

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

“The Zbigniew Brzezinski Annual Prize Dialogue”

EVENT DATE

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TIME

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LOCATION

2nd Floor, CSIS Headquarters, Washington, D.C.

FEATURING

Speaker:

John Warner, Former Secretary of the Navy and United States Senator

CSIS Experts:

John J. Hamre,

President and CEO,

CSIS

Transcript By

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JOHN J. HAMRE: Welcome, to everybody. Please have a chair. Oh, thank you. Please have a chair. We are – I apologize. Just a little late. As typical, I've lost something, and it took me a while to find it. So I apologize. Welcome to all of you. This is a – really an exciting afternoon. We're delighted to have you here. Especially wanted to welcome Emily Brzezinski here. It's a real privilege to have her back in our good company. And of course, Mark and Ian, we're delighted to have you here. Thank you for coming. The Brzezinski family has made every one of these events where we have the Brzezinski Prize Award. And it really does – it's a special thing for us.

Just – this was a tribute that the Smith Richardson Family Foundation wanted to give to recognize one of the most remarkable intellects in American history, which was Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, and the role he played in shaping strategic thinking for America. And we still benefit from it to this day. And part of the way to commemorate that was to establish an annual prize that – and this was something that Dr. Brzezinski, you know, he was reluctant for it. But he said, if we can recognize the contribution of others who have made salient contributions to American security, then I'm willing for it to happen.

And it was in that spirit, Senator, that one of the conversations I had with Zbig before he went home was to talk about who would be the recipients. And he mentioned you. And I'm so – I'm so proud that the selection committee – I didn't put too much spin on the ball. (Laughter.) I put a little bit, maybe. But it was well-earned from your lifetime of service. We'll get into that in a few minutes.

Folks, just a little preparatory. If we do have an emergency, we won't, we've never had one in the five years we've been here, but you'll follow my instructions. We're going to go out, the exits are behind me, we'll take the stairs down to the ground level. We'll take two left-hand turns and a right-hand turn. We're going to go over to National Geographic. We'll assemble there. And I will pay for everybody's tickets to see the Queen of Egypt. It's a great show that's on right now. (Laughter.) It's a wonderful show. You'll enjoy it. And if you want to go on your own, you pay for your own way. (Laughter.) I mean, if I don't have to – OK.

This is a real privilege to be able to both recognize the contributions of Dr. Zbig Brzezinski and his remarkable life, and then to celebrate that by keeping alive what really motivated his passion, which was to do strategic thinking with moral purpose. He didn't use those terms. That was the conversation that I had with the Smith Richardson people on how to characterize this award and it is with that spirit that we've been – we do have a selection committee and this year, unanimously, people decided the recipient for this should be John Warner.

We're going to explore the reasons for that today in a conversation with him. The one thing he did promise – make me promise is that no speeches. You know, he's willing to engage in a conversation and I'm going to bring all of you into that conversation at the right moment. But it is – this is really about celebrating this remarkable man by bringing alive the ideas that still motivate his thinking, his passions, his interests, and I'm so very grateful we can do that.

So if I could ask you, Senator Warner, please come to the stage. We're going to get started. But I first want to give you the award and a little presentation.

JOHN WARNER: (Off mic.)

MR. HAMRE: You just come right up here, sir.

MR. WARNER: Oh, John, is this a good conduct medal? (Laughter.)

MR. HAMRE: This is – I think it's a perfect attendance medal.

MR. WARNER: I never – I never got one in the Marines or the Navy. (Laughter.)

MR. HAMRE: Well, this is the Dr. Brzezinski Prize, and we congratulate you.

MR. WARNER: Oh, that's – thank you very much. I appreciate that. (Applause.)

You know, John, I've been in this room with you since – well, and all the previous rooms. But I never thought I'd be up on the dais with you. (Laughter.) And how this happened is a mystery that I don't understand. Now, we may get to the bottom of it as we move along in this dissertation. But have it, old boy.

MR. HAMRE: OK. The one thing that I would ask, John, if we could get some guys to move the podium back so our colleagues over here have a clear vision line. If we could –

MR. WARNER: Can't go to sleep.

MR. HAMRE: Can we do that? Just pull the whole thing back into the corner. I think we'll be just fine. Thank you. Thank you. OK. This is going to – I'm going to get us started. Like I say, I have the privilege of having thought about this for a bit. You all are still thinking about it. I am going to turn to you, but let me get started.

Senator, I don't know of anyone else that has had experiences in all three of the branches of the federal government.

MR. WARNER: I guess so. That –

MR. HAMRE: Of course, you've had executive positions with the Navy.

And, welcome, Jon Greenert. I'm delighted to have you back on post.

MR. WARNER: Hey, Skipper.

MR. HAMRE: And we've got a real strong contingent of the Navy here tonight, which is good –

MR. WARNER: Yeah, Will Ball, SecNav –

MR. HAMRE: – which is understandable. Will Ball is here. Oh, my – Ed Giambastiani is over here. This is really great to have you all.

