

**Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe:  
U.S. Helsinki Commission**

**“Shoulder to Shoulder: On the Front Lines with the Ukrainian Military’s  
Foreign Soldiers”**

**Committee Members Present:**

**Representative Steve Cohen (D-TN), Co-Chairman;  
Representative Joe Wilson (R-SC), Ranking Member**

**Committee Staff Present:**

**A. Paul Massaro, Senior Policy Advisor, Commission on Security and  
Cooperation in Europe;  
Kyle Parker, Chief of Staff, Commission on Security and Cooperation in  
Europe**

**Participants:**

**Former U.S. Army Staff Sergeant James Vasquez;  
Lieutenant Colonel Rip Rawlings (USMC, Ret.)**

**The Briefing Was Held From 2:00 p.m. To 3:04 p.m. via videoconference, A.  
Paul Massaro, Senior Policy Advisor, Commission on Security and  
Cooperation in Europe, presiding**

**Date: Thursday, July 14, 2022**

MASSARO: Hello. I'm Paul Massaro, senior policy advisor at the U.S. Helsinki Commission. And this is a briefing on the U.S. volunteers fighting Russian aggression in Ukraine. Russia's brutal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine continues unabated. We're almost at 150 days of fighting. Horrible, terroristic acts, including today in Vinnytsia, where a Russian missile has killed multiple Ukrainians, including children. Very sadly, this is not the first. These sort of savage, Russian terrorist attacks continue, the brutal murder of civilians, the genocide of Ukrainians continues.

But people aren't taking this lying down. Certainly, the Ukrainians are not. The Ukrainians have fought back and surprised the world with their fierce resistance, their valor, and their courage in the face of this horrible, savage, brutal act. But it hasn't just been the Ukrainians. Many around the world – Americans, Europeans, others – have provided money and, indeed, taken up arms, provided logistical support, and all sorts of other support to get to Ukraine and to help them in this really historic fight – a fight that is truly, for the first time in my lifetime, a very clear fight between good and evil, between democracy and tyranny, between freedom and autocracy.

So this really is an extraordinary time. And we have two very special guests with us here today to discuss this. We have James Vasquez, who is a former U.S. Army vet. He has actually fought in Ukraine already, fought alongside Ukrainians and intends to go back very soon to continue the fight alongside his Ukrainian brothers in arms. And we have Lieutenant Colonel Rip Rawlings, who's former U.S. Marine Corps, and has been heading up logistical support. Together these two men have formed Ripley's Heroes, which they'll talk about more in-depth. But the Ripley's Heroes has provided support to the Ukrainian armed forces in order to help them win this awful war, this war that Russia started and continues against the Ukrainian people.

So this briefing will proceed like so: We'll hear briefly from our ranking member, Rep. Joe Wilson, who is on the line. And then we will turn to James Vasquez for brief remarks, and then Lieutenant Colonel Rip Rawlings, before we go to a question-and-answer phase in which I will ask a few questions, other Helsinki staff may ask a few questions. And then we'll take questions from the audience. So please think of questions, put them in the chat, and we'll be looking at those.

So I'd like now to hand it off to our Helsinki Commission ranking member, Representative Joe Wilson of South Carolina.

WILSON: Thank you very much, Paul. And ladies and gentlemen and fellow friends of freedom and democracy, I appreciate the Commission staff organizing this important briefing today. On February 24th, the free world watched in horror as war criminal Putin invaded sovereign Ukraine. For so many around the world who have devoted their lives to the cause of freedom, the image of the ordinary Ukrainians taking up arms to defend their families and homeland compel them to join Ukraine's fight for democracy. Sadly, today we're in a global conflict between democracy, rule of law, and authoritarianism, which is rule of gun.

It is critical that the bipartisan support for Ukraine be maintained. Additionally, we should listen to those who are on the ground to better understand and channel humanitarian and lethal aid and understand better the logistical challenges and critical support. As the invasion has proceeded, the unthinkable atrocities committed by Putin's forces amount to genocide. Entire towns have been razed. The mass murder of captured innocent civilians, children abducted and forcibly relocated to Russia. Hospitals, churches, schools, shopping malls have been targeted. Crops and water supplies have been destroyed.

The foreign fighters have actually come in to heroically volunteer. And are – and during intense combat conditions and witnessing the gross human rights violations perpetrated by Putin. I look forward to hearing from former Staff Sergeant James Vasquez and Lieutenant Colonel Rip Rawlings, retired, on how we can support these heroes and the mission, which provides for the future of democracy. I yield back.

MASSARO: Thank you very much, Mr. Wilson.

We'd now like to give the floor to James. James, hoping you could tell us a little bit about how you got involved in this. And why this conflict – why so many when they look at this haven't acted, but you not only acted, you acted in the most profound possible way.

VASQUEZ: I mean, I'm kind of regurgitating this already, because I've been asked this a lot, but it started with – my grandmother, she's Latvian. And so I have a lot of Latvian descent. And my grandmother is the last surviving member of her family because the Russians slaughtered my whole family on my grandmother's side during World War II. So one thing that stands out is when I was a kid, she used to tell me these stories of how she ran through the war. Literally ran through the war. And when I say ran, I'm talking about hiding behind trees, hiding behind rocks, while soldiers are getting slaughtered out in the field. And the one thing that stood out to me when this whole thing happened and started was that, you know, this is exactly what she was telling me about. So, you know, it was no longer something – it wasn't a story in my mind anymore. I can see it on TV. So it was very reflective of what she described to me.

And, you know, I said, you know what? I'll go – I'll give it a couple months. And, you know, I'll go help these people because, you know, I have the ability to do so financially and physically. And so I went over there. And once I got there, I didn't realize how much this was going to really impact my life, and how impactful it's been to me, you know, since then. So, which is why I'm going back. You know, I just was going to do it for two months. I ended up staying there for just about three months. Came back home, and I just pretty much sold everything that I owned – including my house, my boat, my trailer, my tools, my business, my everything – so I can go back and, you know, continue fighting and helping these guys out. And, you know, helping this, you know, country that's getting slaughtered.

