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“A Conversation with Senator Chris Van Hollen (D-MD)”

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Senator Chris Van Hollen (D-MD)

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J. STEPHEN MORRISON: Hello and good morning. I'm Steve Morrison, senior vice president here at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and we're delighted this morning to be joined by Senator Chris Van Hollen, Democrat of Maryland. Chris, thank you so much for being with us.

SENATOR CHRIS VAN HOLLEN: It's great to be with you, Dr. Morrison.

MR. MORRISON: Senator Van Hollen was elected to the Senate in November of 2016 and serves on the Banking and Appropriations Committees; prior to that served a number of terms, 2002 to 2016, in the House of Representatives representing Maryland's 8th District where he served in the Democratic Party leadership, on the Budget Committee with a special focus on Social Security and Medicare.

He served prior to that in the Maryland State Legislature. He's a graduate of Swarthmore, the JFK School of Public Policy at Harvard, and the Georgetown Law Center.

Welcome and thank you.

This is a very solemn day. We've crossed the threshold yesterday at which a hundred thousand individuals here in America have died in less than three months of COVID-19. We should use this moment today, I believe, at the outset, to honor and mourn their passing. It's an unimaginable loss.

Senator Van Hollen, if you want to say a few words –

SEN. VAN HOLLEN: Well, thank you, Dr. Morrison. As you say, it's a solemn moment. We've lost over 100,000 of our fellow Americans in a very short period of time. This pandemic is also wreaking havoc in other places around the world, which means that we need to do everything we can to make sure that we continue to slow its spread and that we address the economic pain that has also resulted from this virus.

But first and foremost, to the families who have lost loved ones, we are with you, as we are with those on the front lines: the healthcare providers, the nurses, the doctors and others who have put themselves at risk to help others, and in many cases, have themselves lost their lives. So this is a moment to reflect but also to rededicate ourselves to defeating this virus.

MR. MORRISON: Thank you so much.

Our purpose today is to discuss with Senator Van Hollen the state of the response and the way forward. Here in the United States our focus is going to be really domestic, and it's going to be two-fold. It's a focus on

the economic dimensions of the response as well as the public health measures that have been instituted.

We'll have a conversation here for the next 30 minutes and then we'll open up to questions that have come from our audience members that we will call and come forward, and then we'll close promptly at 9:45.

So let's kick things off. Senator, on March 26, Congress passed and the president signed into law the CARES Act, the largest economic relief package in history – 2.2 trillion (dollars). That followed the earlier tax relief bill. A month later the emergency interim bill, almost a half a trillion dollars, was added on to that.

As you look at the big picture today, on the intentions – the intentions behind these bills, they have many different dimensions and many different targets – businesses, individuals, parts of our government, state and local, public health. There's many different dimensions. Have these measures, in your view, had the stabilizing impact that we intended for them?

SEN. VAN HOLLEN:

Well, the short answer is, I think there have been mixed results. Certainly, we are better off today because Congress, on a bipartisan basis, passed those enormous emergency relief packages, but that doesn't mean that millions of Americans are not hurting. And as you know, all those pieces of legislation contain elements focused on the health-care battle to defeat the virus and treat those who have COVID-19, and then of course the other focus – what we're talking about right now – which is to really help weather the economic storm. And if you look at the monies that have gone out the door, as you say, they fall into several categories. One is relief aimed at individuals, and probably the biggest and most important piece of that is the unemployment insurance changes we made: the additional \$600 a week, also making sure that unemployment compensation was eligible to a much broader group of people than is normally the case. That is going to be a critical lifeline.

Now, that said, there have been very serious implementation problems. Just look at my state of Maryland. We're getting calls – hundreds per day – from people who have not been able to access those funds. And so that's creating a critical cash flow problem for them. It means that other forms of assistance like food assistance are even more important, and we see longer lines, partly because of the backup on UI.

There is also, of course, the individual payments that have gone out, and many of those have been sent. Many are still in the mail or have not been processed, and then there are also, as you indicated, the programs like the Paycheck Protection Program that were designed to help small businesses and non-profits keep more employees on their payrolls.

There was a rocky rollout there. We have made important reforms, and I think, you know, again, there's a mixed-results story. But all told, it is fair to say that without these programs people would be in much more desperate shape than they are.

