



Remarks as Delivered to the City Club of Chicago

U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth

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Hi, everyone! It's great to be back this afternoon, and it's so wonderful to see so many old friends in the room. I'd be remiss if I didn't mention Marca Bristo with Access Living, who's here at the table with me. Without her work for the last 30 years, I could not be a U.S. Senator today because the ADA would not be in existence.

I want to talk to you today about what we can do to keep America strong—something that I care very deeply about. First, though, let me say this: America will never be as strong as she should be as long as we keep letting the places where our loved ones learn or pray or play be turned into warzones. My heart is broken for the 22 people who lost their lives and for their loved ones in El Paso, and the nine who were killed in Dayton just hours later. I also grieve for the loved ones and those who died from gun violence in Chicago this year. Hundreds of them.

It is well past time that we honor the lives of those lost not just with moments of silence, but with real action. And I'm sorry to say that as I was coming up onto the stage, I received a note that there are reports of a shooting occurring right now in Virginia, at the USA TODAY Gannett building. That is happening right now. So I'm going to keep doing everything that I can to pass commonsense legislation like expanded background checks: something that 97 percent of Americans support and which would help keep weapons of war out of the wrong hands without infringing on anyone's Second Amendment rights.

Because no one should kneel in their pew, sit down at their desk or walk down the street on a Saturday night with the fear that every prayer, every lesson, every step could be their last. We're better than that as a nation, and we can truly do this.

You know, nothing about this great nation was inevitable. Nothing about our success has been preordained. It took the kind of action that I just spoke of. It took the courage of the citizen Soldiers who followed Washington across the Delaware, willing to sacrifice everything for an idea—America—and an ideal—democracy for the people, by the people.

It took the sweat of the immigrant laborers who literally connected our nation one railroad tie at a time, breaking their backs building the transcontinental railroad. And it took the bravery of those who crisscrossed the *underground* railroad, risking their lives to guide others toward freedom—making America more American with every step that they took.



From the Lincoln-Douglas debates to the World Fair, Myra Bradwell to Barack Obama, Illinoisans have led the way. They've started businesses, broken the barriers and set the milestones that have helped make this nation's improbable story possible.

But past is not necessarily prologue. The heights that we reached in decades, or centuries, prior have little bearing on how tall our country will stand in the years to come. Because right now, we are at a precipice, and no matter which way we look, threats abound. China is surging, while tensions with Iran spike. Russia's bludgeoning its way back into relevance, while our country is fracturing along political and racial lines—while partisan fissures threaten both our economic and national security.

You know, I've dedicated my entire adult life to protecting and defending this nation, first as a citizen Soldier and now in the United States Senate. So keeping this country the strongest she can possibly be isn't just some vague notion for me. It's an imperative. It is a must. But through the years... through my time in the Army and now in Washington... I've learned that there isn't just one way to keep this nation strong. There are many. Today, I want to focus on two: our infrastructure and our national security.

All too often, people assume that investing in infrastructure just means fixing some potholes. They think that investing in our military just means writing a bigger check for some more lethal tanks or faster fighter jets. They are wrong. When done right, bolstering our infrastructure and national security will help our economy grow and our small businesses expand, and it will keep our families healthier and our homeland safer.

So as we face threats ranging from domestic to international to planetary, investing in infrastructure and national security in the right way is crucial to maintaining American strength—and with it, our place leading the international order.

Whether it's factories or farms, billion-dollar corporations or mom-and-pop shops, America's businesses have always depended on a strong infrastructure network to get their goods and services to market.



And as it so often does, Illinois has led the way. We built the nation's first elevated electric rail line back in the 1800s, while O'Hare has been one of America's most important transportation hubs ever since its runways first opened for takeoff more than a half-century ago. Those down-payments previous generations made on our infrastructure have paid dividends for all of us who are in this room today. With every bridge fortified and every telephone line hung, they made our country physically and figuratively stronger: supercharging our economy after World War II; helping small businesses by keeping the power on, keeping shipping costs down and keeping tourism revenue up; and helping families stay in touch through easier travel and better broadband, also.

