

BRIAN WILLIAMS: A brief explanation. I now have been asked more than once, those of you here for the top of the session this morning, witnessed my thorough embarrassment when Caroline read from the letter I wrote to President Lyndon Johnson at age 7.5. And I've now been asked by Halberstam and others, "How is it the letter that you wrote to President Johnson exists?"

The short story is I was watching C-SPAN. Michael Beschloss, who was out at the LBJ Library in conjunction with his two books on the tapes, offhandedly mentioned that he at age eight in Illinois wrote to Johnson. His suggestion was, "Add the bust of John F. Kennedy to Rushmore."

[Laughter] Those of you clued into the politics between the two men perhaps are aware of the reaction that Johnson had to the suggestion.

But the Beschloss letter ended up in LBJ's, what he called his night reading. It was a manila pouch and it contained a representative sample of letters from Americans. It is a custom the presidents have long maintained and from all I can find out, continues to this day with this administration. Incensed, there I was watching at home. I called Beschloss who I had come to know over the years and I said, "Look. I wrote him, too." [Laughter] "I was seven and a half. Where is my letter?" Half joking.

And in that earnest, if you know Michael or have seen him on television, that earnest puppy dog way he said, "Well, I will call the library and have"-- So he gets on the phone. And I just met a man two minutes ago who walked

up on this podium and said, "I'm the archivist in Austin. I found your letter." John Wilson. John Wilson is here with us.

[Applause]

The fiction is that my letter, too, made it into the old man's manila envelope, and hope he got a chuckle at the end of a long day. That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

Well, to say it's been an interesting day thus far puts it mildly. And now, we, once again have a lot of candle power up here. To my left on this stage, all gentlemen on the stage, I should quickly add, are veterans. And I am going to start with a quote I think I wrote down on the fly, but accurately, when it was spoken by the author, *Fire in the Lake*, Frances Fitzgerald in our last panel.

Speaking about American soldiers in Vietnam and the politization of the wars she said, "For all their sacrifices, the American soldiers were almost irrelevant." It was clear it more or less broke Frances' heart to say that. We saw and heard the context in which she said it. And since you are next to me, General Wesley Clark, your reaction to that statement in the context that we heard today.

WESLEY CLARK: Well, I think it goes back to whether you believe that the war was fundamentally a manifestation of Vietnamese nationalism, with

all of the tones that everyone brought to it. Or whether you believe it was something else. It is a long-standing debate. And it was there at the time. Frankie wrote a great book and gave her view on it.

For me, all the research I've done, what I've seen of it, it is a very complicated, there were certainly nationalist overtones. But I don't believe the American presence, the American military presence was irrelevant. I think we went into it without a strategy for success, without a willingness to pay the price, without an understanding of what was going to be required. We do go into it in an incremental fashion.

And in the long term, the sacrifices of the men and women who served there weren't reflected in the outcome for a lot of reasons. But irrelevant, only in the sense that politically it was going-- General Haig this morning said, "Maybe it could have been done by the bombing." I always thought-- And Steve Bell was up here a few minutes ago. I always thought that an operation, like Lam Son 719 that went across the waist and cut off the Ho Chi Min trail, had it been done early on in the war, had it been accompanied by full strength of the United States military, had it really severed the North's support direction of the south.

Look, it is very clear that the central office for South Vietnam was totally controlled and dominated by North Vietnam. This was not an indigenous insurgency. This was something that was implanted. There were at least

(I've seen different figures.) 40 thousand Russians, 200 thousand Chinese.
It was a war. And we didn't have a strategy that brought us success.

WILLIAMS: Senator Hagel, when you were in country, in the infantry, how much was whether they were being cursed or talked about, how much were the policymakers in Washington the bad guys of the effort, especially when gripe sessions would up at the end of a long hump?

CHUCK HAGEL: Well, with Secretary Kissinger seated directly in front of me, I will temper my comments because I have such a high regard for Dr. Kissinger. I would tell you that most of us were not consumed with great geopolitical thoughts. And that did not lead us often to think about policymakers in Washington. We were just covering our ass as well as those of our buddies.

We were doing our jobs that we were asked to do. This was a draft army, essentially, as my colleagues up here know, especially General Clark. And we were focused everyday on staying alive and doing the job that we were asked to do. Did we occasionally talk about was it worth or, really, why were we here or a definition of victory as Frances talked a little bit about in the earlier panel? Occasionally.

But it was more, Brian, day-to-day grind it out. And the objective was just live long enough to get over that 12 month hump and go home.

WILLIAMS: Bob Herbert, you are the first panelist of color at this conference that surrounds a war where soldiers of color made huge sacrifices in an all-draft army, the same that is happening today in our all-volunteer force. Is there a synopsis version of your American journey and, as a young man, your view of this conflict? Bob is a Vietnam era veteran who had the good fortune of being assigned to Korea for his duration of his assignment in the armed forces.

BOB HERBERT: I tend to think of it in terms of, going back to the use of this term irrelevant. In terms of all the GIs, get caught up in this war frenzy that breaks out periodically. And I think of it as a kind of madness and a profoundly tragic madness. And whether you think that these GIs who were lost in Vietnam ended up being irrelevant or not, I'm inclined to think that their effort was ultimately irrelevant.

They are certainly forgotten. Fifty-eight thousand American GIs were killed. And unless you lost somebody in your family or you know some specific friend who was killed, no name will come to mind to you. No face will come to mind. These were just 58 thousand people who were just dead a long time ago. And I was looking-- I remember a few years ago, I went down to the Vietnam Memorial again.

And there was this enormous directory with all of the names in alphabetical order and it has the dates of birth and dates of death. And even though I lost friends in Vietnam and knew others who had been wounded-- So even

though I knew that generation, that was my generation, it still struck me how short those lives were. The dates of birth were all 1945, '46, '47, '48 for the most part. And the dates of death were 1965, '66, '67, '68. I mean the kids were 17, 18, 19, 20 years old.

And it's just astonishing to me. And I wonder what we would say if by some miracle you could begin to bring these fellows in here now, if we could bring them back to life and look at the war from that perspective, and say then, "Was it worth it?" Would we be willing to push the button again and send these 58 thousand men to their doom?

And then, if your answer to that is no, then that is where we get to the issue of the lessons learned. And so now we are confronted, or a few years ago we were confronted, with this idea of going into Iraq. And then you have the lesson of Vietnam behind you. And then you have the chance to push the button. And then what we did was we pushed the button again and said, "Yeah, we are going to send you to your doom." And these men and women who were killed in this war are going to be perceived at some future date as possibly irrelevant and I would say certainly forgotten.

At some point we need to decide, as the grown ups in this society we need to do a better job in deciding what's worth fighting for and why.

[Applause]

WILLIAMS: One of the great works of non-fiction over the last 20 years for history buffs is a book called *Wise Men* by Walter Isaacson. And I once asked him if he were writing an updated version. It's about the men, exclusively men, at that time who moved with great ease between military and government and business and law and, oh yes, advising the president. I asked Walter if he were to write an updated version with corrections for gender, who he would include in the book.

