

Representative Mike Rogers (R-AL)
Ranking Member of the House Armed Services Committee

Defense Writers Group
Project for Media and National Security
George Washington School of Media and Public Affairs

22 March 2021

DWG: Members of the Defense Writers Group I would like to welcome our honored guest today, the new Ranking Member of the House Armed Services Committee, Congressman Nike Rogers, a Republican of Alabama. Sir, thank you very much for joining us.

I understand your schedule doesn't allow you to stay for the full hour so we're going to dive straight in since we've only got around half that time.

I'm just going to ask you, very briefly could you tell us what your priorities are on the committee and then we'll get to the questions of the members.

Congressman Rogers: My number one priority is the top line spending budget. Well, the budget period. Not just the top line. I want to see a 3-5 percent increase over last year's level after inflation consistent with the National Defense Strategy, my party's [inaudible] recommendation. That is my number one, number two and number three priority.

After that, I'm very focused on trying to get the committee thinking about China and meeting the challenges of China. They are moving at an incredible pace to develop their military capabilities across the spectrum and around the world. We have to focus on them. We can't ignore Iran, we can't ignore North Korea or Russia, but they are nothing compared to the challenge we're going to face with China.

Third, I'm really interested in trying to develop our work force with cyber and AI capabilities. We just had a really cool subcommittee hearing a little over a week ago with Eric Schmidt's commission that recommended the Digital Service Academy. Much like the military academies now where we train people in cyber, AI, other high tech skills. Anywhere from a certificate level to associate's degree, bachelor's degree to a doctoral degree. They go for no charge, and at the end they have to work five years for the government. So that's something I'm really focused on

Professional Word Processing & Transcribing
(801) 556-7255

Congressman Mike Rogers - 3/22/21

because cyber is an emerging threat that we've just got to recognize we're not prepared to meet.

DWG: Thank you, sir. I'm going to now recognize folks who are on the line in the order in which they signed up.

Leo Shane of Military Times, you'll be first if you have a question.

DWG: I do. I appreciate it.

To keep it short and quick here, Congressman, what personnel priorities do you see coming up this year? Is there anything you're focused on? I know there's been a lot of attention with the Guard still being on the Hill and some of those things, but as you look at that top line are there specific personnel concerns that you're worried about?

Congressman Rogers: No. Other than the Guard, no. Adam and I both signed a letter we both believe that there's no need for 5200 Guardsmen on the Hill. I don't believe there's a need for any Guardsmen on the Hill. It's police action, the Capitol Police and the Metropolitan Police [we saw] in this. We have no credible threats of any kind right now to justify anything more than the Capitol Police presence that we already have.

Now I do appreciate the Honoré Commission recommendation that we hire 900 Capitol Police Officers so that we have an adequate force, but there's plenty of time to do more training, which they have not done in the past. But we don't need National Guardsmen to be there while that goes on.

DWG: Sarah Cammarata of Stars & Stripes. Do you have a question? If so, you're next.

DWG: Thanks for doing this.

There is a hearing on extremism in the armed forces on Wednesday. I'm just curious what you are most curious about on that subject and what you're expecting from the hearing.

Congressman Rogers: I'm not expecting anything in particular. I'm really curious, though, about what we're going to learn. As you might imagine, I don't believe there's any place in the military for extremists of any kind. So I'm looking forward to

Congressman Mike Rogers - 3/22/21

educating myself. I think it's going to be a beneficial hearing for that purpose if nothing else.

DWG: Connor O'Brien of Politico?

DWG: Sir, I know you supported - you obviously don't have a role in confirming cabinet nominees but you supported the waiver for Secretary Austin. Since the top two officials were confirmed at the Pentagon, though, we haven't seen any new nominations for services service secretaries, no under secretaries in OSD, anything like that. I'm just wondering, are you concerned at all about the pace of nominations and the Pentagon staffing up at the senior level?

Congressman Rogers: Yeah, I'm bothered by it. I was bothered by it four years ago when the Democrats held up Trump's people. I just think the President ought to get his or her people and they can sink or swim based on who they put in there, but I hope the Senate gets after it and they can get these people in place because we've got business to do.

