TRANSCRIPT
Ocean Security Forum 2021

Keynote Address by Secretary of the Navy
Carlos Del Toro

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FEATURING
Carlos Del Toro
Secretary of the Navy

CSIS EXPERTS
Whitley Saumweber
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Whitley Saumweber: All right. Thank you. Welcome back. Welcome back to those of you online watching us here.

And something I should have mentioned at the top during the last session is that there is an electronic form online for submitting questions. So please feel free to go ahead and click that button and submit questions, and we’ll get that during the conversation from the online audience, and we’ll also go to this audience here in person for questions as well. But before we get to that point, I’d like to just sort of reiterate the agenda for the remainder of the afternoon. So we’re going to have a conversation here with Navy Secretary Del Toro and then move into a panel on technical applications for maritime domain awareness, so – at 3:30.

So now I’d like to introduce Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro. Really pleased that he could be here today. Secretary Del Toro was sworn in as the 70th secretary of the Navy in August of 2021. As secretary, he’s responsible for over 900,000 sailors, Marines, Reservists, and civilian personnel. He was born in Havana, Cuba and emigrated to the United States as a refugee in 1962, where he was raised in New York City. Secretary Del Toro spent 22 years in the Navy before leaving the service and founding his own technology company, SBG Technology. He has been secretary of the Navy, as I said, since August of last year, and we are just incredibly pleased that he could be here to join us. Mr. Secretary. (Applause.)

Secretary Carlos Del Toro: Actually, it was August of this year. August of last year might have been a little bit complicated. (Laughter.) Good afternoon, everyone. Dr. Saumweber, thank you very much for inviting me here today at CSIS. And thank you for your incredible work on this very important issue that you’ve done over the past three and a half years and beyond, actually. I also want to thank Dr. Hamre, wherever he may be today, and the entire CSIS team here for helping us, quite frankly, think differently and more strategically about this incredibly important topic and the many challenges that we face today in the Navy and throughout the globe.

The CSIS Ocean Security Project is truly a great example of the kind of strategic thinking that we require on this incredibly important topic to address all the hard challenges that we face in the months and years ahead, as our planet becomes warmer. The CSIS Ocean Security Project is, in fact, an extraordinary organization, I think, that really has brought together an enormous number of intellectuals and people thinking about this together with folks in the Department of Defense to address this challenging problem.

Without question, the United States is a maritime nation. In fact, our people, our way of life, and our prosperity are undeniably linked to the sea, and they always have been since the very beginning of our nation’s founding and the days of the Constitution. The American people recognize that protecting our
nation at sea is a critical priority. In fact, just this month, December, a Gallup quarterly survey shows that Americans consider the Navy the most important military service for national defense. When you combine the Navy and the Marine Corps, that recognition is even stronger.

Our sailors, our Marines, civilians, they protect our shorelines, the sea lanes, the skies, and the oceans. They also protect our vital connections to allies and partners in support of our global economy. Ninety percent of the global trade travels on the ocean. Ninety percent. So when you get your holiday packages this December, in the next couple weeks, you can thank the Navy/Marine Corps team for protecting the sea lanes.

Our impact on the global economy, however, is about much more than just presents and packages. Our impact is measured in livelihoods and GDP across the globe. Five-point-four trillion dollars of annual U.S. commerce and 31 million American jobs are dependent on ocean-going trade. Undersea cables transmit 95 percent of international communications and $10 trillion in financial transactions each and every day. How complicated our world has become since the days of the USS Constitution. Seafood supports millions of livelihoods and provides direct food security to more than 3 billion people.

The world’s blue economy has never been more important and, in some ways, has never been more challenged either. The Marine environment is under threat from receding shorelines, melting of sea ice, extreme weather, and more powerful natural disasters. Maritime nations are experiencing greater displacement of people and wildlife, and more aggressive competition for resources. As we all know, the Arctic region will witness significant changes in the coming decades.

The region is warming at a faster rate than at any place else on Earth. Melting sea ice makes Arctic waters more accessible and navigable, increasing traffic in the region. It also increases resource competition, of course, shifts the geopolitical and the political environment, and it has ecological impacts around the globe. Changes in water temperature and ocean salinity is driving an unprecedented migration of fish stock with the global fishing fleet close behind. Threats to the oceans are indeed threats to our economy, our allies, partners, and our very national security.