I've seen a lot. And so has Rip. We've both been on the ground over there. And it's a lot. And you know, we're fortunate – we're both fortunate enough to be able to, you know, help these people in one capacity or another. You know, me boots on the ground and, you know, picking up a weapon and being able to help, and Rip being a master logistician, and being able to form this foundation and, you know, help with financial aid, with gear, with, you know, our

different skill sets. And it's become – it's become a great marriage between me and Rip as far as, you know, how we are able to help these people, and conduct our business in an efficient way.

MASSARO: Thank you, James. And I – you know, when we – when we get to questions – I want to hear Rip and his perspective and now, Rip, I hope you can also speak to how you two got to know one another, because I know a little bit about that story and I think it's really quite an extraordinary thing. But, you know, we want to also ask you, James, after that, a little bit about the kind of spirit of what it's like to be on the ground and what you've seen over there. But, Rip, if you could – if you could speak to your organization, and your logistics, and how you became involved, and what you intend to do now, right, going forward, that would be fantastic. Thank you.

RAWLINGS: So, I mean, I think it's a unique feature of state-on-state violence that we see the humanity of the people that are caught in between. And I don't think that we've seen suffering on this scale and atrocities on this scale since World War II. And that's coming after many, many hours of studying the history of conflict and war, having been a part of our nation as we've defended other countries around the globe. I will say, though, that I think it's a unique feature of democracies that we stand up for one another when we're faced with the atrocious evil that James just spoke of and that we've witnessed over in Ukraine.

So it is incumbent, in my mind, on democracies to especially look out for and care for the burgeoning democracy, the young democracy in that case, since 2014, with all its faults and all its goodnesses you can accredit the Ukrainian people and their government. So I think it's possibly the best thing that a democracy can do that the sons and daughters of the democracy, James included in that, pick up arms. We've seen this in World War I. We've seen it in World War II. We've certainly seen it in other conflicts. This one right now I think is one that all of us need to put our shoulder behind, because it is a terrible strategy that we're dealing with over there, and it's terrible atrocities.

I think the best quote I've heard about the war so far and private citizens being involved is not a quote from me, but from somebody else that I read online. That said: If you've ever wondered what you would do to stop World War II in 1939, well, you're doing it right now. And so I think that encompasses a least a little bit of how James and I felt, and why we've decided that as private citizens now, and especially as retirees and veterans who've had combat experience, that we have perhaps a unique feature that we could lend to this fight. A little bit of knowledge and certainly a healthy respect for the democracy that both of us grew up in, and that gave us all the advantages that we have today.

MASSARO: So can you tell us a little bit about how you met there and how you formed – I know Ripley's Heroes is your organization, and what you intend to do with that organization?

RAWLINGS: Sure. Yeah, so James and I met in Lviv for the first time. We had corresponded quite a bit on Twitter. James can speak for himself on his combat experiences, and I hope you will do so because I think everybody listening needs to hear exactly what the fight is like. He and I both have experienced combat while under arms for the United States. And what

we're experienced and what he specifically experienced, what I saw after the fact in Ukraine, is enough, I think, to shake the foundations of war in general, but also of where we are in the 21st century.

We met in Lviv after some correspondence about things that we could do to support troops downrange. And it started with Americans, and Brits, and other close allies that were veterans because, for us, that was the easiest acquaintanceships. Those were men and – predominantly men, but some women – that had picked up arms on behalf of Ukraine. And James had a vision initially with his unit, which he'll speak about, I'm sure, about crowdsourcing some support. Frankly, we kind of copied that, and said: Well, you know, here's a guy who's been able to get some night vision goggles and some other things donated. Perhaps we can do that to help some other units.

We had a chance then to meet with one another after I said let's see if we can help one another in fundraising. We did so, and from there decided to declare ourselves a full organization to support any units that really asked. So far, we've raised terrific funds through crowdsourcing – \$5 here, \$10 there, literally people's lunch money for those that are able to contribute. We've commonly said, if you can't contribute, don't worry about it. There's lots more organizations like ours. We're just one of many. We're in a state in our organization where partnerships have become part of the most important thing that we do. We've found that we can double, triple, and quadruple our efforts just because there are other groups and organizations that are doing things similar to us. And we can help each other with networking and transporting equipment, or whatever the case is.

MASSARO: So who else is working on this, before we move on? Who should we be paying attention to?

RAWLINGS: Well, Come Back Alive is probably our closest partner right now, although I'll say Serhii Prytula and his organization, both Ukrainian based, are very close – is a close second if not, you know, also first place. Mainly because their organization – this is Come Back Alive – has been doing what we do for – since 2014. And so they're a slick, well-oiled machine. And we've learned a tremendous amount. They are Ukrainian-based, so that, obviously, is a huge boon for us when it comes to logistics and transportation – us, being U.S.-based. You know, to use Winston Churchill's words, in the center of the forge and the arsenal of democracy, the power of the Western purse has been tremendous in helping get privately funded equipment into the hands of troops downrange.

MASSARO: Fantastic. So let's move to that – James, the look into the combat experience and the feeling on the ground. I mean, I'm sure I'd – we've talked about this a little bit, you and I, but we just – it'd be good – it'd be good to hear what it is like to be on the ground, and some of your – some of your stories of being on the ground. And what it's like to fight alongside the Ukrainian forces.

VASQUEZ: Initially – well, initially I was going to join the Foreign Legion. On my trip over here I spent two days of traveling and I didn't know until I got to Lviv that the Foreign Legion actually had gotten bombed while I was on my way over there. So they –

MASSARO: I'm sorry, had gotten what?

RAWLINGS: Bombed.

VASQUEZ: Bombed. Yeah, they got shelled pretty bad. They lost about 40 men. And they really didn't know what to do with me. So I hooked up with this U.K. soldier who was a – (audio break) – active U.K. soldier, British soldier, who left his command and his country to go back home and fight. So him and I made our way to the front lines because he knew guys since, you know, he was a child, you know, who he grew up with that were on the front lines fighting. So I was able to make my way over there.

