



**Episode 1,044: GOP Congressman Denounces Pentagon Budget**

**Guest: John Duncan**

**WOODS:** I really, really like your article. I want to talk about it in a minute. But I'm very sad to know that this is probably the last time we'll speak with you as a member of Congress.

**DUNCAN:** Well, you know, I've got nine little grandchildren all here in Knoxville and I think my family needs me maybe more than my country does at this time. I want to spend a little family time, and I've missed a lot of things with my own — you know, I have four grown children, but I missed a lot of things when they were growing up, and so at the end of this term, it will be 30 years in the Congress, and that's probably enough, although I'm certainly still going to be very interested in national and international issues and hopefully maybe will write some more articles.

**WOODS:** Well, sure, and of course I understand that the schedule of a congressman is harrowing, because not only are you away from home for a long time being in Washington, but also when you are home, there's so much constituent work to do and in effect campaigning for the next run. It must be exhausting. I don't know how somebody does that for 30 years.

**DUNCAN:** Well, I'll tell you, most of us work harder at home than we do when we're in Washington, because I've always felt very lucky to have my job, but in this job you get to work nights and weekends and holidays. And I have one of those — it's not like a big-city district where you cross the street and you're in a different district and you're lucky if half the people know who the congressman is, or a very rural district where the lines have been changed many times over the years. In this district, I'm sure there's several thousand who'll be glad if I drop dead today, but they do know the name Duncan, and so we get an awful lot of invitations. And I tell people I've got 780,000 bosses, and it's growing every day because Knoxville's one of the most popular places to move to in the whole country. People all over the country are moving from the high-tax states to the low-tax states.

**WOODS:** Ah, makes sense, makes sense. Now, are you anywhere near where Glenn Jacobs is?

**DUNCAN:** Oh yes, uh huh. In fact, he's a friend of mine. I've eaten with him and I have two sons who are big wrestling fans, so I've been to some wrestling matches over the years, more so when they were little. But they're grown. One is 31 and one's 36, and much to my surprise, they're still big wrestling fans and big fans of Kane. But you

know, I mentioned a moment ago that people are moving from the high-tax states to the low-tax states. The most romantic way that I can show that, New York had 41 congressmen in the 1970s. Now they've got 27. And somebody told me a couple months ago that they're probably going to go to 25 or 24 in the next Congress. And it's really dramatic. That's what's been happening all over the Northeast and the Midwest. In fact, when Flint, Michigan was having all those water problems, it was in large part because they'd lost almost half their population since the 1970s.

**WOODS:** Let's switch gears and talk a bit about your article. I'm going to have a link to it up at [TomWoods.com/1044](http://TomWoods.com/1044), which is our episode number.

And you talk in here about – you say, "On November 14, the House passed what one Capitol Hill paper described as a '\$700 billion compromise defense bill.' It was \$80 billion over the budget caps and many billions more than even President Trump had requested."

Is there a part of you that thinks that more than not, the military budget is a racket?

**DUNCAN:** Well, I said in this article that I've wondered several times over the years whether there's any fiscal conservatives at the Pentagon because when it comes to money, the Defense Department is just a gigantic bureaucracy that says, "More, more, more." And one of the main points of this article was that it's very false to think that the Defense Department has been cut drastically or depleted or eviscerated or whatever, as we've heard so many times over the last few years, because the 700 billion is not the entire amount that the Defense Department gets. The Military Construction Bill is a different bill, and then they also get extra amounts in most of the emergency and supplemental appropriations bills – for instance, the flooding bills and various others. And then the omnibus bill at the end of the year, which we do every time, usually contains even more for the Defense Department.

**WOODS:** It's quite something. You're right, because I'm looking in your article and the statistics are pretty telling. I mean, Defense Department appropriations more than doubling since 2000, emergency and supplemental appropriation bills. Then money spent every single year on new equipment and tanks and everything, and most of this is stuff that doesn't wear out after one year. And then you point out that – you say, "It is ironic that the only president in the last 60 or 70 years who has tried to rein in defense spending is the only president in that period who spent most of his career in the military." And who would that be?

