An Interview with Jim Webb

Courtesy of the Office of Senator Jim Webb

Are we better at protecting our national security today than we were 10 years ago?

Senator Webb: Certain things are better. For example, our intelligence systems are much more advanced. Tactically, our people have adapted well to different situations, first in Iraq, and then in Afghanistan. But in terms of protecting national security, we're really talking about national strategy. And if you look at where we are in terms of our national strategy—that involves economic policy, overall strategic forces, and how you connect and communicate to the rest of the world—here we have a lot of issues to address.

One is our vulnerability economically, with respect particularly to China, in terms of trade and how that impacts our diplomacy and our military operations. I have been talking about this for 20 years as this situation has evolved. I wrote a piece for the *Wall Street Journal* in April of 2001 basically warning that we were reaching a tipping point in terms of how vulnerable we are when our economy reaches a certain level of reliance on trade with a country, particularly one with a different economic and ideological system. We've held hearings on these issues in the Foreign Relations Committee—I chair the East Asia Subcommittee. We just recently saw in the Senkaku Islands, a sovereignty dispute between Japan and China that I was warning about 4 years ago.

So in terms of our ability to deal with the terrorist threat, per se, I think we're really doing a good job. In terms of our overall national strategy, the economic vulnerabilities that we have, and the composition of our strategic forces, I think we could do a lot better. Look

Jim Webb, the senior U.S. Senator from Virginia, serves as Chairman of the Personnel Subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee and Chairman of the Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Senator Webb has extensive knowledge of military and foreign affairs from his service as a highly decorated combat Marine in Vietnam, Assistant Secretary of Defense, and Secretary of the Navy.

at the size of the Navy right now; its floor for strategic planning is 313 ships. The Navy is now, I believe, at 288 combatants. When I was commissioned in 1968, we had 930 combatants. It was a different era, with different types of ships, but we went from 930 down to 479 post-Vietnam, and we got it up to 568 when I was Secretary of the Navy; now we're back down to nearly 290. That is our strategic presence around the world. So the question requires a careful answer. We tend so often to focus on the tactical issues of the day, particularly when we're committed on the ground, but we have to understand the larger vulnerabilities that we have as a nation.

We are face to face with China in Africa. Should we be doing more strategically in Africa?

Senator Webb: The Millennium Challenge Corporation [MCC] is an interesting case; MCC was designed to provide American tax dollars for infrastructure projects, particularly in Africa, without the money getting lost inside the governmental structures of these countries, which frequently have problems with payoffs and corruption. We discovered a couple of months ago that a significant amount of the MCC money was going to Chinese-owned companies. We were looking at the MCC in Mali specifically. I immediately wrote the head of the MCC saying no taxpayer dollars should be going to fund state-owned companies, particularly Chinese state-owned ones, as a part of this process. We got a commitment that will be taking effect, I think, at the end of October when they're going to stop doing this. But it shows how strategically careless we have been with this mammoth governmental process in terms of protecting our own interests.

We have made a lot of executive branch changes over the last 10 years, most notably the creation of the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization and a proliferation of interagency processes. Does more need to be done in terms of restructuring the executive branch to be more effective in responding to national security challenges?

Senator Webb: First I salute Secretary [of Defense Robert] Gates for having the courage and wherewithal to state that we need to reexamine DOD [Department of Defense] structure. I wouldn't want to presuppose a result, but the first step is to have a proper analytical model to evaluate what we have today. That wasn't done with JFCOM [U.S. Joint Forces Command], and that's why we asked for hearings before deciding to dismantle the command.

I made a comment last week about the process—and this gets to what you're talking about because the bureaucracy of DOD has grown and grown since 9/11. I would want to start with an analytical model from year 2000 baseline up to 2010 in terms of all 10 of the combatant commands and see where growth has occurred. Then we should start examining in a structural way how we can downsize rationally. I'm not saying we need to preserve any one command at the expense of any other command. We need to be able to show in a very specific way the analytical model that was being used and why we made the decisions we made.

What about the architecture for interagency collaboration: the Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development, DOD, the National Security Council and how they interact?

Senator Webb: It is, as you know, very personality-driven—driven by relationships. It depends who the National Security Advisor is and who the principals are in terms of how they relate. My reaction is that they seem to be functioning well together. Structural changes are ways to get around the realities of process, personnel, and personal interaction. That's something that's pretty well driven by the President—any particular President, how he uses his Cabinet, his National Security Advisor.

