

The Problem with Jon Stewart Podcast Episode 1 Transcript

Jon Stewart: ARE YOU READY TO PODCAST! Is that, probably, I came in a little hot, didn't I?

[INTRO MUSIC]

Jon: Ok everybody, welcome. I'm Jon Stewart. Thank you very much for tuning into the podcast. This is where we will f*** around. Quite a bit. It's going to hopefully be a little bit less structured, going to allow us a little bit more of a space to to play around, to follow up to talk to some of the extra people that we want to talk to, get to know some of the people who work on the show. They're the ones that the toil in obscurity and quite frankly, no light. At The Daily Show, I created a generation of mole people, and I don't want that to be the case this time.

So on this episode, we're going to be talking about burn pits, which is something that Iraq and Afghanistan veterans were exposed to during their deployments overseas. A burn pit is basically everything that the military wants to get rid of on the base. They dig a giant hole, sometimes 10 acres, and they pour jet fuel on it and they light them on fire. They can burn 24/7, releasing dioxins and benzene and all kinds of other cancer causing and respiratory disease causing items.

Servicemen and women are getting sick and dying from exposure to these toxins. We had talked to some veterans and their families who have experienced firsthand the effects of these burn pits.

We did a whole show on it, so I'm just going to show you some highlights of that on -- well, not really show you... You'll listen to it. I don't know where you are. You're probably in the car. So take a listen. 100% on board.

[SFX CUE]

[EPISODE CLIPS]

Isiah James: I was a healthy kid when I went into the army. I could run 5 miles like it was nothing. Now I can barely breathe at night. If another country was doing to our veterans what we allowed to be done to our veterans, we'd be at war already.

Jim Binns: The number of veterans injured by toxic exposures vastly exceeds the number injured by bombs and bullets.

Rosie Torres: We were treated as if -- uh -- we wanted a handout.

Daniel Diaz: Right now we're a quarter million dollars in debt from cancer costs. We're bankrupt and the VA still denies my claim that it's not from exposures.

Gina Cancelino: [...] That's the VA and the Marine Corps' responsibility. [...] It's their responsibility. And they are failing.

Isiah: "Burn pits is our generation's Agent Orange. And the United States military and the government doesn't give a damn about us once we're out."

Daniel Diaz: "Delay, deny, hope you die."

[SFX CUE]

Jon: I know we all have an assumption that veterans get healthcare for life, but it's not really the case at all. And over 70 percent of the claims that have been filed by veterans suffering from burn pit exposure have been denied by the VA, which is not good for the over three million service members who have had exposure to these burn pits.

So the [a] fix is basically something called presumption, that presumes that any veteran who served in the global war on terror has been exposed to these kinds of toxins. And then there's a list of illnesses that if they have them, they will absolutely be covered by the VA for health and benefits.

We do have a couple of veterans who work here on the show. And so we wanted to have a quick conversation with them to see if anything we were saying resonated with them or if they thought we were weak. Are we weak and maggots? Probably weak and maggots is where this is going to end up, but we're going to hear their perspective on the military, the process, etc, etc.

[MUSIC]

Interview with Rob Christensen and Charles Wojcik

Jon: We're talking to Rob Christensen. Charles Wojcik. Say what you do on the show. Rob, what's your job?

Rob Christensen: I'm a writer on the show.

Jon: What, on this show?

Rob: Yeah, they hired me for some reason.

Jon: Charles?

Charles Wojcik: And I'm a production assistant.

Jon: And you're also veterans of and I'm going to say the United States military. Now, you may have different loyalties, but it's the United States military.

Rob: Yeah. The United States one, correct.

Jon: Branch Rob?

Rob: Air Force, Air Force Reserves.

Jon: Branch Charles?

Charles: Marine Corps.

Jon: Oh, boy. OK, so there's already a bit of a rivalry that goes on here.

Rob: [LAUGHS] We've got the brains and the brawn.

Jon: Yeah I know there's all kinds of. You know, we wanted to talk to you guys. I think, first of all, in television, it is not an industry that is well populated with people who've served in the military.

Charles: Which is surprising.

Jon: Right?

Charles: It is.

Jon: It is surprising. Rob, How did you get involved in television?

Rob: Through stand-up comedy.

Jon: Charles?

Charles: I actually did your veteran immersion program.

Jon: The internship program.

Charles: Yeah at the Daily Show.

Jon: Did you find that helpful?

Charles: I did. I had an internship at a smaller production company and then I got involved with ACP and then I did the veteran immersion program.

Jon: Right. The thing that we found different because we started hiring the veterans off of the immersion program because you meet these incredibly talented people. And we were like, it was almost like a little secret we had and the producers were like, just get more of them because they're not f***** spoiled. There's no sense of entitlement and they seem to have a work ethic. That's insane. So let's just get more of them.

Have your friends found a path? Is it something that has been a big struggle for a lot of the guys that you served with, a lot of the women that you served with?

Charles: Yeah, definitely. I -- a lot of the people I served with sort of went on, you know, some stayed in, but then others went into their, different careers, a lot into like business. It kind of seemed like a translatable move for them.

Jon: Right.