**DUNCAN:** Well, that was Dwight Eisenhower. I read a book a couple of years ago called *Ike's Bluff* about Eisenhower's foreign policy, and at one point in that book, it says that he told his top staffer, when his staffer told him he couldn't cut the military, he said if he gave every general who would cut his budget an extra star, he said you'd have to get out of the way of the rush. And he said, "Heaven help me if we ever have a president who doesn't know as much about the military as I do." And of course his most famous speech was his farewell address about the military industrial complex, and I've said before that I think Eisenhower would be shocked by how far we've gone down that road that he warned us against. And I'll say this. I think national defense is probably one of the most legitimate functions of the federal government, and I actually served

in the military and I'm not a pacifist, but it's ridiculous how we've gone overboard in this way over the last many years.

**WOODS:** It's interesting that *The New York Times*, which you quote in here, had an editorial last month called "America's Forever Wars," talking about the U.S. being at war continuously since the attacks of 9/11. Well, that's very sweet and kind of them to point that out, but they themselves played no small role in propagandizing for precisely this outcome.

**DUNCAN:** Well, that's true, and I said in my article that it's almost a huge understatement to say that I very seldom agree with the *New York Times* editorial board, but when they wrote this editorial about America's forever wars and they said in the editorial that the U.S. now has troops in at least 172 countries and it said the American people seem to have accepted all this militarism so far, but "it's a very real question whether, in addition to endorsing these commitments, which have cost trillions of dollars and many lives over 16 years, whether or not they will embrace new entanglements." And of course, as I pointed out on an earlier program with you, I'm the only Republican left in the Congress now that voted against going to war in Iraq, and I certainly would do that all over again. I told you once before and I've said it before that, while that was probably the most unpopular vote I ever cast in my district for three or four years, it slowly became probably the most popular vote I've ever cast.

**WOODS:** On the other hand, the folks who are in the interventionist camp, they speak at well-funded conferences, there's money flowing like crazy, there's donations coming into them. It doesn't seem like there's a lot of money in being a noninterventionist.

**DUNCAN:** Well, there's not, and I think you're very accurate in saying that, really, most of this is more about money than it is about any real threat to this country. And I think it's very sad, particularly when you've considered that we're over \$20 trillion in debt and two or three weeks ago they reported that the deficit for this past fiscal year, which just ended, was 666 billion, and next year it may be even higher. It's really sad what we're doing to this country.

And as I pointed out in that article, in the last fiscal year, we spent – or in fiscal year 2016, we spent 177.5 billion on new equipment. And we do that every year, and yet we hear on the news that the equipment is outdated, everything's old. Well, everything is not old, and they're just loaded with all kinds of new equipment. And I want our military to be well equipped, but you can go ridiculously overboard on anything and I think that's pretty much what we've done. In fact, I said in this article, I said I think public relations students and professors in future years should study how in the world the Pentagon has been able to convince most of the people in the country that they've been cut drastically at the same time that they're getting more money than ever before.

**WOODS:** Yeah, you know, in a way it's obviously on a much larger scale, but I can think of the education bureaucracy I think is the same way. There are really no cuts to education, so-called. That money goes up every single year. But the impression is given that if they don't have that bake sale, they're that close to just going under or something. And it's not so. The numbers go up and up and up and the results get worse and worse. Just education and the military being very similar in that respect.

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Congressman, also in your article you say we have too many officers, too many military officers. What do you mean by that?

**DUNCAN:** Well, I said in this article – you know, I read in Scott Berg's biography of Woodrow Wilson that he said that in World War I we had 30 enlisted members to each one officer. And then I remember reading several years ago that Dwight Eisenhower, once again quoting him, that he said we had too many officers when we had nine enlisted for each officer. And today, we have four and half to five and a half enlisted for each officer. And so this is very expensive, both in regard to active duty and in retirement. I remember several years ago that I'd ask how many retired admirals and generals there were, and there were almost 8,000 at that point. It's probably even more now. And at the same time, I think there were a little over 400 retired members of Congress.

But we have too many officers, and I think that helps advance the fact that we will have troops based in almost every country in the world, and I think it makes us more likely to get into all these little wars all around the world. I mean, when it came out a few months ago that we had 1,000 troops in Niger, almost nobody in the Congress even knew that they were there.

**WOODS:** What's your relationship with the GOP been like since that fateful vote in 2003?

**DUNCAN:** Well, I get along personally with almost everybody in the Congress, but obviously my position on this is very much in a minority. Although I think it's becoming more and more a majority feeling among the populous all across the country. You know, I wrote an article for *The American Conservative* magazine I think in 2015 in which I said that at one point, the Republican Party was the peace party in this country.

