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THE ROLE OF VETERANS IN
STRENGTHENING OUR DEMOCRACY

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. O'HANLON: I'm Mike O'Hanlon with the Foreign Policy program and we have a real privilege and pleasure today to host an event by a broad group of military veterans and families called We the Veterans. It's a coalition of a number of different specific organizations that are fundamentally unified around the idea that veterans have a lot to contribute to our country. And at a time when our country is in turmoil and maybe even in danger, they have a big part of potential solution to this problem. Not that we should be relying exclusively on the almost 20 million people who have served this country but no longer are in uniform, but that is a remarkably capable, patriotic, and dedicated pool of individuals and probably a group that can lead the way and help maybe some of the rest of us also take some inspiration as we all look for ways to strengthen our democracy and serve our country, even out of uniform.

In just a moment I'm going to bring out the panel when they finish getting wired, but it's an incredible group of folks. I'm not going to spend lengthy time on the introductions of each of them, but we've got Admiral Steve Abbott, one of the most accomplished Navy officers of the modern era, who also did a lot on homeland security towards the end of his government career. Admiral Thad Allen of Katrina fame, also thereafter commandant of the Coast Guard. Ellen Gustafson, who's a Navy spouse today and has been involved in a lot of the grassroots efforts in getting veterans and military families involved in various kinds of democracy-strengthening and national service efforts. General Craig McKinley, who used to run the National Guard Bureau, four-star general, who was our senior military leader on matters concerning the Reserve and National Guard. And then our own Elaine Kamarck, who has a tradition in her family of military service and her kids are in the military. And she has worked on a broad array of issues in strengthening and reforming democracy, reforming our government, very famous for working on Al Gore's efforts when he was vice president in this vein, but has continued to study the role of military and veterans in our society. And so, without further ado, would you please join me in

welcoming the panel to the stage. (Applause)

So I know that was an unconventional start, but I didn't want to keep C-SPAN waiting, or any of you. And so now we're going to launch right in.

Again, the unifying theme here is what can military veterans and military families do to help strengthen our democracy. And we're going to hear a range of ideas. So rather than try to summarize them all myself, I'm going to let the panelists work down the row and each talk a little bit about how they define the problem or how they see this challenge and what they think can be done about it. And they're not going to each speak comprehensively, they're going to give, to begin with, one idea or two ideas of what they're most involved in. And then we'll have a little bit of time for discussion up here and then a bit of time for discussion with you.

I'd like to begin with Elaine Kamarck because she's been doing a study on the role of veterans in current American political races. The primary season, the beginnings of the general election season for this congressional round, and also elections I think across the country at different levels. And she has a lot of data that I think will be useful for helping us understand the role military veterans are playing at the level of potential elected office. That's just going to be one of the many themes that we'll hear about today.

So, Elaine, over to you.

MS. KAMARCK: Great. Thank you. Thank you very much.

I don't know about you, Michael, but this is my first time back in this room in more than two years because we've all been on Zoom. So thank you for making this possible.

This is the fourth year of a major study that Brookings has done studying people who run for Congress, House and Senate, in primaries because that gives us a very good idea of what the two parties are going to be like, what the factions within each party are about, and what the factions within the House caucus or the House Democratic Caucus or House Republican Caucus, Senate Caucuses are going to be talking about and that the

candidates themselves will be worried about or the members of Congress who get elected, what they'll be worried about, what kind of primary challenges they will try to avoid.

So this is a comprehensive study. It is not a sample. We looked at over 2,000 candidates this year and in previous years. And we of course looked carefully at veterans.

So let me tell you a little bit about what we found. First of all, veterans constituted 17 percent of all the candidates running for office this year. That's a very large number because no other sort of demographic subgroup was that big. This was about the same — a little bit bigger than in 2018, which is the last time that we did this. It was 2018. So it's a little bit bigger. Of those, 72 percent running in Republican primaries, 28 percent were running in Democratic primaries, which is consistent with studies about what we know about the sort of officer corps in the military being slightly more Republican than Democratic.

By and large, of course, these candidates tend to reflect their political party. However, there were a couple of things that stood out. First of all, we asked only two questions about international affairs, which I sort of laugh at because when it comes to American elections, particularly presidentially and Congress, a lot of what they do is foreign affairs, but almost nothing that they do on the campaign trail has to do with foreign affairs. It's just not a voting issue for us. However, what was different is that the veterans really had long and mostly well thought out positions on foreign affairs. They talked quite intelligently and quite passionately about America's role in the world, what they saw, what they thought should happen, et cetera. And it was stark difference from really all the other candidates, with the exception of some of the incumbents who obviously were doing this as part of their job and knew a lot about it. So that was the biggest difference.

Among the Republican veterans, they were quite critical and quite carefully critical, not just slamming, about the pull out of Afghanistan last summer and critical of Biden and critical of Biden's leadership there. The Democrats simply didn't mention it. They didn't try to defend it, but they simply didn't mention it.

So those were the two things where they were different than the rest.

Basically, one of the things which we saw this year and we have seen in previous years is that both political parties back in 2021, when you had to recruit, really sought out veterans. They wanted veterans to run. And that was equally intense in both political parties. The 2019 study by political scientists found that there's a reason for that. Veterans were more favorably perceived by the voters than non-veterans. And it didn't matter — the gender didn't matter. So female veterans were as well perceived as male veterans. And they definitely had an important leg up on other candidates. And then they had to in fact, you know, perform well as a candidate.

We did find a lot of districts, by the way, where veterans were running against other veterans, okay. And that tended to happen, and veterans would — in districts with a lot of military people. So that was sort of to be expected.

So that's the sort of top of our findings. We don't have complete win-loss numbers yet because — believe it or not, there are still primaries to happen. But basically veterans are a very, very important part of the pool of candidates that are competing. And that I think is good for everyone.

But let me move in closing to what I call a tale of two veterans, okay, who have run for office. Both of these guys are featured in a 2016 book by the journalist Joe Klein, called "Charlie Mike: A Tale of Heroes who Brought Their Mission Home". And he focuses on veterans who came home and gave back to the community. And since Joe Klein was a political reporter for his career, right, there's a heavy overlay of politics in there. And you can see him sort of thinking in between the lines, well this guy's presidential material, this guy's presidential material.

