

TRANSCRIPT:
Is Disarming America Smart Politics?
The Security and Economic Costs of Obama's Policies

February 9, 2012
CPAC 2012

JACK KLIMP:

I'm going to start off, if I may, with a little bit of a commercial here. As Frank said, I'm the president of NAUS. National Association for Uniformed Services. We have at least one other NAUS member over here. I hope my guys aren't checking up on me. I'm a relatively new president of the organization. We're unique amongst the veterans support organizations and the military support organizations in this town in that we represent, actually we are the voice for all seven of the uniformed services, the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, NOA, and the US Public Health Service as well. We speak for all ranks and all grades. Private through general. Seaman through admiral, if you will. And we represent all conditions of service. So whether it's reserve, active duty, National Guard, veteran, or yet to serve, we feel that we are a spokesman for those individuals.

Our mission is to promote a strong national defense and protect the benefits earned through service and sacrifice in the uniformed services. And I tell you all this not just as an advertisement for NAUS, but to give you a feel for where I'm going to be coming from with my comments here this afternoon. When Frank invited me, I anticipated that you were going to hear a lot about strategic impacts and power shifts and power vacuums and the industrial base and the economic impact on our cities and communities. And you have in fact done that. What I would like to do is to try to put a bit of a human face on these strategy and budget implications, specifically the human face of those who have served and have sacrificed for the defense of this nation and those who will serve and sacrifice for the defense of this nation. NAUS believes that the first and priority role of government is defense of the nation. In that regard, NAUS is concerned, obviously, about the potential represented by 487 billion dollars in defense cuts already being executed, plus the six hundred billion in additional cuts resident in sequestration and the threat that that could create or will create, we believe, a hollow force for the defense of this nation. They will in fact, we believe, cripple the US armed forces and endanger the security of the nation. Now we have been there before. Frank asked me to talk about this. Coming out of Vietnam, we downsized the force, shifted to an all volunteer structure and in the process we experienced incredible, incredible problems.

And I'm going to talk about my own service here because I don't want to badmouth anybody else's service. But typical was the experience of the United States Marine Corps, one of our elite components. Back in those days and today. In 1976, two thousand five hundred of the three thousand Marines in the 6th Marine Regiment were slated to participate in a training exercise. Only twelve hundred of those Marines actually waded ashore on Operation Solid Shield, that exercise. Of the remaining thirteen hundred, eight hundred were back in barracks awaiting undesirable discharges. More than two hundred others were absent without leave. Still others that

were on the regimental rolls were classified as deserters. Also 267 of the 6th Regiment's Marines had been administratively reassigned to the brig where they were awaiting court martials for various offenses or were serving their sentences for the court martials that they received. The percentage of high school graduates in the 2nd Marine Division had dropped to thirty-eight percent. The commanding general estimated that eighty percent of his Marines had used marijuana. We in fact did a study in 1975 where we ascertained that forty-two percent of all Marines, officer and enlisted, had used an illicit substance within the last month. Forty-nine percent had used an illicit substance within the last year. Half of the Marine Corps was one drugs back in those days. One rifle company commander in – yeah, that's the response I get. It's true. People don't realize what an ugly place the US military was from the mid-60s through until – up until the 80s kind of thing. One rifle company commander remembered that he had only seventeen of a hundred and eighty-nine men available for training because of personnel problems. I was a reconnaissance company commander in Vietnam during this time, all those captain's billets I had. Recon companies are relatively small. Sixty-five Marines is all in a company. I had more Marines in a deserter status and absent without leave status for that company than I had present for training and for missions. Now where they went in Okinawa beats the heck out of me. But they were out there somewhere.

