

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Online Event

**“Aiding Ukraine: How the United States Can Give
Ukrainians the Means to Fight”**

DATE

Tuesday, March 14, 2022 at 5:15 p.m. ET

FEATURING

Michael McCaul

U.S. Representative (R-TX); Ranking Member, House Foreign Affairs Committee

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Dr. John J.
Hamre:

Good afternoon, everyone. My name is John Hamre. I'm the president here at CSIS and I'm delighted to have this opportunity where we can present to you a very important member of Congress, Representative Michael McCaul.

Not all members of Congress – as a matter of fact, very few – are national leaders. Most of them are representatives. But Congressman McCaul is a national leader. He is – he devotes so much of his time to things that are much bigger than just the 10th District of Texas, and he recently traveled to Ukraine. He is the ranking member on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, an important voice and always a strong voice for us, and he's agreed to share his insights this afternoon.

My colleague, Dr. Eliot Cohen, is going to lead the conversation with Representative McCaul but I wanted to be here to greet him and say thank you for what you're doing, Mr. Chairman, what you've been doing in helping keep the consciousness of Americans focused on this remarkable tragedy in this pivotal moment of what's going on in Ukraine with the aggression coming from Russia.

So let me say thank you to you. I'm grateful that you've given us the opportunity. I think probably we'll turn to you for some initial remarks and then my colleague, Eliot, will take it from there. Thank you, sir.

Representative
Michael McCaul
(R-TX):

No, and thank you, John. That really meant a lot to me when you said, you know, a national leader because, yeah, I represent a district but I, kind of like a parliamentary government, also try to represent views on the national stage as it comes to foreign policy and national security. And CSIS has always been an important partner for me, going back to when we wrote that great report on cybersecurity many years ago when a lot of people didn't even know what that was. It was a great educational piece and had a lot of bandwidth to it. And I always enjoy working with your great organization.

Let me just say that the events unfolding currently, I don't think we've seen anything like this since my father's generation, and that was World War II, the largest invasion in Europe since World War II. When I was at the Ukrainian border seeing the hundreds of thousands of refugees, now 2.5 million in just two weeks. It was – the parallels – and it was eerie, the parallels to when Hitler invaded Poland. And I think we're dealing with a similar type of monster, and that would be Mr. Putin, I think the parallels to the two of them. And then to go beyond that, with President Xi and the unholy alliance I see between President Xi now and Putin, and the threats to Taiwan are reminiscent of the Emperor Hirohito and his expansion into the South Pacific.

I've been praising the administration and a critic at the same time. And I'll keep this short, but where I give praise and give them credit is how they've

unified the world. But I would argue that Putin has unified the world against him. NATO has never been more unified. They were on life support. Now they're a relevant organization again and they're all increasing their defense spending, realizing that this is in their backyard, and they have a responsibility to deal with this. And also the U.N. Security Council resolution vote, you know, 141 nations against five, was very impressive to demonstrate to Putin that he is – he is surrounded and he doesn't have very many friends in this fight.

Where I have been critical is I thought we could have had more deterrence earlier on. As far back as last November we had a weapons sale package. And in my position, I sign off on those. That was held up for many months. And it wasn't till just right before the invasion that we transferred these weapons, lethal weapons. And now we're in the post-invasion world, and we're trying to catch up. And but the problem is – they call it turning out. The Ukrainian people have really demonstrated to the world an inspiration of resistance to a dictator and an oppressor, an inspiration to everyone.

In fact, we'll hear from President Zelensky tomorrow in a joint session of Congress virtually, which doesn't happen very often. And I know that will be a very strong performance, you know, on his part. I think we're all the people of Ukraine now. I mean, we're completely supportive of their mission and we're unified I think both as Republicans, you know, and Democrats.

So, John, with that I'll, as we say in the Congress, yield back. But I appreciate the invitation. And, really, thanks again for your kind words.

Dr. Eliot A.
Cohen:

Well, Congressman McCaul, let me join Dr. Hamre in welcoming you to CSIS, and expressing gratitude for giving us time in a busy schedule. And I also want to say that I think you're – you know, you're framing this event in the right way. This is a watershed event of a kind that we really haven't experienced, certainly since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Let me begin with your recent trip, if I might. You know, I think we all know from our own experiences that there's a difference between seeing things firsthand and what you follow. And I know you've been following the Ukraine situation very closely all along. But I am curious, on this latest visit were there insights/impressions that you had which really resulted from seeing things up close?

