

**Senator Roger Wicker
Chairman, Senate Armed Services Committee
Ronald Reagan Institute**

**Defense Writers Group
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Moderator: Good morning everyone, and welcome to a very special Defense Writers Group. Our guest today is Senator Roger Wicker, Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and it's coming at a really important time.

The ground rules: As always, this is on the record. You can record it for accuracy of quotes, but there's no rebroadcast of audio or video. I have quite a few advance requests for questions, we'll get to as many as we can. Others please drop in direct chat.

For those of you who were watching their email in-basket at six p.m. last night you saw that Chairman Wicker released his reconciliation measure that would add more than \$156 billion to the DoD budget for this year.

We're incredibly honored he's chosen Defense Writers Group for his first public engagement on that.

Mr. Chairman, welcome, sir. We're honored to have you. The floor is yours for your opening comments to sort of tell us your priorities and what's next, sir.

Senator Wicker: We are of course going to stay within the \$150 billion ceiling that we have. We've had to make a few adjustments based on scoring and [the] parliamentarian over here, but we will comply with the instructions of the Senate Resolution.

Thank you for doing this. I hope it's a good exercise for you.

I've been saying for months that every year, whether it's a confirmation hearing or a conversation with our already serving members of the military in the various commands, that this is the most perilous threat environment we have faced since World War II. We still have a strong military but the trend is not headed in the right direction and the military advancements that will result from this bill are indeed historic and their

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importance cannot be overstated.

We're committed to peace through strength. This is an area of the Reconciliation Bill where the House and Senate are very, very close in the provisions. The Chairman, Chairman Rogers and I are really very close together, and the administration is supportive. The difficult portions of reconciliation and the things that might trip it up, things that you've been hearing about in the press, are really in other parts of the bill. Clearly, this is my emphasis and it's a very important \$150 billion.

The fact that we're going to prevent the largest tax increase in the history of the United States of America is I think the reason that the other portions of the bill will pass, because we just cannot tolerate this.

I sat with the President in the Oval Office to talk about what I call the Iron Dome for America. It became Golden Dome. This is in keeping with the President's goal of a major investment in the Golden Dome technology. The largest investment in unmanned ships and drones and clearly uncrewed is where we're headed. So it's a good package and it's a package that is not controversial among House and Senate Members.

Frankly, I think everybody viewed the drone attack by Ukraine against the Russian Air Force as historic. People are still counting the number of aircraft and there's a little debate about that, but it was historic and it underscores the fact that drone technology is very important.

Our bill has funding to really emphasize that, and the bill also hits some of the President's highest priorities. Modernizing our military; enhancing border security; revitalizing America's manufacturing; and deterring war in the process. Much of the manufacturing is affected by my Forged Act, and much of the Forged Act will also need to occur in the NDAA Bill. In addition, a lot of it can be done without legislation, so we're excited about the way that has been received.

The funding also serves to jumpstart the Golden Dome - in terms of Golden Dome, \$25 billion to kickstart that. In addition to the \$25 billion we're going to have to have another \$150 billion when it's all said and done, to build cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, and hypersonic strike weapons. It's a historic

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investment, but it's far from paying for everything we need, frankly. It is the start, but it's far from paid for by reconciliation.

We've prioritized renewed shipbuilding to produce a 21st century naval fleet with over a dozen new ships. A historic large-scale investment in unmanned ships to create thousands of small, unmanned surface vessels; dozens of medium unmanned surface vessels; and thousands of unmanned underwater vehicles to expand the fleet.

I want to emphasize that we've been able to advance many of these priorities effectively thanks to our close cooperation with Chairman Rogers and the White House team. As I said starting things off, we are largely of one mind on this. We may have had to do an adjustment or two, but we've done it in coordination with the administration and the House.

So there we are. We'll be happy to have a little conversation with you. I know schedules are tight. Also, I will not be embarrassed if I have to call on my great panel of staff members that are here to fill in the details to the extent we can.

Moderator: Mr. Chairman, thank you for setting the scene for us.

For those on the call, as the Chairman said, schedules are tight. He does have a hard stop at 10:30 which is shorter than usual. So first, I will forego my traditional opening question and go straight to you. And Dave _____ Burger from the SASC staff has promised to be available later today by phone or email for any follow-up questions.

So from the floor, the first question goes to Sam LaGrone, Naval Institute News.

DWG: Good morning. Real quick, talking about shipbuilding, I'm really curious in the Reconciliation Bill how you all were able to kind of find the balance for the things that you're going to include. Kind of my math here, I'm seeing \$34 billion for the Reconciliation Bill on top of a loose \$39 billion-ish as part of the FY25 Continuing Resolutions.

How does that feather in with OMB's release of the '26 budget. The [SCN] line is more like \$20 billion.

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So it seems that relative to the reconciliation which has been explained to us is supplemental, as kind of a jump start for sort of the larger issue. How does that feather into what one person told me was kind of an anemic shipbuilding budget that's coming out from the White House right now. Could you help in sort of figuring out how you all are racking and stacking what you need and how those priorities are going to manifest themselves in this bill?

Thank you, sir.