And the other gentleman from Nebraska at the far end of this dais, was on Walter's list. And I've not chosen all day to break out everyone's resume on these panels, loaded with distinguished people. And I'm doing so now for this reason. I have a personal habit of putting men who served as prisoners of war for this country on a level higher than my own. Knowing nothing about them, just that they did it, that they made it, that they survived, they are better men than I am.

Pete Peterson has hit for the cycle in American life it seems to me. Six and a half years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam to then be named our first Ambassador to Vietnam in addition to having earned a seat in Congress. So with all of that background, Mr. Ambassador, when you hear that the United States is once again involved in a campaign against insurgent enemy, where going in the plan had to be changed to present day--

And in light of Frances Fitzgerald's quote here today, can you start us off with an opening statement?

PETE PETERSON: Well, I have mixed emotions. Obviously, the panel is supposed to be looking at lessons learned. The first lesson that I learned after Vietnam was no more Vietnams. [Applause] That was it. But as Bob said, we pushed the button again. And so many of the lessons that have been reviewed throughout previous panels, frankly I am afraid that we maybe should be talking about lessons learned but forgotten.

So many of the things that came out of Vietnam lasted in our psyche only for a very short time historically. But to look at those who served in Vietnam and write it off that their service is irrelevant is not quite accurate. They may very well have been pawns to some degree. But they served with great distinction and they moved the needle. They did what they were told. They took great pride in what they were doing.

And, you know, Bob talked about 58 thousand that perished. There are a lot of those veterans that are dying right now because of their wounds and the infections and all of the other things that they incurred during that service. But I'm absolutely convinced that before we engage in the next war or the next confrontation or the next, the next conflict, that we do what so many of the other panelists have said we must do.

And that is we must talk about it before we get there. Now for me, when I came back from Vietnam I said, "No more Vietnams." And I also said, "You know, I will never serve in another military conflict unless we have a

declaration of war.” That was for me. [Applause] Because in my positions as a POW, it haunted me to see all of these people walking through Hanoi giving comfort to the enemy. That was so painful. And there was no way anybody could shut it off because it was totally illegal.

The other part of it, though, was I didn’t want us to enter into another conflict where we didn’t know the enemy, we hadn’t studied their history, had no clue what the objective was and we hadn’t answered the question that I think the first panel brought up. And that was the question of why. That question has to be answered before we engage our troops in any kind of future combat. And the only way to do that is by forcing public debate before, not after, the decisions have been made to go in.

[Applause]

WILLIAMS: Senator Hagel is the only one up here in elective office. And with a vote to cast on such matters. When you look back on the genesis of the war this nation is in, we all know about the history of the Gulf of Tonkin vote. Do you feel-- What are your emotions on it? Do you feel-- Pick a word, misled, duped? Did you know what you, as a member of 100 were getting into?

HAGEL: You are speaking of Iraq? I was asked a few minutes ago whether our involvement in Iraq three years ago was wrong. And my answer was, I think history will define that. I have believed and I said in a

speech on the Senate floor an hour before the vote, in October of 2002, that there should be a very clear definition of the political objective before we ever commit a nation to war.

That clear objective, I said, should also consist of an achievable and definable objective. And I also said that we could find the Middle East more unstable as a result of our invasion of Iraq. And I said other things. But in the end I voted for the resolution. And I voted for it for two main reasons. With all the caveats I had said and made clear, not only in that speech on the Senate floor two hours before the vote but also other speeches I had given around the country before that--

One reason I voted for it was because I did believe, as the Bush administration had committed to the Congress and to the nation, that they would use, in fact, every diplomatic effort to avoid war. War is always and should always be the last choice. And I believed that we still had a number of diplomatic possibilities left. Because I had never believed and said so many times that Saddam Hussein was never an imminent threat to the security of the United States nor the world.

And I said I thought that Iran represented the real threat to the United States. But, nonetheless I was assured that the diplomatic efforts would be ongoing. The second reason I voted for it, not just because of what happened in this country September 11, 2001. And we must all be very clear here that terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, the threats, challenges of the 21st century

are real. And we should not lose sight of that. But there must always be some perspective.

The second reason I voted for it was in context of where we were in the world at that time. I believe that the president of the United States should have all the options available to him and his team, to carry out the highest responsibility for a nation, and that is its national security. I could go on for some time and to spend far more focus than I have on it. I will leave it at that to answer your question, Brian, because I think heard this is in the last panel we heard this morning.

Where we are going and where the uncontrollables-- And, essentially, we are dealing with uncontrollables as much as anything. And Frances talked about those in the previous panel on Vietnam will determine much of the outcome.

WILLIAMS: Question for Bob Herbert from a member of the US Navy Reserve, a veteran of Danang '69 and Baghdad in 1990. On your last visit here you agreed with me that the Iraq was unjust and immoral. Yet you argue we must win the war. Why should we have to win an unjust war?

HERBERT: Because I'm an American. I don't want to lose a war. If you are going to send troops into harm's way in a conflict, I don't want the soldiers to lose the war just because I disagree with the war or because I personally don't feel the attack or the attack or the incursion or whatever it

was warranted. I think that there are a lot of problems surrounding this very complex issue of Iraq. I think the war should never have occurred. But once we commit our troops to war, as simplistic as it sounds, I'm on the side of our troops.

WILLIAMS: Thank you, members of the audience that have already started coming in. This next one is to you, General Clark. All US military strategy is impacted by the four-year presidential election cycle. How do you maximize effectiveness given that circumstance?

CLARK: Well, I think the basic rule for presidents is they try their best to avoid going to war. That war should be the absolute last, last, last resort. Whether it's Vietnam or Iraq or what we did in the Balkans, it is much easier to get into it than it is to get out of it. It is not just the four-year election cycle, it's the two-year election cycle. It's the daily news cycle. There are many things that impact on the conduct of the operation.

What you need is hard-headed, practical people who understand that the siren song of nationalism and flag raising and the promises of high technology-- When once the bombs start to fall you get into different levels of emotion. That the enemy has a vote on what works-- That courage is about equally distributed-- That different political systems process it a different way.

You know, wars are extremely ugly and painful and difficult. So it is not a matter of tactics about the election cycle is what I'm trying to say. The lesson is, don't do war unless you absolutely, absolutely must. Vietnam was an elective war. So is Iraq.

WILLIAMS: Ambassador Peterson, this is an unusual question. We've heard much celebration of military men and the courage of those who fight. To paraphrase a young John F. Kennedy, "We will continue to fight wars until the conscientious objector has the same standing as the General." Please comment.

PETERSON: Well, I think it is suggesting that we are going to fight until we solve all the world's problems or everyone has the same right across the globe. Quite simplistic in my view, if that's the meaning of the question. I think, as General Clark just mentioned, I think the stakes for going to war have to be incredibly high before the decision is made to go in. And then, as was said earlier, I think we go in to win. We don't go in with our toe into the water to check the temperature.

