Civil-Military Relations in the United States: A Conversation with the Hon. Leon E. Panetta

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS
Leon E. Panetta
Former Secretary of Defense and Director of the CIA

INTRODUCTION:
John J. Hamre,
President and CEO, CSIS

MODERATOR
Alice Hunt Friend
Senior Fellow, International Security Program, CSIS
John J. Hamre: Good morning, everybody. Welcome. We’re really delighted to have you here.

John J. Hamre: You are in for a treat. We have an opportunity to spend the next, oh, 75 minutes or so with Secretary Panetta. And I’ve had the privilege of working with him – really, as a student under him – for, oh, 25 years, and every opportunity has been rich, and I’ve learned so much from this. And we’re going to collectively learn today. And so I want to welcome him and say to all of you I’m glad you’re here and congratulations. You’re going to have fun today. This is going to be very interesting.

John J. Hamre: When we have public events, we always – we’re responsible for your safety, OK? So we take it seriously. And if we hear an announcement, I’d ask you to follow directions. Alice is going to be leading you. I’m a little enfeebled these days, so you don’t want to be following me. I’ll be the last guy out, probably. But what we’ll do is both of these exits here will take us down to – the stairs is right over here by this. We’ll go down two floors, take two left-hand turns, a right-hand turn. We’re going to go over to National Geographic. They got a great show right now on the queens of Egypt, you know? (Laughter.) And I’ll pay for everybody’s ticket if we have to do it. (Laughter.) You’ll enjoy it. We’ve never had to do this, but please be careful. If we do hear an announcement, we want everybody to get out safely. And we’ll take care of the secretary first, but please follow us.

John J. Hamre: And I – Alice is going to carry the substantive load to introduce the secretary. I just want to say how fortunate we are to have him here. I remember the old joke. It used to be California was the land of fruits and nuts. Well, welcome to Washington, OK? (Laughter.) We’ve stolen that flag. But I think what we’re going to hear today is a very rich discussion about how do we get through this. America needs a good government and America needs an active government, a government that’s solving problems. And no one is better in background and disposition to help us understand that than Secretary Leon Panetta.

John J. Hamre: Alice, take it from here. Let’s get us started here.

John J. Hamre: And thank you, Secretary.

Alice Hunt Friend: As Dr. Hamre said, my name is Alice Friend. I’m a senior fellow here at CSIS in the International Security Program, and I do our civil-military relations work.

Alice Hunt Friend: I’m extremely honored to have Secretary Panetta here today. He, of course, needs no introduction to all of you; just a partial reading of his resume, as congressman from California, director of Office of Management and Budget, chief of staff of the White House for President Clinton, and then, of course, director of the CIA and then later my boss as secretary of defense. So we’re very pleased to have him.

Alice Hunt Friend: I hope everyone understands that we’re going to get to a Q&A at the end after he and I talk for a little bit. And we find at CSIS that it’s actually – we’re able to get in many more questions if we do it by cards. And so I think everyone got
cards when they came in, signed in. Please do write your questions as you come up with them on the cards. And we have some folks who are going to walk around and collect them and then give them to me, and I’ll ask the questions. And hopefully that will get more people to have a chance to ask you their burning questions, sir.

Alice Hunt Friend: So I thought we could start broadly by putting the American civil-military relationship in context. What do you see as the major challenges and imperatives facing the country today? And what do those challenges mean for DOD and for the civil-military relationship?

Leon Panetta: Well, thank you for the question.

Leon Panetta: And thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for being here. And I want to express my thanks to John Hamre, who has been a great leader here at CSIS. And we are all pleased that he’s continuing to provide that leadership for CSIS.

Leon Panetta: I want to thank you, Alice, and also Kath Hicks and all of the staff here at CSIS for all the great work that you do.

Leon Panetta: The issue we’re kind of discussing is civil-military relations. And I think it gives us an opportunity to look at the strengths of America’s military capability, but to also look at the dangers that are out there that can potentially threaten our strength.

Leon Panetta: We are, without question, the world’s most powerful military on the face of the earth. And we’re that for several important reasons. One is obviously the quality of the force, our capabilities, our – first in the world, really, in terms of the capabilities we’ve developed, our weapon systems, and the ability of those weapon systems to operate on land and sea and air and space, and the technology, the fact that we are on the cutting edge of technology in our research, in the things that we are doing, to look to the future.