Senator Wicker: I think House and Senate authorizers and House and Senate appropriators are likely to have quite a different view from the amount that is racked and stacked. I don't think the OMB recommendation is close to getting us where we need to be. And it would not be uncommon to see a vastly different number coming out of the Congress.

In fact we have the power of the purse and we're going to try to accommodate. What I've said many times, this is the most perilous threat environment we've faced since World War II. I don't think OMB is adequate.

Moderator: Thank you, sir. Next is Missy Ryan of The Atlantic.

DWG: Thank you so much, Thom, and thanks, Senator.

I was actually going to ask you about the FY26 budget and what you described as an actual cut, a real money cut to the budget says about the administration's commitment to the peace through strength goal.

But I also, because we only have 20 minutes, I also want you to address if you could how you think Secretary Hegseth is doing. He's had some months in, and obviously a lot of resistance from the Democratic side, so I'd love your assessment. Thank you.

Senator Wicker: To answer your second question first, Secretary Hegseth and I are getting along fine, and our teams are getting along well. Of course he has to work in cooperation with the rest of the White House team, and I don't envy him on that. But I have no complaints whatever and no regret about our efforts to get him confirmed.

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I guess my earlier statement on Mr. LaGrone's question will suffice about the budget request. There are some members of the administration who thought we would be delighted with the \$1 trillion. That's not the way we viewed it. We need a steady increase in terms of the baseline year after year after year to get where we need to get, and we need to get to five percent of gross domestic product.

We cannot be asking our allies to go from their two percent or less of GDP to five percent when we're not willing to do that ourselves. And we view reconciliation as a major opportunity to try to catch up but it makes no sense to have a flat budget and sort of pretend that we're able to cut spending on national defense and try to convince the American people that we're raising defense spending to \$1 trillion. That's my opinion, that's how I view it.

I've sat next to the OMB Director at meetings and expressed my opinion. He has his. He has his goals, and they're noble. But we can get to a responsible budget and we can address the deficit, but it should not come at the expense of making us uneven players as compared to Communist China, Russia, Iran and North Korea.

Moderator: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Next up is Tony Capaccio, Bloomberg.

DWG: I wanted to get your opinion, your assessment of Secretary Hegseth's move last week to greatly reduce the 43 year old department's Test and Evaluation Office that your predecessors McCain and Inhofe leaned heavily on. Did you think that reduction is a prudent move in light of, if the threat the uss is facing?

Senator Wicker: I'm going to reserve judgment on that. I'm listening but I think you probably have a guess as to how we may come down at the end, but I'm not fully briefed on that so I'd rather withhold comment.

DWG: Can I ask you what questions you have about the move that you'd like to get answered before you render a final opinion?

Senator Wicker: Well, I have questions not only for the Secretary and his team, and to an extent the National Security

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Council is involved in this, but also with stakeholders and experts around town as to the advisability of this, which would amount to a reversal of congressional policy.

Moderator: Thank you, sir.

Next up is Courtney Kube of NBC.

DWG: Thanks Thom. Thanks, Senator.

I want to go back to Missy's question again because I appreciate that you said that your teams are getting along and you're getting along with Secretary Hegseth, but I'm wondering if you could give us more of your sense, with your years of experience, on more of an evaluation of the job he's doing. And specifically, his priorities seem to be, I mean he's saying about you know, DEI and rooting out transgender. Do you think that his priorities are - do you agree with what he's spending his time on as Secretary of Defense?

And then I wonder if we could get you also to comment on his order to rename the USNS Harvey Milk as well as potentially other civil rights icons.

Senator Wicker: I had not heard of the Harvey Milk news until last night after I got home from work, so let me say I'm still processing that. I do understand Mr. Milk was a pioneer for gay rights and that he served in the Navy. So I'd like to factor that in.

I don't know that, as far as the first part of your question, I don't know that Secretary Hegseth is spending an inordinate amount of time on DEI. He does work for the President of the United States who vowed as a campaign issue to move us away from DEI. I think most of the American people think that's a good thing to do. So on issues like that he's made a decision. But I don't think that those two issues occupy a great deal of his working day.

To the extent he's doing it, I'm supportive and I think the American people are.

Moderator: Thank you, sir.

Next up is Rebecca Kheel of Military.Com.

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DWG: Thank you for doing this.

So the Reconciliation Bill has some money for servicemember quality of life, and obviously last year the NDAA had a big focus on servicemember quality of life, but is there anything else you think still needs to be done in that area that you're hoping to accomplish in the NDAA?

Senator Wicker: We want to continue making quality of life better and more inviting for our servicemembers.

I do think it is, I think it's significant that almost immediately after the presidential election and the House and Senate elections of November, that recruitments started improving in most if not all of the services.

So quality of life is important and we'd better protect the benefits and enhance them.

There's also a provision in our bill, and I guess it's going to have to be in the NDAA, but we're going to insist that a certain amount of money that we've directed to fixing up the facilities that have long been neglected, actually gets spent. We don't need to ask our service people to work in sort of, in facilities that we wouldn't ask people in the private sector, and we wouldn't try to recruit them to work in.

