

RALLY

POINT

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FORMER ARMY COLONEL AND CONGRESSMAN

CHRIS GIBSON

Rally Point: *Five Tasks to Unite the Country and Revitalize the American Dream* by Chris Gibson

Looking Inward to Improve National Security

A Conversation with Former Congressman Christopher Gibson

Interviewed by FSR Staff

Fletcher Security Review: A general question to start out with, we had a number of military leaders come and speak to the student body last semester. One such visitor was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Dunford, he cited a fractured Congress' lack of ability to pass a budget and ensure funding stability for the military as one of the largest issues the military is currently facing. Do you see this as a major issue and what other issues do you think the military is facing due to this fractured congress?

Chris Gibson: I agree with General Dunford and think that what we really need in order to establish a credible deterrence is a unified vision of how we are going to proceed strategically, and the resources to allow us to substantiate this vision. This is among the reasons why I published *Rally Point*. It is an attempt to get Americans on the same page on many issues, including our approach to national security. I think the president can play a key role. You mentioned how fractured Congress is, and I lived that. When the system is operating correctly, at least how the Founders envisioned, a good framework to understand its workings is the President as a point guard. The President can play a key role in shaping decisions or positions of Congress and helping members who may not be as knowledgeable on an issue or not ready to commit to a particular approach. The President can play a constructive role through persuasion.

What I explained in *Rally Point* is that over time we have moved too much power to the executive branch and to the presidency and I think that has been a detriment to many things, including, quite frankly, national security. That is not to say that the President cannot play a leadership role. Ultimately, in a government of the people, by the people, for the people, the Congress needs to play the instrumental role. To the general's point that what we need is a major budget agreement that would not only impact national security but also the deficit and the debt, which I list in the chapter on national security as among our threats.

FSR: When I interned in your DC office in the Spring of 2014, you spoke often to us on the danger of Congress ceding powers to the executive.

CG: That is exactly right. This was not a heist. This was not the president seizing powers. It was the Congress pushing many of its responsibilities off onto the executive. For example, the War Powers Act. The Founders never intended for presidents to make these decisions by fiat, this was always reserved for the people's representatives. On the solemn decision for the use of force, as a country we were meant to debate that widely in Congress and ultimately take votes on the record. What has happened over time is that we have seen our representatives push that responsibility onto the President and we have seen Presidents from both political parties take us to war without the consent of the governed. This is my larger point that in some ways this is ironical.

I do have a policy recommendation that can help. It is an amendment to the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act. One of the requirements of the act is for the Executive to submit to Congress annually a national security strategy. What we could do is amend the law and require the President to submit a draft national security strategy that would ultimately be debated and marked up in Congress. This way, you would get a presidential draft, Congress would then mark it up and take a vote on it. By refining this process you get Congress to take ownership of the national security strategy in collaboration with the President. Ultimately this would drive more consensus towards budgeting.

FSR: Are you encouraged by any signs from Congress that they might take back their full constitutional power? It seems like both parties have a very short memory. When one party is in the White House, they are ok with their President using Executive Orders but when they lose the office they complain.

CG: I think we have a long way to go, that is part of the



Beijing, China. President Barack Obama of the United States and President Xi Jinping of China hold a press conference (Chuck Kennedy / Public Domain)

inspiration to write *Rally Point*. This dynamic is part of the problem, you see the parties flipping on this issue depending on who is controlling the White House. My party, I happen to be a Republican, we like to believe that we adhere closely to the Constitution and to the intent of the Founders. But too often, as soon as Republicans are in control of the White House we see our leaders give up that principle for political advancement. I think that is a mistake. Part of the passion behind *Rally Point* is to bring this front and center so that American citizens can play a more active role in communicating to our elected leaders that we want reform.

FSR: Following on that line, in *Rally Point* you talked about how America's deterrence policy needs to change to face 21st century threats. In the current climate, how does the United States deter a country like China that is looking to plan many years ahead, while we seem to have a very difficult time doing that? What is our best strategy for facing a growing, and strengthening, China?