Rep. McCaul:

I think the takeaway for me, I mean, it's just very chilling. You can put this in black and white video, and it would look like 1939. But what was even more, in terms of from a humanitarian standpoint, the fact that the males – the fathers, the husbands – are required by law if they're 18 to 60 years old to stay back to fight the war. And so what we saw coming in were the mothers

and the children that were stripped from their fathers and husbands maybe for the, you know, last time in their lives. They may never see each other again. And that's very, very – I don't know – it's emotional. And Poland can't absorb this number, and oh, probably reach the number of 10 million when all is said and done. And I think our European allies and I think the United States, you know, we need to stand up and help with this humanitarian refugee crisis.

The second thing that really stood out – and we met with the secretary, Secretary Blinken, we met with the foreign prime minister – or foreign minister, I should say, of Poland while we were there. Really, most interestingly, we went to the 82nd Airborne to witness firsthand their heroic operations and some multilateral multinational unit there of Americans, NATO allies, Polish, a lot of Polish soldiers. We sat in for General Donahue's daily briefing on the latest situation with the Russians and what they're doing in Ukraine. And then – and then we had a very highly classified briefing on the weapons transfers that are taking place from an undisclosed location into Ukraine itself.

The reason why I mentioned I wish this been done a little bit earlier, is because we know that Russian intelligence is on to this and the location. As you know, in the press accounts recently, last Sunday, a former NATO facility in Ukraine was taken out by Russian missiles. I anticipate that these supply lines that we have going from Poland into Ukraine and other countries for these weapons transfers will be compromised, you know, in the near future, if not already, by the bombing that's going to take place as they encircle Kiev and this ring of steel, they call it, the tanks, and then they will, unfortunately, probably demolish the city itself. But it's very important that we keep this up, because at the end of the day – and I'll close with this – I think the – I think the strength of the Ukrainian people, the morale of the Ukrainian people is far stronger than the morale of the Russian soldier who probably doesn't even know why – what they're fighting against, why they're there, and certainly don't want to be engaged in killing innocent women and children. But that's what it's really come to.

Dr. Cohen: Are we doing enough?

Rep. McCaul: I think when I was there, the MiG transfer was supposed to happen. It was supposed to be pilots going into Poland and flying them back across the border. I think symbolically – and I've heard the arguments why that's not going to make a difference – but I think if Zelensky's asking for this, it's a symbolic gesture that from a morale standpoint would be hugely significant, even maybe more so than the MiGs themselves. What we need to do more of, we've been sending stingers, which are, you know, that's what – those are anti-aircraft like – but only to like the helicopter level; javelins, which are anti-tank; and a lot of munitions. Where we are behind the curve, I would say

is, are these, the lethal sort of air defense systems, and that would be the drones, the lethal drones, and the S-300s that are Russian anti-aircraft. They need a lot more of those. We have been – I've been in a lot of classified briefings. We are reaching out to our coalition and our allies to get more of these weapons in there. I wish we had done it sooner.

And I will say Turkey, has really stepped up to the plate with their lethal drone, which has proved to be very effective. I had dinner with the ambassador, with the chairman, and we persuaded him to convey – to give – to convey to Erdogan to send more of these drones in country, and I'm pleased to say that they have – you know, they have done that.

Dr. Cohen: So, I mean, this is obviously a coalition effort. When you add up all of the different, you know, efforts that we make, that the Poles make, the Lithuanians, Estonians, Turks, is there enough military aid going to the Ukrainians other than things like the S-300s and so on? Is it – let me put it this way: Is it on the right scale? And is it with the right amount of urgency?

Rep. McCaul: Well, I can tell you that I witnessed firsthand the Stingers and Javelins and the munitions. I think on that front we're doing quite well. Where the deficit is and where we're having to play catch up, where we could have been doing this prior to the invasion – which is, I think, you know, it was a big mistake, that I've been urging the administration back in November to do – I think the deficit is what I was talking about in terms of air defense systems.