Charles: Because when you get out, there's no real roadmap, per say. When you're in the military, it's very structured like, you know, where you have to be at what time.

Jon: Prescribed.

Charles: Very prescribed like and that is another thing. Yes, the military is hard, but you know where you have to be. Things are sort of, in a way taken care of for you, like housing and medical or things of that nature, where you're going to eat.

Jon: This sounds like socialism.

Charles: I know, right?

[ROB LAUGHS]

Jon: You're given housing and health care and food.

Rob: Who's paying for all that? The government.

Jon: And you're wearing the same uniform.

[ROB LAUGHS]

Charles: Every day.

Jon: It's a socialist nightmare. And then. And did you always have a hankering on TV or something along those lines or just something you came into?

You know, we talk about diversity in hiring and things like that. And when you're in an industry where you are — your experience is so different and so alien, is that another? Do you ever feel that like you know, it's important to pave the way for other veterans that come in. Do you feel any pressure from that?

Charles: Yeah, I know I do like getting a job, maybe I'm the only veteran there. If I f*** up, then, like, oh, we hired a veteran, he kind of sucks, so let's not go back to that route. So it's like there is a bit of an added pressure to, like, make sure I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing or exceeding the expectations so that, like, if they do interview another veteran, they have like a positive view in their mind.

Jon: Right.

Rob: I have the same thing with Norwegians.

[LAUGHS]

Rob: We used to be around a lot more in New York, not so much.

Jon: I do remember Rob had written a joke that just, it wasn't up to par. And I remember turning to Chelsea, who's the head writer, and I said, Scandinavian countries are not humorous. They're too fit. They're too good looking. What do they have to be funny about?

Now, when it turns out that we end up actually doing a show that, that has content. That is also relatable to your experiences out there, because obviously feedback from people who've experienced it firsthand in those things is hugely important. Does that feel cathartic for you guys? Does it feel like a burden? Is a little bit of an eye roll like, oh, you're going to come talk to the veteran and see, you know, what's what's the feeling when you find out we're doing a show about serving in the military and burn pits and such?

Charles: Oh, it's exciting. Yeah, there's a bit of angst because being a veteran isn't necessarily a monolith.

Jon: Mm hmm.

Charles: So, it's not necessarily that there's like one viewpoint within the military.

Jon: Right.

Rob: All military entertainment. It's always on the verge of eyeroll. It can be, it could take it's always one step away from being eyeroll-y. For me, if it's like they treat every veteran like they're just like Captain America.

Jon: Right.

Charles: Right.

Rob: So what I'm worried about is that like when I see the veterans, like, I know that they're like this guy wanted to go to college. This guy needed this, this guy needed that. They're not all Captain America. But the sacrifice is real, right? So the sacrifice doesn't have to be for freedom and for love of country. The sacrifice can be for some college and for some health insurance for my pregnant wife. And you still make that sacrifice. So I want to honor, like, the reality of that, rather than the Captain America portion of it.

Jon: Right.

Rob: Because I think the sacrifice is even bigger if you're going in because you want to better yourself.

Jon: Yeah, man. I think it's also when you do make that kind of sacrifice, I think some of the a** kissing is guilt, is that idea that, you know, here's all these guys and they are sacrificing, whether it's for patriotism or whether it's for college or whether it's for anything, and there is no real contribution from the country it's all kind of kept at a distance. And I think that's some of the a** kissing is like, look, we're not actually going to support you, but at a football game we'll announce one of you and you'll stand up and everybody will cheer. And that's kind of for you, too.

Rob: That's the attention that guy was looking for.

Jon: Right?

Rob: Yeah.

Jon: Everybody claps or we'll put a video on TikTok of you coming home and meeting your dog again.

[LAUGHS]

Rob: That's got to be so stressful. Like, I hope the dog jumps this dog better.

[CHARLES LAUGHS]

Rob: You're on the phone. This dog better f***** jump okay.

[LAUGHS]

Jon: Show him my f***** picture.

Rob: Yeah.

Jon: Before I get in the door

Rob: Give him a shirt to sniff because I'm coming home.

Jon: Had either of you guys had any experience with what we were talking about, which is like that toxic exposure? I mean, the military in general is mostly hazardous materials.

Charles: Yeah, I had direct experience with the burn pits, deployed twice to Afghanistan. So we had them there.

Jon: Terrible. And were you in charge of them at some point or were just next to them?

Charles: Well, next to them. And then, you know, I was the low guy on the totem pole. So, you know, any time trash had to go out, you know, it's usually me bringing it out. I was an intelligence analyst, so when we had to burn classified materials, also usually fell on me. So I'd be stirring a bunch of maps and other various materials.

Jon: Jesus. Had you had any health effects? Do they give you a kind of a panel or a medical exam to kind of check to make sure that's OK?

Charles: I signed the burn pit registry, but.

Rob: So you're good then?

[LAUGHS]

Charles: Yeah, yeah, I mean, I ended up, you know, they didn't make the connection directly, but, you know, I ended up being diagnosed with sleep apnea, but it's not for certain that it was direct exposure to burn pits.