CG: Well, first of all, I agree with your assumption that President Xi and his One Belt, One Road strategy is very forward looking. It is also very ambitious and requires a tremendous amount of resources. I think that also explains why they have been more aggressive in the South China Sea. Clearly they are trying to get access to more natural gas and the fishing grounds there. As I

mentioned in the book, I do not think we are destined to fight them. In fact if you take a look at the current international power relationship, essentially the United States and China are the two strongest, in my view, and benefit most from the current power arrangement. It is in our interest to work with China. I strongly recommend in *Rally Point* that we sit down with China and look to forge a comprehensive bilateral agreement. That agreement would address not only national security, including prickly issues like the South China Sea and how we approach North Korea, but also issues such as trade, intellectual property rights, currency, and a whole host of issues.

The way I think we deter China is to bring them in closer. I think we have every reason to sit down and work out our issues. Look, we are having friction. We are having challenges with China. Some say they are afraid of taking any action because they are afraid of kicking off a trade war with China. Well what is going on right now? We have an asymmetrical relationship with regard to trade with China now. This current arrangement is not in our interest. China has long-term interests, and near-term interests and in some areas they have advantages and in some areas they have disadvantages. We are going to have to work with them.

This is central to the issue of North Korea. I think

China can play an instrumental role in helping resolving that crisis, a win-win-win. For us, we want to see the Korean peninsula denuclearized and we want to see North Korea stop threatening their neighbors. China plays an instrumental role in North Korea, particularly in regard to their energy needs, financial services, trade and even some of their labor markets. But China is not going to help simply because we are demanding they do it. We will have to find a way to help China with some of their priorities, which could very well be in other regions. We have to listen carefully and find ways we can accommodate, provided that they take action in North Korea, and then of course we need iron-clad verification.

I have just described to you the win-win, where is the win-win-win? Well it is in North Korea's interest to resolve this and stop wondering whether their regime is going to survive. Increased stability and global recognition that could ultimately lead to more economic support is in their interest. To get that, they have to agree to denuclearization, to stop threatening their neighbors, and to verification. If that is forthcoming, then I think by working through China we can set up a framework where everyone advances.

FSR: As China is looking to maintain its own sphere of influence across Asia, is there a way for them to do that in concert with the United States?

CG: If we do a major bilateral agreement, we can find a way to get to a place where we are benefitting economically but so is China. This is what the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was. It was a move by the United States and others to try and outflank China. Through a 12-nation agreement, we thought we could outflank China and cause them to move to our position. I think the strategy was flawed from the beginning. We gave away way too much in the process of trying to outflank China, and I do not think we were going to succeed anyway. Now obviously our government has decided not to pursue it. We should quickly pivot to sitting down with China and working out a bilateral agreement.

FSR: Turning to Russia for a moment, I think many people are seeing a politicization of Russia as a national security issue. With President Trump not really being as strong on sanctions as some people would like him to be or fighting back against Russian meddling in the U.S. elections. Are you worried about the politicization of national security and foreign policy?

CG: This has happened from time to time. I do not reject what you are saying but I am less concerned with it. I know some of my former colleagues do not view it the same way as the administration, even the joint chiefs, quite frankly even Secretary of Defense Mattis has had a different view on this than President Trump.



It really comes down to actions. Even though candidate Trump talked a lot about things such as the irrelevance of NATO, his actions have not matched his campaign rhetoric. NATO obviously continues to be a very important entity for us. The United States, views the peace and prosperity of the United States and Europe as inextricably linked to NATO.

When we review the history, particularly over the past 100 years, we have seen that isolationist approaches do not work. America tried twice to stay out of world wars, and both times we ended up getting sucked in. The aftermath of the First World War saw an attempt to make an arrangement that would preclude war. That failed, and as we marched towards the mid and late 1930s we saw the remilitarization of Europe and parts of Asia and ultimately a world war. The isolationist approach of the 1930s failed as well. The last thing we wanted was to be involved in a world war, and we got involved in a world war. Coming out of both of these experiences, there was a belief among many that we should endeavor to strengthen our capability and will and that of our friends and allies to impact the decision making of potential adversaries. From this emerged NATO. Now in this case, I am explicitly talking about Russia. I think Putin is a rational actor and he can be deterred. The important thing here is that we use the right rhetoric and take the right actions to put ourselves in a strong posture where Putin views taking any aggressive action

as against his own interest. This is where, in my view, some of the Trump rhetoric was not helpful.

FSR: As someone who is often stuck in the bubble of academia, I think a lot of my peers view the Republican Party as becoming isolationist. Would you reject that idea?