And that – you know, it was a Russian air force, you know, plane that took out this maternity hospital and we saw the horrific images of pregnant women being wheeled out, you know, in blood, saying, please save my baby. It's these lethal drones and the S-300s that could be extremely effective against these Russian aircraft and it's going to be even more so as the – I hope it's not final days because I think, at the end of the day, the Russians cannot occupy this space with this many people successfully under a resistance movement or an insurgency. And so it's going to be incumbent upon the free world to continue to supply this weaponry to them.

They have the will to fight and they would tell me, we don't want your truth. We don't need that. But we need your weapons. And, you know, they have been calling upon us for months. You know, I'm pleased we're finally doing this. We could have been doing it sooner. But I think that's the missing ingredient, if you will, are these lethal, you know, drones and S-300s and things that can knock planes out of the skies.

Dr. Cohen: So, you know, you, obviously, get a lot of the most highly classified briefings of what's going on. In the unclassified world, there's something of a debate between people who are saying, well, the Russians have sort of slowed down. Yes, it's a lot more difficult. Lots of attacks on logistics. Higher

casualties than they expected. But they're still, basically, intact and just kind of very slowly moving along.

There's a different view, which has been expressed by people like General Ben Hodges, for example, that actually the Russians are in much worse shape than we think, and that it's not just that they could be stalemated, that they really – you could even see, in some areas, collapse.

I'm curious, where – between those two poles where would you stand?

Rep. McCaul:

I hate to sound like a diplomat but I will be on this one. I think it's both. I think that there's been a bit of incompetency on the part of the Russians that we were surprised by. Remember, we were briefed this would be over in three to four days, and so was Putin. And I think he got very angry when he saw that he was misled in this effort and that now they're at a snail's pace. I would call it a slow grind is where they are but, you know, the convoy – the tanks getting stuck in the mud, which is why they're sitting there vulnerable for that 40-mile space for, you know, weeks, and it was a very vulnerable target that I wish we could have taken out at that time and I urged the administration to get more lethal assistance to do just that so they couldn't circle around the city. But now they're on their way in the woods and they're going to circle Kyiv.

But, you know, I think, so there's a little bit of the incompetence. I think we overestimated the Russian military and I think Putin did as well, and I think we underestimated the Ukrainian people's will to fight in the resistance itself. That's why I – you know, I do think the Ukrainians can't – they will not be able to completely stop the Russian front from taking over. It will be very difficult, I think, for them to do that.

But I think urban warfare is very difficult, and the Ukrainians have a lot of equipment in there on a defensive posture. A lot of people say, why haven't we seen them take out the convoy. I think they've been keeping what they have right now in the hopes that – in Kyiv so that when they do get circled they will unleash everything they have. You know, they put in Ukraine to the – in Russian in Kyiv "Welcome to Hell" to the Russians and I think they're going to give them hell. They're going to give them everything they have and all the weapons we've given them and you're going to see quite a fight take place.

You know, guerrilla warfare is the worst and the hardest and, you know, Putin's going to bomb it and he's going to level that beautiful city I've been to so many times. It's going to be really hard to watch, just like it's hard – it's hard for the American people to watch this with one hand tied behind our backs. You know, it's like watching a bully on the playground beating up the little kid, and everybody's standing around watching it, and they want to

stop it. But I think the Ukrainians, again, have put up a fight that we will all be inspired by.

And again, in my final analysis long term, it is not sustainable. It is – it is nearly impossible. Putin's already got 100 percent of what he's got in there. And I think another key point, Eliot, is now he's turning to China for more weapons. That means he's running out. And he's already put 100 percent of what he has in this one country, and now he's having to turn to China for weapons. I think that speaks volumes about the state of play in this war.

Dr. Cohen: You mentioned that the American people find it hard to see this happening and you compared it to watching a bully on a playground beat up a small kid. So, really, there – one question that follows from that: What is your basic judgment about, you know, do the American people understand what's at stake here? Now, obviously, you see the news, you can't help but say this is terrible. But Aleppo was terrible, too. I mean, this – you know, I think we agree this is something even bigger than that, although the human misery may be similar. Do your constituents, do you feel, really understand what is at stake about what kind of world we're going to have depending on how this thing goes?