And I was speaking to – at that point, I was speaking at the Willard Hotel in downtown Washington to 200 executives from the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, and I said in that speech, I said that we're long past the time when we should stop trying to run the whole world and we should start putting our own country and our own people first once again. And I was very surprised – I had said that in speeches around the country and in my district to middle- and lower-income groups and was always interrupted by applause. Well, I was surprised, though, that this very upper-income group that I was speaking to also interrupted those comments or that part of my speech by applause. And I think it was sort of a forerunner of the platform that President Trump later ran on.

**WOODS:** Where do you see the GOP in 2020 when it comes time for – well, I guess in 2019 you'd have a presidential election coming up. The GOP seems very divided, although of course these days, the Democrats are divided too, the progressive

insurgents vs. the Hillary establishment and some other divisions. But what do you see coming out of all of this for the Republicans?

**DUNCAN:** Well, I think that the Republicans will be all right if we can pass some of these things, if we can pass the tax cut, and also if we would start following the platform or the views that President Trump ran on, which are sort of the America First-type platform. I think that's very appealing to most people. If we continue to be the hawkish, interventionist party, then I think we will have trouble. And you know, you mentioned that comment that I had in the article about too many officers, and that came from that biography on Woodrow Wilson. But I will tell you the most interesting thing, these little wars seem to foster other wars.

And I was very interested, in that same book on Woodrow Wilson, you know, Winston Churchill told William Griffin, a New York newspaper editor in 1936, he said America should have minded its own business and stayed out of the World War – he was talking about World War I. And Churchill said if you hadn't entered the war, the Allies would have made peace with Germany in the spring of 1917. Had we made peace, then there would have been no collapse in Russia followed by communism, no breakdown in Italy followed by fascism, and Germany would not have enthroned Nazism. And that's a quote from Winston Churchill, so I think that was very surprising. But I think that in many ways, the foreign policy that we've followed over the last few years have created more enemies for this country than they have friends, especially in the Middle East.

**WOODS:** That is interesting about Churchill saying that, because that is the standard view that the noninterventionists have, to go to show that simply because you have good intentions – *Why, we need to get rid of this German regime* – is not really enough, because there are a lot of consequences to that. You may find yourself pining for that regime some day when you realize that in this world you're often faced with a choice of bad versus worse as opposed to bad versus good.

But I wonder, certainly with the Middle East stuff today, it seems like the people waging these wars have got to have their own private agenda. It can't be that they just can't see – can it really be that they simply are blind to the fact that if you knock out Iraq, you by default strengthen Iran? I mean, are they really that dim that they couldn't see that? If they had taken one half of a Middle East course, they would have seen that you're just going to empower the Shiites, who will just cleanse the Sunnis, and then you're going to strengthen Iran. I mean, is it really a matter of stupidity, or do they have some agenda other than their stated one? How do you make sense of all this?

**DUNCAN:** Well, I don't know. I don't think it's stupidity, but I think it's just almost humanly impossible for the neocons to admit that they've been just totally wrong in all their foreign policy views that they've advocated over the last few years, that everything they've supported just about has gone badly or has been proven to be among the biggest foreign policy mistakes that we've made in the history of this country. I'd almost like to see what Bill Kristol would say if I read that same quote from Churchill to him or the neocons at *The Weekly Standard*, because they seem to hold Churchill up as a model and that quote that I had goes totally against everything that they've advocated over the last few years.

**WOODS:** So with you retiring, who's going to replace you? Are they having an election? What's going on?

**DUNCAN:** Well, there are several people running for my seat now, and so that's still sort of up in the air. But there of course are friends of mine in the Congress — Walter Jones is running for reelection and Thomas Massie and Justin Amash. And there's a few others. Morgan Griffith from southwest Virginia has voted with us on several things, and Mark Sandford of South Carolina votes with a lot of the time, and there are others. And I think it's a view that's slowly, slowly, slowly becoming more acceptable and popular in the Republican Party.

Although I will tell you this. I've been fiscally conservative about almost everything, not just defense. And you talk about my standing in the party. In my first six years in office, we were in the minority and almost all the Republicans voted the same way that I was voting. Then we took control, and I kept voting against these big spending bills. And Tom DeLay at that point was more powerful than the Speaker, and he came to me one time and he told me — he said, "But these are Republican bills now." And I said, "Yes, Tom, but you're spending more money than the Democrats were spending." I will give him credit in that the Democrats were still attacking for not spending even more, but I think we very much disappointed our base by not holding down spending when we had the White House and the Congress.