So let me talk about two of the veterans in that book who were both prominently in the book in literally the last three months. Okay. One of these was Eric Greitens of Missouri, the other was Wes Moore of Maryland. Now, Eric was featured prominently in the book. He had future president written all over him. He was a Navy Seal,

a Rhodes Scholar, Bronze Star and a Purple Heart winner, and he founded The Mission Continues, which I'm sure many of you know about. Then he ran for governor in 2016 and won as governor of Missouri. He ran as a Republican even though he had been a Democrat and he was in office a little over a year when things began to implode. There was an affair with his hairdresser, there was maybe or maybe not a series of pornographic pictures of her, there was maybe or maybe not some abuse. Anyway, things kind of fell apart. Along the way he was charged with using his fundraising list for The Mission Continues for his political work, and that's a no-no. You're not supposed to do that. And basically things fell apart and by 2018 the Missouri legislature was voting articles of impeachment against him, his party had refused to support him, and he went to the woods for a while to think about things.

He came back in 2022 to run in the Missouri primary for Senate, Republican primary for Senate, and again things started out great. He was in first, number one spot, and things sort of fell apart. His estranged wife accused him of abuse and then he ran an ad showing himself and some other guys breaking into a house with semi-automatic weapons, going from door to door looking for RINOs, Republicans in Name Only. And the ad was widely panned. He ended up going from first place to third place. He got 20 percent of the vote. And I think — I don't think Joe Klein will be writing anymore books about Eric Greitens that have future president written all over them.

Contrast this, Wes Moore, okay. Wes Moore was in the Army, an Army officer, also a Rhodes Scholar, a successful entrepreneur. In fact he founded a company that produced material for people like Oprah Winfrey, okay. And then he was head of the very prestigious Robin Hood Foundation. And this summer he ran for governor of Maryland and in the tight three-way primary won by about three points, okay. And, of course, since it is Maryland and it's a very Democratic state, we can anticipate that he'll probably be the next governor of Maryland, if, of course, nothing implodes. And that of course is the problem with running for office. And that's why I'm sure we're going to talk about other ways to improve democracy other than running for office, because running for office is, if you think your first

battle was bad, running for office is your second battle and it's a bear.

So vets clearly have an advantage in electoral politics. They go into it with clear advantages in the electorate. Veterans vote as a higher percentage than non-veterans — 74 percent for veterans, about 66 percent for non-veterans. So there's absolutely a clear advantage for veterans in elective office. But once they get in, they fall prey to all the foibles that other candidates fall prey to, and we've got to watch out for that.

Nonetheless, having looked at hundreds of veteran websites in this last congressional cycle, I could tell you that the thoughtfulness is there, the integrity is there, and I suspect we'll very soon have another veteran as president of the United States. Maybe a she, not a he.

MR. O'HANLON: Elaine, thank you. Fantastic setting of the context.

And now, Admiral Abbot, if I could turn to you. Again, I've mentioned your distinguished biography to this group, and you've had an amazing life of service to the country. You took a lot of opinions and views and experience about what veterans can do to give back. And I'd just love to hear your thoughts today please, sir.

ADMIRAL ABBOT: Thank you, Michael. And I'm grateful to be here, grateful to Brookings, and grateful to be here with this group of folks who I have known for a while. We are, by the way, all believers I think that veterans have been doing a whole lot for this country for a long time. As Elaine said, voting at a higher rate, participating in volunteer positions and generally good citizens. Of course, they're not all perfect and she mentioned some examples.

I thought I would just try to paint what I think in the picture broadly of the participation of veterans. And, by the way, that includes retired people, like three of us up here, and how they have done for this country, and I believe could do more. That's the bottom line.

So I think everybody know a bit about the founders of the country and the fact that a lot of them served in militias and therefore were military people. And there were

actually 31 presidents who have had military service out of the 46 presidents we've had. So that's a pretty good number — two-thirds, I think. And a whole lot of veterans serving in other positions, cabinet officers. Of course all of us know examples of prominent veterans who've served in legislative positions. I'm a graduate of the Naval Academy. We're very proud of John McCain. And they continue to do so, as Elaine said, at a remarkably high rate. And I think that's admirable, but we — all of us are involved with organizations which are promoting the notion that veterans could do more. And I hope my colleagues might get into a bit more detail about those organizations.

But I'd like to just briefly mention that the political scientists see this issue of veterans' participation as an element of a larger, broader issue of civilian military relations. Now, in the broadest application of civ-mil relations, it's talking about every intersection that the military has with the civilian community. So that's with Admiral Allen down in New Orleans and General McKinley and all the places that the Guard are, many people tend to believe that it's a more narrow issue of just what's the relationship of the military leadership in Washington to the civilian leadership. And that's a very critical and important issue related to civ-mil and it's been in the news a lot, including this week with an open letter from prior secretaries of defense and former chairman. I think we could possibly get into some of that.

But I'd like to say that the participation of veterans in the country is not just tradition, it's indeed what we have encouraged veterans to do over the history of this country and they've performed wonderfully well. We mentioned that there are some exceptions, and I certainly would include those where — for instance, retired military people worked to promote the candidacy of an individual with the implication that that person was speaking for all of the active-duty military, which is clearly not the case. But nevertheless, there has been an enormous amount done and I hope we can go on and get into some of the details.

MR. O'HANLON: Let me do one quick follow question with you if I could, Admiral. Because both you and Elaine have encouraged veterans to get involved in political life, even as candidates, and I agree with you. And I happen to remember there were some

fairly okay presidents, like George Washington, Ulysses S. Grant, and Dwight Eisenhower, who did pretty well. So it's hard to imagine a blanket prohibition against political life for retirees. But are there any thresholds or lines that people should not cross?

And I'll be blunt, and I'll start by mentioning a name. I think Mike Flynn crossed a line because he was speaking in an inflammatory and incendiary way. I don't like the choice of his candidate, but I'll leave that aside. The way he spoke was to suggest a lawlessness towards the other side's candidate. Lock her up. It seemed to me that he was using his military reputation to try to incite some kind of a militaristic response against the opposition candidate. So that's something to avoid.