During his first week in office, President Biden prioritized addressing our climate crisis, directing us to consider climate change as central to our national security – central to our national security. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin has called the climate crisis an existential threat, and I couldn’t agree more. That’s why as secretary of the Navy I made climate one of my top priorities. One of my four Cs, right alongside China, culture and COVID. We’ve made key investments to increase our energy efficiency and reduce
greenhouse gas emissions, while increasing our capability and our resilience in the Navy.

This year's budget was the first to identify climate investments as specific line items in our budget lines. And I’m building on that commitment in the upcoming budget cycle as well. President Biden provided clear guidance in his recent executive order on sustainability, and we are working to implement his objectives and his strategy as well. This executive order, this historic executive order in fact, mandates the Department of the Navy to use our scale and our procurement power to drive emissions reductions. And we are following through on that commitment, starting with the sources of energy that we depend on the most in the United States Navy.

Right now we are working across the DOD to pull energy purchases toward 100 percent carbon electricity – carbon-free electricity. Department of the Navy can drive positive change throughout the entire supply chain, pushing contracting partners to lower their emissions. And we’re having those discussions. We can leverage the billions of dollars that we spend on everything from hard military equipment to food services and furniture to limit greenhouse gas emissions across the entire economy. The fight against our climate crisis is, indeed, enormous and complicated as well. Winning this fight will require sustained commitment and more resources.

As with any major challenge, the battle against climate change will be won or lost truly in execution. We are aligned with the efforts of the Deputy Secretary Hicks – who I believe you know here at CSIS – (laughs) – to purchase zero-emissions vehicles and working towards net zero emission buildings and installations. We’re investing in our installations, including climate mitigation projects at Parris Island to better prepare hurricanes and extreme weather. We’re working to make our buildings energy efficient through investments in better installations, sustainable materials, and even smart thermostats. We are looking at reforesting portions of our installations, sequestering carbon and buffering ourselves against flooding and erosion.

We’ve implemented hybrid technology on five classes of combat ships and eight classes of logistics ships. These include integrated power systems on the constellation-class frigate, our newest class of ships, hybrid electric drives on destroyers like the one that I used to command, and gas-driven hybrids on amphibious assault platforms. We’re working with the private sector and local governments on projects like the renewable energy system at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar. This innovative partnership uses renewable natural gas from a local landfill to generate 3 megawatts of electricity every single day. That decreases our reliance on the San Diego power grid, and ensuring critical missions continue without interruptions.
And we’re exercising some of these capabilities to see exactly how well they work. Trapping and using methane for energy resilience instead of releasing it into the air demonstrates now we can increase mission readiness while reducing greenhouse gas emissions at the very same time. And at Naval Base Guam, where I recently visited, we’re investing in a new battery energy storage system that will increase our ability to support forward-deployed submarines and decrease our impact on the environment. These are but just some of the examples of how climate mitigation and adaptation can align with our mission.

Improving energy efficiency, storage and distributed generation are important ways to improve our readiness for critical missions. Reducing operational energy at sea command can also help mitigate contested logistics, which is one of the functional concepts in Secretary Austin’s Joint Warfighting Concepts. When it comes to the climate crisis, responsibility and readiness are not just mutually exclusive, in fact they are very much intertwined. We must repair our installations and our fleet to continue our mission of national defense in the face of more extreme weather and challenging operational environments. At the same time, we must monitor and respond to climate-driven changes in the global security environment.

Future climate-related challenges will likely lead to continued mass migrations and greater conflict. That’s the reality. Creating greater demand for both peacekeeping and humanitarian missions. To meet these challenges, we’re working with military, academic, and industry partners, and other nations, and you, in innovative ways as well. So for example, our chief of naval research is spearheading a seven-nation program to improve polar operations and increase understanding of the shifting polar environment. This 25-year effort, supported by the Arctic Domain Awareness Center, will foster sustained cooperation in order to preserve safe, stable, and secure polar regions.