DWG: Paul McLeary of Breaking Defense. Are you on and do you have a question?

Sara Friedman of Inside Cybersecurity?

How about Michael Gordon of the Wall Street Journal?

DWG: I don't have a question. I'll pass.

DWG: Lauren Williams of FCW?

DWG: Thanks for doing, this, sir. My question goes back to the top line. I know Chairman Smith has been pushing reform, looking for money between the seat cushions. I'm interested in what your response or answer to kind of pushing for more of those [inaudible] efforts would be.

Congressman Rogers: Obviously I'm going to be supportive of anything that I think makes the Pentagon more efficient in the way of reforms. But the fact is we have passed a lot of reforms in the last four years that they just haven't implemented. So I would really like to work with Adam to try to force the Pentagon to comply with what we've already put in place.

Congressman Mike Rogers - 3/22/21

But even with that, we have to recognize that we're going to have to increase defense spending to keep up with the pace from China. You just have to look at the threats around the world to know that we - and not just China, but others - that we have to modernize and we have to do this stuff now.

Just like what we saw from Indo-PACOM, they're asking for some sizeable increases in spending there for us to meet the threats and we just can't deny those. So while I'm going to support anything Adam comes up with in the way of forcing efficiencies, it doesn't change the fact that we cannot have stagnant defense spending.

DWG: Ellen Milhiser of Synopsis, do you have a question??

DWG: I do not have a question but thank you for doing this, Representative Rogers.

DWG: Meredith Roaten of National Defense Magazine?

DWG: I do have a question.

Sir, if you could talk about how your response, your thinking related to Chairman Smith's comments a couple of weeks ago about the F-35 program. He referenced trying to cut our losses. What is your reaction to that?

Congressman Rogers: He knows how to stir things up, doesn't he? I wouldn't be quite so colorful in my description of how that money's being used as Adam was, but he does cite a legitimate concern. Obviously the sustainment costs along with the problems that we're having with the F-35 are alarming. It's just a fact. But it doesn't alter the fact that we need the capabilities that we have in the F-35. We own about 550 of them. We've got to find a way to get control of those costs and handle those shortcomings, but I don't really see that we have a lot of options other than doing that.

I'm interested, if Adam's got some suggestions, but I can't imagine what they are. I think we've got to fix what we've got and find a way to make it through until we get the next generation air dominance system on-line, the 6th generation system.

DWG: Rebecca Kheel of The Hill. Do you have a question?

Congressman Mike Rogers - 3/22/21

DWG: Yes. I wanted to get back to the issue of the National Guard. You already talked a bit about it in an earlier question and how you don't think there's any need for them there anymore. What, if anything, has the committee been told about why the National Guard is still there? Is it just to kind of backfill Capitol Police? Or have you been told about any generalized threats or anything like that?

Congressman Rogers: Well, we haven't been told anything by the Speaker and the Capitol Police. General Honoré's committee, when they briefed me a little over a week ago, said that at that time they had recommended two weeks earlier that most of the Guard in the outer perimeter be sent home and the fences taken down and the Capitol Police have just refused to act on that.

Now they believe that there should be a contingent of Guardsmen, a much smaller contingent, but nonetheless, a contingent of Guardsmen remain for the foreseeable future. That's where I differ a little bit with them.

One of the things they would like to see is a Rapid Response National Guard Unit which I'm fine with, being remote from the campus and I would support that. But that's about as close as we need to having Guardsmen around the Capitol.

The optics of us having to have razor wire fence and armed service members protecting our Capitol from the public is just off-putting for me and unnecessary. Again, we've gotten the classified briefings. There is no credible threat, so I'm going to be anxious to see where they land on this issue with the Guardsmen for a more long term solution. I hope it's with this Rapid Response Force that is described with a full-time DC contingent that's off campus that can be called on when needed and they can be there in a matter of minutes. But we don't need them standing around like they are right now toting rifles.

DWG: Jeff Seldin, Voice of America. Do you have a question?