Regimental commander confided in a reporter that he was lucky if one in five of his Marines saluted him as he passed by. Between ten and fifteen percent of Marines intentionally tried to fail their physical fitness test. Company commanders were so involved with disciplinary issues and actions that it was difficult to maintain any semblance of corps unity. And the situation was bad or worse in the other services. Some say that recruiting today and retention today are both going very well. And they are. So there's no problem and there will be no problem. With eight of my thirty-three years in the Marine Corps in recruiting, I will tell you it can happen again. And when it does, it will happen quickly and it will take a long, long time to turn around. Today we have, perhaps, the most capable, competent, effective military we have ever fielded against any enemy of this nation. It is truly a national treasure. It is a military that, I said before, it took us more than two decades in the 70s, 80s, and 90s, to create and to build. It's an all volunteer force. One of the many lessons we learned during the more than twenty years of rebuilding was that individuals joined and remained for a wide variety of reasons. The current carefully balanced package of incentives and earned benefits addressed those many recruiting and retention needs and issues. It included out health care, retirement, commissaries and exchanges, GI bill, pay, social security, medicare, [UNCLEAR] tuition, assistance and special pays and allowances. It's clear that there's going to be a hard look taken at all of these with an eye towards reducing costs, which actually means reducing their value to the soldier, sailor, airman, and Marine out there. Even the good guys, or the ones we classify as being good guys, are talking about the need to reform and restructure. That's political talk in our mind that disguises the real possibility of eliminating these benefits as we know them and thus literally changing the nature of the all volunteer force. The job of NAUS is to work to insure that our nation does not, once again, break faith with those who have served and sacrificed. And I say again – once again – break faith. Because this nation has, multiple times, broken faith with those who have served this nation. I'm an Air Force brat. I grew up in the Air Force. I went to the Air Force Naval Academy, [UNCLEAR] Navy [UNCLEAR] Army. Marine Corps, I had to say that.

FRANK GAFFNEY:

Marine Corps.

JACK KLIMP:

We're on a roll here for awhile. But my dad retired in 1965 at the end of my plebe year at the Naval Academy. When he retired, he had full medical coverage. My mother had full medical coverage. My sisters had full medical coverage. I did because I was a midshipman on active duty. Today, we have TriCare. My dad's care, my care, was provided in the Air Force hospital. It cost my dad nothing. Today, we have TriCare, with pharmaceutical costs, with out of pocket costs, and with new fees that are coming forward as well. Our job as I said is to insure that the nation does not break faith with the people who have served and are serving and that the nation honors the contract that it has with those individuals. It's not just promises. It's a contract. These people signed a contract with the belief that they were going to have those benefits available to them. To a retired general, a colonel working in the industry with a six figure salary, life insurance, health care, retirement, and other benefits, a thirteen percent increase in TriCare prime fees and increases in copays and increases in out of pocket fees may not be a big deal. But when you are one of the seventy percent of all retirees who are E-7s or below, making thirty thousand dollars or less a year, they are a big thing. Just as is a two hundred dollar annual TriCare for life fee. On top of what retirees – retirees have paid for medicare for nearly their entire lives, and if still employed, continue to pay. If you run the numbers on the basic cost to live, rent, food, transportation, taxes and all that, health care, there isn't a whole lot left for them to live on. In the 80s, the Department of Defense tried a retirement program that's been mentioned here before similar to what is currently being proposed. It was called Redux. It failed miserably. It had such a negative impact on recruiting and retention that the joint chiefs of staff had to go back to Congress within a couple of years and beg them to rescind it and go back to the old system.

But here we are, thirty years later, talking about the same thing. DOD is currently circulating a survey that asks service members about the tradeoffs in military benefits they would be willing to make, such as whether a fifteen percent hike in pay now would make up for reduced retirement benefits later on. The question I would ask would be what do they expect a young, twenty-two year old corporal with a wife and two children to say? It's hard to think of retirement when they're trying to clothe and feed their family out there and they may be on food stamps. It is insulting that service members and veterans are being asked – and I quote, to put their heads in a noose by tacitly admitting cuts to their earned benefits are somehow acceptable. There's a poem written by Rudyard Kipling. I keep a copy of it in my office on the wall. The title of it is "Tommy". It's about the British society's failure to keep faith with their soldiers, their tommies, during times of peace. It's most famous stanza is, for it's Tommy this and Tommy that and chuck him out, the brute. But it's savior of his country when the guns begin to shoot. And it's Tommy this and Tommy that in anything you please, but Tommy ain't no blooming fool – you bet that Tommy sees. I close with another quote attributed to George Washington. The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional as to how they perceive the veterans of earlier wars are treated and appreciated by their nation. We need to heed the advice of the father of our nation. Equipment and strategy are important. It's the people that make it all work.