Leon Panetta: Secondly, because of the outstanding quality of the men and women in uniform that serve this country. They are, without question, the best-trained, the best-equipped, and have the best leadership of any fighting force in the world. And I was proud, as secretary of defense, to be able to have the men – the young men and women in this country be willing to put their lives on the line in order to protect our security.

Leon Panetta: Thirdly, civil-military relationship is unique to democracy, to our democracy. And George Washington is really the one who made that happen when he resigned his commission in order to become president of the United States, making very clear the differences between civilian leadership and the military. That portrait hangs in the Capitol, and it’s one that I saw often as a member of Congress, that he did that.

Leon Panetta: I remember Karzai, as president of Afghanistan – Hamid Karzai – once asked me what is the secret to our military success. And I remember – because he thought
he was kind of the George Washington of Afghanistan. I said it was – it’s because of George Washington. And George Washington defined the fact that civilian leadership is critical in this country, and that it’s important to have that civil-military relationship, and we have that.

Leon Panetta: And fourthly, because that relationship works well. It works well. And it isn’t – it isn’t one that I think – you know, Huntington in his work kind of defined these kind of strict lines between what the military – what the civilians do in providing objectives, and then the military provides the options to deal with it. But the reality is we’ve moved beyond that. It is very much a deliberative process now between the civilian side and the military side. And in many ways it’s important because it’s a relationship of trust. It’s a dialogue that has to take place. The military these days have to – have to understand the political environment that we’re dealing with. And at the same time, the civilian authorities have to understand what war is all about and what the consequences of war are all about. So it really requires that mix of capabilities working together in a deliberative process to decide, you know, what kind of strategy, what kind of strategy, what kind of goals that we want to achieve, and how we intend to achieve those goals. And the reality is that it has worked well in terms of protecting our national security and protecting our nation.

Leon Panetta: But there are dangers that are lurking out there that can undermine those strengths I just talked about. One is that we’re living at a time when there are a large number of what I call flashpoints in the world, probably more flashpoints since the end of World War II, that in many ways are there and yet my fear is we’re not paying enough attention to the potential of any one of these flashpoints turning into a major confrontation. I’ve commented that it reminded me a lot of that period before World War I, and there were some of the same factors: territorial disputes; alliances that were not working as well as they should; terrorism; and, frankly, failed statesmanship, failed leadership in dealing with that, and thinking that somehow none of those flashpoints would suddenly turn into World War I.

Leon Panetta: Today we’ve got a series of those flashpoints. Terrorism is still a very real threat. We just saw what happened in Sri Lanka. ISIS remains a real threat, along with al-Qaeda, along with Boko Haram, along with al-Shabaab. These are real threats to our – to our security.

Leon Panetta: Secondly, failed states in the Middle East. We’ve seen what happened in Syria. We’ve seen what happened with Libya, with Yemen. These become the breeding grounds for terrorism in the future as well, and instability in the Middle East.

Leon Panetta: We have rogue nations – North Korea, Iran – representing threats to stability.

Leon Panetta: We have Russia, much more aggressive Russia with Putin, seeking not only control of the Crimea, impacting on the Ukraine, deploying forces to Syria, and conducting probably one of the most bold and sweeping cyberattacks on our own election process in this country.
Leon Panetta: China asserting its militarization of the South China Sea, developing its capabilities, and frankly, filling a lot of the vacuums that the United States has made through its whole Belt and Road Initiative.

Leon Panetta: And cyber. Cyber is the battlefield of the future and has the potential to literally destroy our country. You don’t have to use an F-35. You don’t have to send a B-2 bomber. You don’t have to put boots on the ground. You can simply sit at a computer and deploy a sophisticated virus that could literally paralyze our computer systems, our electric grid, our financial systems, our government systems, our banking systems – anything that runs by a computer. That’s a reality.

Leon Panetta: Secondly, we are a country that is witnessing some important changes in the world. The march of populism and nationalism and authoritarian governments that are impacting on democracies that are suffering from job losses and inequality and migrant surges. And the inability of alliances and leadership to be able to adapt in order to respond to those challenges. So that represents a new threat to the stability of the world.

Leon Panetta: And thirdly, I think the fact that the United States is viewed as withdrawing for a leadership role in a very dangerous world. We have – the United States since World War II has represented the most important nation in terms of providing world leadership. And we’ve played that role working with our allies throughout the world. And it’s worked well. And yet, today there’s this sense that somehow we’re abandoning our responsibility to providing that world leadership. Ronald Reagan defined world leadership, it’s a speech at Normandy – the 40th anniversary at Normandy.

