainted with. When an American veteran comes to VA, it is not up to him or her to employ a team of lawyers to get into the system. It is up to us to say yes to all of those who have borne the battle. It is up to us to train all of our employees to get that veteran to yes. I mentioned the Mission Act. That's priority number two. It will fundamentally transform our healthcare by consolidating all of our community care programs into one single program that is easier for our veterans to navigate. It is easier for their families to navigate. And it is easier for their community providers to navigate. The Mission Act finally expands family caregiver support. We have finally righted a great wrong of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, by saying to those families who support the

warriors from Vietnam, that you are now on an equal footing. And we finally say, “Thank you for everything you have done for this country.”

[applause]

So I mentioned the electronic health record. And it is more than providing just an iterative history of a veteran’s health. It is about automating our disability claims and payment claim system, connecting VA to DoD, and more importantly, connecting VA to the private sector. So, for the first time, when someone who visits the VA facilities in my hometown of Fayetteville, North Carolina, goes out to a private pharmacy or a community hospital, that pharmacy, that community hospital will be able to augment that veteran’s healthcare record. So we at VA do two things: we remain as the central node in all of our veterans’ health. But we have a complete picture of what that veteran is experiencing, and what we need to do to help him.

The other part of that, that I insisted when I approved this as the Acting Secretary, was to find a way to allow VA to address the opioid epidemic. We are doing miracles. Our opioid prescription rate is down 51 percent. We have launched into the world of alternative therapies. Bob Wallace of the VFW is sitting out there. He’s of my father’s generation. If I had gone to him in the 1970s and told him that in order to alieve the burdens of the wounds that he carried from Vietnam with tai chi, yoga, and acupuncture, if he didn’t punch me in the nose, he would have just looked at me with a quizzical expression. [laughter]

But we are on the frontlines of those alternative treatments, in order to get the pain that our veterans come to us with, down. And for the opioid, this is how I envision it happening. If a veteran comes into the Durham VA in Durham, North Carolina, that Senator Dole knows so well, and we give him medicine for pain, and if he happens to go to a pharmacy in Durham, or an adjoining county, and that doctor gives him something to make him sleep, that doctor then punches in that prescription to the VA system. And the doctors and nurses at the Durham VA now know that we have an American warrior who is on a dangerous spectrum, either on a spectrum that indicates abuse, addiction, or possibly worse. The alarm flags will go up.

The same applies for indicators for mental health and suicide. We have to get this right to protect our veterans and to address those maladies that are not just impacting Americans, but impacting our veterans at a far greater rate than the general population. And this is the road to making that happen.

And fourth, we have to transform our business systems. If General Bradley walked in today, he would recognize a department that really hasn’t changed much since he and Harry Truman were in charge. The reason I know that, Colonel Powers, my Chief of Staff, discovered a series of letters from Harry Truman to the Department of Veterans Affairs, warning the Department about consultants. [laughter] Warning the Department about excessive cost, but also warning the Department to engage in modern business practices to allow our hospitals and clinics to function efficiently, so that the veteran gets the best service.

Those warnings that Harry Truman put up in the 1940s are still with us. And in many cases, the issues have not changed.

But transforming business as President Truman envisioned means transforming our human resources system, our finance system, and more importantly, our supply chain. Last year, the Department of Veterans Affairs engaged in four million individual credit card transactions, buying everything from x-ray machines to boxes of tongue depressors. The cost was in billions. We can no longer afford to have a haphazard supply chain that, as some of you have reported in here, has forced, in many cases, doctors to run across the street from one hospital to another, to get the equipment that they need. It doesn't happen often. But only one time is enough. It involves the life or death of an American veteran. So that is business transformation.

The other thing that I found out when I addressed the Alaska Federation of Natives a few weeks ago, is that in a state like Alaska, more than half of the veterans in that state are not part of the VA system. I asked the Alaska Natives to double the number of tribal representatives, to help us get out into the wilds of that state, and bring our veterans into the system. But that applies to the rest of the country. We need more robust relationships with our state and local governments, our community leaders, to finally get a handle on homelessness and to prevent veteran suicide. The good news is, as you've seen, is that the rate of veteran suicide has ticked down a little bit. Veterans' homelessness has gone down a great bit. But we need to keep working.

The other area that is of vital importance, and I will once again give you a personal history. When my father was commissioned in the Field Artillery two months before John Kennedy was inaugurated, less than one-half of one percent of the Force was female. During my time as the Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, I looked at a Manning document that said 17 percent of the active duty and reserve force was female. That means 10 percent of the population of the Department of Veterans Affairs, those warriors that we serve are now American women. We are adjusting our VA so that it is no longer your granddaddy's VA. It meets the unique needs of American women who have chosen to volunteer and raise their hand to serve and fight for this country.