Jon: But yeah. But why would you have to prove that, you were sitting in front of a burn pit no matter what you have. Shouldn't they just be like, ah f***, let's just make sure we take care of it.

Charles: I mean, you know, you worked on the you know, helped out with the Droga bill. Like, they don't want any sort of oh, they scammed us. This veteran who was by a burn pit might be scamming us. So, you know, we can't fork over the.

Jon: Quite a shrewd con you pulled. I'm going to go to Afghanistan twice.

[CHARLES LAUGHS]

Jon: I'm going to get in front of a burn pit, stir the classified materials in jet fuel, and then come home and collect that sweet apnea money that's coming my way.

Rob: And what constituency is going to be mad at a politician for, like, helping a veteran's sleep apnea, it doesn't exist. It's totally made up at the top. See, when I got deployed, Air Force is a little different. We went to Burgas, Bulgaria and rented a summer camp.

[LAUGHS]

Rob: We really did. And we had the Burgas, Bulgaria airport. I get on a bus every day and go to work-

[JON LAUGHS]

Rob: At the airport and our trash, it went into a garbage bag. Right. And that garbage just got picked up by the Burgas, Bulgaria garbage man in their garbage truck. So Air Force knows how to handle these things. We need to be in charge of more.

Jon: Is there a frustration? Do you feel like they just lose track of you when you're done? Or is there a sense that they will still live up to an obligation? Do you have optimism that this can get done?

Rob: Hmm.

[JON LAUGHS]

Jon: Everybody gets real quiet.

Charles: Well.

Rob: There's two things.

Charles: That should be the job of the VA, like once you're out of whatever branch you served in. Yeah, I understand, I could see why they kind of forget you because you're not in anymore. You're not their responsibility. You're done with your job. I mean that should be the purpose of the VA, they're to make sure that you're receiving any care for any injuries sustained or any problems you had while you're in. Each VA hospital is just they're not all the same. I've been to ones that were s***** and others that were better.

Rob: They treated me right, so far. I have like an odd thing of where I feel like I owe the military almost.

Jon: Really?

Rob: Military was the first thing that changed my entire life. I was going down a bad direction, just like everyone else around me

Jon: You talking about hair loss?

Rob: Well, that didn't help with that. It didn't help with that. Hair went, but the military built the shoulders to hold up the bald head.

Jon: Nice.

Rob: Yeah.

Jon: Nice. When so, for you, the choice was I'm gonna end up in a ditch.

Rob: Yeah.

Jon: Or I need some f***** discipline.

Rob: Yeah, I needed discipline. I needed anything. I had no options, no money, nothing. Went to the military and it gave me literally everything. The first time I had a bank account and a thousand dollars that I could put into it. I had a thousand dollars before but it couldn't go in a bank. It had to be hidden.

[LAUGHS]

Jon: Right.

Rob: You know, like that's the first time I had a thousand, my first cell phone. Like, I got everything from the military, started going to college because after I went to basic training, I really thought, hey, if I did that, I can do anything. And then I followed that. And then the second thing was getting into comedy. Those two things are why I'm alive. So I feel like I owe the military the my underlying feeling is like at some point I have to give back. I have to volunteer or something.

Jon: I heard, Charles, that you joined the military to straighten Rob out. Is that true?

[LAUGHS]

Jon: That you had heard there was this guy. First of all, when did you join? Was it out of high school? Was it, when did you go in?

Charles: Yeah, I was 17. I was a senior in high school. I just needed some direction and also just some better model characters in my life.

Jon: That's really interesting because it is the flip side of it, which is it provides you with a kind of framework for your life as you're going. Do you feel they have an obligation to the people that serve or that everybody that goes in knows the deal? And should they be held to an obligation?

Rob: I think all veterans should just be taken care of, at least with medical care. And I thought that that was the case. I even learned through our digging into the VA that not all veterans are taken care of. I would go to a VA hospital and I'd get whatever I needed. But I never needed anything serious and I was never asking for more benefits. So I thought in my head, oh, everyone's taking care of.

Jon: Right.

Rob: But at the very least, if you served in a war, you should just medically be taken care of and I'm going to pitch, maybe you don't pay taxes.

[LAUGHS]

Rob: You know those two things. That seems fair.

Jon: Uh huh, OK, well, you know, I'm looking at that. I'm thinking, well, the first one OK, and the second one okay! Anything else?

[LAUGHS]

Jon: Hot and cold running champagne. What's your sense on that?

Charles: I otherwise wouldn't have had I not enlisted. Um yeah, my main gripe was just some issues I had with VA once I got out.

Jon: Right. Yeah. That is, it's such a strange thing that the VA almost exists as a separate entity. It's like, there's no connection that like, you know, the Pentagon, they're making the veterans that go to the VA. You know, it's not a separate entity.

Charles: Right.

Rob: Just stick the VA in all the black slush fund. And just forget about it. It'll be taken care of.

Jon: Done stick it over that OCO slush fund from Afghanistan and you'll be all done. But I wonder how much of it, especially in a volunteer army, is really about choices to get a future that has prospects that you think are brighter than the one you have now.