Leon Panetta: And Ronald Reagan said: The United States of America defined – he defined world leadership by the United States because we’d learned the lessons from two world wars. That’s what he said. And we’ve also learned that isolationism never was and never will be an adequate response for the United States. So he defined the importance of United States leadership. And I believe that’s still important. That’s relevant. And the failure to exert that kind of leadership at a time when we’re facing these dangerous threats creates serious concerns about our ability to face them.

Leon Panetta: And then lastly, there are some things that are happening with regards to management here in this country that concern me. It’s very difficult to have civilian leadership at the Pentagon be on an acting basis, to have an acting secretary. Not only there, but at DHS and elsewhere. Because the reality is that even though the bureaucracy will continue to do its job, they’ll continue to do the work. But when you have an acting leader as opposed to having a full-fledged secretary of defense, make no mistake about it, it impacts on the morale of the institution and of the troops, because there’s a sense that an acting secretary is only temporary and not confirmed by the Senate.
Leon Panetta: So that’s a problem. I’m concerned about the president and some of the things he does that politicize the military – talking about his military, urging troops to lobby the Congress, using the military – deploying the military to border areas as part of a political statement to this country. And then lastly, using funds that are appropriated for the military, for important defense areas, and then using those funds in order to build a wall. All of that impacts on the management and that relationship between civil and military authorities.

Leon Panetta: Look, in the end, I think the key is that I believe in the importance of American leadership. I believe that we have to learn the lessons of the past. I believe that we have to remind ourselves of the values that make us the greatest country on Earth. It is those values that support our leadership in the world, the values of recognizing equality and freedom and liberty and the dignity of every individual and the importance of justice. All of those things are the things that make us who we are.

Leon Panetta: But also it’s the importance of recognizing that we have to provide leadership. Leadership is critical to everything we’ve talked about. I tell the students at the Panetta Institute that we govern either by leadership or crisis. If leadership is there and willing to take the risk associated with leadership, then we can avoid crisis. But if leadership is not there, we will inevitably govern by crisis, and my biggest concern today is we are, largely, a country that is governing by crisis and that undermines trust in our very institutions and in our very democracy.

Leon Panetta: So, ultimately, I think the choice is not between the choice that the president presented between patriotism and globalism. I think the real choice is between leadership or crisis, and if we choose leadership and strong leadership then I think, ultimately, it will not only benefit civil-military relations but it’ll benefit our democracy.

Alice Hunt Friend: You said a lot just now that I want to dive deeper into.

Leon Panetta: OK.

Alice Hunt Friend: Before we really get at your experience as secretary of defense, I want to know what perspective you brought into the role on working with the military. I alluded earlier to the fact that you probably have a broader perspective on the civil-military relationship than anyone else in the country. You’ve been on the Hill. You were at the White House. You were at the agency. And before all that, you served in uniform. So I’m curious. The first day you walked into the E-Ring what did you think you wanted to do and build in your relationship with armed forces, with the chairman, with the other uniformed colleagues you were going to work with?

Leon Panetta: Well, you know, based on my own military experience, which was in the ’60s during the Vietnam era, there’s no question that a lot of it was stovepiped – that I was an intelligence officer in the Army. I never talked to the Navy. I never talked to the Air Force. We just talked to the Army. It was – it was unthinkable
to, basically, reach out to the Navy or anybody else, for that matter. And so those – you know, there were those kind of stovepiping process that went on.

Leon Panetta: I think as a result of Goldwater-Nichols and having been in the Congress during that period that what Goldwater-Nichols did was to emphasize, obviously, the important (sic; importance) of joint commands and the ability of our armed forces to really work together in these combatant commands that we have around the world and it has really built a relationship between the services focusing on the mission and how will we best achieve that mission by utilizing our best assets in doing that.

Leon Panetta: And then as director of the CIA, I, personally, saw the ability of our intelligence officers and the military to work together. The bin Laden raid is a great example of how our intelligence capabilities and all the work we did to try to determine where bin Laden was located and then going to the military – Special Forces – to Bill McRaven, who was head of Special Forces at the time, who, basically, then designed, you know, kind of the military proposals for if we have to go after this compound how are we going to do it.

Leon Panetta: And I’ll just share with you, I think at the time he was looking at three options. One was to just take a B-2 bomber and blow the hell out of the place, which had a certain attraction. But the problem was the amount of firepower that it would take to do that would probably wipe out several villages. So civilian decision was maybe we ought not to go there.

Leon Panetta: We looked at a drone strike for an individual that was walking in circles in the compound that we thought might be bin Laden. But we were worried that there was some unpredictability with regards to the drone strike capability, and also that we would never know whether it was bin Laden.