DWG: Yes, I do. Congressman, thank you very much for doing this.

I'm wondering quickly if you could share your thoughts on Afghanistan and U.S. troops being there. The deadline is coming up quickly. I'm also wondering from a wider perspective, about

Congressman Mike Rogers - 3/22/21

your thoughts on how the U.S. should handle China, great power competition, but also what seems to be a continuing need for counterterrorism efforts including in some areas where the U.S. is going head to head with Russia, or at least butting up against Russia and other either great or regional powers.

Congressman Rogers: You got me thinking about the second question and I forgot the first one. Was it Afghanistan?

DWG: The first was Afghanistan, yes, sir.

Congressman Rogers: We got a briefing about a week ago, a classified briefing on Afghanistan. And I don't know where the administration is going to come down on this, and frankly, they said they didn't know either. They're still talking with the Taliban and to their credit, they acknowledge the Taliban haven't held up their end of the bargain so far.

So I'm of the opinion that physically if they wanted to leave by May 1st, it's not possible now for us to leave and get out of there in a safe manner and bring the same [tone] that we have over there. So I think by inaction they've made it clear they're not going to be out of there by May 1st.

But the truth is until they start getting some real confidence that the Taliban is going to hold up their end of the bargain, I don't see how we get out. To be honest, I'm not in that much of a hurry right now. We've got roughly 2500 troops over there, part of about 8000 coalition troops. They're not in the fight. They're over there in a train and assist mode, and I'm fine with them being there for an extended period of time if that means we don't have to worry about terrorists being bred over there and trained to attack us.

So I'm hopeful that the administration can find an answer that just doesn't seem apparent to me that they can convince me that it's appropriate, but the fact is the amount of cost that we're expending now is nothing compared to the cost that we had to expend in the first few years trying to root out problems over there. It would be different if we had 25,000 troops over there, but with 2500, that's an expense I'm willing to pay to keep stability in that country.

Now with China, we don't have a choice. We have got to confront them. We've got to have counterterrorism efforts. But a lot of

investments. You heard me talking earlier about my third priority being developing our cyber and AI capabilities, our personnel. China is all over the board. They're getting at it with their Navy, they're getting after it with their air systems, cyber and AI capabilities, but also they're making investments in their Belt and Road Initiative around the globe. They're establishing their presence around the globe in strategic positions and we just can't ignore it unless we want to become subordinate to them and I don't think anybody in this country wants to do that. They are not our friends.

DWG: Sandra Erwin of Space News?

DWG: Good afternoon. Thank you, Congressman.

Last week when you spoke at the Reagan Foundation you indicated that you would like to see the Space Force make investments in new technology and innovation for more resilient systems. Can you elaborate? What specifically would you like for them to do and how do you think they're doing in acquisitions in such an area that you've been concerned about in the past?

Congressman Rogers: That's a great question, Sandra. They really haven't finalized their new acquisition infrastructure. I was very happy I thought with General Raymond a week ago, that they brought in Retired General Ellen Pawlikowski to help from the ground up organize it so that it can be agile and move quickly. I have great confidence in both those two individuals. General Pawlikowski knows everything that shouldn't be done and I think that she's going to do it right for the recommendations.

But specifically, we have to recognize that in this particular domain the technological advantages are very rapid and we've got to be able to capture those and we can't move at the slow speed that Pentagon acquisition has moved in the past. So I really believe that they're committed to being that quick.

Talking about resilience, one of the things that General Hyten talked about for years and General Raymond has emphasized is going to be a change away from what we've been doing, is putting smaller sats up that have less capability but can be replaced very quickly. And there's more of them. So the enemy has far more targets to try to hit to take away capability from us.

So when it comes to resilience I think that's how you're going to

Congressman Mike Rogers - 3/22/21

do that, is just by having a lot more small satellites that have a more limited life. Because, again, the technological changes that take place in that domain are so rapid that 18 months from now you may have something that's just daylight and dark difference, that you can put up there and you want to not have too much of an investment that you can't afford to replace it that quickly.

I'm very optimistic about that, being able to meet the goals and objectives that we've assigned them when it comes to being fast and I believe that until I'm proved wrong.