Together, our international community is also facing many other challenges to the security and sustainability of our oceans. Illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing is having profoundly destabilizing effects in many regions and has replaced piracy as the leading global maritime security threat. It’s truly significant. It is estimated that one in five fish caught around the world is thought to have originated from illegal, unreported or unregulated fishing – one out of every five. With nearly half of the world’s population relying upon fish for 20 percent of their animal protein, these activities undercut food access and security. They also divert billions of dollars from legal fisheries and legitimate economies and undermine the sustainable management of resources.

This is happening on an industrial scale as nations, like China, not only refuse to restrain their distant-water fishing fleets but actively subsidize the
devastation that they’re actually causing. These activities thrive where there is a lack of maritime domain awareness and weak maritime governance. To confront this global challenge, we’re working with our partners across the government through the maritime safe acting working group. Together, we’re developing diplomatic, military, law enforcement, economic, and capacity-building tools to counter this threat to the security of our oceans. And I believe you heard from the commandant earlier today how closely the Coast Guard and the Navy are working together on this.

We’re investing in technologies to support maritime domain awareness, to help our fleet and our allies and partners monitor illicit maritime activities from illegal fishing to smuggling as well. These tools and efforts help support increased governance and regulation of marine resource competition. We’re working across all of our sea services to protect our oceans and our fisheries. As another example, this year the USS Tulsa and USS Charleston conducted missions with an embarked Coast Guard detachment as part of the Oceania Maritime Security Initiative. This joint effort improves our maritime domain awareness in the Western and Central Pacific regions, reduced illicit fishing, combat transnational crimes, and enhance regional security.

We are investing in partnerships and alliances which act as a crucial force multiplier against the many ocean securities that we face as a nation and as a globe. From tighter coordination to more frequent joint exercises and training, we are working closely with partners in the Indo-Pacific and West Africa, in South America, as well as the Arctic. Through these multinational exercises, exercises like RIMPAC, for example, and UNITAS, our sailors and Marines are working alongside other nations to build maritime security capacity. This can help our partners better manage their own fisheries and their fleets.

So from climate change to illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing, the environmental challenges facing our oceans are global challenges that require truly a global response. And the Navy/Marine Corps team is determined to do its part. Protecting our nation and our oceans has never been a greater challenge. Yet, as we have time and, again, throughout our entire nation’s history, the Navy/Marine Corps team is rising to that occasion. For those of us who have sailed the seas, the oceans are a sacred place. The oceans must remain free, open, healthy, majestic, and above all, secure.

In closing, I look forward to working with all of you preserve the peace, the security, and the long-term health of our vital oceans. And I look forward to the discussion ahead. Thank you very much. (Applause.)
Dr. Saumweber: Great. Thank you so much for those remarks. Really appreciated your willingness to join us here today. I think that in and of itself is a marker of how far this conversation has come over the last 10 years. The first time I remember encountering IUU fishing as a security concern was about 2016. I was at the Obama White House then. And we got a National Intelligence Council report that identified this as a threat. And it really focused in on the vectors that you talked about – about food security, about competition, and about how these things could lead to instability, and how that could potentially be a real challenge in key parts of the globe that we care about as the United States.

Since then, there’s been a lot that’s happened around the world. The climate continues to change at an increasing rate. The nature of the competition with China has changed, I think, significantly in the last 10 years, and it continues to grow in different ways. We’ve seen China begin to use IUU fishing as not only a source of economic and food security for their own purposes, but also as a diplomatic tool of soft power for engaging bilaterally or challenging our relationships with partners around the globe. And I think something that is incredibly important that we don’t talk about enough is our understanding of the interlinked challenge of human rights and labor abuses at sea and IUUF, and how they really do go hand in hand.

So I think it’s really great that you’ve come here today. And, again, I think it’s a real marker of sort of the evolution of thinking in this space. And I want to – I think we’ll come back to the IUUF issues in a minute. But I did want to talk about climate more broadly. And you cited some, I think, really important points in your remarks. We had here two years ago the then-recently retired Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Richardson, was kind enough to join us. And that was in the wake of the release by the IPCC of the Special Report on Oceans and Cryosphere. And I talked about this with Assistant Secretary Medina and Admiral Schultz as well.