Leon Panetta: And then, lastly, it was a commando raid, taking SEALs, two teams of SEALs, into Pakistan at night, 150 miles, repelling down into the compound, and then going after bin Laden. And that ultimately was the decision that the president of the United States made, that we ought to proceed with that – with that approach.

Leon Panetta: What I witnessed during that whole mission was the ability of intelligence and the military to work together on a common mission, to bring their best qualities to bear, to bring their best expertise to bear, to discuss these things but ultimately work together. And when I became secretary of defense, I thought it was really important to continue that team approach.

Leon Panetta: Yes, we have civilian leadership at the Pentagon, and the secretary is served by a slew of leaders at the Defense Department that provide both policy guidance as well as foreign policy guidance. I mean, we had areas that looked at every major crisis area in the world and provided backup on each of those. But I also thought it was extremely important to work with the military leadership – with the chairman – Martin Dempsey, who was chairman of the Joint Chiefs – and all of my military chiefs at the same time. I felt that the key was to ensure that we
Leon Panetta: And actually, the example where that paid off a great deal was when the Congress had enacted a budget cut of about $480 billion in the defense budget, and I was handed that number. My approach on that was to use it as an opportunity to try to define what our defense strategy should be for the future. But to do that I did not just rely on civilians. I wanted the military to be involved in that process, and they were. And the result was that working with the military, working with our civilian corps, we were able to develop, you know, what are the areas we have to focus on in terms of defense strategy for the 21st century.

Leon Panetta: And I had an approach that had not really been used that much at Defense, or for that matter at the CIA, but I had used it in all of my positions, which was the importance of a general staff meeting each day. And the reason I liked having that staff meeting is it put everybody in the same place in terms of what was happening – what’s happening on Capitol Hill, what’s happening with regards to the crises that we’re confronting around the world, what’s happening with regards to our forces, what’s happening with regards to legislation that we’ve got to deal with, what’s happening with regards to appropriations, what’s happening with regards to the White House and where they’re at – and to share those thoughts. And at the table, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the deputy was usually there. So we had the military leadership, the civilian leadership, and all of them were part of that information base that I was sharing. And I think it’s that sense of team that was critical to our ability to be able to then accomplish the missions that we were involved with.

Alice Hunt Friend: So this segues in an interesting way into my next question, which is about civilian control of the military, which is one of the major areas of focus for scholars of civil-military relations in the United States. Which is interesting for us because we don’t worry about coups around here, but we do worry about the quality of control. President Trump began his term by declaring his philosophy of delegating more operational decisions down to commanders, which was framed as a reversal of Obama-era micromanagement of operational and tactical decisions. And then last fall the National Defense Strategy Commission report expressed some concern about OSD losing control over decisions with inherent political implications, like force management.

Alice Hunt Friend: What do you think the ideal division of labor is between civilians and the military, between the White House and DOD, between OSD and the joint staff and the combatant commands? Where should we draw that line?

Leon Panetta: Well, my approach is that, as a civilian leader at the Pentagon or wherever I was located, I thought – as a matter of fact, when I became chief of staff to Bill Clinton, I felt the same way – that it was important for me to know what the hell’s going on and to be involved in that process, and that you want to get the best advice, the best guidance you can from those that have knowledge and expertise. And we did that. I would get the best military advice from my
military leaders and the joint chiefs. And then we would proceed to the White House.

Leon Panetta: And normally I felt it was important for the secretary and the chairman to be working off the same book so that we took the time at the Pentagon to sit down and talk through approaches to the crises that we were dealing with and how best to do that. And when we went over to the White House, we were unified. We were not in different places, which doesn’t mean that the chairman wasn’t he could speak independently. He could present his views. But he – I knew where he was going and he knew where I was going.

Leon Panetta: And when the president made a decision as to what option we would use, then the military obviously would implement that decision. And I believe that the military ought to have some autonomy in the ability to do that.

Leon Panetta: But, having said that, I also thought it was absolutely essential that the military let me know what the hell’s going on and that if there is a mission and they’re running into problems, you know, and they’ve got to respond – and I understand that – but I want to know just exactly what happened and how they responded so that I was aware of that and I could brief the White House on what was happening.

Leon Panetta: So it does – I think you can have a relationship in which, you know, you delegate authority. I think delegation of authority is important, because people who have to implement a mission oftentimes have to confront situations where they can’t just suddenly stop and call the White House or call me and say, you know, what do we do now, because of the nature of the mission.