So strong executive branch experience. Obviously, you've distinguished yourself in this career on Capitol Hill, senior senator from –

MR. WARNER: John, the biggest achievement, I was on Capitol Hill 30 years and I didn't get locked up. (Laughter.) So we're not going to do anything here today that can get – (inaudible) – that.

MR. HAMRE: No, I don't think so. I rather think we'll be able to steer clear of any peril that way, you know. And as I – as I recall, you also were in a district attorney's office at a time.

MR. WARNER: Oh, yeah. We had a lot of fun in that.

MR. HAMRE: So let me –

MR. WARNER: That's a good way to start in the practice of law.

MR. HAMRE: Let me just ask you to reflect on – you know, you've had a life where you've lived in each of the aspects of the government. Tell me how you view checks and balances.

MR. WARNER: View checks and balances? (Laughter.)

MR. HAMRE: Yes, sir. We've divided authority in our country and we've given it to different –

MR. WARNER: Well, that works. You're talking about constitutional balance.

MR. HAMRE: Yes, sir. Let's talk about that.

MR. WARNER: Right now, it's being challenged, and that's going to be my keynote. We have got to take this institute and the writings of this wonderful man, Brzezinski, and make them available for people to use that want to go against some of the things being said about the checks and the balances and how our system works today because he's got a wonderful vision into the future and he's put it there, and I'll get to how we're going to write it up.

MR. HAMRE: OK. Well, let's do that. But let me – let me ask your thinking now. I mean, the – you know, it's an unsettled time.

MR. WARNER: It works. That's the main thing, John. And it has worked for 200-plus years. And it's been the envy of the world. It's enabled us to be a leader in the free world, and to project our own form and belief in freedom and democracy as far as we can. So put me down in the favorable column. (Laughter.)

MR. HAMRE: All right. We'll – (laughs) – we will do that.

Sir, you – but one theme that was rather steady throughout your public service has been national security. How do you feel about things now? What are – what are your thoughts about where we are as a nation?

MR. WARNER: Well, fortunately the military have always had the ability to duty, honor – they're sworn to that – to rise above it and keep apart from politics. It's essential that the military not get wrapped up in the political system of this country. Not that the political system isn't good and have its good and bad parts, but it's better that they have made the commitment to serve the country, to do that as their first mission, and to let the rest of us go at each other in our politics. And so by staying out of that, that removes them from a lot of, I think, petty controversy.

And then, of course, they've got, every one of them, the willingness to give their life. Stop to think about it: when you go in the military, you never know what your assignments are going to be and you've literally said I will serve my country at the full risk of my life. And you've got your family to be considering. But that makes you ramrod in the back a little bit, or as you say in the trenches pucker up a little. So that's an important fact, and we got to keep it that way.

And so far I've had the opportunity and the privilege, I say with a great sense of humility, to have had a modest military career. I mean, I went into the Navy when I was 17. We all – I'll never forget the Battle of the Bulge hit us, and it was Christmas of 1944. And my father had been in World War I as a doctor. He was an Army captain, in the trenches, wounded, everything. And as I came along as a youngster, he taught me the fundamentals of the military life. Not that he wanted me to do this or that, but he just felt that it meant a world to him and it worked, and by golly his son was going to do it.

So there we come – the war's coming on and I said, "Dad, I'd really like to go in, and I'm kind of tired of school." And he said, yeah, I know all about it; look at this bad report card and everything. (Laughter.) So anyway, we had a big argument and I promised if I did one good semester and scored well he would sign the papers. When you were 17 you had to have parental consent. And sure enough my mother never could understand why did you say Christmas week of 1944? (Laughs.) Because this country was trapped and its armed forces were suffering casualties which in the end totaled the greatest number of casualties, in the Battle of the Bulge, of any single battle in World War II. And our whole concept that we were winning this thing began to go tilt.

So anyway, 17-year-old guys like me, they were – all of them wanted to go. And we went in, and the military probably did much more for me than did for them because I went into technical work in radios and electrics and all that stuff. And I was in school and we were getting ready to be assigned to ships and everything, and the – Harry Truman saw the wisdom of bringing this war to an end, and it ended like that. (Snaps fingers.) And the next thing you know, it was all ships turning around, go home, and back on to school, things like that.

But I carried with me a sense of discipline. I got the GI Bill. It sent me through engineering school. I made friends all over. It was a fully expanding experience of my life, and I'm always grateful.

So I trotted along. I wanted to be in the Marine Corps. But father in World War I as a surgeon, his division – 5th Division – would work alongside a Marine division. And Marines just have corpsmen; they have no medical doctors as an integral part of their command. They still don't. And so he said I sewed up too many Marines, and I could not sleep at night thinking you were out there under that bunch. So Navy was it. But then I joined the Marine Corps, because I always wanted to do it, and got my commission. And sure enough my number came up and I did a modest tour in Korea and saw a bit. But, again, I was in the communications and radio business. I think I got a little flying in. But it was a wonderful experience for me. So I've been owing the military for a long time.

Now you trot along, and you get on Capitol Hill. I got on the Armed Services Committee. All 30 years I was there, I was on that Committee. Wonderful group of men, wonderful. You know, people forget this Senate that I served in from '78 to '98, during those 30 years, that Senate was 70 percentile World War II veterans. And so I see my friend, Chuck Robb. You know, when the senior boys get around you how they say: It's going to be this way. Now, you can argue it all along on the floor, but when we need your vote, that's it.