But the once-smooth roads that connect our country have become dilapidated. The once-cutting-edge grid lines that power our nation are now outdated. Our infrastructure is crumbling. One port, one power grid at a time. So it falls on us to renew those investments that past generations began.

If we don't, we won't just be risking a bumpier drive down the interstate. We'll risk falling behind our global competitors and being unable to compete in the modern economy. That would cost us countless jobs. It would further hurt the farmers and the producers who already have a hard time moving goods to market. And it would hamper our chances of fighting off both the climate crisis and an attack on American soil.

As your Senator, I am so grateful to be in a position to do something about it. That's why I asked to serve as ranking member of the Transportation and Safety Subcommittee, and in that role, I've been able to sound the alarm on the dire need to modernize our infrastructure before it is too late.

This is not a partisan issue. It's a commonsense economic priority and a national security imperative. Already, the sad state of our infrastructure is weighing down our economy. Research shows that we lose \$200 billion a year from inefficient rail transportation, and we lost \$305 billion in 2017 alone due to traffic congestion. Meanwhile, underinvestment in the sector has cost our nation 900,000 jobs.

So this much is clear: In an era of bitter partisan divides, we have to seize onto the issues that both sides of the aisle can agree to. We should be able to do that here. And I'll keep working across the aisle to hold Trump to his still-un-kept campaign promise to push forward a comprehensive infrastructure plan.



Because every day that we don't take action on infrastructure, we're leaving money on the table for companies that are struggling to get whatever they're selling to market. We're ignoring the families who're having a hard time making ends meet because of the impossible commute to work. We're abandoning rural Americans who don't have adequate access to broadband.

Every dollar invested in transportation infrastructure returns three-fold in economic impact. Every new project will create countless jobs. And we're not just talking about construction work that is short-term, but long-term jobs too, operating and maintaining this infrastructure—jobs from water treatment operators to bus drivers to telecom line installers. Good-paying work that often doesn't require a college degree, with low barriers to entry and wages sometimes 30% higher than the relevant average.

More than 14 million workers hold infrastructure-related jobs today. That's roughly 11% of the workforce. Imagine the economic opportunity... the competition... the boom that would come with modernizing everything from our water pipes to our railroads, our broadband to our waterways. Imagine how much more quickly, cheaply, reliably companies could sell their products—how many more people could get to work or go to school, and how much time they could save getting there. Imagine how that would grow our economy and cushion it against future economic shocks.

That's what I've been thinking about since the day I took the Oath of Office, and that's what I focused on in the very first bill I introduced as Senator. People assumed it would be a Veterans bill. It wasn't, but it was involved with a Veteran because I partnered with my colleague from Indiana, a Marine Veteran. And together we passed a bill that slashed red tape around infrastructure projects to support Illinois jobs and businesses and save taxpayers money, and which set a Senate record for speed by being signed into law just four months after I was sworn in. I know four months doesn't sound that fast. But we're talking about Congress here! In Senate time, that's the blink of an eye.

It's why I introduced also the *TIFIA for Airports Act* to give airport projects greater access to cheaper capital financing by being able to access highway trust funds. That's also why last week I set aside \$200 million in the highway bill to reduce roadway congestion and introduced other legislation to increase pipeline safety.



It's why I've helped secure \$160 million in infrastructure grants for Illinois alone, including, and I'm very proud of this, \$132 million for the 75th Street Corridor Improvement project that would ease congestion at one of Chicago's worst freight rail bottlenecks. Because this city is the beating heart of our nation's freight supply chain, and if rail shipments across Chicago are not efficient, the entire country suffers.

It's also why I've pushed to make our infrastructure greener and more just. All too often, climate, business and working families are seen as competing interests. That's just not true. With more wildfires raging down the coast of California and more storms flooding the Midwest, research shows that every dollar spent on disaster mitigation efforts would save \$6 in future costs.

So by shifting away from our status quo and building green, resilient infrastructure instead, we'd be investing in both the environment and our economy. And by doubling down on renewable energy sources, we'd be investing in our loved ones' health, too... lowering rates of asthma and other diseases linked to pollution that overwhelmingly affect communities of color, like the South Side—a fact that led me to found the Senate's first-ever Environmental Justice Caucus with both Cory Booker and Tom Carper.