And Elaine gave a very concrete example, you know, don't be a criminal and don't abuse your wife. That's something else to avoid.

But are there any more general guidelines that you would acknowledge people should be careful about when they — maybe in the period immediately after they take off the uniform or the kind of rhetoric they use in their political activity? Any kind of guidelines or constraints that should be sort of self-imposed by veterans who want to be parts of our political life?

ADMIRAL ABBOT: Well, I would say this, that the civ-mil relations and the theory regarding what the participation and behavior of veterans and former military people should be is one that's greatly debated within the political science field and among the academics because, indeed, there are no restrictions on what veterans may do. They are citizens, they have the rights of citizens, and they have the First Amendment right to say what they want. There is an objection to individuals like General Flynn, and my friend and colleague, General Allen, in one circumstance, to do things that put the civ-mil relationship between the leadership on the military side and the leadership on the civilian side at risk. And that would occur if the public at large began to think that veterans and retirees like us were indeed speaking for the Department of Defense, speaking for the military services, instead of speaking as citizens who were involved and interested in what the civic duties

they should perform should be.

So, yes, there are going to be some norms, which are violated. "Norms" is a term that the political scientists like to you, but what it means is normal. So the normal activity should not include that "crossing the line", as you say, of implying that veterans and retired military people speak for the active duty.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. Let's keep moving.

And, Ellen, I'd like to go to you next. You're doing amazing things across a wide array of topics, even as you've still got a spouse in the military, even as you've got a family to raise. A lot of energy, a lot of commitment. Tell us a little bit about what you're up to please and thank you as well for joining us today.

MS. GUSTAFSON: Yes, thank you, thank you all.

You know, I think one thing that's so interesting about this conversation is the distinction for military family members like myself and veterans in wanting to serve democracy, serve the country, serve the Constitution as distinct as serving a political party, serving a political agenda, or promoting a political agenda. I think something that has been hard to sort of be in this nuanced space is how military veterans and military family members can actually promote democracy, can help support the institutions and norms of our country while not engaging in partisan politics or engaging as a candidate for a party. And I think we as an organization that I co-founded with my fellow co-founders, who are all veterans, we looked at this opportunity, this incredible group of 17 million veterans plus way more family members like myself, as an incredible opportunity that has not specifically been engaged through other service organizations in this support of democracy.

We know that veterans volunteer in general at higher rate, we know that they vote at a higher rate, so what an incredible group of people to engage in activities that are not political, not for a party, but really are supporting our country. The organization that I co-founded, We the Veterans, with family military members as the silent second part of the organization, is looking to find ways that we can connect our community with opportunities to

support institutions and norms and democracy writ large. We're looking at issues like civics education, civic engagement, issues like countering violent groups and anti-democratic groups and even countering mis-, dis-, and mal-information, which can be really detrimental to our country and to our national security. And we've looked across the opportunities of civic engagement and thought where would this population best serve again? One thing we're recall focused on in this particular election cycle is not just voting, but to have veterans and military family members to serve as poll workers. We believe that is a great opportunity for a trusted group of Americans to actually be in the polling locations where Americans due their most sacred duty. And as they previously defended this democracy and this right to vote, actually be there as civilians helping to support voting to happen.

And, again, we think this opportunity for how you can be engaged in the political life of our country, the civics of our country, but not try to be connected to a political party has really been sort of an open opportunity. And we think that so many members of the military understand what it means to work with people that you don't agree with, and often that gets forgotten in civilian life. There aren't as many opportunities to do that, especially in these siloed ecosystems of news and media and relationships, even communities that we often live in. But that there are things that are like the military, like serving as a poll worker or other civic engagement elements, also like working with military volunteer and veteran volunteer organizations, that can remind you that incredibly important thing for the fabric of our country, of what it means to work across party lines just for the betterment of democracy.

So I think there is this conversation that's alive and well with this open letter from a bunch of senior former military leaders about military members remembering and veterans remembering the roles of civilian leadership and military leadership. But there are important connection points, because if our institutions, if our democracy itself does not have the power and the energy to be maintained with the norms and all the things we were used to defending as military veterans, it's going to be really hard to sort of go back and have all

these amazing candidates run successfully.

So we again think there is just an incredible opportunity to connect the community of military families and veterans with just pro-democracy initiatives and that that hopefully will allow people to serve again in a way that becomes a new norm. And, again, I think it's to the betterment of all of us and all Americans to support the movement of a new civic life that veterans and military family members can lead.

MR. O'HANLON: Can you give an example or two of the kind of activity you're proposing. And then I have a follow up question about sort of the state of what you see in today's military in terms of — it's a troubled time obviously. Military remains a very venerated and respected institution and we all appreciate what men and women in uniform and their families do for the country, but of course January 6 and other trend lines, as well as our concerns about mental health and suicide rates in the veteran and military populations have a lot of us worried about sort of the overall state of the institution. So I want to ask you that because you're close to it right now.

But, first, can you give a couple of examples of the kinds of activities you're proposing people get involved in?

MS. GUSTAFSON: Yeah, I mean I think there's a couple of things.

One, as a military family member, as a military spouse, I live in an ecosystem that's much more broad and diverse in social media and in my physical life than most Americans today. And so I think there's this extrapolating on that to find social connection points that get people engaged with democracy itself.

Our first example, our first program is called "Vet the Vote", and it's to engage veterans and military family members to literally sign up through us to be poll workers in their local communities. And the idea is to actually use the incredible network of existing military family and veteran organizations to ask those already engaged veterans and military family members to do this thing for their country and to reengage in this way.

But to specifically talk about those organizations, that is how you poll and

maintain the connective tissue of the military into veteran life. We have the most incredible network of VSOs, veteran support organizations, military support organizations in our country. People that are engaged in those organizations tend not to have as many challenges when they get out, they tend not to be in need of the feeling of maybe brotherhood that some nefarious groups might offer, they tend to have stronger social bonds and social fabrics. So these organizations already serve an important service to our country and to our democracy and I think looking at them in that way, not just for, hey, it's really important for veterans to be available for disaster relief, like Team Rubicon, it's really important, like The Mission Continues, actually for veterans to volunteer, it's really important for military family members to have groups like Blue Star Families and the National Military Family Association to connect with their community. But to actually use those networks to say let's go back, use those existing networks, and get those folks out actually volunteering for democracy, use those networks to say, hey, let's be inoculated against bad and mis and dis and mal information so that we, military family member and veterans ourselves are the leaders away from any of those nefarious messages or nefarious groups.

