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TRANSCRIPT
Online Event

“Ukraine in Crisis”

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FEATURING
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Member, Senate Ukraine Caucus*

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Dr. John J.
Hamre:

Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome. My name is John Hamre and I'm pleased to welcome all of you for what's going to be a very important and interesting conversation about one of the greatest crises that the world is facing now, and that is this ominous presence of Russia on the border of Ukraine and the prospect of war in Europe.

We're very fortunate that we're going to have two Senators with us who have been to Ukraine recently, live experience. They have been present to know what Ukraine is facing.

And of course, we have a very important obligation here. When we encouraged Ukraine to give up nuclear weapons, we entered into a solemn agreement with them to help with their security. Now we are all engaged in this. This is a very ominous moment, an important moment.

Fortunately, we have two very fine leaders that have led the way in the Senate. Senator Shaheen is with us. And I think we'll turn to you, Senator Shaheen, right now, and then when Senator Portman can join us we'll have Senator Portman come in. My colleague Dr. Seth Jones is going to lead the conversation. But I'm really grateful that you would be with us today, Senator. Thank you. Let's turn to you.

Senator Jeanne
Shaheen (D-NH):

Delighted to be with you. Thank you.

Dr. Hamre:

Go right ahead, please.

Dr. Seth G. Jones:

Senator Shaheen, let me just start off and ask you the first question, which is you met with President Zelensky recently and other Ukrainian officials, and what message did you convey to the Ukrainians? And what did you learn from your engagements with them?

Sen. Shaheen:

Well, I was pleased to – along with Senator Portman – to co-lead a bipartisan delegation to Ukraine about 10 days ago. And we wanted to – there were seven senators, four Democrats and three Republicans. And our message was very direct. It was that we stand in a bipartisan – in bipartisan unity in the Senate in support of Ukraine, and in opposition to what Vladimir Putin is doing. And we were also there to see what we could do to be helpful to Ukraine, and to help really deter Putin, who seems so hellbent on going in and invading Ukraine.

Dr. Jones:

That's helpful. When it comes to just outlining, Senator Shaheen, what is at stake here? You know, there's – on the one hand, there's the very specific issue of Ukraine. And Ukraine is important. But Ukraine is also a democratic country. And it's a relatively recent one. So Freedom House, for example, has

come out with data recently that in the last 15 consecutive years we have seen a decline in the number of democratic countries and a rise in authoritarianism. So what are the bigger issues in addition to just Ukraine that are at stake here that Americans should be cognizant of as we're talking about Ukraine?

Sen. Shaheen: Well, Ukraine is a new democracy. But they should have the ability to determine their own future. And we cannot let Russia determine the future of any sovereign state. We can't give them a veto over the ability of any nation to join NATO. And it's not just Ukraine that should be concerned about this. We've seen Russia's aggressive activities began in 2008 when they went into Georgia. We saw it again in 2014 when they seized Crimea and went into the Donbas and Ukraine. We've seen it in Moldova, where they've tried to destabilize the government. We've seen it in Montenegro, where they initiated – tried to initiate a coup to overthrow the elected government.

And all democracies have at stake whether we're going to take action against oppressors like Vladimir Putin and his actions in Russia. And it's in all of our interests. And as we look at what's happening right now in Ukraine, this is the potential for the biggest conflict since World War II. And if we don't take a stand against Putin now and hold him accountable, it's not at all clear what country's going to be next. I just had a session with a number of Senators and Ambassadors from the Baltic States and Poland. And they were all very concerned about the threat to their sovereign integrity by what Russia is doing. And they were very encouraged to see the announcement that the United States is going to be working with NATO to look at deploying troops into the Baltics and along the western border of Russia.

Dr. Jones: So along those lines, Senator Shaheen, one last question before we bring in Senator Portman, and thanks for joining us. And that is I wanted to just touch base briefly on today in particular U.S. said it would send several thousand troops to the eastern flank of NATO, particularly to Poland and Romania. Last week the Department of Defense placed 8,500 U.S. forces on heightened alert in order to support a potential NATO response. Are these the right steps that the U.S. should be taking to support our NATO allies, as the crisis continues to intensify?