[applause]

I have, in my short time, learned many things about VA that I did not know. And I would be remiss if I did not mention the response of this Department to the hurricanes that impacted my Southeast, Florence and Michael. I did not know, until I became the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs, that the foundational Department for our emergency response to natural disasters is not FEMA, it's not the Department of Commerce, it's nobody. It's the Department of Veterans Affairs. We are the ones who deploy the mobile pharmacies, the mobile clinics, the mobile nutrition centers. We employ emergency teams of nurses, engineers, and doctors. Prior to those storms hitting, hundreds, yes thousands of VA employees went into the communities of North Carolina and South Carolina, Virginia, Florida, and Georgia, and brought out veterans with spinal cord treatment needs. We

distributed oxygen to all of our veterans who needed that oxygen. We made sure that dialysis was up to date and ready.

The best story I heard, and I see my friend Virginia Johnson from North Carolina here today, was when I visited the Wilmington. And a spinal cord patient in Wilmington was evacuated. He was evacuated to Athens, Georgia. And because of the unique nature of the wounds he had suffered in 2002, he got to Athens, and our VA did not have the proper bed to use to treat him. The VA employees in Wilmington, North Carolina got that bed to Athens. And that veteran was able to rest comfortably, even though his house had probably been destroyed by the hurricane that hit the Southeastern part of my state.

So that is a testament to what I said at the beginning, that this is a noble mission. And that even though I am a temporary custodian of the flame that 370,000 of my fellow Americans carry, because of the decision that they made to join VA, I am very honored to be part of their team. It is an equal honor to be here at the National Press Club, not only with those who serve our veterans, who have served in uniform, but also with the wonderful fraternity and sorority of journalists who have put their lives on the line, to tell the truth, but also to serve the cause of freedom in their own special way. And I thank you all for coming. And I hope you have a wonderful and reflective Veterans Day. Thank you all very much.

[applause]

DEREK WALLBANK: Mr. Secretary, thank you so much. It's going to move us into the question and answer part of this program. I appreciated your kind words for my grandfather and for my mom. And so I asked my mom what she would ask you, since she had 21 years at the Miami, and then San Francisco VA. So get ready. [laughter] This is an easy one, actually. There is a lot of training that military personnel get as they are entering the service. She would like to know how much time, effort, training is being given now for these military personnel when they're returning, especially when they're coming home with war wounds that you can't see, PTSD and other similar things.

ROBERT WILKIE: Well, that is an easy question, but it's a sublime one. Let me take a step back in deference to your mother, and go back to my former position as the Undersecretary of Defense. During my tenure, I was responsible for the health, welfare, and training of millions of active duty and reserve warriors. One of the things that we were able to implement is the screening, training our people in the warning signs that exist for things like PTSD, TBI. We educate our warriors now on how to protect themselves, but also to recognize the signs.

But there's another part of your mother's question that General Mattis and I think we need to do more with. I mentioned General Bradley. General Bradley's goal, when he was Head of VA, was to capture as many nurses, doctors, and medics, many of whom, as some of you know, probably have more surgical experience than doctors coming out of our most prestigious medical schools, and grabbed them, and put them into VA. General Bradley's goal was to have at least half of America's doctors work in the VA. And at least three-quarters of all doctors and nurses and medics coming out of the service, come into VA. So

we are working with the Department of Defense to offer that opportunity for those highly skilled warriors. And we've got the Navy Hymn playing. That's all right. That's okay. I served in the Navy too. [laughter]

I have to tell you a story. And I'm not filibustering my own meeting. [laughter] But some of you were in the audience when I had my confirmation hearing. And Senator Sullivan from Alaska, a United States Marine, read a charge to me from one of his constituents, a guy named Cajun Bob. Now how Cajun Bob got to Nome, Alaska, it's hard to fathom that. But Cajun Bob had Senator Sullivan read a charge to me that said, "Mr. Wilkie, your charge is to kick ass." I said, "Senator Sullivan, I am an Air Force Officer. We don't use language like that." [laughter] But thank you for "Anchors Aweigh." [laughter]

Let me also, one other thing. I mentioned talking to the Alaskan Natives. We have not begun—We have not begun to fathom the human brain, its potential, its deficiencies, the impact of service on that incredible machine. And that is a reason why I talked to the Native Federation in Alaska, to help us get those servicemen and women we don't know into our system. Because the things we know today that can help them were probably not available or known to them when they decided to remove themselves from our world.