But there are so many things that we as westerners don't understand, frankly, about the rest of the world. For us to sit here in the United States and determine every aspect of the others' societies is, we are not capable of doing that. We are quite limited in our ability to walk into Asia and think as Asians. It is even becoming more difficult to think as Europeans. And certainly we don't have a clue what's happening in the Middle East.

So, I think that we really have to look at everyone's welfare. And we should support to the maximum degree human rights. But not try to be everything to everyone across the globe because it is something that the United States simply cannot deliver on.

WILLIAMS: Ambassador, if I can hold you over for one more moment. I was approached by an F-4 pilot from the war in the last break and he said that portions of an earlier panel resonated with him about President Johnson selecting the targets, what could not be hit as important as what could for his own/the Pentagon's own reasons. It gave the impression of war limiting itself as it was fought. Did you experience that as a pilot in country?

PETERSON: Well, you probably don't want me to get started on that. But, absolutely. We bombed targets that, you know, a little rope bridge across the stream that a monkey probably couldn't cross. We carried-- An F-4 carried two, 250 bombs into combat. Absolutely ridiculous. Why would you put a \$6 billion airplane over a target to drop something that is equivalent of a peashooter. It didn't make any sense.

I flew over various strategic targets in various packages in North Vietnam that I could not drop on. I couldn't even dump if I couldn't hit the primary target. Of course, we never bombed the dykes and I think there are reasons for that. But, I mean, we had our hands held behind our backs. We had very

strict orders on what we could hit. And if we hit a target that was not on the list, that F-4 pilot--

And, of course, we don't believe the F-4 pilots whenever they are telling us anything. Article 15's many times were issued. They were punished for that. So we were very careful but the targeting was listed right out of the White House as far as I could tell.

WILLIAMS: And General Clark, on the ground, did you have a commensurate experience?

CLARK: No. I didn't have an experience like that. I was given a mission, given an area. Told to take my company out and find the enemy in the area and keep him from getting into Saigon. And we went out and patrolled. We pretty much could go where we wanted in the area. We did some things that in retrospect you have to look back on it and say, "Gosh, I don't know why we considered that was such a good idea." But we did H and I fires at night.

We were actually interdicting fires, dropping artillery at trail intersections at two A.M. or three A.M. and so forth, just in case any Viet Cong or NVA were moving in the area. I didn't see that control. What I saw was a 1969-70, was a US ground chain of command that was very focused on the mission, very professional, very careful to keep in mind the Vietnamese concerns, the welfare of the local civilian population and doing your best to follow instructions in an intelligent way.

WILLIAMS: Senator Hagel, same question.

HAGEL: Well, I was a rifleman and I got to Vietnam as a private, first class. And I was there in '68, all of '68. And we advanced rapidly. So I became a sergeant within two months. Actually, after Tet offensive, I was acting company sergeant. And I had been there a couple of months.

General Clark's definition would be reminiscent of what we were assigned. It was a very clear set of orders. And whether they were ambush patrols or security force or whatever it was, we didn't have any misunderstandings about what we were asked to do. Questions as to sometimes why-- We would, for example, take a village. And in the process suffer a considerable number of casualties.

It may be 24 hours later that we would then give that village up and move somewhere else. That is, was strategically, tactically not important any more. That happened on many occasions. And what happens to the lower, enlisted rank when that occurs, as much as anything else, is there is a real break in the confidence chain, "Why are we doing this and what is the purpose behind it," especially when you are seeing the kind of casualty that we took in those days.

To take a hill or an area or a village and then give it up a day or two later-- And I think that really was the beginning as much as anything, a little bit of

a carry-over for your question in the last panel as, when was this thing identifiable in the unraveling? I saw it as a lower enlisted man, back in '68 when you would get those kind of orders and confusion would set in. And it started, I think, to make an impression on many of us that something was not quite right at the top.

WILLIAMS: So, General Clark, I know you are a West Pointer. But we've heard Ambassador Peterson talk about his target list that didn't make sense. You mean to tell me (Forget Kissinger is in the front row.) you didn't sit around at night and say, "What in God's name are we doing here? This doesn't make any sense." Did you never-- Was it all mission?

CLARK: No. We did sit around and talk about things like that. When I first got to Vietnam in the summer of '69, I was pulled into the division headquarters. I was a captain there and I was one of the briefing officers. I did some of the plans. We talked a lot about it. It was the start of the Vietnamization. It was the pullback of the 9th infantry division.

And there we were fighting a war and when I got there the ground dynamic was, we had succeeded pretty well in Tet '68 in destroying the main enemy units that were in the area north of Saigon where we were, the Dong Nai regiment and others. They would come back again. We destroyed them a second time in Tet of '69. So this was four months later. We were running out of identifiable, willing opponents in the area in which the 1st infantry division was in.

But we knew there was a lot of enemy elsewhere, up near the Cambodian border and so forth. And the national command authority had made the decision we are going to start pulling troops out. And we knew that the delta wasn't pacified. It was still contested. And so it didn't make strategic sense. And it was the first time that we started to say, "You know, we are over here. People are dying. But on the other hand, what is the national logic for this? Why are we gambling on this?"

We knew what the Vietnamese forces were like and why are we gambling all that we've put in to start pulling these forces back out for what is, in essence, the politics in the United States. It didn't make a lot of military sense at the time. But we did talk about it.

PETERSON: Brian, can I add--

WILLIAMS: Sure.

PETERSON: It's important I think to note that in North Vietnam, there really weren't very many good targets. It wasn't that they had a big industrial military complex that we could take out. So we were relegated to taking out some bridges and putting a hole in the road that they filled up right away. And we could do a few things here and there. But there really wasn't any good strategic targets.

We did hit some POL docks and things like that. But most of it was strictly interdiction. And in some cases we did a pretty good job. But we were never able to get ahead of the curve. Because you put a hole in the road and they were incredibly quick in putting them together.

Just a quick aside. My counterpart Le Van Bang was the Vietnamese ambassador to the United States, while I was the ambassador to Vietnam. And we always got together and laughed because I was making these big holes in the road and he was filling them up. [Laughter]

WILLIAMS: Bob Herbert, if we-- There are so many metaphors there, it is just not-- We can't even begin. Bob Herbert, if we are on the side of our troops, does this not mean ending the war, pulling out before they become irrelevant, dead and irrelevant? Is it a worthwhile objective? Question for you from someone in the audience.

HERBERT: Well, I think the troops need to be pulled out. The question is the timetable. In other words, I don't think that we should be in Iraq indefinitely. I don't think the question has been properly answered. And I don't feel I'm positioned to properly answer whether they should be pulled out in six months or 18 months or whatever. But I mean I think the American troops are going to have to come out of, or should come out of Iraq. I don't know if they will or not. But if I could just add a little bit to something Ambassador Peterson mentioned.

And that has to do with this idea of we don't have-- Before we go into these wars, we don't have a broad enough national discussion of the pros and cons of why we are actually doing it. So there are an awful lot of smart people in the United States. But if you look at the history leading up to, just take Vietnam and Iraq, that presidents listen to a very narrow, small group of people who are in favor of the war and that's that.

