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ARE WE HEADED FOR CRISIS WITH RUSSIA?

A CONVERSATION WITH  
U.S. SENATOR CHRIS COONS (D-DE)

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## P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. JONES: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, ambassadors, colleagues. Welcome to Brookings. Thanks for coming on a rainy day. It's my pleasure to welcome you to this morning's event with Senator Chris Coons. Senator Coons has represented the people of Delaware in the Senate since 2010, currently serves on the Committees on Appropriations, Justice, and perhaps most pertinent to today's discussion, Foreign Relations. He also serves on the Sub-Committee for Africa, a shared passion.

I think it's important to say that Senator Coons has been a model of trying to sustain bipartisanship in the Senate on a whole range of both domestic and economic issues as well as foreign policy issues, including most recently in a joint statement -- parallel statements on the floor with Senator Rubio on today's topic, Russia. So I commend you for that and thank you for your service to our country, sir, and thank you for being here today.

When we think about foreign policy we often think of the executive branch and the tools that the executive has at its disposal for foreign policy. But the Senate also plays a vital role in this nation's foreign policy. Constitutionally it fulfills a central role in providing advice and consent on both treaties and ambassadors, but it's also home to dialogue and debate that can shape the national discourse in foreign affairs, which is done from the Marshall Plan to the Fulbright Hearings. The Senate has shaped the debate on foreign policy in this nation and the course of foreign policy at critical times, including through sanctions and other tools that are at the legislature's disposal.

Brookings believes it's very important, especially at this moment perhaps, to engage both the administration and the Senate and Legislative Branch on foreign policy issues. We've recently hosted Senator McCain on similar topics and are delighted and honored to have Senator Coons with us today.

We also of course remain committed to working with the Executive Branch in a non partisan fashion to further shared goals of the safe and prosperous United States in a safe and secure world. And it's a particular point of pride that one of our top scholars, Fiona Hill, has just joined the administration to serve as deputy assistant to the president and senior director for Russia and Europe. And we wish her very well in what will be a challenging role dealing with the topic we're going to discuss today, namely Russia, which is among the most complicated challenges we confront.

Since the end of the Cold War that relationship has evolved dramatically and in a complex way, and of course over the last two or three years has been in a negative spiral and a spiral of escalating tensions, which is the backdrop to some of what we'll discuss today.

I think there's nobody better suited to guide today's conversation than Brookings's president, my boss, Strobe Talbot, a decades-long Russia watcher and Russia manager and Russia handler, in particular when he served under the Clinton administration as ambassador to the newly independent states and then as deputy secretary of state for seven years, where he was really first into the breach in terms of trying to forge a different kind of relationship between Moscow and Washington after the end of the Cold War.

So this morning Strobe will join Senator Coons in a conversation examining how U.S. relations got to where they are today and what the future may hold, and you'll be welcome to join that conversation and discussion and questions, or on Twitter with #USRussia. So for now please join me in welcoming Senator Coons to the stage. (Applause)

SENATOR COONS: Well, good morning everybody. Thank you, Bruce, for that introduction and Strobe for your remarkable career in public service and leadership and your 15 years of leadership here at Brookings. This institution and the public policy conversations in Washington are stronger because of your long leadership

and service. And I look forward to your discussion after my hopefully relatively brief remarks.

Back in 1950 a national intelligence estimate delivered to then-President Harry Truman outlined two goals of the Soviet Union. First, and I quote, "Destruction of working unity among the Western countries, and thereby isolation of the United States." Second, "Alienating the Western people from their government to undermine the strength of the Western democracies." Well, 70 years later the Cold War is over, communism is widely discredited, and the international arena has fundamentally changed. Yet the regime of Vladimir Putin in Russia is achieving today what the Soviet Union set out to do back in 1950 as described in that memo. It is destroying unity in the West, isolating the United States, and alienating Western people from our governments.

Today I'll discuss the campaign that the Russian government is waging against the United States and our European allies. This is not a new Cold War, it is a new type of war, one that is undeclared and waged using unconventional tools. I am gravely concerned that the United States is failing to see this challenge clearly and to respond effectively. And I think it's important that I also offer several specific suggestions for how Congress can take responsibility and action.

Since the Second World War, the set of norms, alliances, and institutions that we now know as the American led liberal international order has helped to preserve peace in Europe and promote stability around the world. This order isn't just good for the world, it's good for the United States. It has allowed our economy to grow, it has enabled democracy to spread, it has provided a framework for U.S. engagement in multilateral initiatives around the world and across the decades. It has strengthened fundamental democratic values, like the rule of law, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, pluralism, and human rights. We don't fight for the liberal world order, for our allies, and for these values as an act of simple charity, a world committed to democracy and the rule of law is, I'm convinced, a more stable and prosperous world in which Americans are

safer and more economically secure.