And that's the way that the Senate worked in those days, and Goldwater, and Howard Baker, and all those wonderful guys, all of whom served in the military, Danny Inouye. It was a wonderful group. Old Ted Stevens, got angry Ted. (Laughter.) And we just got together, and we made things work. And that – not to demean today's Senator, except I'm very disappointed on the inaction that they've taken. But we got to live with that Senate as it is, and hopefully some of the work that we may do as a consequence of this meeting today, I would like to think could infiltrate and inspire one or more of those

senators to get up and more articulate with the very principles that the man we honor today did.

MR. HAMRE: Yeah. Senator, you – one of the early things that you did for the country was help negotiate an agreement with the Soviets about incidents at sea. This was – you know, we were having, as we do, you know, we kind of rub up against each other. We're trying to gather intelligence, we're trying to kind of send political signals, and sometimes it was getting dangerous.

MR. WARNER: And we were having incidents, not unlike what's occurred here in the last month or so. You had that Russian ship come alongside our destroyer, and the proximity of the ship is about 40 yards or so. That's about right in the cheek. But it was damn dangerous, because when you're operating a big ship like that through fairly heavy seas. And so we had a lot of those incidents. And I give the credit in many respects to Dr. Kissinger. Now, he somehow is missing today, isn't he?

MR. HAMRE: No, Zbig's not here today, unfortunately.

MR. WARNER: He's not here.

MR. HAMRE: Or, I mean, Dr. Kissinger's not here today.

MR. WARNER: He – I got to know him. And so he said, we've got to stop this. And I said, well, I've had some experience in the Navy secretariat. And he said, fine, you do this job. And it was a fascinating job. It was in the most intense period of the Cold War. I mean, the tension between the Soviet Union and the U.S. was just rigid. And here I am, going over there – and I had to go over covertly in the beginning. I was hiding in civilian clothes and taken around through different countries to smuggle me up in there. But I'd sit down with those Russians. And I had a team of wonderful naval officers that came with me. And for two years, we went back and forth.

And if I can tell some of the humorous sides of it, they came over here one time. And so I got the Army War College. And the problem is that some of those guys had to start every session with a drink. Well, I – you know, learned to nibble a little bit here in alcohol, but nothing like they did.

MR. HAMRE: Yes, they're pros.

MR. WARNER: And one of the guys, head of the delegation, he would – he was – he was a roommate of the CNO at that time, the Soviet CNO, and they were great pals. He was an old submariner. And he said to me one time in one of our sessions: I got to have a drink. So I put the session aside and delayed it for 20 minutes. Took him down to the – on the base, the BOQ, and a bar there – officer's bar. And of course, he had on all these medals. And the Soviets had a way of – they didn't give you a star for your second medal. You got another ribbon. And the things went from here all the way down here. (Laughter.)

MR. HAMRE: They weighed about 40 pounds.

MR. WARNER: It was 40 pounds. And he walked in. And I'm a sloppy old suit and everything. And we sit down, and I told the waiter I want two. And we brought the drinks, he was much pleased to see I drink and everything.

Got ready to leave, and I didn't have any money. (Laughter.) So I said to the waiter, look, I'm secretary of the Navy – (laughter) – and this waiter said, then who the hell is this joker sitting next to you? (Laughter.) I said, he's the vice chief of the Soviet navy. So this guy goes off and he calls the MP on the base – (laughter) – and the MPs come over to the bar, and they really want to grill me. Well, finally, by this time people could come, and I got some money, paid the bill. (Laughter.) Then that same guy, two nights later in the Hilton hotel where I got a whole section of the floor for him, he fell in his bathtub and banged his head, you know. Again, he'd been drinking.

So I established in my cadre – I had about two admirals, and three captains and couple of commanders – just wonderful, bright people working at that time with me. We would have the drinking watch and the non-drinking watch. (Laughter.) And that was inviolate.

So things were getting along, but the Soviets knew that we were not matching them in drinking. I'll get to the bottom of this, John, because this is not elevating the intellect of this crowd. (Laughter.)

So they took us out to the naval academy, which in – folks, if you ever get over there, it is one of the most beautiful, old naval facilities in the world. And they built the ships right in the same yard that the navy lived and operated. And they had a wonderful bar. And so this old four-star admiral gave us a dinner, and they like to start their dinners at three in the afternoon, and they're drinking.

Well, this guy saw that half of my guys would raise the glass and nothing would happen. He got furious, absolutely furious. And I told my guys, hold tight, boys, just cool it. And so the old boy got up, and he poured a drink, and said, every man pour his drink. OK, drinks got poured. All men stand. You cannot refuse to drink with me. This is a toast to our mothers! (Laughter.) And I say to my guys, hang tough, you're not drinking with your mother. (Laughter.) And he took this glass, and he threw it against the wall, smashed it. And the whole meeting just descended into a – the sooner we got out of there the better. (Laughter.)