Rep. McCaul: You know, I just spoke at a Syrian event on the 11th anniversary of Assad and his war-crime atrocities, and the parallels are very similar. But to answer your question, you know, I would say a month ago my constituents were asking the question, why is Ukraine important? And I would have to demonstrate to them why it was important. And it had to be more than freedom and democracy, I have to be honest. I would think that would be enough, but I had to also talk about his strategy to close off the Black Sea, Nord Stream 2, that this was also about Putin's attempt to dominate in the energy space but it also had an impact on President Xi Jinping and his desire to invade Taiwan. Also, I talked about the ayatollah in Iran as we are negotiating with the Iranians. That there is – there's an interconnection there, and it no coincidence they all feel emboldened right now and empowered.

And I would go back to Afghanistan. I think Putin's always wanted to invade Ukraine, always wanted to take back the breadbasket to, you know, the mother country – just like Xi feels like he deserves Taiwan, they're part of imperial China. And I think with Afghanistan they saw weakness. And we know from Chamberlain and Hitler what happened; and what Churchill stood for, against appeasement; Reagan, peace through strength. These are historical actions that are true. And I think they saw a moment of weakness and made the calculation to take advantage of that. I'm hoping this miscalculation by Putin, though, will be seen by President Xi as something that he doesn't want for his country.

Dr. Cohen: Yeah. Of course, that will probably depend on what we do. I guess in –

Rep. McCaul: Oh, no, if I could just – to further expand on your question, you know, the American people have changed their perception, and I think it's because of the social media. I think it's because when you turn on the TV all that you see are these war crimes and the atrocities and the maternity hospital getting bombed. And you know, I mean, you can't – you cannot look at those images and not feel compelled to do something about it. And so I think that's really galvanized.

There are still pockets of, you know, people in our – you know, in America that are isolationists. But I think for the most part when I have to explain why is Ukraine relevant or important, I think they understand that now.

Dr. Cohen: Yeah. Well, I mean, again, let me just pursue a little bit further that bully in the playground. You know, usually what you'd hope would be that your kid would step in and stop it. So let me turn that into a question: Are there circumstances in which you favor American – use of American military power?

Rep. McCaul: Is my volume – (technical difficulties).

Eliot, I think to answer your question, we need to – I think it's important – and these are discussions I've had internally with the administration. I was with the U.K. ambassador at her residence with the U.K. foreign minister and Secretary Blinken. But we need to start thinking about, what are the redlines here? And I think that's going to be the big debate. I think the no-fly zone, for obvious reasons, has shown – and I know Zelensky's going to ask for that. But that would put Russian aircrafts in direct conflict with NATO and it would trigger Article 5 very quickly. That's why we're going to arm them. That's why I was in favor of the MiGs. But I think we have to have this discussion about redlines.

Are we going to sit back and allow him to drop – and we know with this false flag operation on the Ukrainian biolabs he's laying the predicate for chemical weapons, just like he did in Syria. And is the world going to stand back and allow that to happen, using weapons of mass destruction in violation of the Geneva Convention as a war criminal. How long are we going to sit back and do nothing? You know, I know there were redlines in the Obama administration, when they were crossed didn't do anything. The previous administration struck Syria. I think the equation here's a little different because you're dealing with two major world powers that can put this on the scale of a World War III.

So we don't want a miscalculation or an escalation that will put us into a world war. But certainly a redline with respect to chemical weapons. And I

would say also these short-range tactical nukes that Putin – Russia has many more of them than we do. If he gets pushed into a corner, like a scorpion, and he's in a desperate situation, he could very well sting with a short-range tactical nuke, which would really wake up the eyes of the world. I can't see the world just standing back and allowing that to happen without further involvement.

Dr. Cohen: Yeah. So, I mean, you've indicated that either chemical weapons or nuclear weapons of any kind would be a redline. Should we be thinking about any other kind of redline?

Rep. McCaul: You know, I think the crimes against humanity, the war crimes. I think that there will be a miscalculation that will eventually trigger something. Like, for instance, when the Russians fire those missiles at the bases on the – on the border of Poland and Ukraine, you can't really see that border really well from the air. What if there's a miscalculation and one of those missiles landed in Poland, you know? What if the prime ministers – you got the prime ministers of Poland and Slovakia and Romania going into Kyiv to meet with Zelensky. What if they are bombed and assassinated like Archduke Ferdinand? There are a lot of scenarios that could trigger this. But too, the easiest, clearer redlines in my judgement would be any attack by a weapon of mass destruction.