The Project on National Security Reform [PNSR] proposed certain legislative changes. It argued that the committee structure reinforces stovepipes between foreign affairs and defense and between appropriations and authorizations. PNSR argued for a change in the way the committee structure addresses national security issues. Do you agree?

Senator Webb: Let me give you a different take on that. This is my third tour through government. I've spent most of my professional life in the private sector; I have 4 years Active duty in the Marine Corps, 4 years as a committee counsel in the House 1977–1981, and then 5 years in the Pentagon (1 year as a Marine and 4 as a defense executive 1984–1988), and now I'm a Member of Congress. I'm comfortable with the structure of the committees in Congress. My greatest surprise in the Senate was the lack of true oversight by Congress of the executive branch. It's one of the major objectives that we have in this office—to rebalance the two branches. After 9/11, everything was moving fast; the money was moving so fast that DOD went off on its own inertia unchecked. I started from 2007 forward asking prototypical management questions: how do these things work? I'll give you a couple of examples. There are two problems to be addressed in terms of congressional structure. One is whether Congress has the wherewithal to reassert its proper position and its proper role, and the other is the relationship between the authorizing committees and the appropriating committees. The authorizing committees, for instance the Foreign Relations Committee, just stopped authorizing. And that gives too much power to the appropriations side, where we don't really get the right sort of policy hearings.

When I mentioned oversight with respect to the executive branch, I think this is what's happened. People [in Congress] have confused a requirement for a report with what real oversight means. So the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs comes in with a thick book of reports and says, "I have to deliver to you every year a stack of reports this high." I said to him, "Show us the ones you don't think are appropriate." A lot of times people in the agencies think they've solved a problem by submitting a report, and as you know, paper doesn't solve a problem. With true oversight—like we had in 1977–1981 and 1984–1988, when I was on Caspar Weinberger's staff and then Secretary of the Navy—agencies would not dare cross authorizing committees because they would be reined in. There was great respect between the two branches, and I don't see that now.

When I came to the Senate in 2007 I saw—I'll give you two data points here because you'll see where I'm going—I read in the *Wall Street Journal* that San Diego County was protesting a facility that Blackwater was going to use to train Active-duty Sailors how to go room by room, or compartment by compartment, to determine if there were unauthorized persons on their ship. I wrote Secretary Gates a letter; I asked him: Was this ever specifically authorized by Congress? Was there any paper trail? (The Navy's training

contract had a ceiling price of nearly $64 million.) Was it ever authorized or appropriated in specific language, and, quite frankly, how have we reached the situation where a private contractor should be training Active-duty people how to do their job? It would be like Blackwater teaching me how to patrol when I was going through Marine Corps training in Quantico years ago. And we got stiff-armed. It's just like, "I'll have someone talk to you about it." We got a non-answer. And I said, "All right, I'm holding up all civilian nominations from DOD until we get specific answers."

Then they started talking to us, and the answer was that there was never any specific authorization. In other words, Congress never reviewed the use of these funds. They moved hundreds of millions of dollars of O&M [Operations and Maintenance] money through the appropriations committee to the Navy. I was told that such contracts had to exceed $78.5 million before they would be reviewed by the Service secretary. So without specific approval from Congress, they could kick these things off as long as the cost was $78 million or less. They called it "needs of the service/O&M money." We've been working with DOD to get a more rigorous management model in place for senior-level oversight of such outsourcing contracts. That's example number one.

Now we have the proposal to close JFCOM. My way of coming to positions is to try to go from the data to the answer. Emotional arguments are best made through facts; examine the data. I've done years of work inside the Pentagon; I know where the numbers are. I said, all right, let's look at the OSD staff, JCS staff, the Service secretary staff. Give us the data models—how many people were on these staffs in 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, and today? That could be answered in a day and would give us a structured way to engage in the discussion. We're still waiting. We sent them a notice yesterday that if I don't get the data, we're going to hold up DOD civilian and flag and general officer nominations again. That's what's happened in the breakdown of the process.

The Foreign Relations Committee has an important role to play. I chair the East Asia Subcommittee, and I spend a lot of time in East Asia. We can have discussions that go beyond simply military discussions, and on occasion we can pull the issues into the Armed Services Committee, like the planned realignment of Marines from Okinawa to Guam.