Or by replacing our lead-laden pipe system, we wouldn't only be promoting sustainability or widening our workforce, but also helping prevent something like the Flint crisis from ever happening again. After all, how could America be anywhere near its strongest while low-income—or any of our—kids are still getting poisoned just by drinking from the school's water fountain?

But we don't have forever to take these steps. Because while Flint was a tragedy, it was not an anomaly. Today, thousands of communities—including many military communities and other communities here in Illinois—are on the brink of disaster, with lead poisoning rates two times higher than those found during the worst moments of the Flint crisis. Meanwhile, extreme weather-related disasters have already cost the U.S. \$1.6 trillion in the last four decades alone.

Storms have already ravaged our military bases and high tides have already flooded our Coast Guard stations—affecting troop readiness, sapping American strength and proving time after time that not all the biggest threats over the next 50 years will take the shape of a missile.



One hundred U.S. military bases are slated to be flooded due to climate change. So climate change isn't some partisan squabble. It's a national and global security threat: something that military leaders and this Administration's own intelligence officials admit, as terrorist groups like ISIS and Boko Haram use droughts to solidify their power in Syria and Nigeria.

There are no shades of gray here. We need to take action to curb climate change before it's too late. One way to do that, which I'm working on, is to pivot the military further away from fossil fuel, investing in green energy instead. Even conservatives like former Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis have spent years pushing for this. Not only because it'd slash pollutants. Not only because it'd be cheaper and help strengthen one of the fastest-growing industries in our country: solar. Not even because it reduces our dependence on foreign oil and cuts ties to oil-rich bad actors like Saudi Arabia—though it would do all those things.

Even Republicans support doing something because it's proven time and again to save our troops' lives. Don't take my word for it—Secretary Mattis, who all but begged the military to untether itself from fossil fuel, has spoken on this. Why? Fuel supply convoys make for easy, predictable targets: In Afghanistan, for example, in 2007, one of every 24 fuel convoys suffered casualties. In Iraq, 50 percent of all casualties that occurred were as a result of convoy operations—not from kicking down doors, looking for insurgents—and 80 percent of all convoys conducted in Iraq were to transport fuel.

Even George W. Bush agreed, setting energy benchmarks for our military to reach—benchmarks that became more ambitious under President Obama. During President Obama's tenure, the Navy actually conducted an entire naval training exercise operating 100 percent on biofuel blends. And in the years since, we've learned that these policies *work*. Green energy keeps our troops safer as efficient fuel-use slashes the number of refueling stops. Mobile solar panels enable troops to turn off generators, helping them move through enemy territory unheard and undetected. And low-weight, longer-lasting batteries lighten troops' packs—meaning they can carry more bullets.

As one former Navy Captain put it, and I quote: “Years ago, the belief was you could either be efficient or capable as a warfighter... [Now] we've found they are interdependent. By being more efficient, you become a better warfighter.” End-quote. In other words, the dollars we invest in green energy bolster our infrastructure and military, making our economy and families healthier in the process—but they also make our military more efficient.



To me, this is just the latest proof point that we risk falling behind our adversaries as long as we keep silo-ing issues in the ways that we're used to. Instead, if we want America to be at its best, we have to begin taking a more interconnected approach to the challenges we're facing, including rethinking how we view national security—reframing it into something more holistic than just dollars or numbers of missiles.

Because while today we have the greatest military on Earth, that may not be true tomorrow if we keep on the path we've been treading.

Pentagon spending already accounts for about half of the discretionary federal budget. We pour roughly \$700 billion into defense every year. But just funneling money into the DOD is not enough. For too long, we've measured the might of our military by the size of our arsenal. And in doing so, we've made the flawed assumption that our decades of dominance on the global stage can predict our future place in the world.

But ISIS doesn't care that we stormed the beaches of Normandy. Russia isn't giving us points because once upon a time we outraced them to the moon. China doesn't give a damn what we did during Desert Storm.

We *will* lose ground—literally and figuratively—if we sit back and assume that last century's tactics will win us the next decade's wars—if we believe that 2030's battles will be decided solely by how much money we spend on fighter jets or ships.