Rob: And then that's why you have to put the word volunteer in quotation marks, a volunteer army, because how volunteer could it be if there's no education for people and people who are

living in poverty and so many of those people are going to the military. Is it a choice at that point?

Jon: Right. Is that a discussion that happens amongst active military? Do guys talk about like, this is my way out. This is my hope. Like I'm f***** here. I'm just trying to stay alive. I'm trying to keep you guys alive. I was always struck by that feeling of brotherhood. And when people told their stories, and this would be at like Walter Reed or something, when people had come back and they had been wounded, the stories were never about for freedom. I, it was always, "I saw my guy, he was down. I ran to him. I got hit. So then I." And it really is about the band of brothers, the band of sisters that are together more than it is anything else. It surprised me.

Rob: And that's the stronger bond. There's no like, "I'm doing this for my country. I'm doing this for freedom." The strong bond is like, "Oh, I know this dude's daughter." Like, "Oh he's, he's going to community college at night." You get to know these people. That's where the bond is strong. You agree?

Charles: Yeah. I mean, when you're on a patrol like, yes, you have your mission, your objective. But at the end of the day, like your mindset is to make sure you come back to the patrol base with the same amount of people you left with.

Jon: Right.

Charles: There's certain things you have to do on a patrol, but like your focus is on making sure everyone gets back alright.

Jon: After having been there and now seeing all the images are going on now in Afghanistan, does it stir up a lot of complex emotions? Do you feel distanced from it or do you still feel a real connection to that place and to that mission?

Charles: Yeah, I mean, I spent 14 months of my life there. Two seven month deployments. But over the past couple of months, it's been hitting me pretty hard in terms of like seeing the result of Afghanistan. And, you know, it is, it's definitely frustrating.

Jon: While you were there, did you have more of a sense of optimism for a more permanent elevation of the conditions in that country and the conditions for the people and all that sort of thing?

Charles: I could have given you the same answer in 2011 as I could in 2013, as I could have given you last week and that's what really pisses me off.

Jon: Right.

Charles: Is you get these, quote unquote, experts who come on the news and say, we're doing this. This is the progress we're making. When everyone echoes the same f***** sentiment, don't listen to those people because they're full of s***.

Jon: Right.

Rob: They're making money off this s***..

Charles: Yeah.

Jon: Everybody's making money off this s***..

Rob: I was on Air Force base when 9/11 happened, and I had to ask permission because I was like both my parents work in Manhattan. So I got permission. I ran to Manhattan, made sure everyone is alive. And then I went straight back to the military base, like, let's kick some f***** ass.

Jon: Right.

Rob: That was the attitude, like, let's go get it. And that's not my attitude anymore. It's been too long. Like, I've lived three different lives since 9/11.

Jon: The other thing that always kind of was incredible to me is the amount of bureaucracy around soldiers getting the benefits and health care that they need because the Pentagon, for their toys, they face no oversight. Nobody is keeping an eye on them. Nobody's auditing them. But if a soldier comes home and it's like, I can't breathe, they put you. It's like you're a defendant in a case. Does presumption that idea that, look, if you were there, these are the list of diseases and conditions that that may arise from that, f***** waive the paperwork, you're in. Does that seem like it takes care of it? To some extent?

Rob: I think it does. I think it's going to be super hard because the price tag on that is huge. I think it would do two things, like if it was presumption those soldiers would be taken care of and then we would live in a reality of how much this actually costs.

Jon: Right.

Rob: So we would know now. And so that's like the presumption would also maybe if we learned anything, help us going forward to the inevitable next war.

Charles: As long as veterans are getting the care they need, that should be the main focus. I love the military, but like there is the mindset when you're in to not seek help. And I think that also impacts it. I mean, the way, you know, the government budgets, like if only X amount of people use something, they're only going to give X amount of money for that program. So, the more veterans that seek care and they're certainly veterans who do and they don't receive it.

But the more veterans that do go out and seek it, the better they are at funding it and getting better at their procedures.

Jon: Guys, thanks very much.

Charles: Oh, thank you.

Rob: Thank you.

Jon: And unfortunately, you're both fired.

[LAUGHS]

Rob: We knew that was coming. Now they're done. They did the VA episode.

Jon: Yeah. Get your s*** and go.

[MUSIC]

Jon: Great. So for those of you at home, the 'you're fired' is a standard, humorous bit that we try out on the employees every now and again at the end of a particularly stirring and relevant conversation.

[JON CHUCKLES]

Jon: All right. Anyway, actually there's a tremendous amount of research that goes into the show. It's the age old battle of comedy shows where the writers would like to say terrible, terrible things using hyperbole, et cetera. And the researchers come in and say, yeah, that's completely wrong, which is quite annoying for the writers. And it leads us to our first piece, Writers versus Research.

[MUSIC]

Writers versus research

Jon: There will be blood.

[MUSIC CUE]

Henrik: I'm Henrik.

Kris: And I'm Kris, we're both writers on the show.

Henrik: So we had heard in a meeting that there was a 60 thousand dollar toilet somewhere in the Pentagon. And we wanted to make jokes about that because the point we were making was that the Department of Defense can't fund veterans health care, but they can spend 60 thousand dollars on a toilet.