But we finally got this agreement through, and Zbig was not involved in this; I'm not sure why. Nixon came over while I was in my last visit there, and we had this picture taken of everybody. Oh, Henry is not in the picture. Oh, he was very much – well, on the trip with us. Henry had gone to the restroom when the picture was taken – (laughter) – and to this day when I see him he looks at me – you didn't wait till I, da, da, da – (laughter) – before taking that picture, you know. The picture went all over the world. (Laughter.)

So we've got to make more progress in this meeting here.

MR. HAMRE: Yes, we will, sir. (Laughter.) So let's just step – (laughs) –

MR. WARNER: Yeah.

MR. HAMRE: I'm having too much fun.

MR. WARNER: Yeah.

MR. HAMRE: Now, let's just step back. I mean, you know, you worked with the Russians at the time, and it was a testy time. You're right back into it. I mean, you've had – lots of your career you've worked around the Russians.

MR. WARNER: Yeah.

MR. HAMRE: What should we be doing now?

MR. WARNER: It's the old adage that Zbig had: You've got to learn how to agree to disagree, and you've got to understand that we've got a very serious situation facing us in the Russians beginning to collaborate with China.

Now here you've got Russia, who has about one-tenth of the economy of China. I mean, it's that –

MR. HAMRE: Not even that much.

MR. WARNER: – I mean, if it's that much. And therefore – but Russia has kind of got a lot of experience with us; more so than China. But we cannot let that type of coalition between those two countries begin to further undermine our – frankly, disabuse of our allied nations in NATO and in other things that we've done.

I talked to a group of people the other day who said, well, what does NATO do? I said, are you going to Europe this summer? And they said, oh, yes, all our group's going to Europe. Well, you're walking the streets of those countries in Europe simply because there's peace. And that peace is being justified night and day by NATO. It's there to protect. It's not there to react against anybody. It's there to protect. And we've got to stand up strong against the verbiage that's being used against our allies and friends. That deserves a hand of applause. (Applause.)

MR. HAMRE: I should say it does.

MR. WARNER: You know, the Soviets, they always say, time to have a hand of applause, and you know – (laughter) – there's applause when they wanted to applaud.

MR. HAMRE: Well, I'm glad that you've signaled out the importance that allies have played with us through the years. I mean, we had allies because it made it easier for us to carry the collective burden.

MR. WARNER: Correct.

MR. HAMRE: But Americans seem to be confused about that these days. I mean, you were a politician. You, Senator Robb were, you know, going back, talking to average people. Do they understand the importance of allies? And how do we talk to them about that?

MR. WARNER: Well, the people – it's the demagoguery that's being poured out about we're carrying – paying all their bills and so on. Now, I agree, when we – when the Senate committee – I mean, we always tried to nudge up their contributions and they never really came up to ours, many of them. But there are other advantages that those allies provided.

For instance, here's this incident that took place in the Gulf yesterday. Don't you think every one of our allies, we're going right to them, who do you think did it? What information do you have on it? And I'd bet you in this instance most of them are still sharing their top intelligence with us. And that's got to be – that's the most important thing. The economic can rise and fall, but that strength of linkage on intelligence has got to remain strong.

MR. HAMRE: We also are in a pretty tense way now with China.

MR. WARNER: Yes.

MR. HAMRE: What are your thoughts about China?

MR. WARNER: Well, China is very ambitious, but they know how to pace themselves. And say what you say about old Nixon, he – and I'll talk about him in a minute; I knew him very well – he and Henry Kissinger – Henry was the architect – they finally got the – got the padlock opened and started it. And we've – each successive administration I think has positively added to it until where we are now.

And we're playing a game with them on these tariffs. Now, most people just don't understand the complexity of the balances of tariffs and so forth, but they understand the reality of the farmers not being able to have a market to sell their soybeans and so forth. And this jerking them back and forth and this ridiculous, oh, I've got an agreement here in the pocket, here it is right here, and it goes back in the pocket again, and we don't know what that is, it's very difficult for us to manage our markets given the way that this is being handled by the executive branch right now.

MR. HAMRE: Are we heading to a new Cold War with China?

MR. WARNER: Oh, no. Oh, I don't think so. China's too smart. They've come too far. What have they got to gain by a war? What is it? I know they pull our chain down there with islands in the South Pacific or wherever it is down in there, but that – the Navy's doing the right thing. They run the ships through there to assert the freedom of the seas. We've got a pretty good balance. That thing will flare up now and then, but they're not going to start a war. It's not to their advantage.

MR. HAMRE: You know, we have a –

MR. WARNER: They've got – I never forget Sam Nunn, the boss of this outfit for so many years, was really one of the closest friends to this day I ever had in the Senate. He was a wonderful man. He was chairman and I was ranking member, and the two of us would travel all over the world together and quietly see people with very low-key appearances. We never shot for the big PR. But he was good and solid.

But he always said about China that they will pace themselves and it's not to their advantage. And we went into Deng Xiaoping. Two of us – just the two of us sat there with him, and he was the third person on the dais and maybe there were some interpreters around. And Sam and I would flip a coin as to which one was going to open up the mandatory requirement we got, talking about human rights. And so I'm not belittling the importance of human rights, but we had to – each CODEL had to do that.