You mentioned Secretary Weinberger a minute ago. Does the Weinberger Doctrine, also called the Powell Doctrine, still have any relevance? Should the kinds of thresholds described in the Weinberger/Powell Doctrine still determine when we should apply military force, or is that outdated?

Senator Webb: I think you have to define what you're doing in terms of use of force. In the situations that we're in right now, these are campaigns—they're long campaigns—and their strategic validity can certainly be debated in terms of how we're using our people. I don't think that it's the same thing they were considering. Weinberger was very much the driver of that doctrine; I was on his staff when they were doing it. The year I was in Vietnam, 1969, we probably had in 1 year at least twice as many dead as we've had in all 10 years in both the Iraq and Afghanistan engagements combined. In 1969, we lost 12,000 dead in that 1 year, and 1968 was worse.

It's not low intensity if you're in it, but in terms of national policy, it's a long campaign. So we have to shape the use of our military

to national strategy, not to one enunciation of one doctrine or another. So I know where Weinberger was going with that, and I fully agree that we need to be able to articulate the end point of what we're doing, which has been a big problem in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I actually wrote an article for the *Washington Post* in September of 2002, 6 months before we went into Iraq, and said, "Do you really want to be there for the next 30 years? You need to be able to clearly articulate your exit strategy." And they don't have one. It's hard on the people who are doing this, it's hard on the country—we're burning up a lot of money. This was one of al Qaeda's strategic objectives: to burn us out economically. So the real question with respect to the Weinberger Doctrine is that we have to follow our national interest in terms of massive use of force. If we define the war in Iraq as the decapitation of the Saddam Hussein regime, it was over very quickly. But then we went into this interminable occupation, which I do not believe we should be involved in. The question for us is how can we get out of there—what's the process we should use to get out of there without further destabilizing the region. It's a delicate process; I don't think we should keep 50,000 troops in Iraq.

Over the last 10 years, the military has started going into some nontraditional military mission objective areas, perhaps because of the lack of civilian manpower, or strength, for example, conflict prevention, development, and stabilization. Do you think these are appropriate roles for the military?

Senator Webb: I lived in that environment as a Marine in populated areas in South Vietnam. Almost all of the villages in the area I was in, the An Hoa Basin, were what they called "Category Five" villages; Category A was completely government-controlled, Category E was completely Vietcong-controlled, and Category Five was politically hopeless. These zones had free-fire zones—that didn't mean you could shoot anyone that moved, but it meant you could get your artillery without having to go through political clearance.

But every day in this environment where you're making moral decisions, you're up against a civilian population that is very, very similar to what you have in Afghanistan right now—very similar in that mindset. When you're in that environment as a young military leader, a part of what you're doing is unavoidably those sorts of things you're talking about. You have to try to connect. We did MEDCAPS [Medical Civic Action Programs]; we'd take care of stuff. It is wise that the young military leaders get the training so that they can carry on some of that environment, to connect and survive in the places that they're operating. In the long term, though, on the larger scale, that should be something the State Department does.

We talk about the "three Ds," diplomacy, defense, and development, as co-equal. If those three elements are co-equal in status, shouldn't the three governmental departments leading each of those three elements be co-equal in status?

Senator Webb: I'm not sure I accept the premise that they are co-equal. In terms of importance to national security, they are co-equal, but not in terms of resources. You have to deal with all three in order to get the desired end result. So I would say in terms of access to the decisionmaker, you need to have all three at the table, no doubt about that.

Do you see any future for the concept of the national security professional as opposed to professionals from different agencies? That is, some title called a national security professional and taught at a national security university?

Senator Webb: You can do that with the right kind of cross-fertilization that we're seeing right now. I'll give you an anecdote. When I returned from Vietnam, I was stationed at Quantico. I had spent all these years reading the strategists, you know, the great makers of modern strategy, studying the history of national defense and warfare, etc. I was 24 years old, and I suddenly said to myself, "I am a military professional," which is very similar to what you're talking about here.

I was assigned to Officer Candidate School, so I'd go over to the Breckinridge library and get every book I could get and read it, just a part of what I believed was my duty in order to be able to advance and eventually be in a position where I could affect policy. It didn't happen in uniform. I think that's endemic to our system; I'm not sure you would need to teach it in a separate place. PRISM