(Audio break) – being signatory to the legion and being able to just join a Ukrainian unit, and who were happy to have us because, you know, him being – (audio break) – soldier and me being former American soldier, we had, you know, quite a bit more experience than these guys had. I mean, these guys had never picked up arms prior to, you know, us being there. And they were just getting, you know, really tossed into the throes of war, you know, over in – and this is when I first went to Kyiv. And, you know, Kyiv was getting beat up pretty bad – well, on the outskirts of Kyiv, Bucha. And so we joined up with a unit. And there was a lot of – you know, we gave them a lot of resistance.

But at the same time, these guys were fighting very primitively. In other words, they didn't have any body armor, they didn't have Kevlar, they didn't have proper weaponry. They were using AK-47s and 74s that were old as, you know, Christ's knickers. I mean, it was embarrassing. So and at that point – you know, and selfishly, in my best interest, I said, well, I got to get these guys some gear because they're going to get me killed. (Laughter.) So, you know, I went – you know, I took to Twitter and started a PayPal, and raised a bunch of money.

And I was able to get some good guys from Poland who needs to still be unnamed today, because, you know, there's kind of, like, this underground railroad of the ability to get what you need over there. And I was able to get them, you know, rails for their weapons. You know, ACOGs, you know, red dot sights. Fit out their weapons so these guys can fight like gentlemen. Get them additional magazines. You know, because a lot of these guys just had two magazines and – you know, and a pocketful of bullets that they would have to reload with out in the field.

MASSARO: (Laughs.) Unbelievable.

VASQUEZ: I mean – (inaudible). So within that month – that first month that I was there, I was able to provide these guys with a lot of things, including vehicles. Our vehicles get shot up pretty quickly. They get shelled up and rendered useless. So, you know, I was – because him and I had a – he has a U.K. passport, I have an American passport, we were able to move about the country rather easily, whereas Ukrainian soldiers, if they see you heading towards the rear they think that you're fleeing the country and not wanting to fight, so you can easily be detained. And plus, they didn't have the resources either.

So, you know, I was garnishing – getting all these resources, you know, financially through PayPal and people donating. And it enabled me to, you know, start getting these guys what they need. And that was a big deal, because, you know, seriously when I first got there these guys were, like – I mean, I was fighting with guys with a red t-shirt on and sneakers. And that's not even a joke. That was – you know, so him and I, we went and got these guys uniforms. We went and got them – you know, their weapons outfitted. They went – you know, we took them downrange to – we took them to a shooting range, told them how to shoot, you know, zeroed in all their weapons, showed them how to, you know, fight like gentlemen, give them, you know, basic tactical instruction.

So all these things, you know, it was a gamechanger, you know, because – you know, otherwise these guys would – you know, we were literally holed up in a mechanics shop that we commandeered, sleeping on the floor and – you know, I mean, not to say that it didn't get – it didn't get easier after that. I mean, where you sleep is where you sleep. But so, you know, I brought back vehicles. I found a – I found a paint gun in this mechanics shop and a paint booth, and I started painting the cars right there in –

MASSARO: Wow.

VASQUEZ: And, you know, I went in the basement. I'm like, hm, that looks like green paint. That looks like black paint. Why don't we just do this? And started, you know, camouflaging our vehicles. We were going into battle with white Toyota Camrys, you know?

MASSARO: (Laughs.) Yeah.

VASQUEZ: I mean, with Javelins in the back. (Laughter.) So, you know, I tried to – I tried to just give us the ability to fight like gentlemen and, you know, give – provide these guys with what they need, you know, to be able to fight the correct way and not just, you know, be so primitive and, you know, fight like cavemen. So it was a lot of work in the beginning. But what I'm telling you right now was all in, like, a few weeks period. You know, it seems like it would take a lot longer but when – you know, when you're thrown into that sink or swim situation you just – you do whatever it takes in order to make it happen.

So, you know, it sounds like it – what I'm telling you takes a lot of time. But when you're up 20 hours a day between fighting, training, and trying to get all this done, you can get a lot done. You know, we were all tirelessly working towards the common goal, which is, you know, getting our unit squared away and making sure that, you know, these guys have what they need. So it was a lot of work.

RAWLINGS: we didn't have any gray hair when we started this.

MASSARO: Oh, yeah? (Laughter.) It was all the last five months of aging. (Laughs.) So one of the – one of the things that I – you know, we've read a lot about and we've seen, and I think really helps to explain the initial resistance of Ukrainians, and continued resistance, is this incredible spirit and morale among Ukrainian forces. And I'm wondering, James, if you can

speak at all to your experience. I mean, fighting alongside. I mean, yes, they were missing a lot of equipment, but is there –

VASQUEZ: I can put it very simply. These guys – you know, again, these guys weren't warriors the day before. But they were warriors in spirit and warriors in heart. They just didn't have the warrior training yet. So what's happening now is they're catching up – their skills are catching up with their heart. And this is why we have this resistance. This is why they've lasted so long. These guys are becoming battle-hardened, they're becoming warriors. And now they're having – they're getting what they need and they're getting more and more stuff, you know, between Rip and I and the United States and, you know, weapons training.

So what they lacked in skill before and had in heart is – are becoming equal. And this is why they're still there. And this is why they have this resilience every day is because they are not giving their country up. And, you know, all these people who said they were going to be taken over in three days are so wrong. And I knew they were, because I wouldn't have – I wouldn't have put in for an emergency passport if I thought they were going to get taken over in three days. It would have been a waste of my time. I knew – I know Ukrainians. I have the Ukrainians – I built high rise buildings for a living prior to going back and doing this.

I have Ukrainians on my job site. These guys are tough as nails. And I knew they weren't going to be giving up their country in three days. And, you know, and I knew I wanted to help them. And again, I wouldn't have wasted my time if I didn't think that they had the ability to do that. And here we are today and look at them now. But the problem with that is, you know, it's not a guarantee of when. So, you know, this is why Rip and I are so instrumental in trying to support these people and make sure that they have what they need. And, you know, we've made so many alliances and friends and, you know, really brothers now with these guys that, you know, we have this – you know, it's no longer something that we just wanted to try to do. It's now almost, you know, our mission in life.

You know, listen, we both have things that we should have been doing that is not this. But, you know, what's more important than, you know, saving a country from democracy – you know, saving their democracy and saving them from getting slaughtered, if we have the ability to? So where's the bad news?