So we got by that. And Deng Xiaoping shook his head after we talked about human rights and everything. He said, well, I appreciate that. I appreciate that. And I would like to pursue it, he said. I would like to pursue it, but my main priority – and he had a magnificent command, the way he talked, and be quiet, and then talk. And he'd lean forward, and he'd talk. He said, I have a problem. And it faces me every night I go to bed. I have 20 million people who have no food in their stomachs. When I can find a means by which to feed my people, then we'll really explore as best we can the natural human rights.

So there's a practicality. And they have now got – I think their cost of living and lifestyle is somewhat improved. And they're not going to get in a war. Do you think otherwise? What do you think?

MR. HAMRE: Well, sir, it's about you tonight, not me.

MR. WARNER: Beg your pardon?

MR. HAMRE: This is about you –

MR. WARNER: Oh, no, you're in trial too. (Laughter.) Come on, you're not going to get off this –

MR. HAMRE: You know, I –

MR. WARNER: We've known each other for so long, it's ridiculous. There were times when he's been my boss, when he was deputy secretary of defense. (Laughter.) I was secretary of the Navy, he's on the staff of the Armed Services Committee. I was your boss. So we've managed that, you know?

MR. HAMRE: It's always been asymmetric. You've had power and I haven't. (Laughter.) And I've always had a very – it does shape your consciousness, you know, when you're like me. But I do think we need to stand up – the fact that they may have a legitimate point doesn't mean we shouldn't be standing up for our principles and articulating them.

MR. WARNER: Well, I think we are, in a way. We're not selling the farmers out. We're trying to make our farmers – if you get by this, then it'll be something else. And they might wake up on this incident of the oil thing that happened, you know, because they're highly dependent on that.

MR. HAMRE: So can I go back on – you know, we've had some close calls in the South China Sea. You know, we've had – you know, a Chinese commander had too much Viagra for breakfast and he was off sailing a little too aggressively.

MR. WARNER: Sure.

MR. HAMRE: You know, tell – go back to your experience when you were doing incidents at sea. First of all, did – was the military opposed to it? Was it a politically initiated thing by civilian leaders? Or was it a military – what was the role of the military?

MR. WARNER: Well, the military – and I think they properly – are always a little suspicious in the civilians in control. Now, that's the constitutional way we have our government established, is the military are controlled by the political system. And they salute, and

march off, and have done it for years. But they should remain suspicious because not that we're trying to do things to undercut them, or anything like that, but they're a little suspicious about it. And I'm all for they're remaining suspicious. Now, as the China Sea thing go, I follow it a little bit. It pops up now and then. But the Navy has, in a very modulated way, returned the signals that sailors understand their ships are going through. And I don't think they've ever actually pulled one of their ships out and tried to block passage of a ship down in that area. I don't know, am I wrong on that skipper?

MR. HAMRE: We've had some reckless behavior.

MR. WARNER: Reckless, oh, yeah.

MR. HAMRE: But it hasn't – you know, and we see other patterns. It does appear to under central positive control.

MR. WARNER: But your question was incidents at sea. The Navy was apprehensive that we might give away – because what it is is a framework of rules and regs to be operated and followed in international waters by warships. So we had a Russian and now the U.S. And once you begin to tell the sailors they can go into this and they can't go into that, their suspicions should – our sailors – should be suspicion. But all along, I kept – well, I had a whole team of Navy guys working with me the whole time. So you – I'm sure they called up old Admiral Moorer the moment I did anything. God bless his heart. He was a tough old guy. And a wonderful CNO.

MR. HAMRE: Sir, I'm going to ask one last question, and then – do we have a microphone? OK. So let me just ask one last question and then I'll open up here.

You worked for a lot of different presidents.

MR. WARNER: Yeah.

MR. HAMRE: I think you even started doing advance work for Richard Nixon, as I recall. What –

MR. WARNER: Old Bill Rogers was secretary of state. And when Nixon made the decision he wanted to in 1960 run, he commissioned Rogers to go out and find about four, five, six – we had a very small staff – six individuals, all men, to work with Haldeman and Ehrlichman – they

were the two chiefs under Nixon – to do advance work. In other words, you go out ahead of the candidate, visit with the mayor and the chief and the Secret Service, and check all these things, and see that it's OK. And then you travel with the candidate for about three or four stops, then you get off, go back home, see your family for a night or two, and then go back on the road again. And it was a fascinating experience. I enjoyed it enormously.

But I remember one thing about that '60 race. Kennedy had the charm and the warmth, and Nixon, he just had a nervousness about it. We never fully detected what it was, and a lot of people have tried to write about it, but he was not at ease around the Kennedys. And he sort of felt that they had money and privilege and he and his wife had struggled to get where they were, so it was out of balance.