Sen. Shaheen: Well, I think they're among the kinds of steps that we need to be taking. As I heard earlier today from the Ambassadors, the countries on the eastern flank of Europe are very concerned about Russia's aggressive behavior. And they – those countries are all members of NATO. And so they have the protection of Article 5 in NATO. And they were very interested to see the United States take that action, and to see NATO really act unified, which, given some of the threats, it has been challenging. And what's ironic about this situation is that Vladimir Putin claims that he's taking action against Ukraine because he feels

threatened. He feels like Russia's security is threatened and what he's doing is exactly the opposite of de-escalating the situation. What it has done is unite NATO in opposition to the aggression that Russia's taking and that's exactly the opposite of what he claims he wants to do. So he has manufactured this crisis and the West needs to respond.

Dr. Jones: So I want to bring – Senator Portman, thanks for joining us. And I want to get your thoughts on your extent – your assessment of the severity of the situation. But before we do that, I want to go to the force disposition map we have and this goes to Senator Shaheen's point that as we look at the Russian laydown of ground forces, air facilities, and naval bases, as people here can see, Ukraine is surrounded on three sides. And those red rectangles on the Belarus-Ukrainian border were not there just a week ago; they were moved in mostly by rail.

If we go to the slide of the overview of Russian forces in Yelnya, the big one: eight new compounds of Russian forces at Yelnya. If we go to the next one: the 45 percent increase. Our satellite imagery analysis at CSIS is showing those are main battle tanks and howitzers and towed artillery, and surface-to-air missiles. If you go to the next one, we're seeing another compound, same site – 23 and 24 percent increases in Russian activity. So in turning to you, Senator Portman, this to us, anyway, looks like it is a growing presence. These are forces that could be used for an invasion of Ukraine. But what is your sense of the threat now?

Senator Rob Portman (R-OH): Well, the threat level clearly has increased and you just laid it out. By looking at these intel maps, which, by the way, have been provided to all of our allies, including the Ukrainians, and there's really no question as to what's going on. So when the Russians say these are just exercises, they're very different than what happened in the spring, different than what's happened in the past, and different in terms of the types of troops, the types of equipment, the health units that are now moving to the border preparing for blood transfusions, things like that. So it's a very different profile. And none of this is classified material; it's all in public sources now. So it's very clear that there is a massive, unwarranted, and intimidating buildup going on.

But in addition to that, Seth – and, you know, Senator Shaheen and I just got back from Ukraine; we've both traveled there a lot, I've been there I think six times since 2014 – things have changed on the Ukrainian side, too, which is that they're more prepared and ready than ever, so it's not 2014 when Crimea was taken with very little military interaction. Ukrainians are ready to fight and they're better equipped, better trained. We need to do even more to equip them. They need more military weaponry to be able to push back against a potential invasion. They're looking for more anti-tank, anti-air, anti-ship missiles, as an example. But this is going to be a very bloody conflict, should it occur. And I've been to the line of contact; I've met with

Ukrainian soldiers out there. These are patriots. These are people who are not going to be intimidated. They may not have the capability the Russians have, but they certainly have the spirit. So I think that's one thing that Senator Shaheen and I have tried to emphasize, as we've been here in Washington talking about it and certainly in Ukraine, is that not only is the United States standing firm with the people of Ukraine and standing firm against the Russian intimidation and the destabilization efforts of all kinds, kinetic but as well what we're seeing in terms of disinformation and cyberattacks, but also to make the point that if this conflict occurs that the consequences will be devastating for Russia, and that includes the sanctions but also the fact that the military conflict will be very bloody and difficult for them.

So my hope is that the Russians won't make a huge mistake and cross the line. Meanwhile, they're already doing a number of things which are clearly harming Ukraine and trying to destabilize Ukraine. So I think, you know, some consequences are needed now, but the major consequences that would come, should they invade, would be devastating for the Russian economy and for the Russian military, I believe. So that's one of the messages that we have been talking about as we give presentations here in Washington and certainly in Ukraine itself.

Dr. Jones: So I wonder if I could turn to Senator Shaheen on the subject of sanctions, because that's, obviously, been a big subject. There are at least two parts of this discussion. One is the pre-invasion sanctions and one are the post-invasion sanctions. So, Senator Shaheen, I'm wondering how you – what your thoughts are on both of those different types and what kinds of sanctions we should be prepared to enact against not just the Russians, but if they're doing this also from Belarus too whether we should also expand that to any of Russia's partners in conducting the invasion.