MASSARO: Without a doubt. And I'm sure every single Ukrainians thinks there's a lot of things we should have been doing other than this, and everybody's been driven to this from Russia's senseless, senseless war. I mean, I'm really – this notion of their skills are catching up with their heart is really kind of a cool notion. (Laughs.)

VASQUEZ: Well, I mean, it's just a true story, you know? There's no doubt about it. I talk to my men every day still. As a matter of fact, while I was talking to you they were just calling me right now.

MASSARO: Oh, yeah? (Laughs.)



VASQUEZ: So this camaraderie that I've developed with these guys and this brotherhood has taken a life of its own. And to the point that, you know, they're like family to me. You know, so, you know, I could never in good conscience not go back and take care of these guys and help them out because I lost a lot of men over there. Good men, young men. So it breaks my heart.

RAWLINGS: Thanks for doing what you're doing there.

MASSARO: I mean, seriously. You know.

WILSON: Sergeant, I want to, again commend you and the colonel. What you're doing, to me, is in the tradition of the Marquis de Lafayette, coming to provide for the freedom of the citizens of America. And then I think of his service in South Carolina and then Count Pulaski of Poland's service in Georgia. And so there is a historical background of what you're doing and how meaningful it would be. In fact, the only two portraits that are in the chamber of the U.S. House of Representatives are of George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette. And so what you've done is so important.

Additionally, your background on logistics is so important. To me, Putin has sacrificed thousands of young Russians, as we saw in the beginning, by not having proper logistics. But can you reassure the American people that you feel like the supply lines are in place and that the equipment is getting to the proper personnel as quickly as possible to defend themselves, and also enable them to be effective?

RAWLINGS: We can reassure the American public that the equipment that's being provided by foreign nations, and specifically the United States, is getting to the battlefield and being used. It's in, I think, the opinion of everybody in Ukraine – and certainly I carry the same opinion – we need more. They need more. And we're able to fill a niche in a logistics sense but ensuring that not just U.S. veterans but also a lot of Ukrainian units can receive the benefits of what the West is able to produce.

I will say that we are at a very tenuous and fragile point. Meaning this war could go in any direction, very unfortunately. This could be one of the conflicts that in five to 10 years we discuss and say: This specific opportunity, this fulcrum that we're in right now, was missed because we didn't provide what was – more of what was needed. Now, again, not to disparage anything that's being sent. You just need to tune into Twitter on a daily basis. You can look at both of our Twitters this morning and see that HIMARS is having an effect. You can see that the M777 is having an effect. I'm not sure about the M113, because I hated that vehicle when I was in the Marine Corps. (Laughter.) But the Ukrainians have found a use for it, so good on us for helping it – having it sent over. I do think it's a bit of a booby prize.

But the equipment and the gear that's being sent from the United States, I mean, James was – he can tell you, was never a Javelin operator when he was in the United States Army. One quick correction, by the way. It's staff sergeant, not just sergeant. So he –

VASQUEZ: It's alright.

RAWLINGS: So you're not going to demote James. (Laughter.) But James wasn't a Javelin operator, but he had the benefit of having Javelins handed to him. And I don't want to take away, James, you were able to kill quite a few Russian tanks. James probably won't talk about it because he doesn't talk too much about, you know, some of that aspect of combat, but I'll be happy to brag on his behalf and let the American public know that not only was he a hero for picking up the United States guidon as a warrior for the United States Army, but as a product of a democracy this is the best of what you would expect of a democracy, which is he now is going to help defend another democracy.

So he's killed well over 19 tanks – I'm sorry – well over – yeah, 19 tanks total. That includes some BMPs. And that's including a few, you know, kills with his unit. But in general, James is a very lethal person. The United States, you know, had an opportunity to train him to be that person. And now he's using the benefits of his skill to train others. And he's using some U.S. weapons and training Ukrainians to use U.S. weapons in order to ensure that they can guarantee their own democracy. I mean, James, you weren't a Javelin missileer before you left.

VASQUEZ: No. No, no. (Laughs.) It's the opposite effect. The Ukrainians taught me how to shoot Javelins. (Laughter.)

RAWLINGS: But then you trained a lot of –

MASSARO: Saint Javelin. (Laughs.)

VASQUEZ: I could – you know, I could be pulled up to this mechanics shop and we had a – we had an armored assault vehicle full of Javelins. It's the first time I've actually seen them. (Laughter.) And these guys trained me. There was only, like, three Javelin-trained kids when I got there. And when I say "kids," they were literally kids. You know, 18-years-old, 19-year-old, that got trained to use a Javelin. And when I first got there, it took me about four or five days to even get an AK-47 to get, you know, small arms. And so the first thing I did was I got put on this Javelin team, because they didn't even have enough weapons. And even when I got my AK-47, I had three magazines, you know, before I got my own.

So we started doing night ops and taking out tanks with these Javelins. And that's the only weapon I had. So basically, if I was getting shot at I couldn't even protect myself. I didn't have a small arm yet. So –

MASSARO: God!

RAWLINGS: Just to put that in perspective, the average U.S. fighting load in Iraq, which is an insurgency not, obviously, state versus state violence, was eight magazines of M-16 5.56 millimeter. James had three 7.62 millimeter magazines with him when he went into combat. So, I mean, that alone should kind of speak to the American public about what this looks like. Ukraine wasn't a wealthy nation to begin with. Clearly, obviously, not a member of NATO. Although now, at this point, you know, having received premier weapons, they're able to hold their own.

VASQUEZ: It was crazy because I was in Kyiv one day and I see a hunting store. And I was like holy – it was – so they weren't open, but people were in there. So I'm knocking on the door, we're in uniform, me and the Brit. And we're, like, hey, guys. You know, we need some magazines and ammunition.

MASSARO: We're going hunting. (Laughs.)

VASQUEZ: Well, they didn't have magazines. But they did have 7.62 rounds. So I just bought every round that they had over there. And then with my three magazines, I would literally have to reload rounds – you know, magazines in the field before I had, you know, a sufficient amount of magazines, which took a couple weeks actually. So it was – it was really hiding behind a tree and –

RAWLINGS: Reloading. This is probably another aspect of democracy also. You did what? You bought ammunition. You paid for it.