But I tell you, the one incident I had with him that I never forgot – and I always have defended him on this – and that is that I took him on his last trip in the campaign to go out to California and vote. He was a resident of California. And so we loaded up this big plane we were flying, had lots of wonderful women, the secretaries and all kinds; we must have had 50 people on our big plane. And I picked him up and took him out there. And we were in the hotel room as the returns were coming in with Haldeman and Ehrlichman and myself and fellow named Unger (sp), and maybe one other guy. And Nixon came in and first thing he said to me, he said, John – because I was the head advance man on the trip – he said, you forgot to bring me my scotch and soda. And I – oh, yeah, I did that. (Laughter.) His idea of a sleeping pill was a weak scotch and soda. And I had to spend an inordinate amount of time finding what was the critical point between weak and right – (laughter) – so he would get his night's sleep and everything. But anyway, he was fun.

And then he said, listen, you guys go to bed. I know something about politics, and this thing is not going to be decided tonight. And we got to get up maybe early in the morning, and I want you bright and up – get up, get on that plane. Well, sure enough he got up at the crack of dawn, the whole thing had – Texas, they can't find the votes; Chicago, they know they were gone and burned. (Laughter.) And the whole thing was a mess. And we got the plane. We took it out to the end of the strip. The press were all over trying to find us. We're out at the end of the strip.

I'll never forget, I put the staff on the plane, went back and got Mrs. Nixon and the vice president, put them in the car and drove them out there. And in those days we – the planes all dumped their oil and gas as they were coming in. It's the dirtiest place we had the plane in, mud puddles and gasoline all over the place. And there was an old mechanic sleeping there, and he was holding a little radio, and the radio was blasting "we can't find the votes" in this state, "we can't find the" – and Nixon stopped and he said, can I listen with you? And this guy says, oh, yeah. He says, fine. So here's the vice

president of the United States and a guy up to his ankles in mud and everything else, and they're listening to the returns. And this went on for about five minutes.

And Nixon said to me – no, he said to Herb Klein, his press secretary – I was standing, Herb right there – but, get the president on the phone right away. And Herb says, well, you know, let's discuss what is it you want to talk to him about. Nixon said, the continuity of the presidency of the United States should never be in doubt for one minute. Not one minute. And this mess is going to take an eternity to solve. I'm going to have my announcement that I will not contest the election, and everybody was – well, so he got on the plane and we're flying back and, sure enough, we got back to Washington and then he went in and saw the president and he announced the next day that very same statement. He thought he put his country first against these political interests.

MR. HAMRE: Just as you have, sir. I mean –

MR. WARNER: Oh, well –

MR. HAMRE: – you've done the same thing and very grateful for your leadership.

MR. WARNER: John, I've been a lucky guy.

MR. HAMRE: No, I have to – you have –

MR. WARNER: When you have guys – listen, there's a lot of people sitting out here –

MR. HAMRE: We do have –

MR. WARNER: – who worked for me one time and they're nodding their head. (Laughter.) That rascal is up there only because I did this and I did that for him for all these – I see them laughing.

MR. HAMRE: We do have a – we've got about 15 minutes and I – and would welcome any questions that people want to bring up from the floor. I've got more I can do if you – if you want, but if people do want to raise a question –

MR. WARNER: Well, let's have some fun. And you used the "we can answer," see. You and I together. (Laughter.)

MR. HAMRE: I'm smarter than that. (Laughter.)

MR. WARNER: Yeah.

MR. HAMRE: Anything – if people want to raise a question. If –

MR. WARNER: Come on, fire.

MR. HAMRE: Jon, let's – we've got a microphone right down here to – Jon Alterman is the Brzezinski Chair holder here at CSIS.

JON ALTERMAN: Q: And a fan of Senator John Warner. Senator, I remember in about 2005, 2006 you came over to CSIS and you said things in Iraq are going sideways; what should we do. And I've thought about that as I've thought about where we are in Syria, and I've thought, what would John Warner say we should do about Syria. Do we need to be more engaged in Syria? Do we need to be working more with allies? Do we need to be working more with adversaries? Is Syria somebody else's problem? With all of your national security experience, where should we rank Syria on our list of priorities?

MR. WARNER: Well, I was in the saddle. I'll never forget – George Bush, Sr., got Bob Dole and me over to the office and he said, we've got to form a coalition and repel the – Saddam Hussein's attack into Kuwait. It's just terrible. And, John, you write the resolution up. And I actually wrote the resolution. This is a bit of humor and I'll give you that, too. And it said that he was going – he, Bush, would join the U.N. to enforce the U.N. resolutions. And so he drew it up carefully and broad, and said its purpose of liberating this wrong that had been inflicted by Saddam Hussein. I have 12 countries join, and we put it all together and it looked good. We had a good solid bunch of Republicans. But the Democrats were totally opposed to it.

I'm not sure where you were. I mean, you might want to give me your vote. And I can't remember. Yeah, you do. I won't ask you. But, anyway, I think you might have voted with me. I think you did, yeah, because we only won that thing on the floor of the Senate to give the president of the United States the right to use force by five votes, and all of that region was under fire. And that was a close one but we pulled it together.

I remember Sam Nunn to this day said that was a vote that he knew he made wrong. But George Mitchell had – he was the majority leader. But I bring that up – that was the beginning of when we went in and there was a clear challenge to democracy and freedom and everything by Saddam Hussein tackling that country, and that began to embolden. As we went in, my God, the military put that campaign together and within 36 hours – no, more than that – three days, I guess – that thing was wrapped up and was a very decisive victory and done. Military – just give them the job and they did it. And I'll never forget that.