Sen. Shaheen: Well, I think it's the kind of issue that's under consideration. And we are very close to having agreement between the chair and ranking member on the Foreign Relations Committee on a bill that would look at preemptive sanctions, ones that we can put in place that respond to what we've already seen from Russia in terms of their aggressive behavior, but then also looking at what kinds of sanctions – and as it's been characterized by the State Department, by the president, by the chairman and ranking member of the Foreign Relations Committee, we're talking about massive sanctions on Putin and Russia so that, should he invade Ukraine, he would feel and the country would feel very directly the impact of those sanctions.

One of the things that we need to do is make sure that we are clear with Vladimir Putin what we're looking at and how he will be accountable for his actions. And you know, one of the troubling things to me is all of the reports that I've seen suggest that Vladimir Putin is not really listening to anyone,

that no one wants to tell him what the potential consequences of his action might be, that he's in Sochi in his palatial dacha and that he is really not listening to anyone who might have news for him that he doesn't want to hear.

And as Senator Portman pointed out, what we heard from the Ukrainians is that they are ready to fight. This is not the same Ukraine that Russia went into in 2014. It is a Ukraine that has much more of a national identity, that has much more of a professional military, it's much better equipped, and that is ready to fight for their country. This is – they've had a war going on – again, as Senator Portman pointed out – for the last eight years. Since Russia went into Ukraine, they've lost 14,000 Ukrainians fighting that war. And they are still fighting it because they don't want Russia in their country. They want to be able to determine their own future. And that's why this is such a concern – should be such a concern for Europe, for NATO, for the Transatlantic Alliance, and for all countries who are looking at determining their own futures.

Dr. Jones: So we talked a little bit about sanctions. We've talked about military assistance. We'll continue to talk about various aspects of those. But I wondered, in asking Senator Portman, the Russians have responded and signaled that they would respond to sanctions and would respond to military assistance to the Ukrainians. I know the current administration – U.S. administration has been talking with natural gas producers in recent weeks to discuss a surge in supply to European countries in case Russia cuts off some of its output during a crisis. We've had Russian ships off the coast of Ireland, where the transatlantic fiber-optic cables are. There are – there certainly are concerns about Russian offensive cyber activities. So how do we think second- and third-order effects about how to protect ourselves and the West if the Russians do respond to that?

Sen. Portman: Are you asking me, Seth?

Dr. Jones: Yes.

Sen. Portman: OK. Well, first of all, we don't know what happens with regard to Nord Stream, much less other sources of, you know, Russian energy to Europe. But you said that Russia might cut it off. I would hope Germany would cut it off. I would hope that if there were an invasion of Europe, which is what this would be – and again, a bloody conflict, first time a major land campaign like this, if it happens, in over 75 years, not since World War II – one would hope that there wouldn't be a question but that the Russian revenue that comes from both Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 would be cut off.

So I would hope that that wouldn't be a Russian decision, but it would be a European decision. And I wish that Germany would be more forthright about

that now. We're told that, privately, that's what they are saying, but we need to hear it publicly and I think it would have an effect on Russia, again, being deterred from taking this action, which would be such a terrible mistake.

So that's one of my responses, would be, you know, the United States and our other allies around the world, including in the Middle East, are ready to provide more LNG, liquified natural gas, and other forms of energy that we might be able to provide. And that could help. But, you know, this is – this is the danger of becoming dependent on Russia for your natural gas. So I would hope countries in the region would also look to other sources of energy – as France does, as the U.K. does.

In terms of cyberattacks, they're ongoing, Seth. We are sustaining Russian cyberattacks on a regular basis. And I'm on the Homeland Security Governmental Affairs Committee. We are trying to draft legislation right now to push back against things like the Colonial Pipeline attack. So many of these have been traced back to Russia. And, as you know, this is a point that has been made to the government of Russia many times by our government at every level. And sometimes they indicate that they're taking some action against some of these nonstate actors and some of the state actors. Sometimes they don't.