But they pointed out in that report that under the worst-case scenarios, which hopefully we’re no longer on track, the tropics could face a 50 percent reduction in fisheries resources by the end of the century. Even if it’s 25 percent, that’s still incredibly dire given where we are with food resources. But so we know that climate is destabilizing from a food security/natural resource perspective. But it’s also destabilizing from an institutional perspective. It erodes our institutions. It erodes our multilateral partnerships. And so I guess maybe would you mind speaking for just a minute about your thoughts about that aspect of climate and how we might be working better to shore up those institutions and think strategically about the climate challenge in the maritime space?

Sec. Del Toro: Absolutely. And you’ve mentioned so many things that are so critical to our national security and our economic security. But unquestionably, you know,
what’s undeniable is that climate and temperature rise on the oceans is having a dramatic impact on the food security of nations across the entire globe, and particularly in the tropics, as you suggest, as our oceans become hotter, patterns of fish migrations become different and, of course, those nations that abuse the situation, and have the capacity to do so as well too, take advantage of it to the disadvantage of poorer countries that simply don’t have the same capacity to do so.

And so it creates incredible food insecurity. And it is, in many ways, a human rights issue, I think, that impacts certainly the poorest countries around the globe. And so, you know, I think it’s important for all of us as allies and partners to work together to address these very difficult issues in responsible ways and work together to try to come to a balance whereby, you know, we don’t abuse those that are most at risk in this fight for resources globally.

Dr. Saumweber: I won’t claim credit for this, but there is an idea that, you know, our embrace of human rights in the ’70s, and individual rights, was a real opportunity for us – a natural fit, obviously, with the U.S. and our founding principles – but also an opportunity to differentiate ourselves in a real fundamental way from the Soviet Union at that time. And our ability to develop international agreements that highlighted the value of individual rights and the value of human rights at that time was something that we could signify as something we stood for in that way.

And I think that there’s an opportunity here in the 21st century to think about sustainability in that same context, and resilience, as a way to differentiate ourselves from our competitors and in terms of what we can offer to partners around the globe. (Background noise.)

Sec. Del Toro: Oops. Oh, sorry. Well, we have a moral obligation to actually do it, I suggest.

Dr. Saumweber: Mmm hmm. Absolutely. Yeah. Is that something that the Navy can support? And exactly what -

Sec. Del Toro: Well, absolutely. And particularly when you think about the Navy’s role in maritime domain awareness, for example. And, you know, we have the capacity and the ability to work with our allies and partners in the Pacific and elsewhere around the world to monitor those nations that are violating fishing rules and extended economic zones around the globe, and to try to bring greater awareness to the violations that actually are occurring, so that they be based in fact and not just anecdotally by other countries.

Dr. Saumweber: Yeah. That’s one of the key challenge in this space, is how do you take it from just a – something that is an awareness and transparency issue, which is already hard enough, and then you take it into the prosecutorial realm.
Sec. Del Toro: Exactly. And that’s why it’s important for, you know, the relationship that the Department of the Navy has with the U.S. Coast Guard, for example, and being able to embark Coast Guard detachments in the Pacific, around the world, on our LCSs and other vessels, so that we can provide that added assistance to our allies and partners. It’s critical, I think, to this issue.

Dr. Saumweber: Yeah, you mentioned OMSI is a great example that the commandant also mentioned that as a great example, that partnership between the Navy and the Coast Guard. Is that a model that you’re looking to export in other regions as well?

Sec. Del Toro: Oh, very much so. I believe so. I mean, we’re only challenged, obviously, by the resources that are available, particularly to the Coast Guard and the Department of Homeland Security. But we have to look for innovative ways for us to work collaboratively together to be able to, you know, maintain the degree of operations that are necessary to help our allies and partners where they’re greatly needed.

You know, as I travel the Pacific and I travel the globe, and I meet with nations that are smaller nations, that are less-wealthy nations, this issue of violations in their extended economic zones is the one issue that always rises to the top in terms of their priority, because it’s the health of their economic strength in their own countries. And it raises issues of sovereignty as well too. And so when we see these violations, largely on the part of China in the Pacific, with other nations – whether it be the Philippines or many other countries – it really is an incredibly important issue for them. One that we have to respect and work collaboratively with them on.

Dr. Saumweber: Yeah. I think there is this – and people say, oh, it’s just fish. But in many parts of the globe, it’s the primary source of natural wealth.

Sec. Del Toro: Exactly right.

Dr. Saumweber: So for many countries, that’s what they view as their national heritage, in some ways.