VASQUEZ: I bought – I bought out the whole store.

RAWLINGS: Right. How many – how many – how many Russian units did you see or experience or see the aftereffects of that stole –

MASSARO: Looting, yeah.

RAWLINGS: Looted. So, you know, it bears mentioning that obviously, you know, former U.S. service members, veterans, or just citizens that were, you know, put into a society, as ours was, a good society that teaches its people the foundations of good versus evil, and right versus wrong, the law of armed conflict and the Geneva Convention. So James has adhered to all of that, as a uniformed combatant in the Ukrainian Army. We have seen none of that – or, I should say, exceedingly little.

James, I think, puts it the best, which is he was teaching his men to fight like gentlemen and ensure that they're equipped so that they could fight like gentlemen. And that means, you know, a tremendous amount more than just they had the right weapons. It means that they conducted themselves and comported themselves in the right way. Ukrainians you didn't have too much trouble with, but the Russians clearly – you and I have spoken about it at length.

VASQUEZ: It is the difference between how Ukrainians conduct themselves and how Russians conduct themselves in battle is crazy. I was just telling him earlier, you know, I mean, this – they wouldn't even take their dead. Even if we gave them the opportunity, they would just leave their men. And to be – and I hate to say this, and, you know, it's – you know, they were getting eaten by stray dogs because they left their men out in the field. They wouldn't even –

RAWLINGS: You gave them opportunity.

VASQUEZ: And we gave them opportunity to take their men.

RAWLINGS: Can you ever conceive in your time in service not taking one of your men fallen in combat?

VASQUEZ: Never in a million – never in a million years.

RAWLINGS: So their ability to fight in a modern 21st century way, that we all respect and have encoded into the Geneva Conventions, is clearly impossible. So eradicating their evil includes getting all of their troops off of the country of Ukraine, for reasons as we started.

WILSON: On ground level, very important for the American people, there's been concern as to the funding of the Ukrainian troops and the monitoring of the equipment. And it really hasn't been given proper attention. But in the legislation that Paul has helped put together we've always had inspector generals to make sure that there's proper expenditures. From your perspective, do you – do you believe that there has been proper oversight of the equipment that has been provided by all the NATO countries?

RAWLINGS: So I can answer to that, because I've seen a tremendous amount of foreign equipment as it's arrived in theater from Lviv to not necessarily its terminus, but at least one of the staging zones in Kyiv. And I can say without a doubt that, you know, I think President Zelensky and his public relations machine have been unbelievable in ensuring that the public gets a chance to see in a very democratic way where our equipment is going. So you're seeing M777s firing on the nightly news. You're seeing, you know, HIMARS rockets being expended, you know, at the front within a day or two days of coming into theater. Which militarily is a little bit out there. It's amazing to see, because disguising a HIMARS on a rail system, and preventing it from being attacked by either saboteurs or Russian rocket, is a miracle in itself.

So not only I think should the West feel as though its – I should mention, obviously this is war. So there's a tremendous amount of equipment that goes to the front that does not come back. So if America's expecting to see, you know, the HIMARS that we gave them survive the entire war, I think the best thing that all of us should keep in mind is this is the first really violent state-on-state war that we've seen – a hot war that we've seen since World War II. So a lot of equipment is not going to survive. And I know that that's our intent, is that use it until it's done and do the right things with it. I know that that's, you know, our perspective. But I believe everything I've seen so far has said that the Ukrainians have been exceedingly responsible.

And, I mean, partly just because they're so thankful to have premier weapon system that were developed by the West that are as precision as we're able to provide. So you can imagine if our nation was at war, every piece of technology that's as premier as the equipment that we provided would be not just accounted for, but would be utilized to its best effect. So I can assure the public that I've seen – what I've witnessed of that.

WILSON: One of the most significant bipartisan successes, Congressman Steve Cohen and myself working along with Senator John Cornyn, for lend-lease, to provide – that equipment can be provided immediately. And this is in the tradition of what, ironically, World War II. The success of the Soviet Union was due to American lend-lease. They may not want to recognize

that, but that's what happened. And so now to defend the people of Ukraine – and also, the lend-lease applies to all the frontline states of NATO. And so hopefully – and I'm just confident that the Pentagon is working in every way to expedite to get the equipment to the front line.

RAWLINGS: It's happening. I mean, I've seen Patriot missile batteries in Poland. My experiences have been predominantly Poland and Ukraine. But, you know, we're seeing the effects, obviously. I think it's – you know, it's going to take a lot more. This is – this is a very hot war.

WILSON: It's been encouraging to me also. Initially it was polling that Germany would not allow Javelin missiles to be provided from Estonia to cross German territory. The good news is they have fully – Chancellor Scholz is fully on board now. Germany's on board now. And so what was initially hesitation, indeed, it's so reassuring to see the NATO countries and the European Union. I'm really grateful to be the co-chair of the European Union Caucus. And working with Congressman Brendan Byrne (sic; Boyle) of Philadelphia.

And we read where \$2 billion worth of military equipment have been provided by the European Union. And both of us commented we didn't even know the European Union had military equipment. (Laughter.) And so we thought it was a parliamentary body. So things have come together. But your service with your background, both of you, and others who have volunteered, really adds so much to the credibility, and have to be so encouraging to the people of Ukraine.

RAWLINGS: That's important to note, is that we represent quite a few people. So obviously we're thrilled and very pleased to be here today, but behind us, in front us, around us, as a part of our organization and certainly on the front lines are quite a few others from a lot of different nations. So hopefully we're representing them in the right way. I believe we are.

WILSON: Well, it's very inspiring.

MASSARO: James, Rep. Wilson actually kind of jogged my memory. Very briefly for you, you know, I mean, one of the – one of the things I face a lot in the work I do, which is more on the sanctions/economic front, is kind of the failure to sanction Russian energy buys. There's still a lot of money going from the European Union to Russia today. And I'm wondering, does this – does this kind of image, that Germany and the European Union is funding Russia's war, does that affect the morale of Ukrainians? Do they talk about that at the kind of, you know, ground level?