Vladimir Putin, however, demonstrably does not support the liberal world order or the values that have created it and sustained it. He perceives it as fundamentally unfair to Russia and hostile to its interests. Throughout Europe Putin's Russia seeks to undermine the order through overt aggression, such as his armed interventions in Ukraine in 2014, in Georgia in 2008, and through many other means, including disinformation, subversion and open and covert support for illiberal and authoritarian parties. Putin's regime benefits directly from the election of European leaders who support narrow minded nationalism and share its opposition to a cohesive European Union and a strong NATO.

But that's not the Putin regime's only goal. Through propaganda campaigns that widely spread misinformation, it also seeks to create a climate of confusion, of doubt, and of uncertainty, to undermine trust in institutions and in the very concept of democracy itself. Russia knows that it can't really compete with the United States or European allies on a level playing field, or free markets, democratic elections, and the rule of law. That's why it is following a strategy based on a so called hybrid war doctrine outlined in the Gerasimov Doctrine, a 2013 paper written by Valerie Gerasimov, then chief of the general staff of Russian armed forces. This doctrine boldly proclaims that in the modern world the lines between war and peace are blurred and conflicts often undeclared. This doctrine says, and I quote, "That the very rules of war have changed. The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals have grown, and in many cases they have exceeded the power of weapons in their effectiveness." A key component of the Gerasimov approach is exploiting an enemy's weaknesses. It argues, and again I quote, "No matter what forces the enemy has, no matter how well developed his forces and means of armed conflict may be, forms and methods for overcoming them can be found. He will always have vulnerabilities, and that means adequate means of opposing him exist."

Russia has enthusiastically and somewhat so far sadly successfully employed this Gerasimov Doctrine by waging a covert and undeclared hybrid war on the West, as I mentioned using propaganda, economic statecraft, energy supplies, corruption, information warfare and support for opposition parties. This undeclared but very real war has already come to the United States. It has undermined American's trust in our institutions, in each other, and in the very credibility of our democracy.

War, as 19th century Prussian strategist Von Clausewitz said, is politics by other means. But this conflict is not limited to the United States. Today the front in this war is upcoming European elections. Across Europe low levels of economic growth, rising income inequality, and a massive influx of refugees have sowed divisions and created conditions of instability and fear. This destabilized climate makes European nations particularly susceptible to Russian subversion that appeals to and inflames nationalism, xenophobia, and populism. Last August I saw this reality firsthand while leading a bipartisan Congressional delegation to visit the Czech Republic, Ukraine, and Estonia. Putin continues to move aggressively to exploit Europe's political vulnerabilities. As predicted in a January 2017 report by the U.S. intelligence community, the tactics employed in our own election are today now widely on display. For example in France, where Russia is actively supporting the presidential campaign to the national front and seeking to undermine Emmanuel Macron, the surging independent candidate through a series of fake stories created and distributed through Russian support on line trolls and propaganda networks like Russia Today, RT, or Sputnik International.

The Putin regime is employing similar tactics across Europe, seeking to influence elections from Germany, the Netherlands, to Austria, Italy, and even the UK. The rise of far right authoritarian anti immigrant parties threatens the very existence of the European Union and America's own well being. Trading goods and services between the U.S. and EU exceeds \$1 trillion a year, so any instability in the European continent can and likely will have a direct economic impact here in the United States. But the

national security consequences of a weaker EU and thus perhaps a weakened NATO could be even more profound. A fragile EU may revitalize national rivalries, sparking the type of division that could spell the end of sanctions against Russia for its illegal annexation of Crimea. Under this scenario Russia would then have free reign to expand its power, particularly in Eastern Europe, where Putin has his sights set on sovereign nations he believes are part of Russia's deserved sphere of influence, what was long called the near abroad.

Make no mistake, the Putin regime has launched an undeclared war on the international order that has preserved peace and stability in the United States and Europe since World War II. And in light of this challenge let me just briefly suggest five ways that Congress must respond. First, members of both political parties must understand the type of conflict in which we're engaged. To again paraphrase Clausewitz, we must first establish the kind of war on which our adversary has embarked. I've heard many people say we're in a new Cold War with Russia, but that's frankly false, or the wrong frame. As I mentioned earlier, the nature of our current competition with Russia is different from previous conflicts. That means that we cannot pursue the policy prescriptions of the past if we only build up traditional military capabilities and seek to contain Russia through force without defending against its propaganda, its cyber attacks, and information warfare. We will lose this conflict.

To successfully contain and respond to Russia the understanding and buy in of the American people, who strongly influence the actions of Congress, are essential. According to a recent, a March 29 CBS news poll, only half of all Americans believe that Russia actually interfered in our presidential election. Even more dangerously, perceptions of Russian influence in our election split sharply along partisan party lines. This is alarming, particularly after the entire U.S. intelligence community made it unanimously clear that Russia did indeed intervene in our electoral process. This profound and unsettling domestic division makes an effective and unified American

response more difficult, but also more urgent.