DWG: Tara Copp, McClatchy?

DWG: Thank you for doing this, and I apologize if you said this at the top. I was having some significant Zoom technological difficulties.

If you could talk a little bit about the challenges that GBSD will face in this budget cycle and whether you think that there will be any movement on the Minuteman III replacement this year given the administration's potential hesitancy to fully fund and balance that with other defense modernization costs.

Congressman Rogers: In my years, I've been on the committee now for 19 years and I've seen different administrations come in and have apprehensions about the triad, and after about six months they move away from those apprehensions and get solidly behind it.

The fact is, we have to modernize the GBSD and that's just a fact. And Secretary Austin has committed to that. He's going to move forward with it. I think that's going to be his advice to the President. I know Adam is going to try to kill it again this year. He's done that pretty much every year as long as I can remember. But I don't think he'll have the votes on it. I know he won't have the votes on our side, and most of the Democrat Members are going to be with us on this too.

I have confidence that the GBSD is going to move forward with this modernization effort in a timely manner. I don't see it stopping.

But as Dennis Miller would say, that's my opinion. I could be wrong.

Congressman Mike Rogers - 3/22/21

DWG: Just to follow up on that, I mean it's likely that there will be either a flat or maybe slightly reduced defense budget this year just with different priorities. So where do you cut in order to continue to move forward with GBSD?

Congressman Rogers: I don't go along with the agreement that it's going to be flat or cut. It won't get my vote.

DWG: Do you think there's an appetite among the Members to have an increased budget this year?

Congressman Rogers: If they can waste \$1.9 trillion like they did a couple of weeks ago with only nine percent of it goes to COVID, they can afford a 3-5 percent increase in defense spending.

DWG: Thank you.

DWG: Lee Hudson of Aviation Week?

DWG: Thanks for doing this.

To follow up on the F-35 comments earlier, do you support the Air Force purchasing a 4.5 generation fighter? And separately my question is, do you support the nomination of Bill Nelson to be NASA Administrator? Especially since he used to be in charge of oversight for that agency?

Congressman Rogers: I'm not a big fan of Bill Nelson, so if I was in the Senate I wouldn't confirm him.

But go back to your first question. What were you asking me about?

DWG: Are you supportive of the Air Force instead of buying all F-35s for its 5th generation fighter capability, would you support them buying another aircraft? General Brown, the Chief of Staff, has mentioned F-4.5 generation fighter. It would be something new.

Congressman Rogers: I'm open to that. I can't say that - I want to know more about it. I have heard that reference made. I would like for them to explain to me how it's going to meet our capability challenges but I'm not adverse to that.

Congressman Mike Rogers - 3/22/21

DWG: Thank you.

Joe Gould, do you have a question?

DWG: I sure do. Thanks so much. Thanks, Congressman.

To follow up on Tara's question about GBSD, I'm wondering where else you expect there to be fights when it comes to nuclear weapons spending, and do you have any sense of where if you've spoken with Adam Smith, where you have some common ground on nuclear spending.

Congressman Rogers: Adam and I haven't talked about it so I don't know where we have common ground. I don't know where the other side's going to be. Joe, you're one that's been around a long time and watched this. We don't have a lot of fusses in our committee over a lot of things. We fight over nuclear weapons and climate change and GTMO and transgender stuff, but we're a pretty bipartisan committee as a general rule. Adam and I get along real well. We see things pretty much alike on most areas. So I can't think of any particular fights on nuclear weapons with Adam other than he wants less and I don't.

DWG: Scott Maucione of Federal News?

DWG: Thank you very much.

Congressman, I was just curious, this 3 to 5 percent, I realize that you haven't seen the President's budget yet, but where would you like to add, especially considering if you do add more planes that costs more money down the road with maintenance and things like that.

Congressman Rogers: But we've got to recognize we've got to do it. One of the main places I'd like to add is in our naval fleet. But you look at what we just heard about Indo-PACOM. We need to put an Aegis Ashore system on Guam. It would be nice if we didn't have to but we really don't have a choice. People need to stop denying reality there. And look where China's making their investments. The Navy's just one, but they're doing the same things when it comes to hypersonics. We've got to be prepared to deal with those threats. We can't just ignore them like some people seem to think we can.