VASQUEZ: I'll be honest with you, at the ground level we are – we are so busy just fighting. You know, this is not even things that we're really privy to. You know, we're out in the field. We're not looking at the news every day. We're just getting orders and we're carrying them out. So it's more – I would imagine that it would be a morale killer, knowing that – you know, that Europe is still being supportive of anything that comes from Russia. But when we're boots on the ground, we don't – we don't – it's not something that we're looking at. Our goal is to stay alive every day and keep up the fight.

RAWLINGS: The average Ukrainian citizen knows. I mean, so you could go to any Ukrainian web blog or any Ukrainian twitter right now. The majority understand very clearly that, you know, Europe continues to provide funds that will be used against them and want to cut off. And doesn't understand when nations – you know, we won't name names – but some nations provide the parts and equipment that had been – that shouldn't go back to Russia but have been sent back to Russia and are now going to be used directly in supporting, you know, that gas enterprise.

So your average citizen is well aware, as we would be if our country was attacked and the country that was attacking us was being funded by our allies. I think that's not lost on, you know, the average citizen. On the front lines, you know, having been in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan, I mean, I'm – you know, James is more concerned about making sure that he puts a round downrange in the direction it needs to go, and his men do the same thing, so.

MASSARO: So we're joined today by our chief of staff Kyle Parker, who's in the room even though you can't see him. (Laughs.) But in any case, Kyle, I wanted to hand the floor to you, see if you have any questions to ask James and Rip.

PARKER: Sure. Thank you, Paul. Hello, everyone. You can't see me, but hopefully you can hear me. Thank you, Congressman Wilson.

And just I – you know, James and Rip, you know, as a fellow citizen, right, I just want to thank you. Thank you both for what you're doing. It really – this is – this is a hard war. And I fear that this is going to be a long war. And, you know, it just seems like each day brings new outrage and new heartache. And you know, just –

VASQUEZ: And new challenges.

PARKER: New challenges. And just a few hours ago, as we all, you know, witnessed this, you know, yet another barbaric attack on innocent Ukrainian civilians in Vinnytsia. And, you know, this little down syndrome girl, Lisa, who – you know, there's a video out there of her enjoying a summer day with her mother and then – and then, you know, we all learn that hours later, right? Or not even an hour later she's killed by a Russian rocket strike. So, you know, I think it's – what you do is not only material support, it's also moral support to help us all to face this, and to face this and to have some hope, and to see what we all can do, as one feels helpless, right? You know, and you have shown that an individual can do a whole lot.

And I will say that, you know, in my own family – you know, my wife is from eastern Ukraine, you know, I have relatives on the ground there. My children have all lived in the city of Kharkiv. They've seen their beautiful playground at Park Gorkogo destroyed with Russian cluster munitions and all of that. And yet, we have some traditions that we've built since February 24th. And, you know, whether it's a Telegram channel we follow or, you know, in your case following your adventures and, you know, the – sort of the – some of the lighthearted humor.

And for anyone who's listening, if you don't follow James in Twitter, you're doing it wrong. You know, remedy that immediately. You know, I have some of your greatest hits. You know, I think maybe my favorite is when you're at the Ukrainian checkpoint welcoming Ukrainians to America. Cars are driving through and you're reaching in –

VASQUEZ: That wasn't my idea, by the way. It was my guys. They're like, hey –

PARKER: No, but it was great.

VASQUEZ: Start confusing these people.

PARKER: It was great. Or taking – using your trusty Leatherman to take 50 caliber machine guns off Russian tanks, repurpose them. I mean, that's the type of stuff that, you know, is needed levity and lifts the spirit. And, you know, just I'm bowled over by your grit and your heart. It's wonderful to hear that, you know, you scratch – you dig deeper and find this Baltic connection through Latvia. You know, if really watching how the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and how Poland have responded to this have really been inspirational. I mean, this is – this is for the ages.

VASQUEZ: I was fighting with Latvian soldiers over there. Good guys.

PARKER: Yeah. Yeah. And –

VASQUEZ: They put a lot of work into their training, and they came there with their own weapons, and they came there ready to go. So these were good guys.

PARKER: And this is – you know, in our own country, though the – through the extended diasporas, I mean, these are – these are a people who know what's at stake, right? And who have been there. And so it's just great to see that. And really – and, you know, again, it gives us – it gives us the hope to face another day and confront another thing, and really step up and say: Hey, how can I do something? How can we do more?

Two questions for each of you. For you, James, you know, I'm just wondering how do you expect the fight that you return to in a couple weeks to differ from the fight you left a couple months ago? And –

VASQUEZ: Well, it's going to be a big difference, for good and bad. Good in a way that we are – we have much more support now. And we have the weapons and gear that we need to be able to fight properly. On the flipside of that, it's – the fight's harder than it was when I left. And that was hard fighting when I left. So the eastern front is a mess. I've lost a lot of guys, like I said earlier, in the last couple weeks. Heartbreaking. You know, we supported a unit where these two guys were captured. I don't even know what the latest on that is. We had a proof of life photo, and then we haven't heard from them since. So that's a tough thing too. And I'm going to guess that they're not having a good time right now.

So the fight's going to be harder, but the experience and the equipment and the support is going to be better. So it's going to be – it's a perfect storm for us to, you know, fight the better fight. But, you know, as Rip – you know, again our master logistician, in my opinion – will tell you that, you know, they started this three-point attack in the beginning. And clearly that didn't work out for them. And this is why now they're doing kind of, like, a spearhead attack on the eastern front, which is – you know, which is causing a lot of casualties and a lot of hard fighting for these guys.

And who knows what's going to happen, but, you know, one thing I know is, you know, the resilience of these Ukrainians and other foreign soldiers – we're not going to just, you know, let this – you know, we're not going to let them roll over anybody. You know, we're going to fight, and we're going to fight hard. And that's going to – one thing, that's definitely going to continue. And as we get more support, as we get more, you know, proper weapons, you know, air superiority is obviously a big problem for us over there.