So the first thing Congress must do is comprehend the nature of our conflict with Russia and ensure our constituents, the American people, share that understanding. The second step Congress must take is to maintain sanctions against Russia. One by partisan bill, the Counteracting Russian Hostilities Act, led by democratic Senator Ben Cardin and republican Senator John McCain, would authorize new sanctions against Russia for its aggression. This bill would also support civil society, pro democracy, and anti corruption activists in Russia and across Europe. Another bipartisan bill, the Russia Review Act, introduced by republican Senator Lindsey Graham, would require that Congress weigh in before President Trump could relax sanctions against Russia. Majority Leader McConnell should bring both bills to the Senate Floor where I believe they would pass with overwhelming bipartisan support. The third step Congress must take is to provide support for our Eastern European partners by backing brave reformers in states like Ukraine and promoting economic development in countries like Georgia. Moscow is attempting to export corruption to its neighbors to expand its influence. By helping our partners continue their fight to root out corruption and by demonstrating that people in Eastern Europe are better off as a result of being able to do business with the European Union and the United States, we can hopefully mitigate Russia's sway over these societies. Fourth, all elected American officials should publicly, privately, and repeatedly reassure our allies that the American people support NATO and the European Union as well as increased U.S. troop rotations through Central and Eastern Europe.

This brings me to the final step Congress should take, fully funding programs that promote a more stable and prosperous world. As recent protests in Russia demonstrate, Vladimir Putin does not speak for all of the Russian people, but he has infiltrated and subverted Russian institutions to the extent that no one in Russia has the power to constrain him, even though many brave Russians continue to try. Only the



United States and our allies can counter his aggressive aims successively.

That's why as a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee I'm working with my colleagues to fund the European Reassurance Initiative, to strengthen NATO, and to support exiting USAID programs intended to bolster free and fair elections and civil society across Europe, and to counter influence. Our ongoing support of independent objective journalism, such as the Broadcasting Board of Governors, specifically Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, Voice of America, is vital to this effort. Another important step is the creation of a new fund specifically designated and targeting the Russian government's aggressive and subversive actions, which Senator Graham recently proposed at an Appropriations hearing.

Each of the five Congressional actions I briefly outlined fits well within a bipartisan policy making tradition that supports our allies and seeks to punish the Russian government when it breaks the rules that threaten our very security. Until Russia makes it absolutely clear that it intends to act as a responsible and law abiding nation we must spare no effort to push back against its aggression, to avoid the very scenario that you, Strobe, warned of in a recent *New Yorker* article, a dog eat dog world with constant instability and conflict.

In the 1950 memo to President Truman that I mentioned at the outset of my remarks, the intelligence community wrote, "Moscow may be hoping to frighten the West and reduce our will to resist." Today, the European Union is faltering, Americans are fighting amongst ourselves, and Russia is interfering even more brazenly in our nation's affairs. If President Truman could see us today he would demand that we summon the will to resist. I've long said it's vital for Congress to play a more constructive role in U.S. foreign policy. Without meaningful leadership from the Executive Branch and bipartisan leadership from Congress on the issues I discussed, it is even more critical that Congress find the will to act.

Thank you. (Applause)

MR. TALBOTT: Senator, thank you very much. You have given us a lot to think about and thank you for giving us some time to think a little bit more with you and with your help on some of the implications of what you have just said.

As I listened to you it occurred to me that there might be a small bit of light in this dark cloud that you have laid out so clearly. And it goes to I think your first point with regard to what the Senate and the American people have learned about what Russia is up to. Had it not been for what the Russian government and its security services intended to be a covert operation, that now all the world knows about there is -- it's very, very hard I would think for anybody to question the activities that brought our democracy to the brink of disruption.

So to what degree do you feel that, particularly in the non partisan way that you discussed with us, is there a growing recognition of the threat and are your colleagues in both Houses of Congress in the time coming up over the next couple of weeks and months, are they going to be talking to their constituents and explaining what we're really dealing with?

SENATOR COONS: Well, Strobe, thank you again for the opportunity to be with you here at Brookings and for what you and this institution have done to focus us in a purposeful way on the challenges and the opportunities facing America and the world.

I'm gravely concerned, bluntly, that my colleagues and our constituents are not that focused on this issue. There is widespread concern, even alarm, among democratic party activists about the last election and about the impact of Russian meddling on the last election and about pursuing the investigation into that, where it should go or where it may go or to its conclusion. What I keep trying to emphasize to friends and colleagues in both parties is that this is as much about our next election as it is about the last election. In my view, to the extent we narrowly focus on some public campaign to undermine or delegitimize President Trump, that is exactly wrong. It misses

what is an ongoing Russian campaign of aggression against the very institutions of democracy and of the Atlantic Alliance that really have been fundamental to our peace and prosperity and security over most of the last 70 years.

