Nicola S. (Niki) Tsongas

U.S. Representative of Massachusetts (2007-2019)

Oral History Interview
Final Edited Transcript

January 18, 2018

Office of the Historian
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C.

"But the thing that struck me in those first weeks or two that, as we were rushing over to vote, I said it was like going from the playing field to the locker room. The only thing that was missing was the snapping of the towels. There was this kind of physicality and energy that I think reflected the fact that it has been historically shaped by men only and that women had not been part of it. Had we been part of it from the outset, I do think there would have been a different kind of aura on the floor of the House."

The Honorable Nicola S. (Niki) Tsongas
January 18, 2018

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Abstract

Growing up in a military family, Nicola S. (Niki) Tsongas traveled the world and lived abroad as a child. In her interview she describes how the frequent moves encouraged her to adapt and connect with people from different countries and diverse backgrounds. Initially drawn to politics during John F. Kennedy's presidency, her marriage to Paul Efthemios Tsongas and support of his political aspirations had an impact on her own career path. Tsongas recalls her active work in her husband's House, Senate, and presidential campaigns. She credits her "independent role" on the campaign trail during this period as valuable experience in engaging with and understanding voters—skills she utilized during her six terms in the House of Representatives. Tsongas recalls her time as a congressional wife, including the observations about her husband's "Watergate baby" freshman class, as well as the culture and typical lifestyle of Capitol Hill during the 1970s and 1980s.

During her interview, Tsongas describes why she ran for Congress in 2007. With her special election win she became the first woman in 25 years to represent Massachusetts in Congress—an important achievement for Tsongas who spoke of the need for women to seek elected office. Tsongas compares her experience in the House with her husband's time in Congress, pointing out key differences such as campaigning, fundraising, and life at the Capitol. She also describes her time on the Armed Services Committee and how she worked on issues directly affecting women in the military. Finally, Tsongas shares her reasons for not seeking re-election to Congress.

Biography

TSONGAS, Nicola S. (Niki), (wife of Paul Tsongas), a Representative from Massachusetts; born in Chico, Butte County, Calif., April 26, 1946; graduated from Narimasu American High School, Tokyo, Japan, 1964; attended Michigan State University, East Lansing, Mich.; B.A., Smith College, Northampton, Mass. 1968; J.D., Boston University, Boston, Mass., 1988; social worker; lawyer, private practice; dean of external affairs, Middlesex Community College, Lowell, Mass., 1997–2007; elected as a Democrat to the One Hundred Tenth Congress, by special election, to fill the vacancy caused by the resignation of Representative Martin Meehan, and reelected to the five succeeding Congresses (October 16, 2007–January 3, 2019); was not a candidate for reelection to the One Hundred Sixteenth Congress in 2018.

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Editing Practices

In preparing interview transcripts for publication, the editors sought to balance several priorities:

- As a primary rule, the editors aimed for fidelity to the spoken word and the conversational style in accord with generally accepted oral history practices.
- The editors made minor editorial changes to the transcripts in instances where they believed such changes would make interviews more accessible to readers. For instance, excessive false starts and filler words were removed when they did not materially affect the meaning of the ideas expressed by the interviewee.
- In accord with standard oral history practices, interviewees were allowed to review their transcripts, although they were encouraged to avoid making substantial editorial revisions and deletions that would change the conversational style of the transcripts or the ideas expressed therein.
- The editors welcomed additional notes, comments, or written observations that the interviewees wished to insert into the record and noted any substantial changes or redactions to the transcript.
- Copy-editing of the transcripts was based on the standards set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

The first reference to a Member of Congress (House or Senate) is underlined in the oral history transcript. For more information about individuals who served in the House or Senate, please refer to the online *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, http://bioguide.congress.gov and the "People Search" section of the History, Art & Archives website, http://history.house.gov.

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Interviewer Biographies

Matt Wasniewski is the Historian of the U.S. House of Representatives, a position he has held since 2010. He has worked in the House as a historical editor and manager since 2002. Matt served as the editor-in-chief of *Women in Congress, 1917–2006* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2006), *Black Americans in Congress, 1870–2007* (GPO, 2008), *Hispanic Americans in Congress, 1822–2012* (GPO, 2013), and *Asian and Pacific Islander Americans in Congress: 1900-2017* (GPO, 2017). He helped to create the House's first oral history program, focusing on collecting the institutional memory of current and former Members, longtime staff, and support personnel. Matt earned his Ph.D. in U.S. history from the University of Maryland, College Park. His prior work experience includes several years as the associate historian and communications director at the U.S. Capitol Historical Society, and, in the early 1990s, as the sports editor for a northern Virginia newspaper.

Kathleen Johnson is the Manager of Oral History for the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. She earned a B.A. in history from Columbia University, where she also played basketball for four years, and holds two master's degrees from North Carolina State University in education and public history. In 2004, she helped to create the House's first oral history program, focusing on collecting the institutional memory of Members and staff. She co-authored two books: *Women in Congress: 1917–2006* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2006) and *Black Americans in Congress: 1870–2007* (GPO, 2008). Before joining the Office of the Historian, she worked as a high school history teacher and social studies curriculum consultant.