So these existing networks that people build from military service into civilian life are actually essential for keeping democracy strong. You know, there's a lot of great data from social scientists on civil society organizations and connective tissue and how that — you know, there's the great book about bowling that —

MS. KAMARCK: "Bowling Alone".

MS. GUSTAFSON: "Bowling Alone", right. And so I think — you know, as a military family member, I regularly go bowling on base and I think it's a reminder that we have this connective tissue built into military life. We can teach Americans a lot about being in civil society organizations, being connected to people across party lines, working together for the common good, following the rules and norms. You know, those are all things we're really good at in the military and extended to the military family. Let's use those skills and talents to better our democracy in this new way.

MR. O'HANLON: Well, that's great. You've begun to answer already my other question for you, which is impossibly big, but I'll put it on the table anyway, and others may want to touch on it as well, which is to sort of get your reading on, if you will, for lack of a better phrase, sort of the moral and institutional health of the Armed Forces at a time when some people have started to doubt, because we've seen more extremism in the ranks, we've seen a higher percentage of January 6 insurrectionists from military service than from the general population, we know suicide rates are still very high — maybe that's because we've asked too much of too few for too long of those in the general country, we've asked people in uniform to go back on repeated tours and that's led to mental health issues. Whatever the cause, how severe is the problem? You're saying some very good things about the state of the military today and that's encouraging, but I also wanted to gauge your degree of anxiety or worry.

MS. GUSTAFSON: Well, I mean I think — look, like with the veteran population, with the military, when you've met one veteran, you've met one veteran, right. When you've met — so the military is not a monolith. But I also think that like America we are victim to all of the bad elements that we're dealing with in society — mis and dis information, you know, stratification, silos for information. But one thing that's really interesting about the military is that we are given credit — as a military spouse, I will say this 100 percent, and I think a lot of veterans would say this — we are given credit for knowing more about civics than the general population. We don't necessarily. And that is a problem. And that is a problem that my organization is very interested in engaging with because when you credit people and give them trust and faith for knowing more about our general civics and our Constitution and the way our country operates and our three branches of government, you're giving people credit for something, therefore making them — putting them on a pedestal, making them experts in area where they don't — you know, we don't have — I don't — I didn't marry someone in the military and then get a civics education class. Maybe I should, right. If I'm going to be given credit for that or if a veteran is going to

be really held up as the beacon and the pinnacle of knowledge about how our country is supposed to work, maybe we should invest more in making sure they do know more than anyone else and inoculating them against any messaging that suggests otherwise.

MR. O'HANLON: That's great.

MS. GUSTAFSON: And I think that's a big opportunity for us today.

MR. O'HANLON: That's a great answer. Thank you.

Admiral Allen, really privileged to have you here, sir. And you come from a military service that, besides the Space Force, is the smallest. Also, as you reminded me, one that lives in the communities in this country where it does its work most directly. And so the Coast Guard has some unique vantage points on this set of challenges and opportunities.

I wondered if you could speak to those please.

ADMIRAL ALLEN: Sure, happy to. First of all, thanks for having us here and love these gentleman. I've served with them over the years. It's great to be back on this forum with them.

The Coast Guard is radically different than the other services. We are an armed force in time of war, we can be moved to the Navy, we operate as components with joint combatant commanders around the world, but generally in the United States, we're deployed where we live and we're providing first response of law enforcement and management of ports and waterways and we need to control those ports and waterways as we did after 9/11 when we closed New York Harbor and evacuated 500,000 people from lower Manhattan.

Now, I've come to believe where my time in the Coast Guard, any hard problem we deal with, whether it's Covid, whether it's Hurricane Katrina, whether it's the oil spill, these become exercises in applied civics. They test the resiliency and the load test the Constitution and the ability of us as a nation to react to it. And I think there are direct transferrable skills and talents, at least from my experience in the Coast Guard and working

with people in the Coast Guard, that can be brought to bear against these problems at the community level or the national level.

I had the opportunity to work two very hard problems. One was coming in after Mike Brown and Hurricane Katrina, and then being the national incident commander for the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Radically different issues. Natural disaster response is a purview of state and local governments with the help of the federal government. In the oil spill, there's federal preemption. The federal government is in charge of it. But in both cases I worked for a Republican president and a Democratic president — reported to them personally, was accountable to them. And what I focused on was achieving an effect, fixing the problem. And the people that have worked for me in the Coast Guard over the years, whether it's trying to talk to appropriators or OMB examiners who are getting ready for hearings, I've tried to explain to them — this works at all levels — you need to learn how to be effective in a political process without being political. That's basically what's been said by the people that are here.

Just because you're working in a political process doesn't mean you have to be partisan; it means you have to participate if you're going to be successful. And the organizational structure of the Armed Forces and what we learn when we come in, the ethics and how we do work and how we build teams are directly transferrable and add value to the private sector, if you got there and working in your communities, whether it's coaching soccer or becoming a member of the local school board, or ultimately running for office.

So my pitch is that we need to understand why we are effective when we wear a uniform, how we're able to achieve effects without becoming political, and how we can transfer that to complex problems we have to deal with in the community that are all, as I said, exercise in applied civics.

MR. O'HANLON: So thank you. That's beautifully said. But I want to just make sure I understand clearly, are you saying to stay out of partisan politics even after retirement? So is there a slight difference of opinion here on the panel or are you talking

more about people who are still in uniform, but they can contribute even while they are?