And meanwhile, we continue – both on our public websites and our private websites and some of our critical infrastructure – to have constant probing and constant attacks. So I don't – I don't know that that would change much. If there was a more massive cyberattack on us than there already is on a daily basis, then we have the ability to respond offensively. And that would be appropriate. So, look, I think the point here is not to have Russia attack and then to have sanctions be put in place. The point is to keep Russia from – again, I've said this a few times – from making a terrible mistake. Because the consequences would be so devastating. And if they do it, then the free world must respond.

You indicated earlier that authoritarian regimes are expanding. Well, every authoritarian regime in the world is looking at this situation and wondering whether the lamp of freedom will be extinguished here, or whether we will stand up – not the United States, but the free world – to say that this is inappropriate, we're not going to let it stand. And, you know, that's a challenge not just for Europe and not just our NATO allies, but for freedom loving countries all over the world. China is looking at this with regard to Taiwan. Iran is looking at this with regard to Lebanon and their interest in expanding their influence throughout the Middle East.

Other countries are in a position of wondering, after our precipitous and chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, whether the United States is up to this. I believe we are. I believe we're showing that. We're going to do it on a

bipartisan basis. And we want to be sure that we have our partners with us. So we are gathering our allies around us. And so far, so good. There are countries that have really stepped up. And I think about Denmark and the F-16s that they sent to the Baltics. Or I think about Canada and the training they're providing. The U.K., certainly. When Senator Shaheen and I were in Kyiv we got to experience a cargo jet from the U.K., a C-17 as I recall, unloading anti-tank weapons that the Ukrainians were very pleased to get.

So countries are stepping up all over the – all over the region. The Baltic countries are doing everything they possibly can to help Ukraine. Poland is, Hungary. So we are – we are blessed to have the greatest alliance in the history of the world, NATO and NATO+. And we need to be sure we are utilizing here it in this instance to avoid, again, what would be a disaster for Europe. And broader than that, it would be a disaster for democracy and freedom and the sovereign right of countries to respect their territorial integrity.

Dr. Jones:

Well, NATO has certainly come alive in the last couple of weeks. And I wanted to turn to Senator Shaheen, because I know she spoke recently with the U.S. Ambassador to NATO Julie Smith. And I wonder if you could talk a little bit about – I mean, there have been divisions within NATO. Senator Portman mentioned the pipeline. There have been others. The Germans prohibited Estonia from exporting German-originated weapons, including the D-30 howitzers. There was the President Macron comment about working with the U.S. but also through the European Union. Some European countries have not supported, at this point, cutting the Russians out of the SWIFT bank transfer system if it comes to that.

But I wonder, Senator Shaheen, if you could characterize what your sense is of where NATO is at right now, and how to continue to improve unity among NATO allies in the face of what I think all of us – and Senator Portman mentioned this earlier too – what this is – this is one of the most significant threats we have seen, certainly in Europe, in quite some time.

Sen. Shaheen:

Well, it is. And if Putin thought he was going to divide NATO by his actions, what he has done has actually unified NATO in ways that it hasn't been in a very long time. I mentioned earlier that I had a chance to have a conversation with the Ambassadors from the Baltic states. And the Ambassador from Estonia was on that Zoom. And I ask him the question about Germany and the howitzers directly, because we've heard those reports. And he said that determination has not been made yet. So while Germany has been reluctant because of their own laws internally, I think it's important to, as Senator Portman did, to thank all of our NATO partners and to try and be accurate in the reports that we have about what activity is going on.

What we heard from Ambassador Smith yesterday was the unity that she's seeing among our NATO partners. Now, there are 30 countries in NATO, so it's – there are going to be expected differences in ways that we respond to certain things. But the fact is what Putin has done is to really unite the NATO alliance in ways that are important to the future of NATO, to the future of Europe, and that provide a counterbalance to what Putin is doing with Russia.

Dr. Jones: Yeah. Thank you. And thanks for the clarification, too. I wondered if I could move briefly to Senator Portman. We've talked a lot about economic issues. We'll come back to some military-related issues as well. But I wonder if you could just talk briefly your thoughts on diplomatic offramps. I mean, I think if deterrence works here, we don't actually go to war. The Russians don't invade. So what is your sense about what that bargaining space looks like right now, as you and we all heard Vladimir Putin said within the last 24 hours that the West, including the U.S., continue to ignore Russia's security demands. He said within the last 24 hours that the U.S. is just trying to goad Russia into a war. So what is your sense about whether there are offramps, there is an ability to negotiate something? Where do we sit right now?