So in talking persistently with colleagues in the other party I've tried to encourage and support and find common cause with those who do see this clearly, who are raising the alarm, and who are engaging in pushing back on it. There have been hearings on Russia's campaign of aggression in the Appropriations Committee, in Judiciary, in foreign relations, in armed services, and to me that's very encouraging that you see republican sub-committee and committee chairs taking the initiative, taking the time, and putting this forward. But so far there's fewer than 10 perhaps republican senators who have really pressed on this publicly. And my concern is that in the first -- it's not even 100 days yet is it -- in the first --

MR. TALBOTT: Seventy-six I think.

SENATOR COONS: But who's counting. (Laughter) In the first 76 days of the Trump presidency there are so many other things going on. Today the focus on the Senate Floor on the nominee to the Supreme Court, two weeks ago the effort to repeal the Affordable Care Act, the potential of tax reform or infrastructure work. There's so many other things going on domestically, and then Syria, Iraq, the humanitarian crisis, North Korea. There are so many other issues internationally that I am concerned if we don't bear down and focus on both getting to the end of an investigation about what did happen in our election and the possibility of coordination with the Trump campaign, but focusing forward on what does this mean for elections in our allied countries across Europe, and what does this mean for our next election. That this window will pass us by, that the level of concern, excitement, and focus will simply gradually diminish. So I am concerned that in the next two weeks, as virtually every member of Congress goes home to their home state and home districts, they'll hear about healthcare, they'll hear about North Korea, they'll hear about taxes, they'll hear about the Supreme Court, but they

won't hear about Russia. And to me that would be a really unfortunate signal for members of Congress to get from their constituents, that they're just not that concerned about this topic.

MR. TALBOTT: They may not hear as much about Russia as we would hope, but the issue is not going to go silent, not least because of you, including some of your colleagues on the other side of the aisle, are going to continue to address the questions even though you have not come to definitive answers on some of those issues. So I would think that would still be out there. And, of course, the President is front and center, as he should be, but he has put together a team. You and your colleagues on the Hill I'm sure have interaction with the Secretary of Defense who has no delusions I think about this, the National Security Advisor, and others. So is there an ongoing quiet dialogue with other members of the Executive Branch that can get us on the right track?

SENATOR COONS: Yes, I think so. And I agree with you that the national security and foreign policy team of the Trump administration is coalescing and strengthening with the departure or diminution of members who may not have seen this challenge as clearly. And the confirmation and sort of installation and strengthening of the voices of members who I think are clear eyed career professionals in defense and military affairs, and to some extent foreign policy.

You know, frankly developments in the outside world are forcing a focus. The ongoing offenses against humanitarian concerns by the Assad regime, the horrible use of poison gas, you know, which because of modern media was seen by the world almost immediately, has forced Nikki Haley, Ambassador Haley, to step up at the Security Council, as she did, and denounced Russia's role in supporting and facilitating the Assad regime and their ongoing crimes against humanity, and to insist that they allow the Security Council to act. It's forced President Trump to sort of rethink a, I think, misguided idea that we could sort of step back and reach some accommodation with Russia to focus solely on ISIS. Russia has said all along that their intervention in Syria is

really only to oppose terrorism, but it's blindingly clear, I think, after developments in Aleppo and recent actions in Idlib, that what they are doing is facilitating an Iranian beachhead into Syria and a sustained presence there, and making possible the survival of one of the worst regimes in modern human history.

So events in the world are intruding upon what may have been a misguided idea that some grand bargain could be reached with Russia that would involve Ukraine and Crimea, Syria, Iran, and other issues. Let me be clear, we shouldn't close the door to diplomacy with Russia. Presidents Obama and Bush continued to discuss Arctic security and nonproliferation and other areas where there could be some cooperation, but given Russian hostility, given their clear demonstrated aggressive actions over a decade, and now directly against the United States. Not just the United States and our interests, but what defines us. What defines us is a democracy. And to intentionally and directly seek to interfere in our presidential elections is a provocative act of almost unprecedented consequence. And so we have to continue to try to work with Russia, but there has to be consequences and they have to be clear, and our President needs to stand up and say we will stop you, Vladimir Putin, as you continue to try to aggressively intrude on Western Europe and North America and interfere with our democracies.

MR. TALBOTT: I took note, as I'm sure everybody did, of your saying that is not a new Cold War or going back to the Cold War. In a sense this is a more dangerous situation than the Cold War because during most of the Cold War, and certainly through the final decades of it, the USSR and the United States were seriously and successfully engaged in arms control agreements and treaties. And most of those treaties are either defunct or in danger. Do you see and do your colleagues see ways of getting that track back on?