Kris: Here's a joke, hey DOD, if you want to s*** on the vets, why buy a toilet? Just s*** directly on the vets.

Henrik: Have you ever taken a s*** and thought, hmm, that's worth a teacher's salary?

Kris: Do you have a sixty thousand dollar ass? I hope you do, because I would like to see it.

Andy: Actually, I'm sorry, guys. We don't know for sure that the sixty thousand dollar toilet seat existed.

Henrik: And here's where research comes in.

Andy: Hi, I'm Andy and I'm the lead research producer for the show.

Irene: And I'm Irene and I'm a research producer for the show. We looked for the toilet, but we couldn't find it.

Kris: OK, so where did the toilet thing come from?

Andy: The toilet came from Jon Stewart himself. He heard that there is a sixty thousand dollar toilet somewhere either at the Pentagon or location undisclosed that exists in America. So that kind of set us down this quest to find the mythical toilet. We called a bunch of experts, none of them had any idea what we were talking about really. But Chuck Grassley did write an article that told us there was a ten thousand dollar toilet seat.

Irene: So we were hoping the joke could be about toilet seats?

Kris: No, Irene, it's over. You've ruined it. We've moved on.

Henrik: But truly, thank you for keeping us from getting sued by the Department of Defense.

Kris: You guys want to hear some more bangers?

Irene: No, no we got work to do.

Kris: Great.

Henrik: For 60 K it better suck the turds right out of you.

Kris: The bidet irrigates your butthole with Prosecco.

Henrik: The only 60 k toilet I've ever used is the sunroof to my stepdad's Cadillac.

Kris: The Pentagon has a sixty thousand dollar toilet or as Jeff Bezos would call it, a mid-level employee.

Henrik: If I pay sixty K for a piss, it better be on me.

Kris: And they've left the room.

[MUSIC]

Interview with Senators Tester and Moran

Jon: I got to tell you, I don't know how they don't come to blows at lunch. Perhaps it's because I don't allow them to eat with utensils, so there's nothing to stab with. It does turn out, though, that there are some solutions on the table down in Washington that could advance the ball for Veterans healthcare, especially where it comes to toxic exposures. There is a bill coming out of the senate called "The Cost of War Act" sponsored by the Chairman of that Senate of Veterans Affairs Committee, John Tester of Montana, so we got a chance to talk with Senator John Tester of Montana and Senator Jerry Moran, who is the ranking member on the Senate of Veterans Affairs Committee, to find out what the status is of that bill, what do they think of it's chances, and that's really all we're going to ask them, I'm not sure I wanna know anything else.

[MUSIC]

Senator Moran: Me, me, me, me.

Jon: I got to tell you, Senator Moran. You got the dulcet tones, man. You've got a nice radio thing going there. Senator Tester, how are you, man?

Senator Tester: If I was any better, I'd be Jon Stewart, you know?

Jon: Get out of here.

Moran: Jon, before we talk to you, let me talk to this other John and say, is there anything we want to do to gang up on him? Like, do we have any plot plan we should have talk about?

Jon: Unacceptable.

Tester: On Jon Stewart?

Moran: On Jon Stewart.

Tester: Oh yeah man we got some s***, Moran. You didn't get the memo?

Jon: I'm too nimble you can't.

Moran: Too nimble.

Jon: I'm prepared for everything. First of all, guys, thanks so much for sitting down with us. It's much appreciated.

Tester: Great to be with you.

Moran: Jon, we're happy to be here. And Senator Tester and Chairman Tester and I are certainly appreciative of your efforts to get us, Congress and the administration to move on this issue of toxic exposure and what it means to veterans who are still being denied benefits.

Tester: Amen to that.

Jon: Amen to that. And Senator Moran, does he make you call him Chairman Tester is that the way he must be addressed at all times?

Moran: Well, I was trying to be informal on this program.

[JON LAUGHS]

Moran: It's usually something much more, you know. Your Honor.

Tester: Your Honor.

Jon: Commandant. Sure, I got it. It's not a problem.

Jon: Last time I was down there you guys were introducing your Cost of War Act. Senator Tester, you were introducing that to committee. It passed out of committee for those who don't know, it's a comprehensive bill that addresses toxic exposure, burn pits. It includes presumptions for a number of different diseases. It includes training for VA. I just wanted to ask you guys just to start off with, where are we at? Where does it stand now and how are things looking?

Tester: Where is that right now is we're still waiting for some additional information from the VA. We need to know how much is it going to cost so we can figure out how to pay for this doggone thing. That information is going to come in the next couple, two or three weeks, I think. And then once we get that, then Jerry and I can sit down, arm wrestle and figure out how we get this thing to the floor.

Jon: Now, I did get a chance to sit down with Secretary McDonough at the VA and it felt like there was a reluctance on their end to work with Congress, that they wanted to work through a process outside of legislative fiat, that they wanted to go through it. Has that been the experience that that you've had with the VA and has that changed?