The last point I'll make here, Steve, is we do see this big disconnect between Wall Street and Main Street. On one of the days where we reached record numbers of Americans who were unemployed, we actually saw the stock market go way up. And we do have over 35 million people out of work. We have an unemployment rate today around 20 percent, so the economy of course is taking a big hit, and the big question will be, are we able to weather the storm, and then what kind of recovery will we see.

MR. MORRISON:

So let's talk a bit about the politics of getting these measures through. We've had these four measures through. It's an extraordinary scale of investment. One economist, I think it was Paul Krugman, last week estimated that when you look at these bills it's covering 70 to 80 percent of the wage bill of Americans, which is truly extraordinary.

How did this happen in the politics of getting these measures through on a bipartisan basis? I mean, Congress, once it got into action – and there were some delays in getting into action – but once it got into action Congress moved fairly expeditiously through these different measures. What was it that made a bipartisan level of consensus possible, in your view? What were the drivers?

SEN. VAN HOLLEN:

Well, you're right. I think everybody knows that we're in a very politically polarized period of time over the last many years. And yet, Congress was able to quickly come together and pass four pieces of legislation in relatively short order. And I do think it's an indication of a recognition of the incredible national emergency that we were facing. We wanted to rush resources to the front lines of the healthcare system – nurses, doctors – also make sure we invest resources in looking for a vaccine, as well as for therapeutics. And then on the economic side, a recognition that if you're going to stop the virus you have to engage in social distancing. And if you have social distancing that's means the economy is going to slow down. And you need to help people weather the storm.

So while there many differences of opinion and we did have a vigorous debate on these bills, in the end we were able to pull together. I will say that there were lots of provisions in the final bills that we passed that were important to working people and small businesses that were not part of the original proposals from the Trump administration or from Senator McConnell and Senate Republicans. But you know, in the end the process worked. It's not perfect, but it's certainly an important response.

MR. MORRISON:

What is your thinking on the debate that's unfolded recently around what are the unintended consequences if you're paying out a generous \$600 per

week unemployment additional benefit? Does that deter people from going back to work, in your view?

SEN. VAN HOLLEN:

I think people want to work. And you know, you want to make sure you have the security of a job. The \$600 extra weekly payment expires at the end of July. Now, I do think that we should continue that or certainly some other enhanced payment going forward, but I want to make it clear that if you have a job or if you've got a job offer you're not entitled to collect the additional \$600 a week.

Now, I've joined with some of my Senate colleagues, Senator Chris Murphy and Senator Jeff Merkley, to propose something called the Rebuilding Main Street Act, which takes advantage of what's called the workshare program. So if you're a small employer and you don't have enough customers coming in your door today to hire back all your employees – let's say you can only bring back 30 percent of them at 30 – or excuse me, bring them back at 30 percent pay – you could go on a workshare program, and as part of that, under our proposal small business could also get funds to help support some of their fixed costs, up to \$300,000. It's a much more flexible program than PPP. We need to fix PPP in the process.

But I do – and the last point I want to make there, Steve, is that if you adopt that program, every single worker is better off coming back to work. Even though they continue to benefit from the additional \$600 a week, they also get their benefit of at least a partial paycheck from their employer. So we think that's a way to bring people back to work in a way that helps the worker and the small businesses at the same time.

MR. MORRISON:

Yes. I found this workshare proposal that you've put forward quite intriguing and an interesting sort of additional new innovation that could be – it's not entirely new, it would be expanding on something that we know works.

Can you also say a bit about the calculations that people make, individuals make, about going back to work? As things are reopening right now, it's not simply material considerations that come into play. There are considerations around personal protection and safety against the virus. There's issues around home care for children or others. What are you hearing from your constituents as they try? I think you're absolutely right that everybody wants to get back to a life that gave them full meaning before, and it may be in a new normal, but they're having to make a complicated set of decisions right now.

SEN. VAN HOLLEN:

Well, first, on the health-care front, I mean, you're absolutely right. We want to make sure that when people come back to work, they're coming back to work in a safe environment, which is why the bill that passed the House most recently that we've been pushing Senator McConnell to take up and vote on in the Senate contains a provision directing the federal

government, directing OSHA to establish a set of health-care standards, workforce safety standards, because that obviously is an important consideration. We don't want to require people to come back into unsafe circumstances.