Sen. Portman: Well, I support negotiations. I think they're important. But we have to remember two things. One, Russia is the aggressor here. Ukraine wants to live peacefully side by side with Russia. They're fine with that. They'd certainly like to have Crimea and the Donbas back, since that's their country. But they're not the aggressors here. Russia is the aggressor. And it's the aggressor that's making demands. And these demands, of course, are demands that cannot be met, saying that NATO, which has had an open-door policy for, you know, its entire existence, cannot make a decision as to what countries to allow in, and that countries cannot make a decision to join NATO, which has always been something that has, you know, been available to countries in the region, including in Eastern and Central Europe. And many have taken advantage of it.

So to say that, you know, we're going to put a gun to your head through the aggressive action and then say, and our demand is that you not allow what is the longstanding tradition of NATO and the rules of NATO to stand as it relates to Ukraine, or other countries in the region, is obviously not a negotiating point. That's a demand that obviously cannot be met, would not be met. And therefore, you wonder whether there really is an interest to negotiate. On the other hand, more transparency as to military maneuvers, ways in which we can increase our communication with Russia, that's very positive. We should be doing that. They should be doing that. They should allow monitors, by the way. And Senator Shaheen mentioned Georgia, where they had taken over two oblasts. And, you know, that's supposed to be a monitored situation. It's not, because they won't allow the EU monitors on the Russian – or, the occupied side of the border. So, I mean, I think more

transparency, more information, more communication which has been requested.

On the issue of nuclear weapons, there may be some opportunity for discussion. That would be a give and take by both sides.

But I think we just have to remember Seth that, again, they are the aggressor. They're the ones making these unreasonable demands. And it's not the place of the United States or, frankly, NATO or other members of the EU, to negotiate for Ukraine as to whether they would be able to have the ability to have Article 5, you know, protection.

If the Ukrainians were to give that up, I think they feel they would be in a constant, constant war with Russia, which they have been for the past eight years. And they have lost 14,000 people, which is the equivalent of the United States losing a huge number of people. If you think about it, Ukraine's about 41, 42 million people. With 330 million people, if we were to have lost that same percentage it would be well over a hundred thousand people. How would we feel?

And so that's the situation as I see it in terms of the diplomatic discussions. I think they're positive. I think we should do them. But we certainly shouldn't have high expectations so long as Russia makes unreasonable demands.

Sen. Shaheen: And you know, Seth, I just came from a hearing of the Helsinki Commission, which is a bicameral body that looks at human rights and other issues around the world. And we had Fiona Hill, former Ambassador to Ukraine, we had former Ambassador Taylor talking about the situation in Ukraine with Russia. And one of the things that Ambassador Taylor pointed out, he was – he was much more optimistic than many people who I've heard, but one of the things he said was that – he pointed out this has been the most extensive diplomatic effort by the administration in decades and that so far Putin has not invaded. So he clearly has been given offramps for how to get out of this diplomatically and he is still thinking about what he's going to do.

So, like Senator Portman, I'm not optimistic that in the end he will decide not to invade, but so far, he hasn't done that. And I think that's because of all of these deterrent measures that have been underway with our allies, by NATO, in the Congress the sanctions that have been talked about that are being worked on. So, hopefully, he will listen to all of that and may even listen to some of his own people who may be questioning whether this is the best thing for Russia.

Dr. Jones: Thanks, Senator Shaheen. Both great comments on diplomatic options.

I wonder if I could go to Senator Portman just for a moment. And let's say that Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin do not go in in a conventional way into Ukraine but continue to work to destabilize the country, as they've done, as both of you had indicated, over the last several years with irregular operation, offensive cyberattacks. NotPetya was a Russian GRU targeted attack against Ukrainian critical infrastructure which spilled globally. So there's a – there's still a far-reaching question about to what degree, even if there's a standdown, how do we deal with a Russia that potentially continues to threaten Ukraine? What are our options and what would you suggest?

Sen. Portman: Seth, it's a great question. I think there are three things that we should be doing as a country that don't relate to the possibility of a military invasion or kinetic action.