I mean I've read *The Best and the Brightest*, David Halberstam's great book twice, and I've been through it innumerable times. And it is all marked up and dog-eared and that sort of thing. If you read it again now, you will just be astonished at the stuff that was almost like-- What we are going through now is almost a Xerox copy. I guess Xerox really dates me, but you understand what I mean.

So the first part is we need a much broader and honest national discussion before we commit our troops to war. The second thing is, I just really don't think and I agree on this point-- I just really don't think we ought to be going to war without a Congressional declaration of war and without mobilizing the society in such a way that we all have more of a stake in what's going on than we do now.

WILLIAMS: Well, Senator Hagel, this gets into your bailiwick. Jacob Javits, who has long since gone to his reward, if you pull the debate on the War Powers Act, wasn't this supposed to happen?

HAGEL: You mean Iraq?

WILLIAMS: To prevent, as an example, to prevent a military action absent of a declaration?

HAGEL: Well, I think the short answer to the question is yes. But we are living through, and you are seeing some reaction now in Washington with the events of the last month, a recognition among many of my colleagues, and I have spoken of this rather clearly and directly, not to putting myself in a particularly favorable light with the administration over the last few years. But Congress has abdicated its oversight responsibility, I believe, the last five years.

The fact is that we have a co-equal branch of government. The Congress has constitutional responsibilities. Article One of the Constitution is about the Congress, not the executive. But we, in the Congress, allowed this to happen. It has happened I suspect primarily because of September 11, 2001. And when a nation is attacked, although this is unprecedented, a nation rallies around its commander-in-chief and its president. And you want a strong president.

That inhibited, I think, a good deal of legitimate oversight. Also, the Republican party controlled both houses of Congress and the administration. And I don't think there is any doubt, at least in this Senator's mind (And it may well be the same in the Democrats', like a good part of Vietnam had

control of government.) you protect your party. And I think there is an element of that.

So, the War Powers Act, what Javits said and did was intended to try and minimize that. And that you would never hold war captive to a political agenda or make war or your support of your president or your party a litmus test on your loyalty. And so we are going to see, I think, Brian-- The Dubai port issue, as unfortunate as it was-- And I, by the way, don't believe that that was handled very well because I don't think the facts were allowed to be brought out. But that is another debate for another day.

As you will see in a number of these other areas this year of a re-assertion of Congressional oversight. Most recent this week, and I was very much involved in this, was the National Security Administration's wiretapping, and this administration going around FISA. And you saw what happened in the Senate Intelligence Committee, which I helped put that together. Not that it is about me. It is about something far bigger than me.

It's about a balance of power that is critical for our country as well as the fourth estate, and that is the press.

WILLIAMS: But you said a few minutes earlier that you thought the president should have the tools to do what he needed. And isn't that where he is getting the cover for many of the things you just listed?

HAGEL: Absolutely. And his administration has argued that, in fact, as the administration (I don't agree with them on this.) made the case that the President does have the implied authority to do what he is going with the NSA and the wiretaps. I don't believe that's the case. However, I don't think there is anyone in this country that's thinking this responsible, who does not want a strong president that has the constitutional authority to protect the interest of the country, the national security interest.

That requires a very careful balance, just like the FISA law of 1978. In my opinion, judicial review, Congressional oversight. That law has worked well. Obviously, technology has overtaken that law. So we have to balance this so we don't find ourselves seeping back into a kind of a monarchical way of governing. We tried a monarchy once and we didn't like it. And we fought a war over that one.

WILLIAMS: General Clark, you seem to be breathing heavily. [Laughter]

CLARK: I'm a little concerned.

WILLIAMS: You want in on this?

CLARK: Yeah. I do. You see--

WILLIAMS: I'm glad it's about this issue.

CLARK: I think the record suggests that the administration from 9/11, from that afternoon on 9/11, was leaning to get into war in Iraq. Not worried about what to do about Saddam Hussein. It was not about weapons of mass destruction. It was about wanting to go to war against Iraq. And why is a question that the historians have to debate. I was told by my friends in the Pentagon ten days after 9/11 that the decision has already been made. They were going to Iraq.

Before the first bomb fell in Afghanistan-- That all of the UN and all of the resolutions was essentially a done deal. It was a charade. It brought in a lot of people who worried about the tools for the presidency and the need to get our allies. But the decision had been made that we were going to war. And the concern was that, "Gee, I hope Saddam doesn't cave in too quickly on these inspections, because then we won't be able to invade him."

When you think back on it now, four and a half years after 9/11, you think how could these intelligent people that were in the White House in responsible positions ever have thought that they could deploy forces, move into a country, try to take it over, and just have it sort of open and shut case and be a parade down Constitution Avenue.

Yet I'm convinced from all the people I've talked to, inside and outside, that that is really what it was. And I look now at the theory, what's going on, on the NSA and I appreciate Senator Hagel. I have been a fan of his for a long time. And he was a supporter when I was in uniform. I think that he has

played a very important role in the United States Congress. But we do have to have checks and balances. And this nation's freedom is not being well preserved by Congress' performance in exercising its checks and balances.

[Applause]

HAGEL: I thought we were going to talk about Vietnam.

CLARK: Yes, well-

HAGEL: I am the only elected official up here.

WILLIAMS: It is tough to have a panel like this about the last war while there is a war on and not have the elephant in the room come to the fore. Here is a question on Vietnam for Pete Peterson.

Former ambassador to Vietnam, Ray Burghardt, called agent orange the last ghost, an issue of contention between the United States and Vietnam. Now the Vietnamese have filed a class action lawsuit against chemical companies. Do they deserve compensation for health care for themselves and children in the hot spots in Vietnam that are still contaminated?

PETERSON: Well, I don't think it is the last ghost, necessarily, in that case. But it certainly is a huge point of contention between the US and Vietnam. As agent orange-- Within the entire Vietnamese society-- It isn't

just the leadership, by the way. In fact, it is not necessarily leadership. This is one of those bottom up issues in Vietnam. And the leadership is taking enormous heat from their constituencies in this case, to do something about agent orange.

While I was there I worked very hard to determine that extent of the damage, etcetera, etcetera. And we did resolve that there was an opportunity for us to go back and clean up what we called the hot spots. And I made a presentation to our government to do that of which they suggested maybe that is not a good idea. But I think they are now thinking seriously about doing that.

And it does several things. One, it eliminates these hot spots, which are really the big problem. Because if there is, in fact, something that can be contaminated with agent orange (And that is still a debate, by the way.) that can be contained at least or cleaned up. The other is that it serves, I think, the US interest and it shows compassion for this issue. And that would greatly enhance the US-Vietnam relationship.

And I think ultimately would pay off big dividends in the case of moving to the next step. And I think that takes me real quickly to, quote, a lesson learned. When you are in war, you really have to think about how do you re-engage that enemy after the war. And that you really have to think through in your weapon system, talk about all the mines and UXO around the world, etcetera. But you also have to talk about how you treat them.