So the answer is, we are educating on the front end. We have the most comprehensive and well trained force of medical professionals when it comes to looking for the signs and treating this. And I'm going to say one other thing. And I will tell you, it's another thing that most Americans don't know. And I had to tell my counterpart in Canada this, because he didn't know it. And I'm going to talk about one of his great institutions.

You all have been following the progress of traumatic brain issues as made manifest by the National Football League and the National Hockey League, and the wonderful people in Boston who are performing that research. That's VA research. They're doing it in the Boston VA. I told my Canadian counterpart that I have a relationship with the National Hockey League, that he doesn't have. [laughter] But think about that. That is research that not only helps veterans at the tail end, but one of my last jobs at the Pentagon was to lead Secretary Mattis's close combat taskforce. That research that VA is doing makes it easier and more likely that our Marines and Army Infantry will survive longer on the battlefield. And that's because of the research VA is doing.

[applause]

DEREK WALLBANK: Now the VA is working with its largest budget ever, right now. More than \$200 billion. But there's been talk of possible requests for budget cuts next year. Have you been asked to do a five percent budget cut?

ROBERT WILKIE: I have been asked to offer ideas.

DEREK WALLBANK: What are your ideas?

ROBERT WILKIE: I can't tell you.

DEREK WALLBANK: Why not? [laughter]

ROBERT WILKIE: Because I haven't presented them to the President yet.

DEREK WALLBANK: Can you give us a sketch of what some of the things you might--?

ROBERT WILKIE: No. [laughter] No, I can't.

DEREK WALLBANK: I have a lot of ways to phrase that question, sir.

ROBERT WILKIE: I know you have a lot of ways to press it. Look. I'm not going to gild the lily. You all know what the budget process is like. I will present the case for the Department of Veterans Affairs, and as many of you know, in the last campaign, Presidential campaign, the President committed everything he had to making sure that the Department of Veterans Affairs was the most robust it has ever been. Regardless of what comes out of a budget process that begins with ideas at OMB and ends with people like Richard Shelby on Capitol Hill, I am convinced that the veterans' budget, by the time it gets through both chambers of Congress, will replace this last veterans' budget as the largest in our history.

DEREK WALLBANK: So you think, even if you offer up suggested budget cuts, you think you'll walk out of the next budget process with more money?

ROBERT WILKIE: Oh, I think you can address that question to Senator Shelby and—[laughter]

DEREK WALLBANK: Let me tack on, on there, you're obviously going to be walking into Congress that has Democrats in charge of gavels. Questions might be different there, requests for oversight might be different there. How is your job going to change?

ROBERT WILKIE: I have been through this before. And Virginia Johnson from the USO was there with me, when the Department of Defense and Secretary Gates saw the Congress change hands. I believe in transparency. I believe in oversight. I was raised in the United States Senate. I take Article I seriously. There's a reason that people a heck of a lot smarter than me made it the first Article of the Constitution, because that's where the primacy of our government rests. I expect to answer more questions. I have now a 100-day record to defend. [laughter] And I will defend it.

But let me go back to what I said earlier. Veterans' issues, veterans' care, is not partisan. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter where you come from, what side of the aisle. And again, I'm not gilding the lily. It's all designed to make veterans better. If I have to camp out on Capitol Hill for a lengthy time, that's fine. We have a good story to tell. Again, we have new management. I cannot speak, nor will I speak, for what happened before me. I still see some articles in newspapers that were written as if the prior management was still in charge. Well, that's not fair to the new team, but that's politics in this town. I get it.

But I am ready to work, and I think my record, if I'll just say something that is self-indulgent. In this climate I got 86 votes at confirmation. I would have had five more, but five republican Senators were caught on a plane in Chicago. So I think that that is evidence of the bipartisan spirit that I've always tried to carry forward, both in the Defense Department and now at VA.

DEREK WALLBANK: Let me give you an opportunity to draw a pretty clear line between your current management and the previous one. You obviously have one member of Mar-A-Lago who has significant opinions about the VA. Have you talked to any others?

ROBERT WILKIE: Well, I will tell you what I said under oath. And I had—Look. First of all, I talk to anybody who wants to talk about veterans, all walks of life. I went to the wilds of Alaska before the snow hit. On one of my first trips. I was in the homeless shelter deep in the City of New Orleans a week ago. So I put anyone who wants to talk about veterans on the same plane. With the issue that you have mentioned, as I said under oath, I had one meeting with people. I had been told, in my first week as acting, that had a strong interest, had a close relationship with Dr. Shulkin[?], communicated with him regularly. I was down at the West Palm Beach VA. I said I would hop over. I haven't had any meetings since then. And if you're going to believe some of the stories, what was reported that those citizens were interested in.