ADMIRAL ALLEN: Yeah, it's a great distinction to make. I'm talking about people that are actually in the military, living in communities. But when they retire, they can still do that. You have the option if you want to run for public office. You're not precluded from doing that, you have the rights just like any other American. I have a number of friends that have run for office that are holding offices, both Republicans and Democrats, that can do a terrific job, but, again, if you're going to run for office and be successful, as we've heard, you just start with the effects you want to achieve in mind and the fact that if you're elected to an office, you have the opportunity to be relevant. It's not that you have perks, it's not that you have privileges that others don't have, you have the opportunity to be relevant. And that's the goal if you're going to do something like this after you retire.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you very much.

General McKinley, our cleanup hitter.

GENERAL McKINLEY: Thank you.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you very much for being here as well. And, needless to say, with your expertise with the Guard and Reserve, you also deal with a population that is living in the community even while in uniform and then, of course, after as well with opportunities for service at both stages of one's life or career. So would love to hear your perspective.

GENERAL McKINLEY: Thanks, Michael. Thanks for the invitation and to Brookings for hosting us. It's great that we have the privilege of your time here today for those people on a Friday afternoon in D.C. who wanted to hear some very interesting people speak about this subject.

I kind of wanted to start off with a couple of historical dates that are significant to all of us on the front panel. Twenty-one years ago in September was September 11, 2001. That was a high-water mark in terms of my career in the military of seeing young men and women rapidly run to recruiting offices and volunteer to serve. That

was a very patriotic response to a very tragic incident. So I always look back on that because it's a frame of reference, much like what we see today in England with the death of the Queen.

The other date I would like to suggest we think about is it was 50 years ago when President Nixon ended conscription. There aren't many people in this audience, maybe a couple of folks up here, who had a draft number. So our country has moved beyond mandatory forcing young men and women into service, but we've done it very well. And there's a Georgetown study co-authored by George Casey called "Supporting Veterans After 50 Years of the All-Volunteer Force" and the longest war in the United States' history. So I call that out to your attention just in case anybody wants to go a little deeper into this.

The National Guard is, as Admiral Allen said, forward deployed. We like to have a bumper sticker that there's a National Guard woman or man in every zip code, and it's true. I had to do the measles chart. There are people in every zip code in the United States. An old organization that started back when there was a regulated militia by law with rules and regulations on what you did. And we have come a long way and I give credit to the United States Army and the United States Air Force, because those are the two services who train, organize, and equip us and provide the preponderance of resources for us.

So we can do two or three different things. We can have a job in the civilian community, we can be in the National Guard and if the governor calls us, as the governor of Kentucky has done for recent floods and tornadoes, or, as Governor Abbott in Texas has done, call up 10,000 of his National Guardsmen on his dime to go to the border because that's where he thinks the interest should be. I come from Florida and the state legislature is thinking about putting members of the National Guard into prisons because we're short of prison guards. So there's a flexibility there for a member of the National Guard.

And then, finally, what we really train, organize, and equip ourselves for, and that's to augment our services. And I think the last 20-25 years have made a difference. I think its effect was to create a place where I could serve alongside Admiral Allen in the

tank, on the joint chiefs of staff. We didn't use to have that rank or privilege before these long wars started taking a toll on a lot of soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, Coast Guard's men and women. And then to become, finally, in my last two years in the service, a full member of the joint chiefs.

And to spin this all the way around, Michael, to your question, the two chairmen I work for, Mike Mullin and General Marty Dempsey, cautioned all of us during times of political campaigns, whether it be a midterm or a major election, to just stay out of it. And it was kind of like a gentleman or gentlewoman's agreement to your civic duty but to stay out of the headlines, and don't cross red lines that don't exist, by the way. There are no red lines that I'm aware of for members of the military serving or retired to cross. It's just common sense. Being pro democracy.

And Count Every Hero is the reason I'm here today. We've got 10 co-chairmen of people, 3 of us on this panel. There's 7 more people with 3 separate former secretaries. It's a pro-democracy group, but we don't go out and advocate for a specific candidate or party, but we believe the nation needs to focus back on what it does mean to be a citizen of the United States.

So, with that, I'll turn it back to you, Michael.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you, General. Let me ask you one follow up question as well.

GENERAL MCKINLEY: Mm-hmm.

MR. O'HANLON: Are you saying that when veterans get together to form organizations, and maybe this builds on Admiral Allen and some of the other comments as well, that those organizations should really try to be nonpartisan? Whereas individual veterans can obviously exercise their rights as Americans and we need them to, as Elaine was saying, to run as partisan candidates in some cases. And sometimes, you know, Admiral Allen sort of I think encouraged people to show a measure of restraint in their rhetoric and high vision in their goals. And that was a very appealing and inspiring way you

suggested, admiral Allen, that candidates coming out the military might present themselves to the country and serve the country. But is that the distinction, General McKinley, that organizations of veterans should be nonpartisan, even as individual veterans should be encouraged to run for office?

GENERAL MCKINLEY: I have tried to schedule my volunteer service, which I think is really a significant part of giving back to our nation as we did the military service, of choosing organizations that are totally bipartisan, that they're not political. Joe's in the back of the room on the cell phone, I know, but Joe encouraged ten of us to join Count Every Hero, to make sure things — that we express ourselves but not cross red lines. So that's how I'll leave it. And maybe Admiral Allen or Admiral Abbot would have a comment on that.

MR. O'HANLON: Yeah, this is a good time to open up the conversation across the panel, so please.

ADMIRAL ALLEN: Yeah, I'm a proud member of Count Every Hero as well. Let me give you a good example of what's controversial in states and voting and why it's important to us. That's absentee voting.

You can find all kinds of contentious arguments, pro, con, how it's run in every individual state. What if you're deployed? What if you're in the Middle East? All the sudden there's a restriction on how you can absentee vote or time limits make it impossible for you to meet that? That's where we come together, we represent the veterans, active duty — more so in this case — and make sure we count every hero — every vote counts. There's nothing partisan about that and there's everything that a democratic country and the ideals we hold, that's what it's all about.

MR. O'HANLON: I'd like to — please, Ellen.

MS. GUSTAFSON: And I think this is where our work — we're so impassioned. That's a civic norm, right. That's something we've always as a country supported people who are living overseas or stationed overseas or military families overseas, to be able to vote absentee. That's something that is in some context under

threat. And that's the work of civics that is, again, apolitical, nonpartisan. It's political but nonpartisan but pro norms. And I think there's a lot of that now that veterans should be leading, military families should be leading the conversations protecting those things like these senior leaders are. But making sure that everyone up and down sort of the service understand why that's important and why we should fight back against any nefarious narratives against it.