And that then brings me very quickly to the Geneva Conventions. The fact that we did follow Geneva Conventions in dealing with the South Vietnamese POWs, and while the Vietnamese vehemently deny that they had signed the Geneva Conventions and that they had no obligation to follow them, the threat of not following them is always there.

And as a result of that, there are a lot of us who are walking and talking today, probably that wouldn't have, had the Geneva Conventions not been in place. So, that takes me to the next point. For certain individuals in this administration to suggest that the Geneva Conventions are quaint brings fire to my eyes.

[Applause]

They are not quaint. If there is any point of protecting the human identity in a war, it's the Geneva Conventions. It's a moral compass. And for us to ignore that, I think our country ignores it at our own peril.

WILLIAMS: Bob Herbert, what did this war do to your generation?

HERBERT: Well, it messes up a lot of folks. I will tell a story I've told many times and I will tell it quickly. I got drafted on the same day as another buddy of mine from Mt. Vernon, Paul Conover. And we met up in basic training with a fellow from Atlantic City named Michael Farmer. And they both went to Vietnam. I went to Korea. And they both came back from

Vietnam and the three of us got together with girlfriends and parents and brothers and sisters and we had a big celebration.

My sister still has the pictures of us in my parents' living room. But Michael Farmer was younger. He was 17. He joined the Army where the other two of us were draftees. And he got sent back to Vietnam. I still remember the day in the back of my father's upholstery shop where one comes in-- Paul Conover comes through the curtain into the back of my father's upholstery shop and looks at me and just said, "Farmer didn't make it."

So Farmer got killed. Conover had all kinds of trouble coming back from Vietnam after he came back. He had been this happy-go-lucky guy, a lot of fun to be with and stuff. He developed a drinking problem. He started doing drugs. I got a job at the *Star Ledger* in New Jersey. And then one day after work there was a little story that I saw in the paper. It said that Paul Conover had shot his wife to death and killed himself.

And when I mentioned about going down to the wall at the Memorial, the day I was there I looked for Michael Farmer's name and there it was. And not thinking, I looked for Paul Conover's name, too. Of course, his name was not on the wall. But I wrote a column saying that he and his wife had been killed by that war just as certainly as 58 thousand other people.

Well, you can just-- There are endless variations on that story, coast to coast in this country. There are wives and parents and soldiers who have suffered all kinds of demons, not just killed in combat. So I think that that war tore a hole in my generation and that hole has not healed yet. And I don't think that hole is ever going to be healed.

WILLIAMS: I'm guessing we have all been to Ward 57, Walter Reed, where they do amazing things. Ambassador Peterson mentioned, because our protections are better, more of our soldiers are living but the injuries tend to be grievous. They are different from Vietnam and in this war, it is certainly the most close-in combat since Vietnam, in many cases, exceeding the violence. It is a different kind of conflict.

And this is for Messers. Hagel and Clark. Do you worry that the syndrome for those returning from this conflict is going to be just as evil and have its own particular demons? And are you worried it is not being addressed?

CLARK: Well, I'm concerned about it. It is not just in Walter Reed. I mean I've been through the ward. A lot of Americans have. When soldiers first come out from battle, they have been wounded, especially in a traumatic incident, like a improvised explosion device. I mean the first sensation is, "I'm glad to be alive. I'm lucky. And what happened to me is not nearly as bad as what could have happened," and so forth.

But as they go through the long and difficult and painful, years long process of trying to recover from amputations and deal with the consequences of this, I think it is pretty hard, pretty lonely. It's very, very difficult. It is everything from who their friends are and who stays with them and do their families really accept it, to their employment, their self image. It is very deep.

And beyond the physical injuries there are the emotional scars. You know, we killed a lot of people in Iraq. And we killed them very violently when we invaded. I've had people tell me what it was like to look through the thermal sights on the Bradleys and see a 25-millimeter round hit somebody. And it's an explosive round and when it hits there is not much left. It is a lot like a video game, in a way.

WILLIAMS: I've seen it.

CLARK: And it isn't a video game. Those are lifelong consequences. For the people who do it, I think that there will be a lot of issues that come up. About a third of the soldiers who, marines who come back, apparently have requested some kind of counseling beyond the sort of mandatory that comes in. I think it is just the tip of the iceberg that we are seeing.

WILLIAMS: Senator Hagel.

HAGEL: I would agree with General Clark's evaluation and I would add this. Every war has produced a residue of this kind of carryover. One of the big differences today, and we saw it really for the first time in Vietnam, we were able to save more people, than in past wars. Obviously, because of technology and transportation and all the things that we were able to do.

That has produced more of the long-term casualties as well as the psychological effects. Last point I would make on this, I think you had an inordinate number of people that Bob was talking about, and all of us up here, friends in that category as he noted. Partly because it was essentially a draft war. So you had kids that were not trained very well. They were thrown into this, confused by it. I mean the days when I was in 1968, they were taking kids with literally no education.

In many cases, local courts, district courts were giving them the choice of going to jail or going to the Army. Some people would find that hard to believe but that actually was happening. So you had a very unprepared group of people thrown into this thing. And then they come right out and we were separating them. And I recall, when I got back to Oakland, Travis Air Base, I'd been in Vietnam. Forty-eight hours later I was on the street. I was done.

They gave you a class A uniform and a ticket back to where you are from and gave you your pay. They gave you 15 minutes of your benefits. Thank you very much. That was it. That was it. Now, today, we do better,

obviously. Here is what we are facing today on the Iraq situation. Almost the whole time we have been in Iraq for three years, 40% of the force structure has been made up of National Guard and Reserves.

Now, I don't mean in any way to be denigrating National Guard and Reserves service. But these are individuals that are part of a civilian community most of their lives all the time. They are teachers and hardware store people and so on. Versus a very well trained and focused professional army, which we instituted in the early seventies, which I think is the right thing to do. So you are going to see some of that across the landscape because of that large proportion of National Guard and Reserve units fighting in Iraq.

WILLIAMS: Ambassador Peterson, the same question for you has now appeared three times from the audience. When you were serving as Ambassador to Vietnam, did your Vietnamese counterparts discuss their lessons learned with you?

PETERSON: Actually--

WILLIAMS: Except the filling in roads, obviously.

PETERSON: The short answer is no. There were several study groups that came to Vietnam and were going to sit down with the Vietnamese and talk about lessons learned. And the Vietnamese very quickly said, "We won."

And that terminated the discussion. But in rather kind of unofficial comments with Vietnamese officials, we did talk about the huge losses that they had made and the cost to the government for that.

They talked about some of the policy decisions that were made after the war. And I think that the fact that they realized their policies had failed by the time they went through their renovation program, they reevaluated a lot of things. Because they saw that they had been ostracized by the rest of the world simply because of them not having exercised the lessons learned from Vietnam. And it did essentially cost them 20 years of development.