Leon Panetta: So I think – I believe and I trust in people who are capable to be able to do that. But I also want to know what’s going on. We have to know what’s going on. And so I expect that commander to let me know. And we did that. At the Pentagon we would go into a skiff, and basically I would talk directly with those commanders and ask them questions, and they would give me that information. And in turn I would then provide that information to the National Security Council and to the president so that he knew what was happening.

Leon Panetta: And then, you know, you have to respond to questions from the president, from the national security adviser, but at least you’re talking about the same facts. You’re not talking about, you know, some perception of what may or may not have been the case.

Leon Panetta: So I guess what I would say is that the White House – the White House should operate on the basis of getting the best advice to the president of the United States from the Pentagon. The White House shouldn’t run the Pentagon. The White House, for that matter, shouldn’t run other departments. If you appoint good secretaries, if you appoint good people to those departments, then you ought to delegate the responsibility to them to basically run their departments. But then what you want from that secretary is the best guidance that person can provide in order to help the president make the decisions that need to be made.
The worst thing that could happen is that the White House tries to run the Pentagon, tries to get involved in the decisions before they’ve gone up through the process at the Pentagon. And I fought against that. Bob Gates fought against that. Because that’s not – you can’t work that way. It doesn’t – you know, it just – it interferes with the process that you’ve built within the system.

Leon Panetta: So bottom line here is, you need to have responsibility. As a civilian leader, you need the ultimate responsibility for what is – what does on at the Department of Defense, the decisions that are made, and the implementation of those decisions. But you – just as the president delegates authority to me as secretary of defense, I in turn delegate authority to my military leadership to implement those things. But we all need to know what’s going on. And there is no excuse for anyone trying to hide serious mistakes that have been made. I made very clear to the people at the Pentagon that I will be honest with them, but I expect them to be honest with me. And if I find that they’re not honest with me, then that is a serious – a serious moment in terms of whether or not they’ll retain their job.

Alice Hunt Friend: So speaking of transparency then, this administration and this particular DOD is under pressure right now because it’s been over 300 days since a political official appeared on camera in the briefing room. And then there are other examples of DOD reducing transparency, engaging with the press less often. The defense manpower data has been reduced. They took away the deployment numbers about Afghanistan, and Syria, and Iraq. What do you think? Do you think that DOD is making needed adjustments for operational security? Or do you think that this is – you know, others have charged that this is a problem, that the American public and that the Congress need this kind of information and need this sort of access, particularly the civilian leaders, to understand what the DOD is up to. What are your thoughts on that?

Leon Panetta: Well, this is a democracy for God sakes. And the Defense Department’s operating with an over $700 billion budget. The Defense Department has a responsibility to be transparent with the American people and with the Congress about the decisions that are being made, and about, you know, the crises that they’re having to deal with and how those funds are being used. In my – in my experience, my predecessors provided briefings to the press. Bob Gates provided a briefing to the press with the chairman of the Joint Chiefs. I continued that tradition on a regular basis, going down to the briefing room with the chairman of the Joint Chiefs and summarizing some of the more serious issues that we were working on.

Leon Panetta: We were involved in a war in Iraq, in Afghanistan. We were doing counterterrorism operations. I think it’s important obviously to make clear to the public what we are doing. Look, obviously there are classified areas that you’re not going to share. But at the same time, I think the public is entitled to know what is taking place. It’s the men and women in uniform that you are putting on the line, who are putting their lives on the line. I think the American people need to understand the sacrifices that are being made and the decisions that are being made that impact on our national security. And to somehow to try to avoid being
Leon Panetta: So I am a believer in transparency. I’m a believer that, you know, we deal – you deal with the press, because it’s the press that then presents that information to the American people.

Leon Panetta: So I would do briefings. I would take the press with me on the airplane. I would do briefings on our – on the plane. I would do briefings if we were going to Afghanistan or to Iraq or to wherever we were going. We did press conferences with the leadership of those countries and responded to questions, and provided that information. So I don’t – I think it’s wrong not to provide those press briefings. And to go over 300 days and not do that I think is a serious mistake.

Leon Panetta: And you know what? They’re hurting themselves. They’re hurting themselves because the reality is in most decisions you’re going to have to go to Congress. You’re going to have to sometimes redeploys funds in order to conduct certain missions. You’re going to have to work with the chairman and the ranking member of the Armed Services Committees. They’ve got to know what’s going on. And if you’re blindsiding them, that will undermine their support for what you’re trying to do. First thing they’re going to say is, what the hell are you doing? I have no knowledge of that. And now you’re coming in here and asking me to basically reassign money from other areas in order to help you do something I’m not aware of? I mean, John McCain would scream at me and throw me out of the room.