And childcare is a very big issue. You know, we've been having students, of course, not at school, and most schools in the country are not reopening this year. And of course, then we've got the summer coming. And childcare is a top priority – affordable childcare, safe childcare – for families. And again, the HEROES Act, which passed the House, has significant additional support to provide to states for affordable childcare. And you know, we talked about how the earlier four bills, especially the CARES Act, passed the United States Congress in a bipartisan manner. Whereas, of course, we now have this big bill that's come out of the House that covers a lot of the issues you're asking about right now and addresses some of those problems, which is why we'd like to see Senator McConnell take it up. And if he doesn't want to pass it as is – I mean, we all have, you know, proposed changes. Let's debate them, but let's get it done.

MR. MORRISON:

Yes. Well, we do seem to be at a critical turning point right now where we're trying to think more long term than we did a few months back. And by that I mean, you know, some of these key measures are going to be spent out or get – as you point out, they'll reach the end and they need to be extended, and for what period. And we are seeing this debate emerging – Jerome Powell, the head of the Federal Reserve, I think pushed that debate forward in saying, look, we have to make a bigger and longer-term commitment and investment here in order to avoid deep damage to the U.S. economy. That view, of course, is something that gives great support to the notion around the HEROES Act. Others are arguing, wait a second, we need – there's so much money on the table and there's so much happening here, let's pause for a bit and see where we are and see what is happening. And there's worry about, of course, too much deficit, too much spending.

Tell us a bit about your own views on this. There was a very important Banking Committee meeting last week that you participated in, in which the administration, members of the Senate Banking debated these issues out. Tell us a little bit about where that stands, that debate.

SEN. VAN HOLLEN:

Well, that's right, we did have an important hearing in the Banking Committee. It was an all-virtual hearing, which of course is a new experience for the different Senate Committees. But as you say, the chairman of the Federal Reserve, in his Sphinx-like manner, but nevertheless I think set a clear direction that he thought additional fiscal action was required, pointing out that the Federal Reserve has important tools but they are limited.

And as you indicated, a lot of the monies allocated by Congress in these bills take some time to spend out, although those for individuals have, of course, moved faster than some of the others. And that means you've got to be sort of looking over the horizon. And if you look at the projections from the Federal Reserve, if you look at the projections from the Congressional Budget Office, you'll see that, you know, towards the end of the year, while things may be better than they are now, we're going to still have very high levels of unemployment.

And one of the things the chairman of the Federal Reserve has pointed out is the stickiness of unemployment. We find that to the extent people are out of work for longer periods of time, it's harder for them to get back into the workforce. So the more people we can keep on payroll, the more people we can have safely come back to work, the better, and we need all the tools to do that. So I'm of the camp that we should act now, and that's what the HEROES Act does.

And I should point out that one-third of that is assistance to state and local governments. What does that mean? I mean, these are the essential public services that we all get in our counties and places where we live, and they include everything from, picking up the trash to emergency services to schools and making sure that teachers continue to get paid. And I can tell you that Mitch McConnell's first prescription, which was, just let them go bankrupt, would have just made a bad situation much, much worse. And so that's one element of the HEROES Act. It does represent about a third of the bill. And I can tell you, speaking to my local officials, they're talking about significant budget cuts, and that doesn't help anybody. It hurts everybody. So I think we need to move forward.

MR. MORRISON:

Well, here in the District we're looking at an \$800 million annual deficit at the moment, which is a huge problem that we're facing here in the District of Columbia. That HEROES Act includes extending the \$1,200 direct payments to individuals. It includes extending the unemployment insurance benefits, including that \$600 payout, through January. It heightens the investment in testing. Hazard pay for essential workers, 200 billion (dollars). Up until just recently it seemed like there was a bit of a political standoff in Congress around this, but yesterday Senator McConnell made a statement signaling that, ready to move something. The White House in the last couple of days has sent very similar signals. So you have the HEROES Act out there as the measure passed by the House. Tell us what lies ahead, in your view, and the way forward in trying to find a compromise set of provisions here.