Let's see. We're going to get the entire Armed Forces melody. [laughter]

DEREK WALLBANK: It's slightly better than the alternative.

ROBERT WILKIE: That's right. I think Pro Publica said that they were against a particular company getting the contract. Well, even though I was in Jesuitical limbo as an Acting Secretary, that means you are but you're not, I signed the electronic health record systems.

DEREK WALLBANK: I've gotten three questions from the audience on this, so I do want to ask this. There's been a lot of controversy surrounding the use of canines in research at the VA. Who authorized the continued studies? The VA says former Secretary Shulkin. But Shulkin says he didn't. And where do you, yourself, stand on canine experiments at the VA?

ROBERT WILKIE: Well, let me—the previous management authorized it. I will reauthorize it. Let me tell you why. But I'm going to put it in perspective first. We have 92 canines in our treatment and research facility, 92. Every day, 2,000 dogs are euthanized in this country, every day. The canine research that the Department of Veterans Affairs conducts, and it's research that is supported by the Legion, by the DAV, and a host of our largest BSOs, has been responsible for the invention at the VA of the cardiac pacemaker. It was responsible for the research that led to the first liver transplant. It was responsible for cardiac ablation that creates the means to correct deadly cardiac arrhythmias. The research is conducted under strict supervision. I would not do anything that would fail to help veterans.

My charge is to make life easier for those who have borne the battle. And there is nothing more tragic to me, in 2018, at this stage in the development of medical science, that we haven't been able to find that cure to address spinal cord injuries, and paralysis, and early death from that. So I'm going to do everything that is ethical to make sure that our veterans come first. I love canines. I was raised with them. I've seen them in my military life perform miracles. But we have an opportunity to change the lives of men and women who have been terribly hurt. And until somebody tells me that that research does not help in that outcome, then I'll continue it.

DEREK WALLBANK: You mentioned several alternative therapies that you were looking at exploring in the VA. Medical marijuana one of them? Would you be okay with VA benefits going for medical marijuana?

ROBERT WILKIE: NO, medical—Marijuana is against the federal law.

DEREK WALLBANK: If that changed, would you be okay with it?

ROBERT WILKIE: Well, if it changes, and we find medical proof that it helps, I will look at any. I just mentioned canines. If something is legal—and I'll contrast it. We conduct canine experiments under legal regimens and under ethical standards. If the laws change, and there is medical evidence there, of course we look at that. But the law is pretty clear at the federal level.

DEREK WALLBANK: You were also talking about some technical upgrades you're hoping to do at VA. There are some technical problems with the implementation of the Forever GI Bill that resulted in payment delays for student veterans. I'm curious, (a) when that problem is going to be fixed; and (b) if there were problems like that with that sort of thing, how do you then go forward with additional technological upgrades?

ROBERT WILKIE: Well, I will tell you that the payments are flowing. And I'll get to the IT issue second. The payments are flowing. The calculations that were made for this year, and it involved the cost of what we call the basic housing allowance, increased the housing allowance by half of a percent. So for those of you who don't know, if you're on the GI Bill, you are given a monthly check that corresponds with the check that an E-5 gets on active duty, an E-5 who is married with two children. So we weren't able—and this was long before I came—but we weren't able to make that half percent change, which tells you how old our IT systems are.

So Americans are being paid at the 2017 level. They're getting paid that stipend with less than that—without that half of one percent increase. I know of only one veteran, reported to us by our friends at the American Legion, who was forced to move into his parents' house because of the hiccup, the problem with the checks. No one has left school. We have had incredible cooperation from all of our colleges and universities. The one thing that we've done that is not in the question so I'll add it, is that the problem of pay for the profit colleges, those colleges that have failed, we are restoring, in this system, all of the benefits that our

veterans lost when those particular institutions went under. That is the only fair and right thing to do.

I had a meeting yesterday on the IT system. I hope it is ready early next year. But the checks will still continue to go out. And I say to anyone, if you know of any veteran who is not getting the check or has been threatened with eviction, or there is some college out there who is upset, even though I have not heard that yet, and I've talked to a lot of them, I was just in Mississippi. I'm going to South Carolina. I was up in Alaska. And I've talked to colleges all over the country. They've had no problem. But it is one of those things we have to fix.