SENATOR COONS: Well, first, about the importance of a priority focus on U.S.-Russia relations. As a former Chairman of the Joints Chiefs reminded me at a

dinner a few years ago, when we seem to be focusing almost exclusively on ISIS, and to a lesser extent on Iran and its nuclear program, and very little on Russia -- this was several years ago -- he said I'll just remind you, Senator, that ISIS doesn't possess the capability to launch a significant massive attack on the United States. Iran may someday have a nuclear weapon, but does not today. Only Russia possesses the means to literally annihilate the United States. And so as the only genuine existential threat to the United States, we really should prioritize Russia and nonproliferation. North Korea, Iran, Syria, and terrorism certainly have their place in our security concerns around the world, but we really must refocus.

One area I think we can be encouraged by is that the Russians worked with us on nonproliferation concerns on Iran. The JCPOA would not have been concluded without Russian participation and support. And we could debate whether that's been wholly positive or not, but they did work with China, Russia, and our key European allies to create the structure that at least for some brief period contained and stabilized what was a very threatening steady progress towards the development of a nuclear weapon by Iran. Nonproliferation should be one of the key areas where we are able in our mutual interests to coordinate and cooperate in some way with Russia.

But to your point about this being a new Cold War, in the Cold War the elements of this new hybrid war that I reference that included disinformation and corruption and cyber attacks. They're not that dissimilar from some of the no military aspects of the Cold War. There was always propaganda and communicating with the world and, you know, arguing over ideas in the Cold War. There were economic aspects to the Cold War, the things we did to rebuild what became our vital allies after the Second World War and to rebuild Western Europe, for example. But in the Cold War was overwhelmingly military. And the elements of information propaganda, communication, and interference in elections were relatively minor. In this conflict it's much more here, but we cannot forget that hanging in the background, and quite potentially in the

foreground, is the very real possibility of some unintentional and likely devastating shooting war between the United States and Russia if we miscalculate. And in a conflict where what we're doing is undermining confidence in facts and journalism and democratic institutions, the chances for miscalculation and misunderstanding I think go up.

MR. TALBOTT: In your suggestion in the way that we can deal with this war that Russia is waging against us, and I would put in parenthesis, I assume you feel we're not at war with them, we're trying to mitigate what they are trying to do to us. There's an asymmetry, and that is that Russia is resorting to something that they've had a lot of practice with in their history, and that's the big lie. And you talk about Radio Free Europe and basically cranking up our own counter propaganda, but presumably we all as Americans we hope our counter would not be propaganda, it would be the truth.

SENATOR COONS: Right.

MR. TALBOTT: But that's awfully tough, particularly in Russia itself, where the state controls all of the media. And it's tough in other parts, particularly in Central Europe.

SENATOR COONS: But I would look first just at the order of magnitude. How much investment is being made in RT and Sputnik. You travel around the world, there's a lot of places in the world where Russia today is the principle television news that you find. You check into a hotel, you go through the channels, and there's RT and Sputnik beautifully produced, very modern, very engaging, very appealing. This is not the Soviet propaganda of 30 years ago, clunky, awkward, not distributed in the most professional way. In the same way that frankly ISIS demonstrated remarkable success at taking advantage of social media and slick production values to communicate and to radicalize youth, Russia is showing real prominence and success at journalism that is influencing opinions, not just in Russia, but now across Europe, and in some places in the developing world. We are nowhere in this game. And I agree with you that the

United States should not support, fund, or distribute things that are untrue propaganda. But in areas of the world where there isn't language programming appropriate to that community and that region that the United States is supporting directly or indirectly and that provides high quality professional journalism, we're simply ceding an absolutely critical front in this contest. And as journalism as an industry in the United States is under enormous economic pressure, the basic model of modern journalism is under enormous pressure, the absence of any investment, any significant investment by the United States government in countering what is hundreds of millions of dollars being put into Sputnik and RT and other means, I think shows a really egregious unilateral disarmament in this war of ideas.

MR. TALBOTT: I'm about to open the conversation up to our friends in the audience, but I did want to pick up on one other point. You, too, travel a lot around the world. You referenced your visit to several countries in Europe that are particularly concerned about Russia. There are a lot of others as well, some of whom are NATO allies, others are very important friend. We have the Finnish Ambassador here this morning along with some other people from the diplomatic corps. You mentioned that you were in Estonia. Did you hear anxieties from the Estonians about whether this administration is going to follow the legacy of the last 70 years and the last 12 presidencies, 6 republican presidencies and 6 democratic presidencies, that our commitment to NATO in general, and Article 5 in particular, is iron clad?

SENATOR COONS: Yes, I heard those concerns loudly and clearly expressed by leaders all across the government and society, with whom we met in Estonia. I also heard very real concerns in Ukraine, in the Czech Republic, and frankly, more importantly, at a security conference in Halifax not long after the election. Senator McCain led a bipartisan delegation of Senators and Congressmen. I was up virtually all night meeting with, talking to, hearing from ministers of defense and of state and ambassadors from Baltic states, Balkan states, Eastern and Central European states,



and countries around the world, expressing alarm at a number of statements.