You know, I come from a long line of Veterans who've served this country in uniform since before Washington crossed the Delaware. I will always—always—make sure our troops have every dollar, every weapon, they need to bring down the bad guys.

But we can't just keep throwing together huge defense budgets every year for military equipment and thinking that's enough. No. Instead, we have to balance investing in our weaponry with investing in our citizenry—rejecting the false choice between looking out for our troops overseas and caring for our families here at home.

It's not either/or. It's both/and. Our power abroad stems from our strength here on U.S. soil. So it's past time we recognize that funding our domestic priorities actually bolsters our security. Because at this point, refusing to invest in things like our schools or our healthcare system in the name of national strength isn't just shortsighted, it's counterproductive.



Let me give you an example. For the last several years now, the Pentagon has released statistics, and most recently that statistic says that only 29 percent of Americans between 17 and 24 are considered fit to serve. Think about that. Of all the 17 to 24 year olds in this nation, only 29 percent meet the Pentagon's standards for service. 29 percent!

The other 71 percent of our young people do not qualify for military service because: they don't have the basic education needed; they can't pass a physical; or they're barred from enlisting because they made a mistake years ago that still lies on their record, like once struggling with an opioid addiction.

Meanwhile, the Army fell short of its recruiting goals last year for the first time since the peak of the Iraq War. So I'm not pushing for better healthcare or more funding for our schools just because it's the right thing to do, or because I'm some lefty progressive. I'm doing so because I love our country and I want America to remain the toughest nation in the world, and we don't stand a chance of dominating militarily if three-quarters of our would-be recruits can't even get to basic training in the first place.

I'm doing this because just as infrastructure is critical to our national success, our place atop the global order is also contingent on us taking up the domestic policy that all too often is seen as in opposition to our defense priorities. If we don't... well, then we are going to be letting our dwindling recruiting pool shrink even faster, ceding our place in the world to those bad actors like Russia and China in the process.

So what do we need to do? Well first, we need to tackle the systemic issues that are robbing us of so many would-be recruits. How do we expect to win the wars to come if more and more Americans are too sick or have fallen too far behind in school to enlist? We can't. We will lose our place in the world if we don't do the work today to ensure as many people as possible can wear the uniform tomorrow.

That starts with addressing the fact that half of young Americans are considered too unhealthy to serve. Some suffer from diseases like asthma, while 27% are deemed too overweight to enlist. So the recent attempts to strip healthcare from families aren't just cruel. They're hypocritical. Every time our government makes it harder for an American to get healthcare, they're sapping the military's potential strength, robbing it of potential Privates or Second Lieutenants, even while claiming we need to spend more money to make our Armed Forces more powerful. What is the use of spending \$100 million for each F-35 fighter jet if we can't find the people to fly or maintain them?



There are fixes here that shouldn't be considered partisan. Like making sure every child in every classroom in America has access to mental healthcare, or guaranteeing that every parent can afford basic check-ups for their toddler.

Look, the military already pours more than \$1.5 billion a year into treating obesity-related medical conditions, actually discharging those too unhealthy to serve and replacing those discharged with new recruits who have to be trained from scratch. So no one can claim to care about military spending or readiness if they don't support the commonsense healthcare policies that would actually get our forces into better fighting shape and save us money in the process.

It's a similar story when it comes to education. There's something wrong when more than a quarter of potential recruits can't serve because they (a) they can't do math or read at the eighth-grade level that military manuals are written at, or (b) never earned a high school diploma or GED. A quarter of our young people in this country, let me say it again, cannot enter our military because they cannot read or do math at the eighth-grade level.

That figure is shocking but not surprising—reflecting the broader reality that half of U.S. adults can't read books at that same middle-school level. But here, too, there are concrete ways to solve the problem.

Research has proven that early childhood learning directly affects long-term development, with studies showing that at-risk kids who attend good preschools are 44 percent more likely to graduate high school. Meanwhile, in 2015, a Pentagon study uncovered \$125 billion in bureaucratic waste.

Imagine how many more kids would graduate if we invested some of that \$125 billion in Chicago's public schools instead. And if we don't make these investments—if we keep letting our schools slide and our students suffer—imagine how many would-be Marines or Green Berets or helicopter pilots we'd be losing. If we don't start to better invest in our kids, we might lose out on those pilots brave enough to risk their lives to pull an injured buddy out of their burning helicopter, like the ones who carried me to safety. Or perhaps we will miss out on the next Navy Admiral who could have led the raid to capture the next Bin Laden.