Leon Panetta: So it is to your benefit to be able to provide that information. And not only to the press, but frankly, regular briefings to the Hill. I thought it was extremely important to meet in my time with both John McCain and Levin, who was the ranking member, and sit down and walk through the issues I was dealing with. I did the same thing on the House side. We are a democracy. The Pentagon is not some kind of on-your-own, independent agency that can do whatever they hell they want without responding to the Congress and to the American people, and being accountable to the Congress and to the American people.

Leon Panetta: So I think it’s a – it’s a bad mistake not to be transparent because it’ll only hurt their ability to do their job by not keeping the American people informed.

Alice Hunt Friend: I could not agree more.

Alice Hunt Friend: Folks, I mentioned earlier the cards that you had in order to ask questions. I think folks are going to be walking around now and collecting them. I’m going to ask the secretary one more of my questions and then I’ll get to yours.

Alice Hunt Friend: So one of the reasons that – I don’t know if anyone’s openly said this at the Pentagon – one of the reasons you hear in the ether that DOD is dodging the press more right now is because they don’t want to get pulled into political fights. They don’t want to be turned into a political football. And politicization of the military is something a lot of us write about. Surveys are showing that
Democrats and Republicans are increasingly oppositional in their politics, increasingly inflexible about their partisan identities, and scholars are concerned that this phenomenon will affect the U.S. military either by sowing divisions within the ranks or by driving politicians to seek the military’s loyalty on a partisan basis. President Trump has been criticized for doing exactly that, for treating the military like his political constituency, making partisan political statements in front of military audiences and so forth.

Alice Hunt Friend: You have said that the military belongs to the country, not the president or any politician. What can politicians do to reverse and repair this trend in attempting to pull the military into politics? How can we fix this?

Leon Panetta: Well, you know, look—(laughs)—I talked about those series of flashpoints that were threatening our country. Probably one of the greatest national security threats to our country is the dysfunction in this town. I have spent over 50 years in public life. I’ve seen Washington at its best and I’ve seen Washington at its worst. The fact is, I’ve seen Washington work. When I came back as a legislative assistant after I got out of the Army, I worked for the Republican whip from California, a guy named Tom Kuchel, who served under Everett Dirksen. And he was—he came out of the progressive era of California, the Hiram Johnson era.

Leon Panetta: But there were other Republicans like him—Jacob Javits, Clifford Case, George Aiken, Hugh Scott, Margaret Chase Smith, Mark Hatfield—and they worked with their Democratic counterparts—Hubert Humphrey, Jackson, Magnuson, Dick Russell, Bill Fulbright. And they worked together. Did they have their political differences? Of course they did. But when it came to major legislation, when it came to major issues, they worked together and produced landmark legislation for this country.

Leon Panetta: When I got elected to Congress in 1976, Tip O’Neill was the speaker. He was a Democrat’s Democrat. But he had a great relationship with Bob Michel, who was the minority leader. And did they have their political differences and did they fight each other in elections? Of course. But when it came to major issues, whether it was a Democratic president or whether it was a Republican president, they worked together.

Leon Panetta: They worked together on the budget. I mean, for God’s sakes, we balanced the budget by passing some very tough budget deals. That was bipartisan. We did Social Security reform. We did immigration reform. We did tax reform by working together, Republicans and Democrats, because these are issues affecting the country. And people elect you not to just come back here and sit on your butt and worry about political survival. They elect you to govern. And governing—when I was in the Congress, governing was good politics. If you governed the country, it was good politics.

Leon Panetta: I’m not so sure that today they think governing is good politics. They think stopping the other side is good politics. They think confronting the other side, blaming the other side. I’ve never seen Washington as partisan as it is today.
And there is no relationship here between the president and the Congress in terms of working together in dealing with these issues.

Leon Panetta: And so we’re paying a price for that. We’re paying a price for that. We aren’t dealing with the budget – $22 trillion federal debt, for God’s sakes. We’re not dealing with infrastructure, funding infrastructure, and providing that important base that we need for our economy. We’re not dealing with immigration reform. We’re going through this baloney on immigration. We’ve done this for the last 10 years, when what you need is comprehensive immigration reform. That requires both sides to come together and make it happen. And the same thing is true on health care. Everyone wants to provide quality health care to the American people. It’s going to require both sides to work together to make that happen.