WILLIAMS: I think perhaps with the Marshall plan and other factors in mind, and we did do a bang-up job rebuilding. I've received this question now for you more than once. What is your view on reparations? This particular version of it says, in light of the death of three million Vietnamese.

PETERSON: I don't think that's a question to be addressed any further because we agreed in our, to renew our relationship, that reparations were not going to be a factor. And I would add that we also agreed that we would not engage in war crime trials as a result of that re-engagement. I don't think we need to talk about that. The fact is, though, quite interestingly, that Vietnam perhaps is one of the few wars that was ever fought and never has gone back in and really helped that government sort of clean up the act.

We haven't really done that. We have never really put a lot of aid in there. Well, very little. And the Vietnamese have pretty much had to do it on their own or on foreign investments.

WILLIAMS: Senator Hagel, you are just going to love this question. President Bush has defeated John McCain, Al Gore and John Kerry in elections, all of whom served in Vietnam. In the case of McCain and Kerry, he at times appeared to use their service against them. Do the American people have an aversion to electing a Vietnam veteran to the presidency?

HAGEL: No. I think they will elect a Vietnam veteran in 2008.

WILLIAMS: Do you have anybody in mind?

WILLIAMS: That is as close as we have come to a--

HAGEL: Anything further on that Brian?

WILLIAMS: Are you going to declare here? It is the one thing we haven't had happen today.

HAGEL: I have a candidate sitting next to me. And a reporter. [Laughter]
[Applause]

WILLIAMS: Very generous of you, Senator Hagel. Thank you. I'm sure General Clark thanks you. Senator Hagel, this one is from me. I watched you with Brian Lamb talk about the war on C-SPAN. I guess you fought-- Your brother was in country with you.

HAGEL: My brother and I served side-by-side in Vietnam for ten months.

WILLIAMS: And there was one instance where Brian Lamb was going through the various combat declarations you received. If memory serves you were fuzzy on the circumstances of one of your medals. The implication was not that you earned it but you couldn't remember the exact wound. And it struck me watching that there are often various types of weapons, some who wear proudly their decorations, either on their sleeve or on their chest. And no judgment being made, God bless them.

And others for whom it is not that great a part of their life. How much do you keep your experience as a talisman? How much do you define yourself, Chuck Hagel, as a Vietnam veteran?

HAGEL: This is not a swift boat ad.

WILLIAMS: No. No. It has nothing to do with that, who are the rightful recipient of many combat awards.

HAGEL: Well, it's a good question. I think John McCain is a good model for this. When John ran for president in 2000, and some people think he is running again, he minimized his service. And I think that was very wise to do. Not that he disassociated himself, but he didn't define himself-- As, you noted earlier, one of the real premium citizens of this country like Pete Peterson, where John McCain served five and a half years in prison and Pete six and a half. These are special people, just as you noted.

But John never did that. When he was asked, he would respond. He let other people talk about his war service. And I think that is the far wiser course of action. As far as I'm concerned, I'm proud of my service in the Army. I'm proud of my service in Vietnam. I don't define myself with that service. There are very few veterans and only three Vietnam veterans in the United States Senate, John Kerry, John McCain and myself.

I don't think any of my colleagues is any less wise when it comes to defense issues or foreign policy issues because they have not had that experience. I am who I am but that is an accumulation of experiences.

WILLIAMS: Bob Herbert, I have a lot of questions along these lines. It strikes me you would be the perfect one to answer. Do you worry these days about how America is viewed in the world? I guess the so-called Bush doctrine is taken into effect among those asking this question. I have one version of the question. How is it best for America to make its way in the world as we have so often been seen making war?

HERBERT: Yeah. Of course, I'm worried. I don't think I'm alone in that worry. The United States can't make it successfully in this world-- Just this idea of unilateralism. I mean it is just not going to work that way. I mean the world is so much smaller than let's say during the era of World War II or even Vietnam. And the threats are different than they were 30, 40, half century ago, that sort of thing.

And I think that the United States as the most powerful nation in the world, if you can link up the fact that this extraordinary military power and then, perhaps, work to become the wisest nation in the world-- And then use this tremendous influence to embrace as many allies as possible around the world, that is the formula for going forward as far as this country is concerned.

And I think this idea of acting on its own and settling as many problems as you can through force of arms is not only unsuccessful but ultimately tremendously self destructive.

[Applause]

WILLIAMS: Ambassador Peterson, since I named you as a wise man in the introduction-- More accurately Walter Isaacson did. Do you believe in the power of the pendulum theory of American politics and with it American foreign policy? That there will be for those who are dissatisfied with this era

politically, how we are seen, domestic and foreign policy-- Do you believe there will be an equal and opposite reaction and, for all the dissatisfied, better times? In a short or long period of time?

PETERSON: I pray for that every day. I think it will. I think the American people will endure just so much. I also think they are rather impatient. And I think their voices are being heard for the first time relative to Iraq. I think they have found they can be empowered if they speak. But they have to speak without the fear of retribution. And I think for the most part, why Americans have been so quiet is that if they spoke out, they were unpatriotic. The fact is, you are unpatriotic if you don't speak out.

[Applause]

But, yes, I do think and I feel strongly about this. And with Chuck Hagel and people like him in places of leadership and other persons throughout the country, not just in Washington, by the way, we will be led back to what I call the principles of our founding fathers. Because I think we have really gotten off track. And somebody has to pull us back.

WILLIAMS: Senator Hagel, same thought. It strikes me Joseph Nye Welch, the man who with one sentence really put an end to McCarthyism, in effect, by saying, "Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last?" was a good New Englander. This is one of many charges we are hearing in public

life, that people don't like the feeling, the tenor, these days. Do you think we are in for a change?

HAGEL: Well, I noted, Brian, a few questions back in a reference I made to Congressional oversight that I thought we had abdicated that oversight. That as we all are in elected office, represents a reflection of society. Each of us who have the high privilege of serving in high office, who were elected, we represent who we represent. And that means we reflect those attitudes. And we reflect how people respond to crises and to issues.

And not unlike what Ambassador Peterson has just noted, I do believe that there now is a movement that is very palatable, very clearly defined in the American public, not just defined by poll numbers, which will tell you something. Certainly the recent poll numbers have over the last few months. But also the Congress. And this very clear evidence of the Congress now reasserting itself in some of these issues over the last couple of months is a reflection of what's going on in society.

And that is the balance as well as the tension that always exists between not just executive and legislative branches of government but on big issues at important times in the history of a country or in the world. So I have great faith in our country, in our system, in our people.

WILLIAMS: General Clark, this one is for you. And it says, let's step away from Iraq. Should we use American forces along with our allies in places like Rwanda, Kosovo, Haiti, and most currently, Darfur?

CLARK: Well, I think you should use force only, only, only as a last resort. And when you use it, you should use it multilaterally, if it is at all possible. And unilaterally only if it is absolutely essential. I called for the use of US forces in Darfur. I think we were right to use US forces in Kosovo. And I think that the administration is finally coming around to the recognition that it is going to have to do something about Darfur. This is an open, bleeding wound.