SEN. VAN HOLLEN:

Well, you're right, I think there's a growing recognition that we need to act once more with a major package of legislation. Senator McConnell had to walk back those earlier remarks he made about allowing local jurisdictions to go bankrupt. And the Trump administration recognizes

that additional help will be necessary to support the economy and to support workers.

So where do we go from here? Well, really, the ball is in Senator McConnell's court, the administration's court. As we were talking, the House has acted. They put their proposal on the table. So they need to tell us what they like, what they don't like, and they've been very vague about it. They've been slow walking this and they've not been engaged in negotiations. If you read the tea leaves and listen to the statements you just mentioned, it sounds like they may now be ready to engage. But Senator McConnell's been, you know, talking about maybe the end of June. I think we should act earlier. He's put other parameters and conditions and demands on the table which he hasn't fully fleshed out. So we're in for a big debate. I just hope, as we debate, we don't lose sight of the overall objective, which is to help people weather the storm.

MR. MORRISON:

Thank you. Thank you very much.

Let's turn to some of the public-health measures. We've entered a really uncertain and ambiguous and very anxious period right now, as states have reopened, counties have reopened while urging citizens to continue to adhere to social distancing and other things that will control infections and putting local capacities in place. There's a real fear that states and localities are not yet prepared to manage to do the testing and the contact tracing and isolation/quarantining required to respond to the outbreaks that will be inevitable. There's a fear that people are going to relax too quickly in their personal behavior in social distancing, wearing masks, handwashing, other things. Do you fear that we're at a high risk of a rebound outbreak here across the United States?

SEN. VAN HOLLEN:

Well, I have tried to listen to the health-care experts, not the political folks. And we have, of course, from the very start seen very mixed messages from this administration. On the one hand, we have folks who are trying to give us the facts, people like Dr. Fauci, and of course then you have, the president undercutting some of those messages. So let's continue to focus on messages from the health-care experts. And what they tell us is that in order to reopen safely we need to do it gradually and with tests.

So it's not as if we're going to go from an "off" light switch to an "on" bright light. We're going to go through the dimmer light stages. And that needs to be accompanied with ample testing so that we can quickly detect any kind of outbreak, and isolate it, and do the necessary contact tracing because we want to make sure that any outbreak remains a campfire and doesn't becoming a bonfire. Reignition of the pandemic – reignition would, of course, undermine confidence both in the health-care fight as well as the economy. And so that's why it's important that we get this right. And I do worry because of the mixed messaging, that you could see a reignition of the virus and setbacks, which just underscores the

importance of listening to the health-care experts, taking their guidance, and ramping up enough testing.

And I must say, this has been the most frustrating area. Many of us have been pushing for weeks, in fact months now, the Trump administration to fully utilize the Defense Production Act, the DPA, to produce supplies of all the different testing equipment. And the reality is, we're still seeing significant shortages. I think today we're doing about 400,000 tests per day. The experts – there's a range but 5 million a day seems to be a number many people have converged around. And we're not close to that. And the federal government has essentially offloaded a lot of this responsibility on the states, which in my view is irresponsible.

MR. MORRISON:

One of our audience members raised the issue of the racial inequities that are running through the response and what we see in terms of the fatalities and extreme illness being very much disproportionately borne by people of color, people of poverty. We also have acutely vulnerable other populations. We know that those in nursing facilities, those that are frontline responders, those that are working in service industries, in grocery stores and the like. Say a little bit about what we're learning and what more we need to do with respect to racial inequities and these other acutely vulnerable populations.

SEN. VAN HOLLEN:

Well, that's exactly right, the question that came in. What we've seen is, this pandemic has exposed deep disparities and inequities in our health-care systems and other systems that we knew were there and need to be dealing with on an urgent basis. Many of us have been working on closing those gaps in health-care disparities for a very long time. And we need to urgently address those. We're seeing that very much in my state of Maryland, where communities of color, especially the African American community, have been especially hard hit by COVID-19.

I urged our governor to make sure that we released the data, the demographic data and the ZIP code data. I'm pleased that he did that. And just recently our congressional delegation wrote to our governor saying: 'OK, it's important to collect this information to better understand COVID-19, but we really need you to use it to inform decisions and make sure resources, like testing resources, get to places they're needed most.' As you say, we're doing that with other hot spots, like nursing homes, where it's, again, taken way too long to ramp up testing. And we've seen awful losses.