Moran: Well, I would say that the experience with the VA is that they were slow to give us information that we needed to make decisions. They were reluctant to do things that they could do on their own without I don't know them wanting additional information themselves. As a result of the bill coming out of the committee. The VA is behaving differently and they are providing us with information that's useful. But the perhaps the most important thing is they've taken steps to begin to add presumptions to the list so that on their own, without congressional action. So I think the answer to your question is they have changed their behavior and are moving. In a few weeks that we're going to have the information that we need and that's good news.

Tester: I would tell you, proof of that is early August, they announced disability benefit claims for veterans suffering from asthma, rhinitis, sinusitis. I don't think that had done that. If we hadn't got this bill out. And it's a small step, but it's a big step too and I would say also to your point, look, agencies like to do what they want to do, you know, Congress to agencies is sometimes a pain in the neck. But our job is to hold those agencies accountable, to make sure they're doing the job. And that's part of the deal. And that really supersedes politics. When we're talking about the VA and Jerry and I work very, very well together and oftentimes we agree on all this stuff. So we're both calling the VA up saying, what the heck's going on here, guys?

Jon: Senators, what do you think is the reluctance? Because it's so when I spoke with Secretary McDonough, you know, we talked a little bit about presumption.

Jon: Take a listen

[EPISODE CLIPS]

Jon: What gave you the I guess, the confidence that the science or the information had reached the level where you felt comfortable giving presumption, whereas with these other constrictive bronchiolitis, lymphomas, colon cancers, why do you feel like the information hasn't reached that level?

Secretary McDonough: We are able to look and make the decision on these first three conditions based on.

Jon: What were the metrics?

McDonough: We had — I wish I could. I want to be able to answer your question. I just don't — I just I haven't.

Jon: But you were satisfied that that met the statute?

McDonough: I was satisfied.

Jon: So I'm really trying to understand what's the bar you're looking for, because to not be able to articulate that clearly really troubles me. I don't. And by the way, I don't doubt your empathy and I don't doubt your care. I really don't. And that's why you're talking to the —

McDonough: The beauty is I don't really give a s***t. I don't, I don't really care what you think of I'm doing a good job or not. I care what the vets think.

Jon: As you shouldn't.

McDonough: I don't I don't really care what you think of I'm doing a good job or not. I care what the vets think you're asking a very logical question, which is, OK, so do you need, like, you know, three papers from five researchers or what is it? Right. And I, I, I, I don't know the answer to that.

Jon: But if you don't know the answer, how do you know when you found it?

[SFX CUE]

Jon: I'm curious what you guys think about that.

Tester: So, Jon, I'm going to tell you that I think I think science is very, very important and I think that the review of some of these problems sometimes takes a lot longer than anybody is comfortable with. And so we need to we need to continue to push the agency and we need to continue to push them to push the people who are doing the research to get it done in a timely way. I mean, you know this very, very well. If you take a look at Agent Orange, I mean, we're still talking about Agent Orange exposure in 2021. Are you — give me a break. I mean, that's crazy. So I think what we've tried to do here is we've tried to push them. Look, this can be a lot of extra work. I mean, there's no doubt about it. If we get this bill signed into law, this is going to be a lot of extra work for the VA. We just got to make sure that it's done as timely as we can make it happen.

Moran: And it's a part of our jobs that we have to try to prod that along to prod that along. And where I think we're doing that, I sometimes think that when it, particularly with the stereotype of Republican, that there's a thought that this is all about the money. So from my perspective, I mean, the money matters because it tells us something about what we're doing and what it costs and what we're going to have to appropriate. But money for the Department of Veterans Affairs is not something that's been in short supply. We've increased nearly 40 percent of the amount of spending at the Department of Veterans Affairs. But I think the real issue here is operations. Well, how does the VA handle these new responsibilities? That's a higher priority for me. What's it going to do to the backlog of benefits that are already is already huge. A backlog

is considered a benefit that's been waiting 125 days. So that's that increased nearly 200 percent increase over the last year or so. And the explanation, I guess, would be Covid. But what happens when this new arrival of a new benefit, new benefits arrives? What does it do to diminish the capability of the VA to provide for other veterans? The VA now expects the backlog to further balloon to 700,000 claims, even if Congress provides the department with more resources to process those claims.

Jon: Now, you know, the pushback, I guess I would have on that is, you know, we've been involved in a war for twenty years. And, you know, you would expect that the budget for an organization that exists to care for veterans who are wounded and their families is going to balloon in a 20 year war. And if you look at the Pentagon budgets to prosecute those wars, those have gone up exponentially to the point where, you know, you have in an OCO fund that 60 billion dollars, 70 billion dollars a year that is relatively unaccountable. So, while I appreciate the concern, the true cost of war is something we never really deal with in this country, which is there's always money to prosecute the war. There's always money for defense contractors. And if that is a national defense issue that's great, but a covenant was made with these soldiers and their families, and I think it's really hard to watch this go down 20 years later. And then they balance the budget sort of on the back of these soldiers because there's a backlog of claims so that, you know, the reasoning behind it is while there's a backlog of claims or we — you know, we don't really have the expertise or we don't really have the science, and I think we could walk through each one of those pretty easily and knock them down pretty good, especially the science one.

Moran: Well, and Jon, that was my point, which perhaps I didn't make it. It was a poor communicator. My wife says that about me all the time.