You know, we don't have anything in the skies. It's one thing that is constant is us getting bombed by jets and mortar fire. We have to, based on a limited ability to do so, you know, we have to use our mortars and our airstrikes sparingly, where they seem to have an extraordinarily large amount of – infinite munitions. So that's – you know, that's what makes things a little bit more difficult for guys on the ground. It's just constant. It never stops. You're talking about 24 hours a day, even – you know, you just try to find a hole to sleep in and just hope that, you know, a mortar doesn't land in that spot. So that's one thing that they seem to have infinite amount of.

And we don't. And so the mortar fire and the air superiority is – it's advantageous to them. And it makes it very difficult for us on the ground. So I'm kind of going off on a tangent here, but the thing is we know, I know, Rip knows, the next couple months are going to be – it's going to be the hardest fighting that there's been since the beginning. It's a very concentrated effort from the eastern front on, you know, Russians coming and doing this spearhead tactic rather than doing this three-prong approach. And we have to stand in front of it, you know, or we lose, so.

PARKER: Thank you for that.

For you, Rip, we're on Capitol Hill. And, you know, our principals write and rewrite the laws. So I'm wondering, from your perspective as a logistician and working on essentially crowdsourcing, crowdfunding the fight, how much of an obstacle are export control framework and laws such as ITAR to your efforts and other efforts to get as much night vision and long-range rangefinders and, you know, whatever thermal stuff and body armor to the fight? How much – and is this something that could be an opportunity for some legislation?

RAWLINGS: So absolutely. The simple answer is it is the largest single obstacle that we face. When it comes to transportation, we've figured things out. When it comes to finding a network of people that are willing to support, we've found them. When it comes to a group of interest that want to continue to support, they're with us. When it comes to people that are willing to supply \$5, \$10, et cetera, they're all there. The biggest issue that we have is that a



U.S. citizen can go purchase a set of level III body armor, but you cannot purchase it and give it to a Ukrainian.

And the law we understand clearly. We're not going to violate anything that's on the books. But it's drastically in need of being updated. When James goes downrange, he's technically allowed to carry level IIIA body armor, helmet. But he's not allowed to carry ITAR-regulated thermal sight systems with him. The difference between us and the Russians is that thermal system, in a lot of instances. The production of U.S. capabilities – and we're talking about not military-grade. We're talking just below that. Those capabilities are the defining advantages for the troops that we support downrange.

So it's caused us to buy lesser equipment. It's caused us to spend an inordinate amount of these wonderful benefactors' money to purchase the equipment, send it through the right ITAR laws, ensure that it's signed off on the right way, wait eons for it to go into the hands of now a soldier that perhaps even isn't there anymore, because by the time we've gotten it to him it's been a month, it's been 45 days. In one instance it took us 60 days to get four thermal sight systems through the ITAR process. Now, we've applied for all the laws that we need to, we've gotten – spent the money to hire two ITAR lawyers, and we've gone through every possible wicket to ensure that we're doing things legally and correctly.

But it's a hindrance. And it's an unnecessary hindrance. It's one that I think could be cleared away very simply to say: Listen, the law was written in order to ensure that these pieces of equipment do not get in the hands of Russia in the Crimea, or Russia in Donbas. The law needs to be updated to ensure that those things – and we're talking about, you know, level III or below – can go to the hands of a soldier from Kyiv, the legitimately, democratically elected government of Kyiv. So it's a tremendous hindrance to us.

I'll tell you that also all of our partners feel the same way. It's the constant question that we have. We talk with our partners, you know, once, twice daily. And the theme that we hear on a regular basis is, A, provide more HIMARS. B, help us close the skies. And, C, change your laws to update them to address the current conflict. So their parliament recognizes it. I know that their parliament, through several organizations and foundations that we deal with, have taken that directly to Capitol Hill. We've worked with our representatives as well to ensure that they're clear on what the laws are. But from our perspective, it is the single biggest hindrance that we deal with.

WILSON: And the good – hey, the good news, we've been joined by Chairman Cohen. And so we've got somebody, Colonel, who can follow through just what you've said. He's the champion for this.

MASSARO: Welcome, Chairman Cohen. Would you like to say a few words?

COHEN: Well, simply I was on a call with a local government issue and wanted to be with you all and learn from your experience. I've been briefed a bit on what you've said. I don't know if anybody's asked a question, but I would ask you: From your experience on the ground, what more does America need to do to effectively win this war?

RAWLINGS: I think we can both answer that. I'll kick off, and then if you didn't hear it, James is much closer to combat than I am. And he's not only fought there but is intending to go back and fight again. So his perspective is going to give you, I think, a very detailed and nuanced perspective on what's required.

I'll say kind of from maybe a step back from that, the first and most important is what we just mentioned, which is changing the law to ensure that as lend-lease is able to provide the items that state-to-state can provide, the average private citizen, like myself, can provide other means of support that are well within the law in the United States, but in most instances are not within keeping of the law inside Ukraine. But just changing and addressing the law to update it to the conflict that we're dealing with. That would be number one. We have discussions and we have requests from Ukrainian forces as much as American forces: Please send us as little as generation two night vision goggles. And even that's a hindrance because of the law and ITAR.

I mean, the other thing that we talked about earlier, just to kind of refresh you, but it was, you know, we're in a very fragile part in the war. And HIMARS is having an effect. The Ukrainians are eminently accountable for the weapon systems that we provide for them. But we need more of them. They need more of them. It's a very fragile part in the war that I think the next couple months could make or break whether or not Ukraine actually survives this, or their country is bisected by the onslaught of evil, and perhaps more. I mean, Russia probably won't stop when they reach the Dnieper River if they meet success. So they need to be stopped. They must be stopped. And we have it within our power to put a finger on the scale and ensure that justice prevails in this instance.

So over to James.

VASQUEZ: I think I can't follow that show. So I think that's well said and perfectly executed as far as telling these guys what they need.

RAWLINGS: Well, from the trench, I mean, just – again, your perspective from the trench. You and I have had a lot of discussions about this, and we're rehashing stuff that you and I have talked about. But we just recently purchased with private funds, was it, buttstocks for AK-47s. It's not an illegal item, but it's hard to come by. You can imagine price gouging is starting to occur in Europe, because private vendors are taking advantage of private parties like us. And so, you know, there's a fair amount that the average soldier needs on the ground in order to fight and win and get an advantage above his Russian counterpart.