Congressman Mike Rogers - 3/22/21

DWG: Mike Flynn, the Washington Times?

DWG: Thanks a lot, Congressman.

The Army's in the process now of trying to reevaluate and sort of create a new fitness system that's both fair, gender neutral, which has been causing some challenges for them because of the disparity in some of the scores. Do you have any thoughts on that? Are they on the right path? Or do you think there needs to be something else done? Do you have any thoughts on this matter?

Congressman Rogers: Other than I'm glad to see that they're giving it some time and attention and thought. I don't think anything of it. I think it does deserve some attention.

And to go back to Sandra's question about the Space Force. The fact is, most of the people working in the Space Force are going to be sitting at a computer terminal. What we're hiring them for is their technical expertise. I'm much less concerned about their physical capabilities than I am somebody who's going to have to be toting a backpack or communication system through the desert of Afghanistan.

So I'm glad they're looking at it.

One of the creative things that the Space Force is looking at is allowing some of these really capable folks from Silicon Valley to be able to come in on one-year stints as an officer and then rotate back out for a couple of years. Maybe come back in for another year later. We're not really worried about their physical capabilities. We're worried about what's between their ears. And so I think it's worth a discussion and I'm very open-minded to what they're going to suggest.

I have been pushing for the last few years, I will continue to be pushing for us to be thinking outside the box. Wars of the future are not going to be fought like wars of the past. That's why we created the Space Force. That's now a warfighting domain. Cyber and artificial intelligence are going to change the game totally. We've got to urge innovation, we've got to urge risk-taking, and that's what I'm going to do. I just think that we need to let these general officers know if they're not taking risk and failing every once in a while, they're not trying hard enough.

Congressman Mike Rogers - 3/22/21

DWG: We probably have time for one more question, maybe two.

Matt Beinart of Defense Daily, you're next.

DWG: Thank you. I was wondering, do you believe that the Army can achieve its goal to kind of field these 30-plus new weapon systems if there isn't 3-5 percent budget growth? And is there a specific modernization priority that you would be most concerned about if there is flat or potentially declining spending? Whether it's Future Vertical Lift, Long Range Fires? Thank you.

Congressman Rogers: Long Range Fires would be it and I don't think they can do that without the 3-5 percent growth. And I have been assured when, at that time General Austin came before the Armed Services Committee when we were discussing the waiver, he said that he was committed to 3-5 percent increases and was going to recommend that to the President. I talked at length with Chairman Milley. He said and has been very open and vocal in his support, as has every one of the service chiefs. You know, this is not something that we cooked up in policy-maker meetings. This is what they're telling us they need and people have to realize and keep in mind that we have worn our equipment out, we have worn our manpower out over the last two decades. We don't have time to defer these investments any further. So don't believe me, believe them. Because as long as they're telling me they need it, yeah, I'm going to support it, I want to cut spending as much as anybody does but I also don't want to be dead.

DWG: Let's do a Sea Power question from Richard Burgess.

DWG: Thank you very much.

Congressman, some of your Democratic colleagues talk about canceling the Low Yield Nuclear Warhead and also the Sea-Based Nuclear Cruise Missile. Do you think your party has the votes to hold the line on that? Or is it going to be a bit debate?

Congressman Rogers: We'll hold the line. I'm sure there will be a big debate, but we've got some people - as long as there's TV cameras in the room that's going to run their mouth, but I think we'll have the votes to sustain it.

DWG: Thank you.

Congressman Mike Rogers - 3/22/21

DWG: Congressman, it's great to meet you and I hope we can look forward to a long relationship. We want to check in with you from time to time as the Defense Writers Group and we make efficient use of time, as you saw.

Congressman Rogers: You sure did. Thank you very much.

DWG: Thank you, sir. For everyone else who's on, stay tuned for more. We have an early April event coming up. Thank you everyone.

#