MR. O'HANLON: Elaine, I wanted to come back to you if I could. And, please, everyone just jump in or get my attention and I'll bring you in again. Because I wanted to get your thoughts as well on the question that I posed to Admiral Abbot about what kind of constraints should someone leaving the service self-impose or consider self-imposing if they're considering a run for office? And I wondered if you — maybe the answer is nothing. Maybe there's no way, shape or form any kind of constriction, restriction that should be on these fine Americans any more than anybody else, but maybe you feel like the military as an institution has such a prestige in our country, and that's good for the country, we should want to keep it that way, and therefore partly for the good of the military and for the good of keeping the military out of politics and perceived to be out of politics, that there should be certain kinds of self-discipline, self-constraint. I just would love to hear your thoughts on that question.

MS. KAMARCK: Yeah, I mean one of the most important things that I think former military can do once they get out is — and this is unique — in this very polarized environment, they can talk to the other side in a way that other people can't. So I heard a veteran just this morning talking about this in a council I was in of military families saying a military vet can go into a meeting of the other party and will be greeted with some kind of respect and, oh, yeah, we don't agree, you're the Democrat, oh god, but here, have a beer with us. And there's a higher probability that that will happen in the veterans community than it will happen in any other community.

So there is an ability I think that veterans have once they're entering politics

to reduce the heat, if you will, between the two sides. Because after all, we're in a situation now we haven't been in in a long time where people say to pollsters, no, I would be very unhappy if my daughter or my son married somebody of the other party, okay. That's kind of unbelievable, but that's where we are.

So I do think that there's an opportunity to reduce the intensity of polarization and, frankly, the violence that this leads to in some points.

Other than that, other than trying to be a more civil — create a more civil dialogue, the fact is once you enter politics you are in a different game. You're just in a different game. And the game is about your political party, your supporters, which piece of the electorate you're going to get, et cetera. And I think — and I'll say this because I — Admiral Allen really hit a cord with me about your focus on operations in mission, okay — politics — it's interesting about politicians, they get screwed up when a mission fails. Afghanistan being a very good one. Took down Joe Biden's approval numbers and he's never gotten them back, okay. But they don't go into decision making with an operational point of view. Most politicians know about messaging and talking and who's for me and how do you make this deal, et cetera. They don't know about operations. And then the big consequential operations, right, Hurricane Katrina, right, Barack Obama's websites crashing, Afghanistan, the big consequential operations that government is in charge of have enormous political consequences. And very often when you go back and you unravel these, you see that the politicians — there were plenty of warning lights, there were plenty of blinking lights, but the politicians are not trained to think of these or to even pay attention to them.

Now, I do think that a military background, because for you the operation is often a life-or-death thing, so you've got to be planned carefully. I think a military background helps you think about operations, and I think it would be a very good thing if more of our elected officials had some sense of operations and consequences, et cetera, as opposed to what they usually do, which is they say to the speech writer, hey, get me out of

this, right. How do I spin this? (Laughing) We've got a mess here, what do I do.

What did Obama do two days after, three days after his websites were crashing? He went to Boston and gave a speech. Went to Boston and gave a speech. Now, he was suffering the worst operational breakdown of his presidency and what was the reaction? Oh, let's go give a speech. And that is a chronic problem, Democrats and Republicans in our politics today. And I think military backgrounds can help that.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you.

Let's just go down the line. Please, Admiral Abbot and then Admiral Allen.

ADMIRAL ABBOT: I just would like to have a word on the issue of should veterans and retirees try to confine their activities through nonpartisan. And I recently read the McCullough biography of John Adams who talked about James Madison drafting the Constitution and Madison believing at that point that there would be no need for political parties in the country because men and women of good will could speak to each other and find common ground. Of course, even before he was president, there were parties. (Laughter) And have served both with nonpartisan organizations, but I have to say I've also been part of a partisan effort. And I think as a practical matter for veterans, just the way the United States exists in terms of its political makeup, it's not possible to expect that veterans would even only or even largely be identified as nonpartisan. It's simply probably not practical. But they can be, as Elaine described, enormous contributors to trying to find that Madison ground of reasonable people talking to each other and, frankly, help with the stabilization of what many would say is a deterioration in the democratic process in this country.

MR. O'HANLON: One follow up if I could. That's a very compelling answer, but I wanted to ask how do you feel about a group that would say veterans for Democrats or veterans for Republicans? In other words, should veterans organize as groups with a partisan angle and use the fact that they're veterans as a central element of explaining what that group is about? Is that going too far?

ADMIRAL ABBOT: So this is one of the big civ-mil debates and I think, as many of you know, for the last I think eight presidential election cycles there have been what I call beauty contests, which each candidate enlisting their supporters from among the retired and veteran ranks. And it also includes enlisting, you know, individuals with diplomatic experience or other national security experience. And so my answer to that is the genie is out of the bottle. I believe that that's going to continue. I believe it can be organizations which contribute more than simply getting names on a list. There's an organization that I'm part of now called "National Security Leaders for America". And the objective of National Security Leaders for America is to improve the democratic process with individuals who have national security experience from both sides of the aisle and can in fact support specific candidates for office around the states, but with the knowledge that they are working to help improve the understanding of, the explanation of the national security requirements that this country has.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. Let's go to Admiral Allen and then we'll go to you all for your questions.

ADMIRAL ALLEN: Yeah, I'm just reminded of Alexander Hamilton's caution against factions in the Federalist Papers, and I think that's what ultimately became the roots of our parties we have right now.

So looking at the political landscape and how you operate within this, my big concern is we're losing the distinction between campaigning and governing. And the more we extend a campaign into an administration and don't focus on governing, this is including just basic blocking and tackling, like HR systems, accounting, finance, appropriations, and all that other kind of stuff, you are less resilient and less ready to operate when something does occur. And I think this has been happening — and this is my own personal view now — the last transition where that was not materially harmed in my view was when Bush 41 relieved President Reagan because they were in the same party and he was vice president. Ever since then there's been a drop in continuity because our inability to stop campaigning

and shift to governing. And doing that it confused the advice you're getting from the military and even the goals you're trying to achieve. Say during Covid, where all of the sudden medical advice becomes politicizes. Are we campaigning or are we governing?