And I will also say, since I mentioned my predecessor, he did tell the Congress during his hearing on this issue, that with a 50 year old—I think it's 50 years old—system that we were in the process of changing, it was probably going to be a problem with implementing it. But we're working it.

DEREK WALLBANK: Now we've only got about five minutes left, so I'm going to have to go quick here. And any filibusters will be met by the hardest of possible questions. So fair warning. [laughter] I wanted to know, is the VA going to recommend to Congress to change the law and allow the VA to negotiate drug prices with industry?

ROBERT WILKIE: Well, I'm going to tell you that I don't know enough about that in 100 days to give you an answer. My job right now has been to calm the waters, to get out and talk to as many VA employees and veterans as I can. I'm going to give you an honest answer. I really haven't thought about that.

DEREK WALLBANK: I have another question for the audience.

ROBERT WILKIE: That was a hard one, too.

DEREK WALLBANK: Well, I've got a harder one. President Trump told reporters this morning, as he was leaving for his trip to Europe, about the shooter in California. He said he was a mentally ill person who saw some pretty bad things, and may have had PTSD. Your reaction to the President's comments?

ROBERT WILKIE: Well, I haven't seen them. I will tell you, on a factual basis, that the veteran in question was not in the VA system. So we don't know what his status was. We don't know what his mental health condition was.

DEREK WALLBANK: Should there be more done for veterans who are returning more with PTSD?

ROBERT WILKIE: Yeah. Well that goes back to what I said earlier, about Secretary Mattis's efforts and my efforts to try to catch the signs of this before a veteran leaves the service. But also goes back to what I said about my trip to Alaska that is illustrative. In this case, I need help in finding those veterans who are not in our system. I'll give you the suicide numbers. We are sadly only down to about 20, 20 veterans a day take

their lives. Fourteen of those 20 are outside of the VA system. PTSD issues are just like those. We have to get those people into our system. So again, I don't know what was happening with that person out in Ventura.

DEREK WALLBANK: Mr. Secretary, we have just two minutes left, so I'm going to wrap up here. Before I give the final question, I'd like to remind our audience of some upcoming events at the Club. You're more than welcome to stop by and hang out. [laughter] We have a Newsmaker event November 13th on NASA's 25 year plan for humans to inhabit Mars. On November 13th a Headliners Book Event with Joanna Breyer. On November 15th a Newsmaker event on impeachment, indictment, and the 25th Amendment. You don't have to show up for that one. [laughter] And on November 15th a Headliners Book Event with the legendary Marvin Kalb.

And Mr. Secretary, the tradition we have here at the National Press Club is to present our speakers with a gift that falls well under, well under your gift limits. Don't worry about it at all. Our traditional National Press Club mug.

ROBERT WILKIE: Yes. Didn't you give more in the '70s and '80s?

DEREK WALLBANK: There are strict gift limits. What can I do? This isn't my rule.

ROBERT WILKIE: Peter O'Toole got all sorts of stuff when he came here.

DEREK WALLBANK: Well, if you come back, we'll give you another one. [laughter]

[applause]

DEREK WALLBANK: Mr. Secretary, I understand that you're a big fan of William Faulkner. And I'm wondering if you could tell us which of his works best tells about the situation we're in now in the political moment. And why is it *The Sound and the Fury*?

ROBERT WILKIE: Oh. [laughter] Because it's *Intruder in the Dust*, that's why. Let me do it really fast. I was a guest at Roanoke at Oxford last Friday. Roanoke is the home of William Faulkner. Faulkner had a very long relationship with members of my family. And that's why I was invited. And if you have not, I would like for you all to take a minute. And you can do it online. And listen to, I think, one of the greatest speeches to have been giving the western world, in the last 70 years. And that was Faulkner's acceptance of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950.

And even though he was speaking to journalists and writers, I will say at Arlington, when I conclude my remarks on Sunday, that I really believe he was speaking to the heart of the soldier when he said that, "A life's work spent in the agony and sweat of the human spirit, not for glory, but to make out of that material of the human spirit something which was not there before. He must teach himself that the basis of things is to be afraid, and teaching

himself that, forget it forever, leaving no room for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths, lacking which any story is ephemeral in doom. Love and honor, pride and compassion, and sacrifice. Until he relearns these things, he will write as though he stood and watched the end of man. But no matter what the soldier sees, no matter how terrible, it is the soldier who declines to accept the end of man. It is the soldier who endures.” And that’s why it’s an honor for me to be part of the VA team. And I thank the National Press Club very much.

[applause]

DEREK WALLBANK: Secretary Wilkie, thank you so much. We are adjourned.

[gavel]

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