And so to put it in context, as a private citizen and provocateur for a long time, now President Trump made a whole series of -- made campaigns about undermining President Obama's not having been born in the United States. As a candidate he made a whole series of provocative and I think ill considered statements about NATO and the value of our alliances and who owes whom what and what we get out of our role in the world. Then as President he continued to make a number of statements about our relations around the world in the first couple of weeks that were genuinely alarming. That trajectory has calmed or cooled a little bit in recent weeks. There were some important statements made at the Munich Security Conference by the Vice President. I think Secretary Mattis, Secretary Tillerson, and others have made critical overtures and gestures.

MR. TALBOTT: Including on Article 5.

SENATOR COONS: Exactly. But I think we cannot do enough to reinforce these relationships and vital alliances until President Trump himself says we are committed to NATO, we are committed to Article 5, these are absolutely vital alliances, and while we all share the two percent of GDP by 2024 goal, we get a lot more out of the NATO alliance than a simple accounting metric of who invests how much money. We should be looking at the actual impact on our security and on collective security of the contributions of our European allies. And we frankly should be not measuring in a narrow accounting sense, but valuing in a higher sense what it means to have an entire developed continent dedicated to capitalism, to democracy, to open and free societies. That itself is at risk, and if we don't start speaking with one voice as leaders in the Senate and the House and the President about that value, I'm concerned that the American people will not for long continue to sustain what has been an absolutely vital investment over now generations.

MR. TALBOTT: Let's bring our friends in from the audience. Please, as

always, keep your questions questions and short and please identify yourself.

MR. ASLUND: My name is Anders Aslund; I'm from the Atlantic Council. Thank you very much, Senator, for an excellent presentation. I have one additional question or measure for you. You mentioned corruption as a major means now of warfare. But my question is what would you like to do in order to reduce the effect here in the U.S.? There are two major measures by which it can be used today by Russian forces, one is anonymous companies, and the second is anonymous monetary inflows through law firms and attorney-client privilege. Do you see any possibility of doing anything to either of those in order to get more transparency? Thank you.

SENATOR COONS: Thank you. I do think that over decades the United States, which adopted the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act and a variety of legal means to combat corruption, both within our own nation and in our dealings with countries abroad, that we have steadily increased our standards for accountability and for transparency. It was long complained that this put American business at a disadvantage, particularly in the developing world. And beginning maybe 20 years ago a number of our European allies were much more active and progressive in this. And I think we've gotten to a point of real progress and improvement in terms of our interactions in extractive industries, in transborder capital flows. But there is more we can and should do. In the United States, in our own elections, I think tragically ill considered Citizens United decision by our Supreme Court has opened an entire pathway towards largely unreported, unknown massive contributions by corporations and individuals to underwrite campaigns. This loss of transparency in our own political system I think is having corrosive effects. And some of the things you referenced, the lack of transparency both in corporations and in capital flows are things I think we should redouble our efforts to combat. If we want to advocate for the rule of law in other countries we need to adhere to it here. I think on a bipartisan basis I would hope that members of Congress see just how slowly but steadily corrosive is the effect of massive amounts of cash in our own campaigns. We continue to hold a

line on barring foreign contributions to influence campaigns, but given the amount of money and given the way it has influenced our campaigns, I'm concerned that it's just a matter of time until we see here what we've seen across European countries where difficult to track and difficult to report influence, whether by Russian Oligarchs or others, begins to sway campaigns, particularly in smaller countries where the amounts involved are much smaller and the ability for a few individuals to have a significant impact is quite great.

MR. TALBOTT: Ben.

MR. WITTES: Hi, Ben Wittes from the Brookings Institution. I'm interested in -- you've been very gracious toward the administration and the President in the way you've characterized this, but it seems to me the problem is maybe deeper even than you're describing because in our system these foreign policy judgments are principally the judgment of the President. This is a President who has actively expressed all kinds of sympathy and solicitude for Mr. Putin and all kinds of admiration, and has been utterly dismissive of all of the concerns that you're raising. And so I'm interested just in your reflections on how do you, as a Congress, engage the activity that you're describing, not merely in the face of administration passivity on the subject, but in the face of the active solicitude of the President for the very regime and political opponent whom you're identifying.

SENATOR COONS: Well, I'll take your point. Gracious is a term not often used to describe my comments about the President (laughter), so I'm glad if at least in this one place for this one hour my comments have been gracious. Look, I think this is a moment of grave threat to our entire system, to our democracy, and to our nation. And how we handle it deserves less bombastic arm waving and alarm than it does a sort of measured thoughtful engagement. And to the extent that the party and partisans who control the Congress conclude that democrats are simply determined to undermine or drive out this President and his administration, and this is our sole goal, we will be

unsuccessful. We will be unsuccessful in raising the alarm in the American public, in engaging Congress, and in responding to a genuine Russian threat. We will be seen to be narrowly political and partisan rather than patriotic and concerned. Why do I have any reason for optimism?