[JON LAUGHS]

Moran: I'm a poor communicator. But the point I was making is this should not be an appropriations — a budget issue.

Jon: I see.

Moran: We are in my view, we're providing significant increases to the Department of Veterans Affairs with the hope that they get their act together, their operational act together to use that money to meet what you said, the 20 years of this war in Afghanistan and at the same time take care of veterans who are already waiting for the benefits that they earned in previous wars.

Tester: I don't think there's any disagreement whatsoever that when we send men and women off to war that we have an obligation as American taxpayer to try to get their life back to as normal as we possibly can. And we also have an obligation with this bill to get enough votes to get this baby passed and get it to the president's desk.

Moran: What John and I think is not necessarily what every member of the United States Senate who's going to be voting on this bill, so we all have to fashion a bill that doesn't just satisfy a handful of us, but satisfies at least 60 of us. And some people will have different priorities on how they spend money. But my priority is to keep the commitments that have been made to those who served. And that commitment was if you suffer and an injury or a condition as a result of your service and as a result, you are in need of health care or as a result, you're in need of benefits to compensate for loss of income, then there's not a question about that, that for these veterans the day that we started battle in Afghanistan. And it's not a decision that we now can change. The decision was made. Our responsibility, our requirement is that that decision is fulfilled.

Jon: You know, I'm curious, guys, why do you think it is that toxic exposure is not looked upon in the same way as a physical wound that. Why do you think it's not looked at as sort of an IED that goes off in your body seven to 10 years later so that connecting it to service is not so difficult for these families? You know, there's a memo that went out at the Pentagon that said. We have to stop using burn pits, it's putting the health and welfare and safety of our soldiers in danger. And then a memo went out from the VA, from them internally saying, here are the toxins and you're going to start to see cases. If you see anybody from Iraq or Afghanistan, you have to presume that they've been exposed to and it lists, you know, tetra fluorocarbons and benzene and dioxins and a list of illnesses. And here we are 12 years later. And they're still saying to these soldiers, yeah, we're going to look at the science. They knew then, and it's the same chemicals that were used in Agent Orange. So I'm having a hard time understanding why this process isn't flipped a little bit. And instead of talking about science and cost. It's purely not about a five year implementation program, the VA clearly has the ability to have expertise when they're dealing with amputees and adaptive rehabilitation. It's second to none. Why is toxic exposure so trapped? And so many years behind, and why are we losing so many soldiers while we wait?

Tester: Look, I'll give you my perspective. When you're talking about an explosion, it is a specific event. And you can point right to that event and you can point right to the damage that was done by that event. When you have something like Agent Orange or you have something like radiation or in this case, burn pits, it's a general exposure over a period of time. It's not one and done and move on. I agree with you. Look, I think if we'd have had better communication between the VA and the Department of Defense, this didn't need to happen. But the truth is if you burn a garbage beside a barracks, that's a problem. And we need to have folks think about that angle, too. But look, I can't argue with you, Jon. I mean, I think that we've always been late to the party when it comes to toxic exposure.

Moran: The issue here mostly to me is operational. How do you get the VA to provide the services and benefits? But also, I would highlight your memo. You highlight the fact that there are veterans who have not received benefits, even though that was known then. I also would highlight in addition to that, there are veterans that were exposed after that, after it was known and created more veterans with more problems. So if the defense is already saying that in 2009.

I mean, the Department of Defense should be held accountable for their negligence in not protecting the soldiers that now have this.

Jon: I couldn't agree more. I think that's absolutely right.

Moran: Why are there thousands more of [veterans] that could have avoided being exposed to toxic substances if the Department of Defense already?

Jon: Absolutely. And the strange thing is, you know, the contractors are granted sovereign immunity. So there's no recourse for the soldier in terms of negligence of the contractor who, you know, we all know you can't burn the types of hazardous materials with jet fuel in these giant pits next to people sleeping. You certainly can't do it in the United States and you shouldn't be able to do it even in a theater of war, especially when incinerators exist, were shipped there in many cases, and weren't implemented. My concern is with the science and with the implementation. If cost wasn't an issue, we would be working on a five year plan of implementation of toxic exposure expertise and really ramping up the VA. What do you guys think about defense contractors footing some of this bill? You know, they make 400 billion dollars a year from the Defense Department. Is there anything like you would do with an oil company that would go to a trust fund that would that would in some way be useful for the consequences of their profit?

Tester: Yeah. I mean, so that's a problem. I obviously there's one thing more than cost, though, Jon, and that's capacity. I mean-

Jon: Aren't they connected though?

Tester: They are absolutely connected, but oftentimes capacity comes after the money. And so, you know, you got to you can say, all right, so we can say, all right, we're going to give you five hundred billion dollars. That doesn't necessarily mean you're going to deal with the issue immediately. It's still going to take time.

Jon: I just think it would it would be a much more positive message to the soldiers who have been waiting if they knew it was a five year implementation plan, not a not a five to ten year. Yeah. We're going to look at the NAS studies, which we know are paid for by the VA and don't have complete information.

Tester: Fair point, fair point. I can't argue it.