Sec. Del Toro: That’s exactly right.

Dr. Saumweber: Yeah. So I think it’s not surprising that would be the tips of their lips when they want to talk to us about how we can help.

Sec. Del Toro: Very much so. Fish is the main protein staple for most of the world, actually, and certainly for most poor countries.
Dr. Saumweber: Yeah. So you mentioned the Western Pacific and South Pacific. Are there other parts of the world that you are focused on in this case?

Sec. Del Toro: Well, obviously, you know, the climate’s having an enormous impact on the Arctic, right? There’s much to be determined there, certainly as the – as the ice melts, and the – and the climate continues to evolve in the Arctic. You know, we have to be present, and we have to understand what’s happening. And we have to work with our allies and partners to understand the changing dynamics and the impact that it will have on the global economy, and on our economy as well too, as trade routes continue to change.

Obviously, Russia has a tremendous presence in the Arctic. China claims to be an Arctic nation. I’m not exactly sure how that – (laughter) – how that came about. But nevertheless, they certainly have a strong interest in being in the Arctic. And the United States is an Arctic nation. And we have – we always have been, and we always will be. And so our Arctic strategy will be very relevant to the future and what happens there as well.

Dr. Saumweber: Yeah. One of our fellows here, Heather Conley, I’m sure you know, has written quite extensively on the idea of gray zone conflict in the Arctic. And we’ve touched on that as well, and how a melting Arctic is going to lead to more of that in the future, undoubtably. We were lucky enough in 2015, I believe it was, under Secretary Kerry’s leadership, to have a new treaty signed in the Arctic around fishery resources.

But that’s really a temporary stopgap. It was, I think, a 15-year moratorium on fishing resources. But, you know, I sort of like to think about the South China Sea and the Arctic as end members on the same spectrum, if you will, where we have a shared space, a shared group of natural resources that are being competed over. And to date, the Arctic has been a relatively good model of governance, the South China Sea has not.

Sec. Del Toro: Yes. It has not. (Laughter.)

Dr. Saumweber: So I guess I would maybe – just to turn that into a question – is just to say, how do you think about – has the Navy been thinking about how that mode of hybrid conflict that may be on the rise in the Arctic and is showing up in other places, is maybe being vectored as a more common mode of conflict around the globe? And how does IUUF play into that space?

Sec. Del Toro: Well, first and foremost, you know, the Department of the Navy, just like the Department of Defense and, you know, the United States in general, President Biden, we want to avoid conflict. I mean, our goal is to have peace, right? But it’s important for our national security for us to – especially in the Department of the Navy and the Marine Corps and the Navy – you know, our
job is to protect the sea lanes of communication, basically, or to protect that trade that, you know, 90 percent of it is on the ocean.

And so it’s incredibly important as climate continues to impact the oceans in so many different ways, as well as the landmass as well too. When you look at the, you know, changing permafrost, for example. That’s going to have huge impacts on the economy of countries that are impacted directly by that. It’s important for us to continue to, you know, address these issues very carefully and to abide by the norms of international law, and to protect those norms wherever they may exist.

Which is why our freedom of navigation exercises are so incredibly important, so that nations all over the globe, whether they be allies or not – (laughs) – have the right to sail in, you know, international waters, basically, in order to be able to conduct free trade around the globe. And that’s the desired outcome, right?

Dr. Saumweber: And respecting the norms of exclusive economic zones, and sovereignty over –

Sec. Del Toro: Exactly.

Dr. Saumweber: Sovereignty over resources all falls into that space.

Sec. Del Toro: Exactly. Exactly. But it’s so hard to monitor, you know, these extended economic zones. And again, particularly when nations are not abiding by the normal rules of behavior. And so it’s important, wherever possible, for the Department of the Navy, and the Coast Guard, working with our allies and partners together wherever we can to work together very collaboratively to try to protect these natural resources.

Dr. Saumweber: I want to be respectful of your time, so maybe I’ll just turn quickly to the audience here. Do we have any questions from the audience in-house? Nothing? All right. (Laughs.)

Q: Mr. Secretary, thanks for your time today, for being here.

I have a question. It kind of goes with the IUUF, which I think is a model for potentially future issues that relate to strategic minerals, right? The great white north and Greenland, is, like, something that people are seeking. But as we see more and more desire for lithium for EV, which is part of our climate ESG concerns, perhaps this is another strategic problem we’re looking at.