So yes, quality of life is important. We are going to continue in that regard, but in addition I think the new emphasis on lethality and national security and defending our nation if we have to - I think it appeals to the type of people who want to step forward and put their safety and lives on the line for our national defense. So it all comes together.

Moderator: Thank you, sir.

Next, Anne Flaherty of ABC News.

DWG: Thanks, Senator, for doing this.

You mentioned the drone attack being historic, and I'm wondering if you can talk about how concerned you might be that this new type of drone technology could be used against U.S. bases or even we've got this military parade coming up. And it seems

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that there's no such thing as a secure perimeter anymore.

I'm wondering if you've been raising concerns about this in the past. Is this a new frontier for U.S. forces to be concerned about this?

Senator Wicker: It's not the first time this has dawned on people.

With regard to the parade, I'll have to run that through my circuits. To the extent that there's a lot of hardware in one place, you have a point. But let me give that a little thought.

To your larger question, there's no doubt that we have a myriad of aircraft all around the country and all around the world that are stored in facilities, really, that are designed to protect them from the weather and are not resistant to explosives like the ones the Ukrainians used.

So it should be a wakeup call to the public. I'm not sure that it is much of a surprise to our military strategists and tacticians.

We do have \$2 billion in the bill for drones and \$1 billion for counter-drone technology. That's a relatively small amount in terms of a percentage, but it is \$3 billion.

The public at least now is aware and the public around the world in our allied countries and in the countries that wish us ill, that this is a vulnerability.

I have not attended any secure briefings on this subject, so I'm giving you my own personal opinion. I'm not speaking out of school by something that's [been told] in the SCIF.

Moderator: Thank you, sir.

Next is Phil Stewart of Reuters.

DWG: Thank you, Senator.

I notice your Ukraine pin. I was just hoping to get back to that issue.

Could you give us a sense of where you're optimistic that the

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U.S. will either provide further assistance to Ukraine or allow allies to buy exquisite U.S. defense articles, say Patriot interceptors or the like to provide to Ukraine. Are you optimistic that that's possible? And have you spoken to Secretary Hegseth about that? Thank you.

Senator Wicker: I have not spoken to Secretary Hegseth about that in several days.

Am I optimistic? I hope there's reason for optimism. I hope there's a new awareness within the negotiating teams that the Ukrainians intend to fight for their homeland, and they're a smaller country with a smaller gross domestic product, but as we've seen down through history, whether it's the Boer War in South Africa or our war for American independence here on this continent, when people are fighting for their own land and their own ability to run their affairs against an invading power, they can overcome relative inequality in the terms of arms.

We now have 82 sponsors in the Senate of a bill that would authorize secondary sanctions against Russia. This would affect China in a very negative way. So I am optimistic that we'll be able to get there. Am I optimistic that the President will agree to this? I know he's requested Leader Thune not to bring the bill up this week.

So let me say I'm hopeful and I think based on a briefing that I had yesterday, a conversation I had with Ukrainian leaders, and a similar conversation that's possibly going on right now in the Capitol with Mr. Yermak and a number of other members of the Senate, that the leadership, the collective leadership of the United States including the administration will conclude that it is absolutely in our interest for Ukraine to prevail and for Russia to be stymied.

And to follow on that, the Reconciliation Bill has focused on restarting and expanding our industrial base so we can be the arsenal of democracy. And we do have some, or quite a bit of presidential drawdown authority that needs to be exercised, and I would urge to be exercised. And yes, there are allies maybe [in] some surprising places around the world that are eager to make a favorable distribution of weaponry and manufacturing to our Ukrainian friends.

And yes, thanks for noticing this pin I've been wearing. I've

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worn it most days that I've had a lapel since the war started. It was very popular at first, and then sometimes I've gotten a good bit of criticism for it. But I think at the very end history will say that this is a pivotal moment in Europe. It's a pivotal moment among the free countries that have enjoyed peace and freedom and the ability to elect their own leadership for some 70-75 years, and it is absolutely in the interest of international peace and American security for the Russians not to be rewarded for this series of war crimes that carry the most severe criminal penalties under international law. So I'm continuing to stubbornly say that we need to be steadfast.

The aggressors here, the bad guys, the people who would upend decades of international order are the Russians, and this affects America and it affects the Republic of Georgia, Moldova, Armenia. I mean it goes on and on. And I think our European allies are showing that they realize that. But yes, I'm stubbornly pro-Ukraine because I'm pro-freedom and pro-democracy.

Look, they're telling me that I need to run down the hall and check in with some other folks. I hope this has been somewhat helpful.

Here's the bottom line. We've got to pass Reconciliation, we've to prevent this tax increase from occurring. This is a wonderful opportunity to jumpstart getting back where we need to be in national defense. It is something that frankly Democrats will vote against the bill and they will be for this part anyway, and so I really think maybe 85 Senators, if you asked them in a vacuum do they want this \$150 billion to be enacted, they would say yes. Democrats and Republicans. So we're united on that and we're ready to go and it's the other parts that are going to take some massaging for the next couple of weeks.

Thank you.

Moderator: Mr. Chairman, thank you for the engagement today. Thank you for your time.

Senator Wicker: Thanks folks. Bye-bye.