Dr. Cohen: Yeah. For what it's worth, you know, my sense is those are discussions we're going to be having more and more as this thing –

Rep. McCaul: I think, unfortunately, you're correct on that.

Dr. Cohen: – as this thing unrolls. I guess one other way of thinking about this is you mentioned the possibility of the Russians accidentally or maybe even deliberately throwing a missile or two at one of our bases in Poland, from which we're transshipping. Now, I would assume that the Poles would invoke Article 5. That's – you know, it's not entirely automatic that everybody all signs up.

First, how do you think the rest of NATO would react? And, you know, what concretely are the kinds of things that we should think about doing? I mean, let's – I'll give you a scenario. The Russians hit a base in maybe a similar way to the one that they hit that was 15 miles into Ukraine. Similar level of casualties and destruction. The Poles say: This is an attack. You know, we want to invoke Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. An attack against one is an attack against all. How should we think about that scenario?

Rep. McCaul: That's an excellent question, Eliot. I think there's one line of thought that a proportionate response would be adequate, and that would be to immediately take out the source of where that came from. Now, if it comes

from Russia, that's a whole different equation. But if it came out of Ukraine to attack the Russians, that would be one.

I think if Poland did invoke Article 5, because I've never seen NATO more unified, I think they would be hard-pressed not to support Poland's request. Article 5 would be triggered. Now, if it's triggered, that doesn't necessarily mean that we're all going to war against them. There are various levels to that. But my sense is that Poland would ask for – request for Article 5 nations to respond to go to war with Russia.

With respect to the target in Poland, that would be our 82nd Airborne. It is a high-value target. They are hardening it with Patriot batteries. They have a very good anti-missile, anti-aircraft capability. So I think that scenario would be hopefully not likely. But the Russian intelligence are onto all of this.

Dr. Cohen: Yeah. Do you see the – any potential for the conflict to spread horizontally, as it were? Say Belarus gets engaged. I know they're – you know, it looks like Lukashenko is trying to prevent that from happening, because he can't really trust his own military. But, you know, people have also talked about the Russians trying something in the Suwalki Gap, pushing towards Lithuania, maybe trying to, you know, pick a fight with the Estonians over Narva. Do you see any of that? Or you think they just have their hands full in Ukraine?

Rep. McCaul: Well, you know, initially we wargamed this out. And a lot of people thought, well, he'll just go to the Donbas and call it a day and have a victory parade. He may have gotten away with that. You know, but we saw the alignment of the calvary, if you will, one sixty miles north of Kyiv, then it became very clear, or disturbing, that he was going to go for all, go for broke. And that means descending into Kyiv, which is exactly what he's doing. And then some thought, well, because Mariupol is in the Donbas region, he would just call the Donbas extending the two states that the Duma said were legitimate states independent from Ukraine, and then call it a day. But he went far beyond that.

I personally thought he would go for all of it. And that's exactly what he's doing. In Odessa, a very important strategic port for him to take. And that gives him, with Crimea and Mariupol, complete dominance in the Black Sea, cutting off Ukraine from the Black Sea, and giving him energy dominance as well. The two most vulnerable that I see are the non-NATO allies in the region. And that would be Moldova and Georgia. They've already taken 20 percent of Georgia. And Moldova, as you know, they have a presence there, you know, as well. So those would be the two, I think, in the short-term most pressing.

I do think he's bitten off more than he can chew right now and he's got more on his plate dealing with just Ukraine. So in the scenario that took three to

four days, that expansion to Moldova and Georgia could have been a lot – or the Baltic nations and states – could have been more, I think, appealing to him. But this obviously has not gone well for Mr. Putin.

Dr. Cohen: Yeah. You know, let me shift a little bit domestically. Like a lot of people, I've been somewhat dismayed about the nature of our domestic politics. But I have to say, one thing that's very striking is the degree of bipartisanship, or so it looks, particularly in Congress, on this issue. And am I right to feel good about that? And does it – what does it portend for the future, do you think?

Rep. McCaul: Yeah. I think when you have something of this magnitude, partisan politics should take a backseat. We need to do what's best for the world and what's best for Americans, but also our allies and, you know, our democracies. And it's a fight for freedom and democracy against those who oppress it. And there's no stronger fight – if you go back to World War II and the Cold War, it's really what it's been all about. And you know, we took this bipartisan delegation to Poland, we saw the refugees, and we all kind of felt not only great sorrow but great anger that one man could do this to an entire population. And that has a solidarity effect.