President Clinton said something that stuck with me for a long time. He said, "When you can make a difference, you should." The United States can make a difference in Darfur. We've got the military capacity to do it. We've got the leadership to do it. We should make a difference.

[Applause]

WILLIAMS: Bob Herbert, how do we bring back trust, because people really want to serve their country, not a political agenda or any one party?

HERBERT: The trust-- You know, one of the legacies of Vietnam is the military had a hard road for many years. And there was a reluctance to use

force in the United States for a long time. And people were very uncertain about how we ought to look at military power in this country.

I think it is going to take a long time to rebuild trust in the executive branch of government in this country now and probably among elected officials generally. And I think that that is tragic when you have the kind of society, the kind of democracy that we have here in the United States. Trust has to be like a real cornerstone to the whole process.

The way you turn these things around is, the next administration that comes into power and the next Congress, whether it is controlled by Republicans or controlled by Democrats, has to rebuild faith among the American people and reconnect, the federal government especially, with the rest of the population. I think that is going to be a tough job, but I think that should probably be job number one for the next generation of leaders.

WILLIAMS: Ambassador Peterson, after six and a half years as a prisoner of war, how did you feel when President Carter pardoned those who had avoided the draft?

PETERSON: Well, you know, I was a Rip Van Winkle for all practical purposes. Even at that time I really didn't know much about what was going on in the United States. I was still pretty spaced out, frankly. But it really didn't bother me. Someone asked me today or whenever about my own feelings about leaving Vietnam. And I essentially said when I left Vietnam,

I left hate at the gate. Maybe trite in its presentation but the fact is, if you have hate or despise or whatever, you have the inability to find anything good.

And I think we had citizens who objected to a policy and essentially voted with their feet. And we needed to reunite the United States and get a fresh start. And I think that is the way he felt. And I support that position.

WILLIAMS: May I ask on behalf of all us, what mechanism you used to rid yourself of that emotion for your captors who robbed you of six and a half years of an active life? How did you go about doing that?

PETERSON: You know, I don't know. I'm nobody special by any means.

WILLIAMS: Of course not. [Laughter]

PETERSON: I did realize-- I did realize. I made a conscious decision. And, actually, before I got out, that I wasn't going to be a prisoner the rest of my life. And if you have a bad experience, you've got to find ways to not overcome them but to make something positive out of them. And I knew that if I was going to continue to harbor what had happened in the past in a hateful manner, that I was never going to be able to rid the demons that were there.

And I took that track and, you know, it wasn't instantaneous. But over the years I accomplished, essentially, that ability to just, "Hey, I'm not waking up in a cold sweat tonight," because I no longer had to do that. It wasn't something that just drove me. I'm going to go do something in the future that maybe I can make a difference on and that's been my philosophy ever since.

[Applause]

WILLIAMS: Since it's germane, Senator Hagel, I'll ask this of you and General Clark. You were both wounded in combat. And since anger is often the first emotion, how did you shed yours?

HAGEL: Well, it was easy for me because both wounds I sustained were not serious or anything that has caused me difficulty in my life. And, second, when you hear Pete Peterson's story and John McCain's and so many others, it is rather insignificant what I endured. It wasn't even in the same universe. So it's been pretty easy to me. I look to people like Pete Peterson for great inspiration. I think the country does.

WILLIAMS: And General, you were hospitalized with wounds for some time.

CLARK: Yeah. I think you have to recognize what you are feeling and deal with those feelings. I don't think I understood my feelings for a while

afterwards. I was there on the ground and I led our troops to find the enemy across a bamboo foot bridge and I was-- At that point, I was the first guy they shot at. And I turned just as they opened up with an AK-47, so I took a round and it went through the shin, another one through the hand, another one through the shoulder.

And when I was trying to get away, I think that's when I got shot in the butt. So we had a little fire fight there. We overran the base camp. There were some blood trails there. We didn't kill the guy that was in the bunker who did the shooting, as far as I know. And I went back. I went through convalescence. I commanded another company.

I worked in the Pentagon. I taught at West Point. I went through staff college. I was an operations officer in ...(inaudible) Germany. I ended up working for General Haig in Belgium as his assistant executive officer where I was a major. And it was the 19th of February and it was 1979. It was nine years after I've been shot. And I was shaving that morning. I was, you know, working my face over and I realized it was the 19th of February.

And it was nine years since I had been shot and I realized-- I thought back and I said, "Every year I think about this day and I remember that guy got away. And it makes me angry." And that was when I finally came to terms with it. I had had it in me for nine years that I had somehow failed because this man got in the way. And I finally just put it aside.

WILLIAMS: Should have had Peterson shoot down the foot bridge. He became very good at that.

CLARK: It would have been a big help.

PETERSON: Missed it. Sorry about that.

WILLIAMS: Ambassador and then Bob Herbert, same question. And this is an interesting one. Most lessons learned about Vietnam have clearly, here today, been cautionary tales and negative. Has there been anything positive for the country to take away from our experience?

PETERSON: Oh, I think so. I think the international community has gotten maybe a little more than we have. But the fact now that it's been traumatic, of course, for all of the Vietnamese that has to leave the country, did leave the country. But they have enriched a lot of other countries, including our own, with their culture, their work ethic, their intelligence.

And that, I think, is a positive. But there is a lot of military things that are a positive that came out of Vietnam that nobody really talks about. But the fact that after we lost 200 airplanes over one bridge, we decided we needed stand off weapons and we needed to do technology. And we needed to do better to protect not only our fighting men and women but also to make sure that we use the technology in the capacities that are available in the country to do that.

And, of course, we have done that. And you have seen them. The Smart bombs actually came out of Vietnam, or at least the idea.

But I think, also, while we have lamented Vietnam here, rather well I think today, the fact that we had to stop and think about it and we've all individually analyzed where we were when and what, I think it has made us better citizens in many ways. And I thought frankly, this would prevent an Iraq. I felt like America, every citizen would insure that we would make the same mistakes that we made before.

But I think everyone has thought them through and I think we have seen that here today. And even now, having this forum in this wonderful library, with all the distinguished speakers, I think we add value, again, to American society that we wouldn't have had, unfortunately, without the war.

WILLIAMS: Bob.

HERBERT: I think it's tough to find the positives. One of them has to do with the things we learned about saving lives as opposed to killing, which is war is primarily about. So, we learned a great deal in Vietnam about how to treat the people who are wounded in combat and how to get them out of there quickly. And we have improved on that over the decades until the point where as I think as Senator Hagel mentioned a while ago, we now save many people who otherwise would have been lost.

So I think those medical advances that came about as a result of the war experience, have been extremely important. But I think a key thing is that it is not too late to learn the lessons of Vietnam, even if we haven't learned them up to now.

And one of the things that I would really wish could happen is that somehow, and maybe this is the media's role, but somehow the absolute, utter horror of war, of warfare, of killing, of maiming, could be conveyed to the public in a more profound way than we have been able to do it so far.