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you.

Okay, if you would like to pose a question, please raise your hand and then identify yourself when you get a microphone. We may take a couple, or I'll take one or two from the crowd. I've got a couple that have been emailed to us. So, please, sir, over to you.

MR. JAMES: Hi, my name is Matt James. I'm a former Navy veteran myself. Also work in the security space, if you will.

So from my perspective a lot of the political sphere is a clown show and it just looks like a celebrity contest versus normal governing, boring government. How can veterans step up to lead, whether in political service or not, but staying away from, right, this extreme kind of political sphere and kind of bringing things more towards normal operations of government?

MR. O'HANLON: Anybody want to take a first cut at that?

MS. GUSTAFSON: I mean I think there is a lot of opportunity for leadership in actually talking about norms and institutions and the boring stuff. And I think the more — you know, when I experience foreign policy as a military spouse, my political views aren't necessarily represented in my feelings about what's happening with foreign policy, because they're actually affecting my life. And so actually I'm much less partisan in my own military spouse experience than I am if I were just watching a news channel and listening to people talk about their views — like the clowns talking about their views. So I think actually reminding Americans and having more veterans and even military families narrating the experience of actually having politics affect you operationally and talking about the institutions that you engage with and the norms that help you live your military life, it actually is incredibly important for America to hear and is totally missing, as we've just discussed. It's totally missing.

And so I think maybe there's a way that this is how this next sort of class of veterans running for office changes the dialogue.

GENERAL McKINLEY: Yeah, to Elaine's point, this is a large number of vets running. Makes me feel good that that's happening, but the core values of our military services are such that that breeds people who believe in our nation for things that are bigger than themselves. And that's why it gives me hope. So I hope it does come true, but politics is a rough game too.

MS. KAMARCK: Oh, yeah. And let me just say about the clown show, okay. There's a lot of things that voters don't really know about, foreign policy being the very top and world affairs, military affairs, okay. I can remember very clearly a certain presidential candidate a couple of years ago who when asked about the nuclear triad clearly had no idea what it was, right. No idea. Now, most Americans don't know what that is either, but they're not going to be in charge of it, okay. (Laughing) So there's a lot of things Americans don't know about and don't really care about. They leave it to other people.

The reason political parties are essential to democracies — and we are not getting rid of political parties and there's never been a democracy that did not have political parties — is because political parties are the shorthand for most voters. What they want. It's a shorthand, it's a summary. Yeah, I kind of don't like government messing in my business and I don't like high taxes, I think I'm going to be a Republican. I don't necessarily know what the Telecommunications Act of 1996 is about, I have no idea what it is. Huge important piece of legislation. Most people can't tell you what on earth it did. But I kind of know that I want to vote this way, not that way. You know, those are the things.

So political parties, which get a very bad rap, are a shortcut for voters and that's why they always, always persist. And in successful democracies you have strong political parties.

And campaigns tend to get run on the sort of very gritty at home issues, right. What's the price of gasoline, right? But what we need in our politics is we need

people who can not only talk about the price of gasoline and connect with voters, but we need people who can go on the Armed Services Committee and talk about what is the future of the nuclear triad, right, what should we be doing about that. So that's the sweet spot. And I think veterans can really fill that sweet spot in a way that a lot of other — not matter which party they're in, because a lot of these issue — for all the hype around this, a lot of these issues turn out not to be very partisan, okay. So I think veterans can fill some of that sweet spot and be what the political scientists call "quality candidates".

MR. O'HANLON: So let's get the candidates in on this and then we'll go to one last round. Admiral Allen?

ADMIRAL ALLEN: Just one real quick comment.

One of my favorite definitions of leadership is the ability to reconcile opportunity and competency. I would tell any veteran, ask any veteran, what are you competent in, what are you passionate about. There's a place to take that, and it doesn't have anything to do with politics.

MS. KAMARCK: Yeah, that's really well said.

MR. O'HANLON: Admiral Abbot?

ADMIRAL ABBOT: I guess I would say that there's an elephant in the room in a sense in a discussion of this kind of thing about how to make this country's democracy run better, is that in many respects it's not running very well. So if I were trying to answer your question, I don't think I would say well, you can be effective if you're just not identified with anything or anybody. I think we have to look at what it is that's causing the machinery not to work well and then we veterans need to be part of that solution.

And one of the things that Count Every Hero is working to support is the Electoral Count Act, which we believe is essential to improving the function of the democracy. We are watching some Supreme Court cases that are coming along which deal with one of the serious deficiencies of the democratic system, and that's gerrymandering. And we believe that what it has produced is much of the extremism that exists for the two

parties, and we believe that that has national security implications. So that's why we're on it.

So that's my answer. We've got to fix the democracy. Everybody's got to be involved in that.

MR. O'HANLON: Any other questions from the audience? And then I'll see what we have from email. Okay, please here, ma'am, and then, sir. We'll take those two. That may be it actually.

QUESTIONER: Thank you so much. Hi, you mentioned the disproportionate number of veterans that were involved in J6 and in my work — I study right wing extremism, militias, accelerationism — and so beyond J6, seeing the disproportionate number of veterans that are involved in these group.

And so my question is what role can veterans themselves play in deradicalizing the veteran community and what role can society play in better addressing some of the neglected needs of veterans that lead them to be involved in these groups?

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. And I should have asked you to identify yourself too. My apologies.

QUESTIONER: Sorry, my name is Rumaya (phonetic).

MR. O'HANLON: Rumaya. Thank you.

Sir, we'll take yours at the same time. Then I'm going to throw in one myself and then we'll go down the line and you can just do your final concluding remarks. Pick whatever question you like best. And we'll hopefully cover them all.

QUESTIONER: Hi, I'm Nick. I actually recently finished my Ph.D. in linguistics at Georgetown where I study language in military and veteran populations. And I think my question is actually very similar to Rumaya.