We had a very diverse political – politically on the spectrum very diverse membership, but we all came back united that we need to do more to help Ukraine. And even Chairman Meeks, who's not prone to – one to – you know, to do an AUMF or to put weapons in a country, came back completely converted to the idea we need to stand together and do everything we can to help these people. And I think that was unifying. I think what you're going to see tomorrow morning with the joint session of Congress and Zelensky is going to have a very unifying impact on Congress and, therefore, the American people in support of Ukraine. And that will send a very strong message to Putin that he's on the losing edge of this.

Remember, he wants his legacy to be known as the great czar or Stalin or whatever he wants to be known as that brought the empire back. But his legacy, I think, will be that of a war criminal. And the more he gets boxed in with the whole world against him, knowing that his legacy is going to be going down as one of the most ruthless dictators since Hitler, that's going to have a profound impact on his psyche, which I think is very unstable right now.

Dr. Cohen: So we have only a couple of minutes left. Let me just ask you one last question, and feel free to expand on it. I'm just curious, how do you see this playing out? I mean, do you think this war will be rolling on for years? Do you think months? Do you think it ends with occupation but then guerilla war? I mean, what are the scenarios – maybe not a single scenario, but what are the scenarios that you think are most likely?

Rep. McCaul: Well, at the end of the day it's not going to end well for Putin, and I hope the Russian people will oust him and join, you know, the rest of the world. But you know, I don't know if that will happen or not. I certainly hope it does.

But with respect to the battlefield, I think the Russian forces will overpower, but the Ukrainians are going to put up a very, very hard fight and they're going to have a lot of body bags going back to Russia, and the Russian people are going to see this. And the more we can get into Russia from a social media standpoint so they know the truth, the more of an uprising we can see within Russia itself and Mr. Putin.

It could very well turn into an insurgency/resistance war where we continue to funnel weapons. And that's, again, where the morale of the Ukrainians is far superior to the Russians, and I think eventually they're going to give out. I don't know how long that will be. I don't have that kind of crystal ball. You know, General Donahue thinks we wear down the strength of the Russians – we wear them down to get to a point to get back to the negotiating table.

I think the question, though, Eliot, is: What is the offramp? What is the golden bridge, as they call it? What's the offramp here? I mean, and is – would Zelensky be willing to give him anything after what he's done to his own people? I will leave that to President Zelensky. That's his decision to make. But we tried diplomacy. We tried everything. And we still are, but they are not – they want to break the will of the Ukrainian people right now. And so the offramp is very hard to see right now other than at the end of the day, Eliot, I think they're going to have another Afghanistan on their hands, just like they did against the mujahideen, and we know how that turned out.

Dr. Cohen: Yeah. Well, I mean, in the first few weeks they've already taken casualties which are, you know, like half of what they took during the entire Afghan war, so that's pretty – that's pretty significant.

Rep. McCaul: Yeah.

Dr. Cohen: Well, I guess let me just ask you if there are any other thoughts you want to leave us with, and then I'll just thank you and wrap this up.

Rep. McCaul: Well, I think – I think America's at its best when we put our partisan politics aside and we stand as Americans in what has become probably one of the greatest conflicts in our lifetime. You know, as General Donahue said, you know, not since World War II have we seen anything like this. We've had a lot of little wars, but we haven't had a great-power conflict like this. This is a great-power conflict, and the stakes can never be higher, and time is of the essence. And that's why we appropriated so much money for humanitarian but also lethal military assistance to go into Ukraine, and I've had many conversations with them to move this as quickly as possible.

And we do stand together in Congress and hopefully as a nation, you know, in support of what Ukraine stands for. You know, if we can't stand for liberty and freedom and democracy, then what are we worth as a nation? That's what we were founded upon. So I think the fight has never been more justified nor more relevant nor more important in our lifetime.

Dr. Cohen: Well, eloquently put. Let me again thank you for joining us and, above all, thank you for your leadership at a really critical moment for our country and for the world. Thank you, sir.

Rep. McCaul: Thanks, Eliot. And, John, thanks, and thanks to CSIS.