Moran: We need to provide these veterans with something called hope that this is not an unending process, that if —

Jon: Right.

Moran: I love the word hope because I think we all need that. I would say beyond that, the VA I mean, we generally have, you know, hearings and you have a panel of VA witnesses and then you have a panel of veteran witnesses. The VA is there, but they ought to they ought to put down their shield and just come set and have, you know, the cup of coffee and figure out how we move more quickly.

Tester: I can't agree more with what Jerry Moran just said. I think how we solve the problems that you've brought up here is, is getting everybody at the table. Even if this bill passes tomorrow, I still think you have to get everybody at the table and say, all right, now, how do we implement this as quickly and as efficiently as possible.

Jon: Right. The toxic exposure crisis is also a mental health crisis. And you have a lot of people who've lost that hope, Senator Moran. And you see suicide and you see families broken. And it's really difficult. But I'm going to share with you something Isiah James said. He was on our panel. He's an infantry, served in, I believe it was Iraq, maybe even Afghanistan. And he said something chilling, which was if any other country treated our fighting men and women and did this in the way that we're doing it to them, we would be at war. And I thought that was a really powerful statement of how they feel which is abandoned and I think they feel exploited and I think there's only one way to change that narrative, and that's to be proactive and not wait for the things that we know already exist. I just wanted to get your feeling on what I have found to be a relatively pervasive state that these veterans are feeling postwar.

Tester: Well, I mean, that's unfortunate. I will tell you that I've been on the V.A. committee for 15 years and my goal has always been to try to make the world right for the folks who serve this country because they've sacrificed, their families have sacrificed. And we need to make sure that if they're changed because of war, that the government has their back. The fact that that the folks think that they have been shortchanged with their military service is not a good sign. And I'll tell you, in a country that has an all volunteer military, it could have some really negative effects on our national security. So all I would tell you is that what I do I think Jerry will tell you the same thing is I work with a veteran service organizations. We try to prioritize most of the time these guys are on the same page. The reason we have this bill in front of us right now is because every veteran service organization came in the beginning of this Congress and said, do this. This is our number one priority. And so that's where we're going.

Jon: Is there any chance this Congress, you know, let's say Veterans Day, is there any chance this thing comes out and really gets down to the floor and we find ourselves in a place of real progress?

Tester: Yeah, I think there is. And I will tell you that I think we can get this bill done by the end of the year. If we don't get it done by the end of the year. It's not the end of the world because we're going to be doing the same thing after January 1st, too. But the bottom line is, I think the goal is to get this done sooner rather than later. And hopefully it'll be as soon as possible.

Jon: And listen, anything that we can do on our end to help push it, whether it's, you know, through veterans outreach or anything else, you know, we'll do, because I do notice that sometimes it takes a little bit of the glare of the light to maybe focus the energy down there. And we're obviously happy to do it for something that we think is so urgent and so crucial. And quite frankly, I'm just tired of losing people.

Tester: Yeah, we are, too.

Jon: All right, guys, I really appreciate your time. I really appreciate you guys sitting together and crafting this bill with so much support and input from the different veterans communities. And I really look forward to a big change happening in their lives. You know, in the near future.

Tester: We have more work to do, Jon, and we're we're going to get 'er done.

Jon: All right, sir. Thank you guys very much. Senator Moran of Kansas, Senator Tester of Montana.

Tester: Thanks, Jon.

[MUSIC]

Jon: So that brings us towards the end of the episode where after all this conversation and joking around, we actually like to highlight somebody who is truly doing good work, perhaps somebody that you have never heard of, perhaps somebody who toils in anonymity to bring change in increments. So here we go with shout out to a boring motherf***** with Robbie Slowik.

[SFX CUE]

Shoutout to this boring motherf*****

Robby: This week we're shouting out Michigan Senator Gary Peters, because we're so sick of all the media attention going to the politicians who are like getting into Twitter wars with Bette Midler or something, and losing! It's like, aren't you a Senator? Why are you fighting Broadway legends online? Why are you tongue kissing a rifle on Instagram then going on CNN to defend that when you should be trying to help your constituents. But they're the ones who get all the press and never Senators like Gary Peters, who was one of the most effective senators in the 116th Congress, which was just this last one. He sponsored 10 bills that were signed into law, including two that directly helped veterans. And he did it all without a sex scandal, which for a senator is really something. I mean you guys are all 80 years old, how are you still doing this, what do you have candy jars of Cialis laying around your offices? You can follow the good work Senator Peters is doing on Twitter, where his handle is @SenatorGaryPeters not super creative which tracks because he's too busy doing the work. And his feed is so boring it could be a contestant on "The Bachelorette," and not one who's cut right away, no those guys are usually interesting, one who gets sent home right before hometowns, who stick it out right to the very

end and make you watch their boring journey. Those guys are always the worst. Anyway, follow Senator Gary Peters, shoutout to that boring motherf*****.

[MUSIC]

Jon: That's it, everybody, that is the first episode of the podcast. I now have my podcasting merit badge, which I will put on my podcasting sash, which goes along with my podcasting attaché. We truly hope you enjoyed it. Thank you again for joining us.

[MUSIC]

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