First is muscle memory. All of my grandparents were anti communist republicans. Ronald Reagan is rolling in his grave at the idea that a republican president has said the things you're referencing, that are sort of laudatory, about Vladimir Putin. The idea that somehow Angela Merkel and Germany and Vladimir Putin and Russia are morally equivalent, as suggested by an inept early comment by the President, I think was eye opening to anyone who was engaged in the project of promoting democracy in the face of Soviet aggression over decades. So one has to believe that there are many republicans who see this perfectly clearly and who recognize the very real threat in front of us.

Part of our challenge is focus and prioritization. There are so many other things going on in these first 76 days. And with the unexpected, I think to many, results of the election that continuing bipartisan progress on confronting this threat and this challenge I think has to get very high priority. And to do that some measure of graciousness is called for, partly because of where our media is, partly of how unexpected and unusual the last election was, partly because of the degree of economic dislocation and unsettling developments worldwide. Most discussion about any topic in the Congress is overheated and often hyperventilating. I think giving the President the time to confront the world and the realities we face and to reconsider comments made in the course of a campaign as he has assembled a more seasoned and focused national security and diplomacy team is the right course rather than simply making this constantly about Trump. It's not about Trump. It's about America. And if one thing may come out of this that is positive, it's that Trump may succeed in making the Senate great again.  
(Laughter)

MR. TALBOTT: I'm going to call the lady in the back in just a second, but I want to pick up if I could a thread that I think comes out of your colloquy with Ben. In addition to your virtue of graciousness you also are an extremely disciplined, high integrity lawyer. You have on various occasions talked about the difference between smoke and fire, although the smoke is often created by fire.

First of all, how do you going forward intend to identify something as fire as opposed to smoke, and how confident are you that the body you are a part of and the Congress as a whole and the government as a whole is going to handle this in a Constitutionally, intellectually, and legally proper way?

SENATOR COONS: Confronting this foreign policy challenge and conducting what hearings and investigations there are in a thorough, non partisan, and ultimately effective way is probably the greatest challenge leaders in the current Congress will face in their entire careers. I remain hopeful, even optimistic that the Senate Intelligence Committee will do its duty and will carry this forward. And that's partly rooted in knowing the individuals who serve on the Senate Intelligence Committee, it's partly seeing how they have weathered distractions and intentional interventions that have taken the House Intelligence Committee on a very unfortunate, ultimately I think destructive, detour. Devin Nunes is I suspect ruing his little escapade of a few weeks ago and what it's doing to his reputation and to the ability of that Committee to work together.

But if the body of the Congress is to ultimately prove itself capable of oversight and of defending our nation, it has to prove itself capable of defending our democracy, of getting to the bottom of what happened or didn't happen in the last election. This isn't just an arson investigation, this is an investigation into what we know, whether we can know it, and whether we can come to a bipartisan understanding about its consequences and then act. This isn't just a backwards looking investigation of a settled incident, this is an investigation of a series of events that have real consequences

for where we go as a country. This is a profound moment, this is a moment of inflection on the trajectory of our republic. And the people who are charged with this, both in the FBI and in the Intelligence Committee in the Senate, I think are serious and seasoned and thoughtful folks, but I think they will be under immense pressure.

I'll remind people listening, there's been a lot of I think casual talk about how we should instead have a select committee or a special committee and that should move forward. What I find is often missed is just the procedural or tactical route that would have to take. We don't just magically create new select or special committees of the Senate. It requires legislation to do so. Legislation is not exactly rocketing through the Congress on a bipartisan basis these days. And it would reset who are the members, what are the rules, they would have to get new staff, they would have to all get clearances. I mean that would take six months at least. And then we wouldn't hear anything for probably two years. And by then we're in a place where other developments in Europe will have caused further, I think, harm to our alliances and to our core values, and other developments in the United States and around the world may well have distracted the Congress and the American people. I think the best hope we have is the Senate Intelligence Committee. And I think the fact that there have been hearings on this issue in the Armed Services Committee, the Appropriations Committee, the Judiciary Committee, the Foreign Relations Committee -- I take great encouragement from the fact that you've got those four committees engaged and that members of both parties have appeared at those hearings, asked probing questions, and I think reflected on what's really going on in the world and what our relations need to be with Russia and with our vital allies.

MR. TALBOTT: Thank you. The lady in the back.

MS. KELEMEN: Yeah, hi, Michele Kelemen with NPR. As you know, Secretary Tillerson is heading to Moscow in a few days. I wonder what you think he needs to accomplish on that trip. And based on your interactions with him so far, does he

buy into some of the things that you're talking about, pushing back Russia on democracy, meddling, and all of these things?