On Maryland's Eastern Shore, our poultry plants, we've seen some of the same issues that other meat processing plants have experienced around the country, and so we've tried to surge resources there. But it's just as important, and equally important, that we surge resources to communities that have been hardest hit. And that's true when it comes to the economic relief, but it's also true when it comes to deploying testing and making sure that we stop any outbreaks that may reignite here. And so that has to

be part of our strategy. That's what we said to our governor. And that needs to be true across the country.

MR. MORRISON:

Yes. It's been striking recently to watch how difficult, how much in Maryland folks are struggling. And they're not alone, but we've got the underserved populations in Prince George's County, which is really the biggest hotspot within the state of Maryland. We have, as you point out, the meat processing plants out in Accomack County. We have enormous problems in the nursing home sector. And tensions between the governor and county officials, and a bifurcated approach. Can you say a little bit, why is it that Maryland's struggling in this fashion?

SEN. VAN HOLLEN:

Well, you know, early on I think, Maryland was a good model for the country in terms of everybody was sort of team Maryland, and everyone's messages were the same with respect to fighting this pandemic, and the health-care challenges. But as we move toward reopening in our state, we've had less of a uniform messaging. And in some ways the governor has done what the president did, which is to say local jurisdictions in Maryland, you know, just do what you want, without enough overall guidance.

And it is true. Obviously, different regions need to adapt policies to meet their specific needs, but we also know that the overall health-care requirements and protections, those are uniform. I mean, there are some guidelines that everyone needs to follow, no matter where they live and work. And so I do believe that in the last couple weeks we've seen greater levels of confusion.

And the testing issue remains a problem in Maryland, as it does throughout the country. We were talking about nursing homes. We're still having difficulty getting the full amount of testing that's necessary in nursing homes. And so that's just one example. The lack of a national testing strategy is going to be a serious problem. And it can be fixed. And that's what's so frustrating.

MR. MORRISON:

Well, it's true that there's no uniform standards or – there's some guidance that's come out from CDC and HHS. HHS guidance on testing came out this past weekend. CDC guidance on reopening has also come out. But we still don't have a clear national standard at all. We've seen such a proliferation of different standards and different measures being taken across different communities. I mean, just looking at the way that the District of Columbia's making its calculations about reopening as against Virginia and Maryland.

They started as a very unified leadership across those ranks, but as they got closer and closer to reopening you could see them begin to diverge. And that was natural in the sense they were responding to these local pressures and the considerations that came into play for each of them, the two governors and our mayor. But it also was a sign of just what was

missing, that we just don't have enough thinking and guidance coming forward from a national level. Do you think we need to just continue to hammer on that gap?

SEN. VAN HOLLEN:

I do. I think it's important. And you made the very important observation that if you go back a number of weeks or months you had all those jurisdictions that sort of work in coordination saying that they were going to move together in a uniform way, recognizing that this is a region. This is just one example, of course, in the country. But now everybody has gone a little bit their own way. And I do believe that the lack of a consistent message risks undermining some of the progress that we've made through the social distancing today.

You referenced the fact that we now had HHS provide a testing blueprint, they called it. That was only done because in the most recent bill that passed the Congress on a bipartisan basis we directed them to do it. You may recall that the president said that testing was, quote, "overrated," even though the experts tell us it's absolutely essential. And if you look at that proposal, some health-care experts have said it sounds like "The Hunger Games" where, again, it's everyone on their own, everybody go find their own supplies.

They did include some targets in terms of what they wanted to produce, for example, in terms of swabs. But their track record so far from the federal level in terms of producing the supplies has been terrible. So it's one thing to put it on paper. It's another thing to have a strategy to actually accomplish this. And so now we're – again, this testing – and this is going to be a repeated thing when we're talking about health care – it's so important, because that's the only way you can have confidence that the pandemic is not reigniting and spreading as we try to return to some sense of normalcy.

MR. MORRISON:

Thank you.

It's probably not too early to begin thinking about how vaccines are going to be administered in this country, including in Maryland. We haven't focused too much on that because it seemed like a distant critical milestone that will be transformative, potentially, if we arrive at a safe and effective vaccine. But there's also the launch of Operation Warp Speed.