Leon Panetta: So the failure of the parties to work together to deal with that and be partisan about those issues undermines, in many ways, the most important thing in our democracy. We elect people to solve problems. That’s what our forefathers had in mind. We the people elect people to come back to this town, we elect the president, to solve problems, not to blame each other, not to walk away from these issues, not to find excuses for why you’re not dealing with them, but to solve these issues.

Leon Panetta: And the same thing is important when it comes to defense or national defense. I mean, both parties and the president ought to be working together to support our national defense. And the last thing you want to do is politicize the military. The military does belong to the country. It doesn’t belong to the president. It doesn’t belong to a political party. It belongs to the country.

Leon Panetta: Somehow we have got to get back to that kind of leadership, and I was telling a group this morning, look, I’m not so sure this is going to change from the top down. I wish it would, but I don’t think so. I think the only hope I have is that it might change from the bottom up.

Leon Panetta: My youngest son just got elected a couple elections ago to my old seat in the Congress, and Jimmy saw it in my day and saw the relationships between Democrats and Republicans. We used to go out to dinner. We used to, you know, go to sports events together. We used to have great relationships. He saw that. And he wants to see a Congress that’s willing to work to solve issues.

Leon Panetta: He’s a veteran. He served in Afghanistan. He has now formed a Veterans Caucus with a Republican counterpart to try to see if they can work on issues together. There’s a solutions caucus there of members, Democrats and Republicans, that are trying to work together. It’s tough because that place is so partisan. But I think there’s a beginning. These younger people are getting elected. They don’t want to come back here and just pound their shoe on the table. They want to try to get things done.

Leon Panetta: So I guess I’m hopeful that, ultimately, you know, as this younger leadership comes up that we can, again, restore the bipartisanship you absolutely have to
have in order to be able to solve problems in our democracy. And if we – if we don’t do that, if we don’t solve these issues, let me tell you something. Regardless of how much we’re spending on defense, regardless of what we’re trying to do abroad, we will be weakening the United States of America by failing to deal with the important issues facing this country.

Alice Hunt Friend: OK. Well, I want to give the audience high marks for really interesting questions on these cards. So we’ll try and get to a few of them.

Leon Panetta: All right.

Alice Hunt Friend: The first one in my stack is, as secretary you were responsible for opening frontline combat roles to women. What are your thoughts on requiring women to register for the draft and would that be a positive step towards a broader conversation on mandatory national service?

Leon Panetta: I think women should register for the draft. I think – I am a believer that in this country anybody who is qualified to serve should be able to serve in the military. That’s what our democracy is all about. You know, I’m often asked what got me into public service and, first of all, my Italian immigrant parents said it was important to give something back to this country because of what this country had given them.

Leon Panetta: And, secondly, I served two years in the Army and that teaches you a lot about people from across the country – in those days, the draft – across the country coming together in order to accomplish a mission and recognizing what duty to country is all about. And then there was a young president who said ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country.

Leon Panetta: I believe that young people and all Americans, for that matter, have a duty to country. Our democracy depends on that. My wife and I have an Institute for Public Policy and what we try to do is inspire young people to lives of public service, and I make clear to them, you know, I don’t give a damn whether you’re a Republican or Democrat or conservative or liberal – you owe something back to this country. And that’s – I mean, that’s the reason I opened up opportunities for women, for – you know, regardless – individuals regardless of their gender being able to come and serve our country, and they do a great job. They put their lives on the line. Ask anybody. These people are serving this country well.

Leon Panetta: And I also believe, very frankly, that all young people ought to give two years of their life to some kind of national service to this country. I don’t care whether it’s education, or conservation, or health care, or education – whatever it is, the military – give two years of your life back to this country. Serve this country. And then, you know, we can provide a GI bill with benefits, rather than trying to figure out how we forgive student loans or, you know, give free education. You know, if these people serve, we ought to be willing to provide GI benefits to allow them to get a good education. That’s the way to do it. It’s in return for service to the country.
Leon Panetta: And I’ll tell you something, if you get young people – and we see it now – I mean, we’ve got some national service out there that’s important. But if young people are brought into a national service system, and are able to work with others, and are able to learn what discipline is all about and what service is all about, I can’t tell you how important that is to the future of our country. And because if we don’t provide that inspiration to duty and service, then let me tell you something, I think people will continue to take our democracy for granted. And the most important thing is to make people understand that they can make a difference by being involved in our democracy. They can make a difference.