And one is cyber, where we can provide best practices and help Ukraine. I think if we end up with a bipartisan bill or resolution passing, it will include that. And I think it's partly about sharing with Ukraine some of the best practices that we've been working on in our own country to try to harden our infrastructure, but also to be sure that we are focusing on public-private partnerships to do so, which is something that we probably do more extensively than other countries, including Ukraine. And so closing that gap to be sure that the cyber defensive and offensive capabilities are as strong as possible is something that is very important.

Second, with regard to disinformation, I think there's a huge opportunity for us to help Ukraine there as well. We have this Global Engagement Center at the State Department now that Jeanne and I have supported. Senator Murphy and I were the coauthors of this seven, eight years ago, and this is a perfect example where we should be working with NGOs and with governments in the region to push back against the lies and the propaganda that are coming out constantly, which is part of the destabilization effort, as you know.

And then, finally, I would say, again, in addition to weaponry, you know, a strong Ukraine is a prosperous Ukraine, is one where people see opportunity. And I was there in 2014 when the Maidan was still smoldering. This is a square in the middle of Kyiv where the people stood up in what was called Euromaidan, or the Revolution of Dignity, and they were still – it was still occupied by, you know, patriots from Ukraine that were nervous about the government backing down on the commitment to leave the Russian-backed corrupt government and start something that was more akin to a European or an EU approach.

And they were turning to freedom and, you know, the right to gather, the right to free speech, and all the liberties that we take advantage – that we take for granted so often, and they were also looking for economic

prosperity – in other words, to have a more free-market approach and get away from corruption.

Ukraine has made a lot of progress in that regard. They're not done yet. They've still got more work to do. There still are instances of corruption and oligarchs and so on, but they have made tremendous progress and the economy is doing pretty well. But that's part of our objective also is to ensure that the people, particularly, the young people of Ukraine, see a hopeful future, and that comes from economic prosperity in addition to national security.

So I think those are all things that we, as Americans, have an interest in, the Europeans, certainly, do, and we should continue to promote regardless of what happens here in the short term. As you said, the Russian pressure on Ukraine is unlikely to subside. It will continue one way or the other and, in a way, as Senator Shaheen said earlier, they feel like they've been at war for the last eight years, and we need to continue to help them in at least those three ways.

Dr. Jones: Thanks, Senator Portman.

Last question to Senator Shaheen, just to summarize. We've heard a lot of steps from the State Department, from the Department of Defense, from Treasury, including on the sanctions, and I wonder if you could just close this out by summarizing, from your perspective, Senator Shaheen, what Congress' most important steps are in supporting Ukraine, moving forward.

Sen. Shaheen: I think the most important thing we can do is to come to a bipartisan agreement on a number of measures that will support Ukraine, and Senator Portman laid those out very well in terms of support for cybersecurity, support for – to address disinformation. That includes support for Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, which are so important in getting accurate information into Eastern European countries to counter what they're hearing from Russia.

It means looking at the sanctions that we can put in place now and what can we be clear that we are going to do in the future if Putin invades. It means providing that military support, weapons – lethal and defensive, both – and it means presenting a united front with our allies.

And make no mistake, as we've all said, not only are our allies looking at what our response is going to be but our enemies are looking at that as well – China, Iran, North Korea, other countries around the world – and if we are divided – if we are divided at NATO, if we are divided in Europe, if we are divided in the United States Congress – they are going to take note of that and that is going to have an impact.

So being able to act in a bipartisan way quickly in response to what's happening to support the Ukrainian people and to serve as a deterrent to Vladimir Putin is the most important thing, I think, we can do.

Dr. Jones: Thank you very much to you Senator Shaheen and Senator Portman. That was a great way of ending as well because I think what it highlights is, despite the fact that some talk about divisions within the U.S., you both are an extraordinary example of bipartisan support here for what is a tremendous foreign policy challenge but also an opportunity to bring us together as a nation and among allies and friends.

So thanks for your time here. We really appreciate it, and good luck in continuing to lead this country. Thanks.

Sen. Shaheen: Thank you.

Sen. Portman: Thanks to you and thanks to John Hamre, too, and what you all do every day to try to spread the word and inform people. I appreciate it.

Sen. Shaheen: Absolutely.