CG: I do reject that. That is part of the point of *Rally Point*. Chapter one is actually on grand strategy in national security. I think we have been given false choices. We have been given this choice of who has got it right John McCain or Rand Paul. With due respect, neither. I have the highest regard for both gentlemen. John McCain, his war record is truly incredible, I cannot imagine going through the things that he did. He has my highest respect. But it seems like he has not met a country he did not want to bomb. Rand Paul, he wants peace, so do I, but he does not get the strength part.

So we are given these false choices when in fact I think the best construct, as I wrote in *Rally Point*, is the one that President Reagan brought forward of ‘Peace Through Strength.’

FSR: Turning back domestically, in *Rally Point* you talked about the need for campaign finance reform. Your first congressional campaign in 2010 was largely a grassroots effort. What do you see as necessary in cam-



Brussels, Belgium. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis briefs the press at NATO headquarters (Air Force Staff Sgt. Jette Carr / Public Domain)

paigned campaign finance reform, or campaign reform in general, to improve that process so that the will of the people is better recognized over large moneyed interests?

CG: Look at the data. In the 2016 cycle, when you consider all political donations, a significant percentage of the total money came from a very small group of people. This is in part because of the Citizens United Supreme Court decision that allowed for people to give unlimited amounts of money to these organizations. This really calls into question the spirit of one-person one vote. I think the first thing we need to do is recognize that. Then we need a simple amendment to the Constitution. The reason being that every time we have tried to adopt campaign finance reform the courts have struck that legislation down as a violation of free speech. I assure you it is not free speech, it is very expensive speech. I am not trying to infringe on anyone's free speech. If George Soros or Tom Steyer or the Koch brothers want to stand on a corner with a sign, I have no problem with that. What I have an issue with is these very wealthy people using exorbitant amounts of money to influence the outcome of the campaign. That is where we the people need to have a level playing field. We need to have some regulation that will allow for the spirit of one-person one vote.

We need a very simple Amendment, as I describe in the book. I am open to ideas here, but you need to keep it simple. My amendment would be "In view of the spirit of one person one vote, Congress will have the power to regulate federal election campaigns." Now if we can get that ratified, we could reign in this situation. I am not for public financing; we are \$20 trillion in debt. What I argue for is that we should cap the amount of spending. To do that, you would need an algorithm to get a value for every two-year cycle and that would be the cap. Candidates would have to go out and raise that money. It would be up to the viability of that candidate to

get to that number. You would still have the individual limits and every donation would be reported.

Finally, I would recommend as part of this reform that we prohibit all outside spending. There is a lack of accountability in outside spending. If somebody is passionate about a race they need to give to the candidate, because with the candidate we have accountability. We want to enhance transparency and accountability. This is the model that would best serve the American people. Folks can learn more by looking at Chapter 2 of *Rally Point*

FSR: Another big issue is the presence of gerrymandering. I remember your original district was a three or four-hour drive from north to south. What is in the way of addressing this part of our political reality?

CG: That is also addressed in Chapter 2 of *Rally Point*. We have this illusion that we pick our representatives, when too often our representatives pick their voters every 10 years through the reapportionment and redistricting process. The best thing that we can do here is to adopt a reform that requires independent redistricting so that representatives are not involved in this process of deciding what their districts are going to look like. This really gets to a larger point, whether someone went to a Trump rally or Bernie Sanders rally, one thing that both groups agreed with is that the system was rigged. That if you knew somebody or had a lot of money the system worked for you, but if you are an average American citizen living by the rules and by the laws, the system is not accessible and does not work for you. Unfortunately, I agree with that. This is why in *Rally Point*, I argue for political reforms and also substantive reforms. One of the endorsers of the book, General Dan Allyn, said this book is a resounding call for action of citizens to create a better government of the people, for the people, and by the people.

Chris Gibson

Chris Gibson is a former Republican Congressman from upstate New York, and is currently the Stanley Kaplan Distinguished Visiting Professor of American Foreign Policy at Williams College. Prior to his congressional service, Mr. Gibson had a 24-year career as an Army officer before retiring as a Colonel. His services included tours in the First Gulf War, the Balkans, multiple combat tours in Iraq and a humanitarian tour to Haiti after the 2010 earthquake. His new book *Rally Point* addresses the current divisions within U.S. politics and the risks we face if they continue to inhibit the U.S. government from fulfilling its necessary functions.