One other incident. Nixon said when he wanted to get – not Nixon, but George Bush, Sr. – you got to have Democrats on this thing, and Dole says, well, John's very good at getting a Democrat; you get a Democrat. (Laughter.) Chuck, I found Lieberman. He'd only been in the Senate three years. I said, now, this is a chance for you to get some real exposure. (Laughter.) So he – to this day, he says: You sold me that bill of goods. (Laughter.) And so it was the Warner-Lieberman bill. (Laughter.) And we got it through.

But that was the beginning. And we were sort of on a roll. And we felt that we could eventually do the same corrective action in Iraq itself. And Syria was sort of a bad little problem, but it wasn't as big as the bigger scene in Iraq. And so we – our military, once again, put together its best effort. And I think this time George W. Bush, we made the invasion. I worked hard. We put together the – everything he needed to get it through. And I'll tell you, it never has come about that section of the world. You can pick out Syria. You can pick out the other differences of the nations over there. They're far from resolving their own problems, even though we've given them relative peace – absent the problems that pop up in Syria from time to time.

Oh, those were interesting days. But to go back to the first one, with the – going down to – we got 12 nations to join us and go down. And we won in 48 hours, 72 hours, whatever it was. And the guys – the senators all wanted to go and congratulate the troops. And so Dole said, you're the chairman. No, I was ranking; I guess that Sam was still chairman. No – yeah. And I took four successive CODELs in 10 days' time over and back. And the last one, I'll never forget. Old General Schwarzkopf. You remember –

MR. HAMRE: Norm Schwarzkopf.

MR. WARNER: Norm Schwarzkopf. On the last CODEL, I've got these guys all going on the plane. He, obligatory, standing all of them, giving them a medal, and all that thing, when you had –

all that stuff. (Laughter.) And he says, Warner, come over here a minute. So I walked in with him. And I'd been good to him. He grabbed me by the coat and he slammed me up against the wall. He said: I'm trying to wrap this thing up. If you bring another CODEL over here I'm going to bury you somewhere. (Laughter.) I mean, I deserved it. I was a pushing him and his staff, another CODEL, and another CODEL. And years later, we had a couple of drinks and laughed together about that time. (Laughter.) But, boy, I'm telling you, that was not civilian control. (Laughter.)

MR. HAMRE: He was not the one to try to test that out on, either.

MR. WARNER: Yeah. All right.

MR. HAMRE: Right back here. Pat Towell. Right behind you, Pat.

PAT TOWELL: Q: Thank you. Senator, let me stay on the subject of civilian control. We've had a couple of tragedies in the Pacific fleet the last year and a half. A couple of destroyers got into collisions. Seventeen sailors lost. And these things are always very complicated, but it seems pretty clear that in the judgement of many people who've looked into our other problem is we were running the fleet too hard. We cut back on funds. They're short on maintenance. They've only got one watch at a time. And it seems that nobody in the Navy chain of command or the Pacific Command –

MR. WARNER: Nobody, what?

PAT TOWELL: Q: Nobody was willing to say: Mr. President, Mr. Secretary, we can't do it. We got to slow down. Have you – has it been your experience – I don't mean to focus on this one incident – but did you ever get the impression that the can-do spirit was just too strong? That they take imprudent risks? They would say to the president or to the secretary, you know, we just shouldn't do it, it's not a good –

MR. WARNER: Well, it's not the nature of the Navy or any element of our armed forces to say we can't do it. We had not given, I think, sufficient funds, and had asked for too much deployment, too many family separations, for too long. But it's fortunate we have here the man that really came up with the answers and solved it. Admiral Greenert, would you like to stand and – (laughter) – give an answer to that question?

ADM GREENERT: No, thank you. (Laughter.)

MR. WARNER: But I thought you were on the con and you were helping me. You always did.

ADM GREENERT: Would you like me to talk about it?

MR. WARNER: Yes.

MR. HAMRE: Could we – let's bring a microphone down. This is Admiral Jon Greenert. John was the CNO –

MR. WARNER: Former chief of naval operations.

MR. HAMRE: Nobody else has been put on the spot like this. (Laughter.)

ADM GREENERT: I've been dying to be heard about this. (Laughter.)

MR. WARNER: But he was a darn good one, and we worked together. And we had an understanding how to get things done.

ADM GREENERT: Well, as you said, Senator, it's a little complicated. And I would make two comments. One, we're wired up to do the job as necessary. Number two, I would say that read testimony – if one goes back and reads testimony, as you said, there were a lot of warnings. We are taking risk, and there were a lot of adjectives and adverbs trying to define the risk. It's very difficult to say: If we do this two more times we're going to have a collision, we're going to have a failure, whatever.

And number three, it's a complicated process to – where the service says, we really shouldn't do this. They don't make the decision. They say we won't deploy, or we don't deploy. That decision is made at a higher level. Of course, they're a major part of it. But I think, in my opinion, the entire process, and that balance of overall requirements with resources has to be continually looked at. And they are now. And it's unfortunate this took place. But this has been a longstanding debate about how we manage forces globally, and the requirements therein that they support.