And when you listen to some of the key vaccine developers who are making claims, and along with Tony Fauci last night on national television saying, I'm beginning to feel more confident we may have a vaccine that can be administered by the end of the year – a remarkable timeline and a big change in thinking from what he was saying just a short while ago about a 12- to 18-month timeline.

So some of this may be wishful thinking. Some of it may be true. We are in a different phase of life sciences and transformations in synthetic biology and the like. And we have some very promising candidates out there, but it's a very uncertain process.

What's your thinking about what we should do in order to lay the groundwork now for getting the population to have trust and confidence in the vaccine as it's coming forward? Fully a third of Americans in the surveys are saying they're really not very convinced they want to take this up. And if we're going to get to herd immunity, we're looking at 60 to 80 percent uptake.

So that's – you know, it's a hazard. It's a hazard that we'll have delays and controversy surrounding vaccine, even if it's a safe and effective one. Now, we know there'll be misinformation campaigns and we know there are going to be local capacity constraints. And the same inequities that we've been talking about are going to be at play as the vaccine comes forward.

Tell me, what do you think we should start doing now in this regard?

SEN. VAN HOLLEN:

Well, one of the very first steps I made after the outbreak of the coronavirus was to visit Tony Fauci's shop over at the National Institutes of Health, which is one of our national treasures and we're proud that it's located in the state of Maryland. And I talked to folks there, and they had just begun. This was very early on. They had begun those clinical trials, a few people. They were doing them out in Washington state. And at that time Dr. Fauci was saying it would take 12 to 18 months.

And again, the timeline does remain uncertain. It is good that we have so many scientists working to try to find a vaccine. And the very first bills passed by Congress were to rush more resources to help with that purpose.

And as you indicated, there are going to be a number of challenges, just on the issue of misinformation. We should be fighting that really from the start, right now, making it clear that, if and when there's a vaccine and it's gone through the trials, that it's very important that people take it, because that's the only way to stop the transmission of the virus is if we have, as you said, a large share, a very large share, of the population getting vaccinated.

And you're going to have the anti-vaxxers out there with misinformation, which again underscores the importance of a strong national message. And, again, it's unfortunately not been a strong point from this present administration, talking about some of the therapeutics that he has been recommending when, in fact, the most recent studies show that they can be harmful. So when it comes to the vaccine, we all need to be on the same page.

Now, access is going to be essential. I mean, a vaccine doesn't do any good unless you have enough people taking it, as you indicated. And if you look at the testing, we worked – one of the very first things we did was make sure testing for coronavirus was universally available, to the extent that we can ramp it up, meaning that it shouldn't be prohibitively costly, that it shouldn't – everybody who needs to take it should be able to take it. We don't want people saying I can't afford to be tested. That hurts them and it hurts everybody else.

And so we did make those changes so that that's uniformly available. The same needs to be true of a vaccine. I mean, we need to make sure that it's available to everybody, that it's not unaffordable. This is a larger issue. We can talk about the larger issue of prescription drug costs. And there are a number of proposals, including some I've advanced, to deal with that. But it is going to be absolutely essential that the rollout be done in a fair way and in a way where it's accessible to everybody. We can focus it first on populations that are most at risk, but we need to do that in a fair and equitable way.

MR. MORRISON:

Thank you.

Two quick comments, and then I'd like to ask you a question of an international sort. The two comments are, first of all, thank you for your leadership on the national-service proposals that you've pushed forward with respect to AmeriCorps and Peace Corps with Senator Coons and others, and with respect to FEMA, the measure that you advanced with Senator Markey. I think those are terribly important, and I hope those do move forward and I hope we can be supportive of those measures. I think those are essential to get the kind of core force that we need of national service at this moment in our history.

The second point I want to make is the mental health, the anxiety, depression dimension of this is something we're just beginning to understand better. Some of the studies, some of the surveys, are showing fully a third of Americans suffering from excess stress and depression. And I do hope we can pay more attention to that reality as we move forward.