Leon Panetta: I’m often asked in my 50 years of public life, you know, kind of what was your reward for that? I said, you know, the reward is that you’re able to make a difference in people’s lives. My father – I used to ask my father why the hell he came all that distance from Italy to come to this country. And my father would say: The reason we did it is because your mother and I believed we could give our children a better life in this country. Giving our children a better life is what the American dream is all about. But that dream doesn’t just happen. You got to work for it. You got to work for it. You have to sacrifice for it. You got to commit yourself to making that happen. And if we have young people serve this country, then they will understand the importance of the American dream and making people’s lives better.

Alice Hunt Friend: Well another avenue to service is, of course, the foreign service. And we have a couple of questions here expressing concern about the health of the State Department, not only under the current political leadership but I think sort of on a longer-term basis. Your predecessor talked a lot – Secretary Gates talked a lot about support to the State Department. So did you. Where do you think we are now in the State-DOD relationship? And then, also, you know, what can be done for and with the State Department in its role in national security?

Leon Panetta: Well, it – I mean, it’s – look, it’s absolutely critical. You can’t – (laughs) – you cannot deal with these flashpoints in the world simply on a military basis. You’ve got to have a strong diplomatic arm that’s able to engage on these issues. You know, Jim Mattis said it best of all: If you’re not – if you’re not going to give money to the State Department, then you’re going to have to buy more ammunition for me at the Pentagon. And he’s right. We need to have a diplomatic capability here. And I guess I would kind of take Huntington’s approach, and say that hat the way it works today – the way it should work today is that the first thing you do is identify the crisis that you’re dealing with.

Leon Panetta: You know, if you’re at the White House or at the Pentagon or the State Department, identify the crisis. Then identify, you know, what are the options to deal with it? And those options are usually in two directions: One, can you resolve the crisis diplomatically? And if you can’t resolve it diplomatically, then what are the military options? That’s usually the process you go through. So diplomacy plays a very critical role in determining whether or not we can avoid military confrontation. And the expertise that we built into the State Department to provide that expertise, that knowledge of the country, that knowledge of the
leadership, is critical to our ability to deal with countries involved in a crisis and understand what’s going on.

Leon Panetta: When we undercut the State Department and we have depleted the State Department of a lot of that experience – you know, we’re still at a situation where I think a large number of ambassadors have not been appointed yet to represent our country, and they are the diplomatic face of the United States in all of these countries. And frankly, when I was secretary of defense, you know, I visited every ambassador and talked with that ambassador about what was going on in that particular country. It’s the eyes and ears of the United States. Having that capability is part of our strength, part of leadership in the world.

Leon Panetta: Now, if you don’t give a damn about leadership in the world and it’s all about, you know, letting other people do their own thing, then I guess you don’t give a damn about what happens with the State Department. But if you care about American leadership and if you care about the ability to maintain the alliances you have to maintain in order to deal with those problems, you need diplomacy. You need diplomats. They are as important as your military commanders, probably more so, because if they do their role right you can find a way to resolve issues in the world.

Leon Panetta: So it goes to the – to the strength of the United States. We are a strong military power. We’ve got a strong economy. There’s no question that we are a strong nation. But to then take that strength and be able to convert it into the opportunity to provide necessary leadership so you can build those alliances based on the same values – I mean, what makes us strong as a country are our values, who we are. And all of that is part of our strength in going to our allies and building the alliances we need in order to deal with those flashpoints that I talked about.

Leon Panetta: That’s critical. We need to build alliances. We need to, obviously, strengthen NATO. We need to build an alliance with the ASEAN countries in Asia. We need to build alliances in Latin and Central America. We need to build alliances with our moderate Arab friends in the Middle East and Israel. I mean, the ability to create those alliances is not easy. It requires U.S. leadership. And who provides that U.S. leadership in helping to build those alliances? The State Department, our diplomats, along with our military commanders, working together. That is what can provide for the security of the United States in the future. And if we undercut one of those capabilities, if we weaken it, then we are weakening our ability to provide that necessary leadership.

Alice Hunt Friend: Secretary Panetta, I have many more questions here and I could talk to you for the rest of the day, but we have expired our time in the room. I want to thank you so much for coming today and joining us. I know all of us really appreciated you flying all the way out to this coast again.

Leon Panetta: No, that’s all right.

Alice Hunt Friend: And we really hope to see you again soon.
Leon Panetta: Thank you.

Alice Hunt Friend: Thank you all for coming.

Leon Panetta: Thank you all very much. (Applause.)

(END)