MR. WARNER: And response on short notice, very short.

ADM GREENERT: And responding on short notice, yeah.

MR. WARNER: Correct. And also, under your watch was excellent. Family has finally risen up and they're taking more of a voice in things.

ADM GREENERT: Absolutely.

MR. WARNER: The wives and the children and so forth.

ADM GREENERT: Yeah, you have to – like anything, you have to balance the compensation you're giving them, including the families.

MR. WARNER: Good. Thanks, I really appreciate that.

ADM GREENERT: Thank you.

MR. HAMRE: We'll take one last question.

MR. WARNER: No, I want a little wrap up time.

MR. HAMRE: Oh. (Laughter.)

MR. WARNER: But take the question.

MR. HAMRE: No, no, no. I'm going to give you the wrap up. Because I'm near the end. I'm going to let you do wrap up.

MR. WARNER: Well, I want to do it. I want to go at my own pace.

MR. HAMRE: Sure. You do it at your own pace. (Laughter.) How the hell could I argue with that?

MR. WARNER: OK. But I was anxious to get more questions myself.

I want to be serious. This has been a marvelous event in my life. I sort of feel like a son of this outfit. I remember working with Arleigh Burke and that lawyer – (pause) – Dave Abshire.

MR. HAMRE: Dave Abshire, yeah.

MR. WARNER: And it was a figment in their minds to get this thing started. And John, you have been the one and only person that could bring it together and create this big building. I remember you showed me the plans to this thing. I said, John, that's too damn big. You – look at all that white marble – (laughter) – and everything in there. Don't you worry, we're going to get it done, we're going to get it done. He got it done. Nobody thought you could do it. But your persona is what has held this thing together and made it the leading think tank.

Now I'm going to say this, and my boys back on the Hill won't like it, but when we started this, I think there were – how many? – four or five think tanks around town –

MR. HAMRE: Yeah.

MR. WARNER: Four or five. Today what? Twelve, thirteen?

MR. HAMRE: Yeah, there are some big – yeah, yeah.

MR. WARNER: This think tank – are any of those wonderful staff to help me with this thing in here? Still gone – are they all gone?

MR. HAMRE: Well, Karen Wong is the –

MR. WARNER: Well, she is wonderful –

MR. HAMRE: – genius that’s behind –

MR. WARNER: Karen. But anyway, I talked to one of them the other day. You did 10,000 events last year.

MR. HAMRE: Well, no, not 10(,000), but about 2,000.

MR. WARNER: Was it two?

MR. HAMRE: Two thousand, yeah.

MR. WARNER: Well, that was awful few, but – (laughter). Well, maybe collectively.

MR. HAMRE: (Laughs.)

MR. WARNER: But it just shows how this organization, which is premier amongst the family of wonderful organizations in this town – but you’re doing the job that Congress is not doing. You are holding the hearings, you are bringing people up here to freely discuss their views with intelligent staff people and so forth to project that idea out and let it go. And that’s extremely important to do.

And so I want to thank – also I want to thank the family of the honored man we –

MR. HAMRE: The Brzezinski family is right down here.

MR. WARNER: Right down here. I talked to all of them. Would you raise your hands? There you are.

MR. HAMRE: A whole extended family. Yeah.

MR. WARNER: And this little lady right in front, too. And there’s one –

MR. HAMRE: Yeah, the lady is right here.

MR. WARNER: Well, that's wonderful. And, oh, we had a nice visit, yeah.

Anyway, this is a celebration not of just John Warner, but it's what this man did and his dream. And I've enjoyed reading a lot of the things that he wrote in preparation to try and do a reasonable job here today. But they're all in so many different parts and different places. I think you've got to get a book written, pulled together about the subjects that he felt strongly about, the manner in which he used to negotiate to get his ends concluded, and put it there, and have it so that, you know, dummies like me can go over and look at it and find the index –

MR. HAMRE: The guide for the rest of us, yeah.

MR. WARNER: – and get the answer to the thing. Because if there were ever a time in the history of the country when we need a strong voice out here asserting what you had opened up with, the strength of our Constitution and that type of – it is now. And he believed in it, and he believed in the theory you've got to learn to agree and disagree, and all kinds of tricks that he had. It's got to be pulled together, John, in one volume.

MR. HAMRE: That's a worthy thought.

MR. WARNER: It's a handbook. And you're not looking for a – make it paperback so you can get it out there. (Laughter.) And take out some of the lofty languages and put it in language that the young people can probably read.

MR. HAMRE: Accessible terms, yeah.

MR. WARNER: That's a challenge.

Well, listen, folks, I've enjoyed it enormously. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

MR. HAMRE: (Inaudible.)

MR. WARNER: Thank you.

MR. HAMRE: Thank you, sir. (Applause.)

MR. WARNER: Like the Russians always clap for themselves. (Applause.) Thank you, Big John.

MR. HAMRE: Please come up and say your welcome to John Warner. Thank you all.

MR. WARNER: Yeah. That's good.

(END)