It's really never been a choice between schools and national security—I don't care who tries to put up that false equivalency. Just as investing in Future Vertical Lift weapons platforms is a much-needed investment in our Army, so too is investing in the child who could be capable of flying those high-tech helicopters one day.



You know, I'm living proof of that, and many of you are living proof of that as well. My access to a good public education prepared me for my career in the military. And this November, I'll celebrate the 15th anniversary of my Alive Day: the day I would've died had my buddies not risked their lives to save me. So from the moment I woke up at Walter Reed more than a week later, I vowed to spend the rest of my life trying to repay the heroism of those troops who saved me—which brings me to my last point: what we owe to those who are willing to serve.

I can't fly combat missions anymore, or be the one to drag *them* to safety if the worst should strike again. But what I can do is use my new role—serving no longer from the pilot's seat, but from the Senate Armed Services Committee—to make sure that Congress does right by our servicemembers.

Because listen, our troops will always do their job defending our country. No matter what. And many of them go back time and again. The least they deserve in return is to know that they've got the moral support and legal backing of this nation. I personally know troops who have deployed nine times. Nine deployments, can you imagine that?

But for more than 15 years, Washington has failed to give them even that support. One of Congress's most solemn duties is deciding when and how we send troops into combat by debating and passing Authorizations for Use of Military Force, which are supposed to define the mission of Americans who are downrange. But for too long now, some on the Hill have shrugged off that sacred duty.

Scared of the political risks, staring down Election Days, Congress has shirked its responsibility to our troops—refusing to take up any new AUMF to address the wars we're still mired in or the brewing tensions with Iran. And because of that, our troops are left strewn around the world, shadowboxing an ill-defined enemy.

Teenagers who weren't even alive when the Twin Towers fell are now old enough to be shipped off to Afghanistan with little idea what the end-state actually looks like. Heroes who've done six, seven, eight, as I said nine deployments wake up every morning knowing that by week's end, they could be sent back to Iraq—or even to Iran, as the Trump Administration continues to manufacture a crisis that's led us to the brink of disaster, with advisors like John Bolton setting the conditions for war, then having the Administration take actions to make those circumstances a reality—placing us on a collision course with life-and-death stakes and no off-ramp.



Enough. Enough of Congress being so worried about political consequences that we don't do our jobs, even as we expect our troops to do theirs every damn day. Anyone who claims the mantle of patriotism—who says they want to keep our country strong—can't keep demanding such sacrifices from our servicemembers while refusing to have this debate.

So Congress needs to take a cold, hard look in the mirror, muster up some courage and reclaim its constitutional responsibility... its most solemn burden... of declaring war, actually laying out what we're asking for from our troops. After all, how can we expect Americans to re-enlist—or to sign up for the first time—if we can't even tell them why we're asking them to sacrifice? If we don't, our already-narrowing military population will continue to contract, leaving us with too few people to bear too heavy a burden.

I know I've been talking for a while, so let me just say this: America's strength has always stemmed from our ability to come together and find common ground, even when it is hard—*especially* when it's hard. Our power has always come from Americans' desire not only to be great, but to be good—for ourselves and for each other.

But right now, we are at a breaking point. And in this moment when our slow pace of investment in both our economic and national security is imperiling our place on the world stage, in this era when tribalism is threatening to overshadow patriotism, it's on each of us to do everything we can to keep not just our states united, but our people, too.

That starts with viewing the trials in front of us as the complex, grey-shaded challenges that they are. Because there is no real choice between investing in our economy and investing in our citizenry. There is no real choice between caring for our troops and caring about our classrooms. There is no real choice between loving our country and wanting to make it better. In fact, working to improve America is exactly what has allowed it to be so strong for so long.

This nation was founded on the notion of a more perfect union. It was built on the idea that we can always do better—never achieving perfection, but always striving to climb a little higher than the day before. To me, that's true patriotism. And that's how we achieve true, enduring American strength. Thank you.