**WOODS:** Doesn't it feel like President Trump had the ability, because of his independence and his maverick streak and all that — he doesn't owe anything to anybody — could have been the guy in theory to stand up and say, You know what — and he can speak to the Republican masses, a lot of them, and say, *You know what? This is really not helping us, all this intervention. It's just draining resources that you and I both know we obviously need here.* And even if he wanted to say to the people who say we have to fight them over there so they don't come here, he could even reach them by saying, *Well, what do you think's easier? Transforming their entire societies or just building a wall? If you want to keep them from getting here, that would seem to be a lot easier.* At least he could speak to them that way. He could make them think in a new way. And instead, for the most part, since he's gotten in power he's got them thinking in the same old ways.

**DUNCAN:** Well, I think and I hope that President Trump's heart is in the right place, and many things that he said over the years are things that I'm very much in agreement with him on, and I still have hope for him. I think that because he's been in business, I don't think he's followed some of these issues as closely as I have, and I think he probably really believes that, for instance, the Defense Department has been greatly cut and so forth. But I do think that he wants to try to broker some type of peace in the Middle East, and I don't think he's particularly anxious to or not nearly as anxious as some of our leaders have been in the past few years to get us into another war of some sort.

**WOODS:** That's true, that's true, although the posture toward Iran is not that helpful and the obsequiousness towards Saudi Arabia seems altogether unnecessary even if you want to maintain decent relations with them. But of course, if he surrounds himself with generals, how can he be surprised that he gets advice that, hey, we need more equipment? I mean, that's the way it goes, right? If I surround myself with

elementary school teachers, I'm going to hear sob stories about how they don't have chalk and erasers.

**DUNCAN:** Well, that's true, and I've been a little bit concerned that he had too many generals running the show. And also, I'm in a different spot on Iran than he is also, because all the — Iran has fully complied and done everything they were supposed to do, and so I voted against some of these additional sanctions on Iran because I said — in fact, I was on NPR one weekend, and they asked me about that because I was one of three people that voted not to add additional sanctions to Iran. And I said, well, I didn't think we should slap them in the face at the time they're doing everything that we asked or demanded that they do.

**WOODS:** Well, Congressman, now that you are on your way to retirement, as you say, you hope we'll still see more articles from you. What's the most common outlet for you? Is it *The American Conservative*?

**DUNCAN:** Well, I hope so. *The American Conservative*, though, wanted to change — I submitted this article to them first, and they wanted to change several things there, so I had a friendly I guess disagreement with them. But I still like *The American Conservative*. I've written for *Chronicles*; I've written for a lot of publications. I've written for some of the Capitol Hill newspapers. And I'm leaving the Congress, but I really am not — I'm hoping that I'm not going to be retired. I'm just going to continue to speak out on some of the issues. And then in addition to that, Lincoln Memorial University a few years ago was kind enough to name its law school after me, and I think maybe they want me to maybe teach a course or two at that law school. So I'm going to keep on trying to do a lot of different things, but certainly push these views that I expressed in this article in every way possible. And you know, when I first came to Congress, our national debt was slightly less than \$3 trillion, and I thought that was terrible. And now we're up over 20 trillion and going higher all the time.

**WOODS:** Well, let me tell you something, Congressman. I know you know this already, but it needs to be repeated. The fact that you as a Republican stood up against this war at a time when it was extremely unpopular, especially among Republicans, to do so was very, very important for a lot of reasons, not least of which is that it made clear that you don't have to be a commie to be antiwar. In fact, the commies are totally opportunistic when it comes to war anyway. It's not like communist regimes were particularly hesitant about using military force. So you helped to show that there's a coherent way of looking at the world that involves a respect for free markets and for peace and nonintervention, and there are precious few voices like that and every one of them is a true gem. And so we're grateful for what you did, and thank you very much for that and for your time today.

**DUNCAN:** Well, thank you, Tom. I certainly appreciate the work that you do and I enjoy listening to your podcast all the time. You have a real interesting variety of people on there, and I just wish that more and more people were listening. And I'm sure that you have a great many listeners all across the country, so it's a real honor for me to be on here with you again.

**WOODS:** Very kind, Congressman. Thanks again.