The international question is around the World Health Organization. We know that the World Health Organization has come under assault from President Trump. He's suspended payments. He's threatening to withdraw membership. He's threatening to divert the 400 (million dollars), 450 million (dollars) a year that we invest in that organization. And it's coming at a particularly acute and poignant moment, when the pandemic is beginning to surge in low-income and lower-middle-income countries with very large, unprotected, dense populations and the like.

The Senate, it seems to me, is a place where cooler heads may be able to prevail in arguing in favor of, ‘wait a second, let’s not blow a hole – WHO can be reformed, but let’s not trash it at this critical moment.’

I just wanted to get your view. Is it possible, on a bipartisan basis, for folks in the Senate to sort of push back quietly or loudly, whatever seems to make the most sense?

SEN. VAN HOLLEN:

Well, I certainly hope so, because it would be shooting ourselves in the foot to try to incapacitate or walk away from the WHO. But let me first thank you, Dr. Morrison, and CSIS for all the work you’ve done when it comes to national-service programs, including AmeriCorps. I do think that can be a very important part of our response in terms of testing, in terms of contact tracing, and help put back to work, in a safe way, Americans who are out of work. So we are proposing – Senator Markey, Coons and I and others – ramping that up in a significant way.

And then there are, of course, other huge national priorities, even when we’re beyond the pandemic, that AmeriCorps can be deployed to address. On the mental-health front, I just want to second your concern about that. And again, the HEROES Act passed the House has significant additional resources for that purpose.

Now, we all know that the World Health Organization is not a perfect organization. They have lots of issues. But really they are the organization that does have worldwide scope. They are essential as one of our early-warning systems when it comes to pandemics and deploying resources to fight them.

And we can obviously investigate, in due course, how this virus began and the secrecy around it on the part of the government of China and what WHO did or did not do. But to say that, because the organization has flaws, you’re going to walk away from it, makes no sense. We should use our influence, we should use our leadership, to make the necessary reforms but provide it with the resources they need to do this job.

And in addition to it being important on the health-care front, it’s also a huge mistake to allow the government of China to essentially usurp what has been traditionally American leadership in WHO and other international organizations. That just plays into their hands. And finally, what a pandemic teaches us, I mean, we shouldn’t have to be learning this lesson, is that diseases like the coronavirus know no boundaries. And that’s why it’s so important to help use an international organization with international reach to detect these viruses early and put them out, to help people overseas, but also to help everybody here at home avoid the spread.

MR. MORRISON:

Thank you. We opened this conversation this morning with a kind of solemn moment of tribute and honor to those 100,000 American

individuals who've died of COVID-19 in the last three months. I'd like to close by asking you, what gives you the greatest hope and strength today as you look forward? What's giving you the greatest hope in our ability to prevail in this next period?

SEN. VAN HOLLEN: Well, what gives me hope is when I see the response of the American people, reaching out to help their neighbors in need. So, if you have an elderly couple next door that was not able to go to the grocery store, people are reaching out and offering to go with them. People, including small businesses, jumping in to make masks for people. I went to a – what had been used as a sort of hospital that had been covered into a makeshift mask factory where people who were out of work were using their time to help make these masks. And so I do believe that American spirit of helping others is alive and well, even in this era of political polarization.

And so that gives me hope that we will pull through, this idea of neighbors helping neighbors. But it's important that message come from the political and elected leadership as well. We need a message of unity. We need a message of helping one another, and a message, as we were just talking about, of the fact that the world does need to come together to defeat this. I mean, this is a global challenge. And we need to be reaching out to our allies and others around the world to fight this together, because we are all in it together. I know it's been said many times, but it is a fact.

MR. MORRISON: Well, Senator, on behalf of everyone at CSIS, I want to thank you so much for spending this time with us this morning. And I want to thank you for your remarkable leadership on all of these matters that we've talked about today. I mean, you've left your fingerprints on almost every one of these topics that we've talked about. And we're very grateful, and we're in your debt for all that you're doing. So thank you so much.

SEN. VAN HOLLEN: Well, thank you for bringing us together, and thank you for your leadership and CSIS's leadership. And I want to thank everybody who tuned in today to this new form of communication. I will say that I have been in regular communication with lots of Maryland constituents. We've done three large townhalls where I brought on health-care experts. So it is an example of us adapting to these new circumstances. So thank you for doing this.

MR. MORRISON: Thank you.

(END)