VASQUEZ: Yeah. So you got to understand that these AK-47s and 74s have these old wooden stocks that break constantly out in the field. So there's guys running around with weapons with no buttstock on it. So they're shooting – so I had a unit contact me and say, look, man, half my guys' buttstocks are broken. We need to get some – we need to get some buttstocks. So I ordered some synthetic plastic sliding buttstocks, so they don't break easily, they don't crack, you know, they're not getting beat up by the weather. You know, they're able to last.

But, you know, it's just something as simple as that that makes it difficult for a soldier on the ground to be able to fight, because they can't even get a buttstock for their weapon. How are you going to shoot an AK-47 accurately without a buttstock? The AK-47s are already pretty inaccurate as it is. (Laughs.) So buttstocks are critical. And it's just little things like that that these guys need. You know, night vision is a big thing too. These guys need – they don't have thermals. They don't have night vision. So I've been trying to provide these guys with as many as possible, and I'm trying to find them from everywhere.

But, you know, when you got 14 guys doing night operation with two NVGs and can't see anything, and they got to follow those two guys into battle, well, that's a problem, you know? These guys should all have night vision, they should all have thermal vision. Owning the night is very important. That's what the Russians hate. They love fighting during the day, and they don't like doing anything at night except for drinking. So – (laughter) – and, listen, that's just a true story. And just, you know, based on experience. So owning the night is very important. So night vision, thermal vision, phosphorous – hey, you know, whatever it takes in order to get these guys to be able to own the night is very important. It's a great advantage for us.

MASSARO: James, Rip, we're going to move to close the briefing in a couple minutes here. And I just wanted to see if the chairman or the ranking member had any closing remarks. And then of course, yeah.

RAWLINGS: Well, I was going to throw one other thing out there. If any of the frozen oligarch funds are available, you can send them to us and a lot of other organizations like us. We'll find a good use for it.

VASQUEZ: I do need to get a new boat. (Laughs.)

WILSON: Hey, Kyle, I want to thank you for referencing the resilience of the Baltic Republics. And, James, your background of Latvia. For 50 years, 1940 to 1990, the country was occupied. But now it's a free country. And so to me, there's hope that the freedom of Poland and ultimately, again, the restoration of full independence in Ukraine. And, hey, also we are so hopeful of Belarus. And then we've got to be ever mindful that your success is important for the people of Moldova and for the Republic of Georgia. And with that, I'm happy to yield to the chairman.

COHEN: No thank you. I think I've – let me add, did you guys ever run into Malcolm Nance when you were over there? (Laughter.)

RAWLINGS: So we consider Malcolm a fantastic friend of ours. He's not only instrumental in helping the Ukrainian legion, he's a hell of a guy. So if you're not following him – we stay completely apolitical. I know Malcolm dabbles in politics. We don't. But, you know, Malcolm is a stand-up gentleman, also a veteran. He was a senior enlisted in the Navy, which we forgive him for – him being Army and me being Marine Corps. But not only that, he's done amazing things for Ukraine.

VASQUEZ: Yeah. As a matter of fact, right before I left – and I think you left shortly after me – we all met in Lviv, along with some other people that we partnered up with. And, you know, this was just, like, discussions via the phone or WhatsApp or Signal, or Twitter, until we all finally met. So this was a long time coming. We were all in different places doing different things. But collectively trying to work together. And so we finally all just came together and met up in Lviv prior to us leaving, and had a couple beers, and had some great discussions on how we can make big changes.

RAWLINGS: I think it's unique in the veteran community in some regard that there have been so many veterans that have, maybe, the experience and the determination to ensure that we can provide support. And the experiences from how to train soldiers or how to move logistics, you know, that's something that the U.S. military trained us. So we're glad to put it to use to stop another evil.

COHEN: I think Malcolm's in town today or tomorrow. I think he –

RAWLINGS: Yeah, I know, he – we saw. So we're hoping to link up with him soon.

COHEN: Good. Well, thank you for your service. Thank you for going over there. It's just really commendable what you did.

RAWLINGS: Thank you for saying so.

COHEN: And anything we can do to support. Thank you. And, Mr. Wilson, thank you, sir. I was looking at my Romanian money today. Thank you.

WILSON: Hear, hear.

MASSARO: We have one audience question from Youri Ditrikuski (ph). And we're going to take this really quick. And that's, Rip, can you address issue of U.S.-based 501(c)(3) that assist Ukraine vis-à-vis the ability to supply nonlethal aid, that includes tactical medical gear, body armor, drones, radios, et cetera, directly to Ukrainian military units?

RAWLINGS: Yeah, there's no inhibition, as long as it fits within the letter of the law. And so we've been able to provide – you know, again, you said nonmilitary. So we've been providing vehicles, medical support, medical aid, medical equipment. I mean, a simple IFAK kit, which is a – it's a small bag that every U.S. servicemember is issued that includes QuikClot, bandages, a tourniquet, et cetera, chest compression. We've been able to provide those in bulk to Ukrainian Army troops. We provided – we had a(n) anti-aircraft missile battery that was rolling around theater with six stinger missiles in the back of their truck, minivan, defending the skies of Lviv. And we bought them a 4x4 that has a sealable hatch so that their missiles didn't get wet –

VASQUEZ: Or stolen.

RAWLINGS: Or stolen. (Laughter.) And they could give the van back to one of the kids' brothers, who they borrowed it from. So, yeah, all 501(c)s are allowed to provide a

tremendous amount of support. We're able to purchase European-made level II body armor in Poland legally, and legally transport it across the border over into Ukraine, and gift that to the Ukrainian Army. So we've expanded our reach and will continue to do so. I hope that answers the question he's asking.

WILSON: Here, here.

MASSARO: Terrific. Thank you so very much to our chair and ranking member for joining us, and our chief of staff. And of course, James and Rip, thank you for your service.

RAWLINGS: Thanks for having us.

MASSARO: A wonderful panel. And with that, we will close the briefing.

RAWLINGS: It's an honor to be here.

WILSON: Here, here. Thank you.

MASSARO: Thank you very much.

VASQUEZ: Thank you.

WILSON: Thank you all.

[Whereupon, at 3:04 p.m., the briefing ended.]