SENATOR COONS: I joined a bipartisan letter to Secretary Tillerson urging that on his upcoming visit he meet not just with Lavrov and with other Russian senior officials, but also with opposition and civil society leaders. The Secretary of State of the United States across both republican and democratic administrations for a long time when going to a foreign country typically has a practice of meeting not just with the government but with journalists, with the opposition, with civil society, as a way of demonstrating in person our commitment to engagement with folks who fight for civil society, for transparency, and for free and fair elections.

Given some truly alarming recent developments, an assassination -- I don't think you can call it anything other than that -- in Ukraine, that President Poroshenko called a state sponsored act of terrorism, the assassination of a former Russian legislator who was a vital witness in an ongoing corruption investigation there. The profound harm to a human rights lawyer thrown out of the fourth story window in Moscow who was Magnitsky's representative. There are truly troubling events recently that suggest an ongoing use of force and thuggery to suppress dissent and to try and achieve certain results in journalism, in regional affairs, that I think really deserve attention and focus from Secretary Tillerson.

The entire Foreign Relations Committee had a lunch meeting with him at the State Department just a few weeks ago. Chairman Corker has done, I think, a terrific job of bringing the Foreign Relations Committee together, of working in a responsible and bipartisan way with Senator Cardin now, with Senator Menendez before him. After Assad's use of poison gas against his own people the Foreign Relations Committee in the Senate gathered, deliberated, and endorsed an authorization of the use of military force, which Obama, I think, mistakenly did not use to act. After the invasion and occupation of Crimea the foreign Relations Committee did, I think, some very sold

bipartisan work. Senator Corker is the current chair, I think is doing a strong job of setting up meetings and opportunities for us to engage with the national security advisor, the ambassador to the United Nations, the secretary of state, and really challenging us to work together to make our committee more relevant again, both in the annual State authorization and in helping shape the strategy of the United States and of this administration with regards to Russia in particular.

MR. TALBOTT: I just had a footnote that I think it's particularly important that you and your colleagues sent that letter since in the past it has been a routine and very useful part of American diplomacy to have American officials meet with intellectuals, democratic forces, and people who are being persecuted. And if he does not do that it's going to look as though we're going to be basically helping Putin say that the only people that U.S. officials can deal with are the ones that they are dealing with now. He has a paranoid conspiracy theory that the previous administrations were trying to bring him down or keep him from getting elected again. So it would be good to see that thread once again as part of our diplomacy.

SENATOR COONS: I do think it's important that we be clear that we are not seeking regime change; that this is -- it is not part of our objective to overthrow Putin and to reassert that publicly and privately. But meeting with opposition leaders, meeting with journalists, meeting with human rights activists is not the same thing as seeking to undermine him or seeking his overthrow.

And to your point, his world view, his mindset tends to equate the two in a way that's been very corrosive to relationship.

MR. TALBOTT: This gentleman here. Then I'll go to the back. Right here, second row.

SENATOR COONS: He's gesturing we have to go. (Laughter) He's not trying to get the microphone, he's trying to get me to go cast a vote.

MR. TALBOTT: I am really sorry that I called on you. (Laughter) Could



we do one more?

SENATOR COONS: I have no idea.

MR. TALBOTT: The lady right behind you.

SENATOR COONS: Is there a vote that's up on the floor? No. Okay.

And, you know, the thing that has characterized the last 76 days is that every time I pick up my phone something has just happened. Devin Nunes has apparently recused himself from the Russia probe, which I think is a constructive development. (Applause)

SPEAKER: What's your reaction to that?

SENATOR COONS: I think that's a very constructive development. You know, look, this is not meant as any disrespect to Congressman Nunes, but he acted in a way that undermined confidence in his independence. Understanding the role of Congress and its oversight responsibilities as being something independent from a campaign role, which he played, Trump transition and so forth, is a challenge that we need to stand up to. Congress needs to embrace the fact that it is not just an arm of a campaign or an arm of the Executive, but is an independent, constitutionally central body. And, you know when each party has control of the White House and Congress there's characterizations of you're only carrying the water for so and so, but this is an important moment. And I've only see a headline. I think he's taken an important step towards making it possible for the House Intelligence Committee to play its role appropriately as well.

MR. TALBOTT: You've managed to elicit applause before you finished and you ended on a happy note, so let's give you another round of applause. (Applause)

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I, Carleton J. Anderson, III do hereby certify that the forgoing electronic file when originally transmitted was reduced to text at my direction; that said transcript is a true record of the proceedings therein referenced; that I am neither counsel for, related to, nor employed by any of the parties to the action in which these proceedings were taken; and, furthermore, that I am neither a relative or employee of any attorney or counsel employed by the parties hereto, nor financially or otherwise interested in the outcome of this action.

Carleton J. Anderson, III

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