One of the points that I try to make in the column is that if we could see just a little bit of warfare in the same way that we saw the victims of Hurricane Katrina, then we would get a sense-- You would get more than a similar reaction. You would get an overwhelming reaction of revulsion from the public. And the public would say, "Oh, my goodness. Let's not go there unless we absolutely have no choice." That's what I would like to see happen.

So I wish we would stop censoring the images and the stories from the war. I don't think it is so much that you have to see the flag-draped coffins, although I don't think those pictures should be censored. What I'd like to see is right in front of the public, the people who are wounded, who are dying, who are being maimed, the attacking and the effect of killing people.

Put that front and center out there because that is what war is. And then you would have a better shot at stopping it.

[Applause]

WILLIAMS: Senator Hagel, we started this day by talking about the inscription over the door at the National Archives, “What is past is prologue.” Is it your view, should we take away from your comments and demeanor today that you believe we are in the act of forgetting the lessons of the Vietnam War?

HAGEL: No. I don’t believe that we are forgetting the lessons of Vietnam and I’ll tell you why. There is a self correction mechanism in free societies. Partly that comes as a result of elections. But that self corrections process that free societies have does balance not just policy but perspective. And it always draws from the one foundation that is most critical in self correction. And that is past experience.

And have we become disconnected from that Vietnam lesson, the lesson, many lessons, variations of the Vietnam experience over the last few years? Yes, I think we have. Are we going to turn that around? Yes, I believe we will. I think that process is in motion now. I think you will probably see, to some extent, that play out in the election in November and probably in 2008.

The last point I would make on this, if you look at this administration's at least focused efforts, dialogue over the last 12 months, it is a remarkable shift in where they have been three years prior. First, now we are reaching out to allies, alliances. Using a very specific example, the International Atomic Energy Agency. Before we went into Iraq, most in this administration completely dismissed the IAEA. They actually were right. We were wrong.

Today, we are holding on to the IAEA in Iran. We are fastened to the IAEA in a way we haven't been for along time. That is connected to our allies. That's alliances. That's United Nations. Do I think we need to go some? Yes. Do I think we need to reach beyond where we are? Yes. But I'm confident, Brian, that the forces of reality and the events will to a great extent always dictate. And we have not forgotten, nor will we, the lessons of Vietnam.

WILLIAMS: Because I'm a journalist, I have to ask you, are you running?

HAGEL: I am going to make a decision on my political future after the election. And just to show you where my priorities are, I passed up that event in Tennessee today, for you.

WILLIAMS: You did it for them.

HAGEL: No, I was very flattered and humbled to be asked. This is real and this is very important. And I am very pleased to be part of this and thank you.

WILLIAMS: Thank you.

[Applause]

WILLIAMS: General Clark, are you running? I notice you are not in Tennessee?

CLARK: I'm not a Republican. No, what I'm trying to do is-- I'm in business. I'm trying to get some Democrats elected. I think that 2006 really is the battleground because when one party controls both houses of Congress, the presidency, and the Supreme Court, it's very hard for dissenting opinions to be heard.

On a morning talk show on Sunday, and you know this, you say, "Well, let's hear it from both sides. Well, let's hear it from, let's see, the executive branch. Let's get a Republican. And let's hear from Congress. Well, let's get a committee chairman. Well, they are Republicans, too." So a lot of people are asking, always, where are the Democrats? The Democrats need to take control of at least one house of the Congress.

WILLIAMS: Notice, I just asked, are you running?

CLARK: What did I say?

WILLIAMS: Well, you are still in the process of saying it. I'm not quite sure. So--

CLARK: Well, let me make it clear. I'm going to work for everyone of the 55 veterans who are running as Democrats to be members of the United States Congress. I want to see everyone of them elected. They will make a change and they will not forget the lessons of Vietnam or Iraq when they are in office.

WILLIAMS: And Pete Peterson, I need one more favor from you. And for this I need to impose again on your experience. It seems to me our culture today is-- We have been talking so much about the gap of the last 30 to 40 years and how we have changed. We are so self centered. All of commercials end with the tag line that is approximately, "And I like that. It is good for me." And it is all about self.

What you did, it seems to me, couldn't be less about self. It was all for a greater ideal, a greater good in this case, your country. Imagine such a thought. And a very simple question. For all of those who just think they have had a bad day or a bad time, how did you get from day to day, not knowing whether Wednesday was passing into Thursday? How did you

wake up and move on and make it through and do that for six and a half years? Is there anything you can share?

PETERSON: No one thing, perhaps. But I will relate this. When you find yourself in a situation like that, you have to decide, frankly, if you want to be alive. And it sounds simple, right? Yeah, I think I will stay alive today. The fact is, friends of mine laid down and died. Not because they were shot. They quit living. And so that's the first thing one has to determine. They have to decide if they want to live.

And then, after that, it gets easier. And your life becomes just almost measured by hours, each hour. Because if you hear this guy coming down with the keys rattling, you know it is you or somebody else. And this is not going to be a good day. But you just go on and you take that hour by hour by hour. And suddenly the day is gone and then you go up and start the next day.

And I'm really simplifying this. But it is a matter of just surviving from one moment to the next and knowing that you will someday be free. And that someday you will return to your country. You will return to your family. And also, incredibly important is to know that you have not been forgotten. Now, we weren't sure about that because we were very isolated and didn't get any news. But we felt that the country had not forgotten us. And, clearly, they had not.

And, in fact, to be honest with you, one of the things that really worried all of us, I think to a person, was that we didn't want our welfare to restrict American power. We didn't want to be pawns. We were willing to take the ultimate sacrifice. But we did not want the Vietnamese to be able to use us against our own country. And I think we did pretty good on that point.

But surviving something like that is just hanging in there, stick it out, and know that there will be a better day.

WILLIAMS: Well, thank you for hanging in there.

[Applause]

WILLIAMS: As I bring up Deborah Leff from the Kennedy Museum, I want to say two things. Number one, support the closest presidential museum and library near you. And that is just as a history buff saying, this is where great things happen and great things are stored and study can break out if you are not careful.

And secondly, it occurs to me as a veteran of three panels today, the only way this day could have been better is if we had been joined in the front row by a beaming 88, 89-year old former president, so proud of this monument to his administration, to his policies and thought, surrounded by admirers. But absent that, absent him, the best way to honor him, it seems to me as a

citizen is to do exactly this, celebrate what makes us different from a whole lot of other nations.

With extraordinary thanks to our panelists all day and special guest star, John Burns, thank you for having me.

[Applause]

LEFF: I just want to issue a few more thank yous. No conference like this happens without tremendous work from a lot of people. Every Presidential Library and Library Foundation, the National Archives, and here at the Kennedy Library and Foundation every staff member, but most especially Tom Putnam and Amy Macdonald who put together every detail of this conference.

[Applause]

Rumor has it that Brian Williams has a day job. But, despite that he has donated his time here, an incredible amount of time to prepare, to think about this, to work through the panels, and to weave together an exquisite day. So please join me in thanking Brian Williams and thank you for coming.

[Applause]