Sec. Del Toro: It is another strategic problem, obviously. I mean, there’s no doubt that, you know, in the past 10 years, for example, China’s become far more aggressive
in their efforts not just in the Pacific but around the entire globe, right, trying to reach agreements with countries in South America and Africa and other places in order to gain access to – greater access to minerals and other assets that are important to them as well. And so it is a global problem, one that we have to be very conscious of.

You know, we look at the issue of Taiwan, for example, and the semiconductors that get built in Taiwan. You know, they basically feed 90 percent of the electronic market around the world. So therefore, it presents a real both national security challenge for us and an economic security challenge as well too. So all these things have to be taken into consideration and looked at in a global manner. It's not just looked at regionally. You have to look at it globally as well. What happens in one part of the world impacts what happens in another. That's why our economies have been so, you know, globally connected for the past 25 years, you might say.

Dr. Saumweber: Anybody else? I thought I saw one more.

Sec. Del Toro: Yes, sir.

Q: Thank you for your remarks, Mr. Secretary.

Speaking of all these challenges, security challenges that you outlined so eloquently, is there scope or a way to reach some level of cooperation and understanding with countries like China, Russia, the countries that we see as adversaries, but we all face the same threats at the end of the day? Do you see a pathway to working together?

Sec. Del Toro: You're absolutely right. And I think it's incredibly important, despite our differences, that we have dialogue – open dialogue on these very difficult challenges that face all nations, right? Climate change doesn't just impact Western nations, or communist countries. It impacts us all, right? And so for the benefit of our children and our grandchildren, the future health of the globe, I think it is incredibly important, despite our differences between China and Russia and many other nations, that we have a very open dialogue about what we can work on together.

And when you – I think when you take a look at some of the work that Secretary Kerry is doing at the National Security Council, for example, you know, that's exactly what we need to do, is continue to have those dialogues, as difficult as they may be. Even if we don't reach agreements in the near term, it's incredibly important to continue to have them, for us to at least understand, you know, where their challenges may lie, right, so we can come to some sort of agreement, at least even if it's minor agreements along the way that hopefully will lead to just bigger, more important agreements later on as well too. One can't give up trying. That's very, very important for us to
do for the benefit of our country or our future children and grandchildren. So absolutely, yeah.

Dr. Saumweber: One last question I saw in the back of the room.

Q: Thank you for your comments, Mr. Secretary. I'm Liza Tobin from the Special Competitive Studies Project. And I'm just wondering if there's areas where you wished you could get more help from the private sector, either developing or investing in technologies, or somehow partnering with you in a more effective way.

Sec. Del Toro: That's a great question. And, you know, as someone who served in the private sector for 17 years, you know, these problem sets don't just get solved by government. It takes a public-private collaboration to make it happen. And we, in the Department of the Navy, for example, I called out many things that we're doing. You know, most of those great ideas and innovations are coming from the private sector.

And so we have all sorts of programs in the Department of the Navy, for example, you know, when you look at SBIR programs, for example, where we work with small businesses and large businesses across the entire gambit, largely working within the Office of Naval Research and many of our Naval Surface Warfare Centers, for example, to come up with the types of transformative technologies – some of which are very complicated, and actually some of which are very, very simple as well too. And it's what we have to do together, really, to try to achieve these incredibly difficult challenges that, you know, we face together.

Dr. Saumweber: Excellent. We'll close there. Thank you so much for joining us today. We really appreciate it.

Sec. Del Toro: Can I actually just say one last thing?

Mr. Saumweber: Of course, please.

Sec. Del Toro: You know, I'm always the cup is half-full kind of guy. And, you know, where there's tremendous challenges, there's tremendous opportunities. And along those lines, I think there's tremendous opportunities in the private sector and tremendous opportunities in government, and for governments to work together on this incredibly important topic. So thank you for the work that you're doing here at CSIS to help us along.

Dr. Saumweber: Thank you very much. Really appreciate it.

Sec. Del Toro: Thank you. Great to be here. (Applause.)
Dr. Saumweber: OK, everybody stay put, and we're going to move right into our next conversation here. Maybe give it about three minutes for transition, but don't go far.