I'm very active veteran service organizations because I'm a Navy veteran, served for eight years during Don't Ask, Don't Tell. And I particularly am involved with VSOs that help LGBTQ service members and veterans.

And so my question is how can these VSOs find common ground when

divisive rhetoric is pervading political discourse and then being legitimized by state legislation, specifically states like Florida, Texas, where we have a lot of families of service members who are there, that places those service members in precarious waters?

Thank you.

MR. O'HANLON: There was one question by email that's distinct from what we've heard. Let me add that to the mix. I hope I'm not testing your memories too much, but just grab onto whichever question you most like and maybe take that one. We'll go down — as I say, go down the row.

Someone asked about gun control. And not that I wanted to bring that up at 5:08, 5:09 on a Friday afternoon, but it builds on Admiral Abbot's point that there are some issues where veterans may have a particular knowledge base or interest or perspective. Is that a kind of an issue where veterans should get more involved in the debate? Or is it just guaranteed to inflame things and not really ultimately shed more light?

So that's the question by email.

The final question that I want to add, and maybe it's mostly for Ellen, but anybody who might want to touch it. And I it's inspired partly by Admiral Allen and General McKinley and the date of September 9. I don't know when C-SPAN is going to air this, but it may be September 11. I think we all want to extend our sympathies to the victims of 9/11 and their families, and we all want to thank the first responder community, which is really where my question is going, because I wondered if the first responder community should be thought as part of this overall community of veterans of public service that have a special loyalty to the country, a special affinity for serving it. And maybe if there's any way we want to reach out to them in the same conversation.

So that's a lot to put on the table. Please be selective as you each wrap up in about a minute or two a piece.

ADMIRAL ABBOT: If I can go first, I would just say extremism, including the kind that you described, is a severe problem in the country and it needs to be attacked by all

the means that are available, one of which is the proper treatment of individuals who violate our Constitution as they did on January 6. And the country needs to see what the result of that is and understand that that's indeed what would happen if that behavior continued.

MR. O'HANLON: Admiral Allen?

ADMIRAL ALLEN: If you gave me five veterans of completely opposite political, social, and cultural differences and you put them in a room, you say what is something you all agree on, Tri-Care Health, pay, and housing. Food, clothing, and shelter — start there. (Laughter)

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you.

Elaine?

MS. KAMARCK: I think that there's a real generational difference in the United States when it comes particularly to the LGBTQ community. And I think that you will see that generational difference all across the board, including among veterans and in active-duty military. So I think that there's a little bit of this is just kind of wait, right, just kind of wait. Things will get better.

And what we're seeing now in terms of some of the more radical social issues that some people have been promoting is we're seeing the beginnings of backlash. And there's a backlash — it's coming on abortion, it's absolutely going to be a tsunami, and it will be followed quickly by a backlash against some of the things that are going on in Texas and Florida about gay rights, about gay marriage, about all of that basket of social issues. Political parties kind of get ahead of themselves and they overreach, and when they overreach democracy has an amazing way of pulling them back. And I think that's what's happening now, and I think that's what's going to happen.

MR. O'HANLON: Ellen?

MS. GUSTAFSON: So last night, Nick, the Modern Military Association of America, the LGBTQ military family organization, held their first I believe gala at the Army Navy Club. And not only was it all over my social media as a military spouse, but I know that

my friend in the back, who's a colleague who works at the National Military Family Association, was there photographed all over the place. Leadership of a major long standing military family organization at the gala for the LGBTQ military family. To me, that's the first year, right. This has just happened last night. It's a sign of the times. You know, we're moving in the right direction as a community, and I feel that way as a military spouse. I feel that in my own experience as a military spouse, we have military spouses of all family makeups and that's relatively normal and not questioned in the military that I exist in right now.

So that's just a hopeful statement for you.

Rumaya, the work that We the Veterans is doing is 100 percent focused on using the exact same factors that are so attractive to these violent extremist groups are the protective factors against them. Tight bonds, desire for brotherhood and sisterhood, you know, deep social connections, trust among the American public for the perspectives of military families and veterans. Those same factors that are attractive to nefarious groups are really good protective factors.

Now, the work that we're doing with our partners at START, the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Terrorism Related Activities — Bill Braniff is sitting two rows behind you and is the leader of that — is to say let's use those protective factors to go against those nefarious groups.

And the last thing I'll say, as a New Yorker on 9/11, and as a military spouse, my husband — we're both from the New York area — constantly says if we're going to get military members in uniform on the planes first, why aren't we getting all the other first responders on the plane right behind them. And that is a reason and a cause and a maintenance of the civ-mil divide. That's actually really bad for our country because there's a lot of people who serve that should be engaged in the same kind of civics work and conversations that military members and veterans are. And so I think that that's a huge opportunity that we as an organization are also really interested in, but I think a lot of military

members are also interested in seeing changed too.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you.

General?

GENERAL McKINLEY: Real quick, Michael. Thank you again for this opportunity to sit with these great people up here and talk to interested people on the subject.

So I would say first responders definitely need to be part of this group. Admiral Allen and I spent a career working with first responders. They are amazing people. They don't get enough credit for what they do. New York, the Pentagon, Shanksville, Pennsylvania are great examples, because it was very visible what they did and many of them gave their lives.

I would say I'm concerned about a couple of things in our military today. One, we're not recruiting at the levels that we need to to sustain ourselves in an all-volunteer force. I think all our services are suffering from that. We did some studies in the National Guard about parents advising their sons or daughter, whether it be a good idea to join, and many parents are not recommending it right now. I don't know what's causing that, but maybe this panel and others in this audience can think about ways by which we can convince people that the military is not broken, that we're not bringing home their sons or daughters in a mental state that would be classified as sick or ill. We have to work on that because I think parents have a huge responsibility in recommending service, whether it be in the military or any field of government, so that we can get back to a nation that its young people feel empowered to be part of something bigger than themselves.

So, thanks again.

MR. O'HANLON: Fantastic way to end.

Thank you all. Thank you all for being here. And our hearts also will be with the families and others on September 11. but thank you for taking the time for all of what you do in this group as well. So well done.

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