— THE HONORABLE NICOLA S. (NIKI) TSONGAS OF MASSACHUSETTS —
A CENTURY OF WOMEN IN CONGRESS

JOHNSON: My name is Kathleen Johnson, and I'm here with the House Historian Matt Wasniewski. Today's date is January 18th, 2018, and we are very pleased to be here with Congresswoman Niki [Nicola S.] Tsongas of Massachusetts. Thank you so much for coming in.

TSONGAS: Great to be with you.

JOHNSON: This is part of a project that we've been conducting now for almost three years in honor of the 100th anniversary of the election of Jeannette Rankin, the first woman elected to Congress. And we've interviewed a series of former and current Members of Congress and also staff. To start off with today, when you were young, did you have any female role models?

TSONGAS: Well if I think back to it, I would say it must have originated with both my mother and my grandmother. My grandmother had attended college. She went to the University of California in Berkeley. She ended up having to raise her daughters by herself. She came to live with us when she was in her 70s. I think there was something about her determined independence and not letting anything get her down that must have resonated with me. My mother always valued education. She could never attend the art school she wanted to attend; her father insisted that she go to Northwestern and major in mining engineering. And somehow or other, her suggesting that we each needed to follow our own path, get educated—she or my father would never stand in our way—I think were probably quite important. So if I look at just in the very early stages of my young life, I would have to say that they were the two dominant role models.

But over time, I ended up attending a women's college. I went to Smith College in Massachusetts. I just recently had to reflect on the impact of Smith because it will be my 50th reunion year this May. I think going to a school, first of all, that was very challenging academically, thrilling in many ways, being with many young women who were aspiring to fields that historically had been dominated by men. I really was part of a change, a wave that was coming for women. I think that helped fuel my life, really. So no one person, but I think sort of both my mother and grandmother reflecting their times, and then making my way to a college that just fostered that in every way.

JOHNSON: When you were young, what did you aspire to be when you grew up?

TSONGAS: Well I really remember when I was in the eighth grade we had to write something about what we wanted to be, I wanted to dance in a chorus line. I love dancing, and I just saw that as being something that I would enjoy. But that didn't last for very long. But I look back on it, and I do have to laugh. I think, actually, the way it connects with what we do now is there is always a public face to what we do. And you have to be very comfortable with a lot of [being] in the limelight with a lot of attention focused on you. You have to be willing—that's part of the job—you have to be willing to do that, as uncomfortable as it sometimes may be. So I do think there's sort of this very modest link. But I've never been asked to dance in public.

WASNIEWSKI: Your father was in the Air Force, and we're curious to know how that affected your upbringing and your outlook on life?

TSONGAS: Well, as I look back on that as well, I think it wasn't always easy because of the frequent moves that a military family has to do. But you also learn to adapt, and you learn how to engage with people, and as you make your way

through whatever it is you're doing. I do think both my parents' commitment to service was something I always felt and may not have recognized it as such. But looking back on it, this commitment to your country, I think, was very important. It also exposed me to the international community.

I lived in Germany not that long after World War II; it's where I learned to read. I lived in Tokyo in the early '60s when Japan was undergoing rapid change. Again, not that long after World War II. Yet I found two countries that were very open and friendly; I never felt any resistance there, and I think it sort of shaped my view internationally. I think it's something that has lived with me today. We also lived at Langley Air Force Base in the late '50s, when they were training the first astronauts. So again, part of the culture was—I sort of saw the role of the United States leading the way, using new technology, not deterred by new frontiers. Which then, I do think President [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy aligned himself with and, I think, resonated with me as I was growing up. I was exposed to some remarkable places and some remarkable people steeped in public service and serving one's country that I think have stayed with me today.

WASNIEWSKI: And how was it that you became interested in politics? Was this something that was discussed around the dinner table with the family, or was it something that came a little bit later in life?

TSONGAS: My father was not particularly political, and I think in the military there is that resistance. You serve your country, and you serve your President, and your goal is to do whatever you're called upon to do to protect your country.

But my mother loved politics. And it's not something she talked about, but I remember when I was about 10 years old, she was up watching presidential

returns—President [Dwight D.] Eisenhower was re-elected—and for some reason, I think maybe that's what initially piqued my interest.

It was further fostered, I tell the story of being—my father had been stationed in Tokyo, Japan. And my grandmother was coming to live with us at that point, so this is in the summer of 1960, and we're on a ship, crossing the Pacific Ocean. She and I were staying up late to play cards. And this one evening, we heard over the loudspeaker—and we were on a Navy ship, it was barebones, there was nothing fancy about it—but we were both up late at night, playing cards, as we did into the wee hours, and I happened to hear John Kennedy—JFK's acceptance speech—at the Democratic Convention. I could not tell you what he said. I have no recollection of any individual word, but I can forever hear his voice. And I, like many, was captivated by his presidency. I think so saddened by his sudden death and I think drew me to the Democratic Party. My parents had been Republicans. My husband [Paul Efthemios Tsongas] often said that he grew up in a disadvantaged household—his parents were Republicans. I never felt it quite that way, but nevertheless, I think it was the presidency of John Kennedy, in my high school years, that really drew me to politics.

JOHNSON: You just mentioned your husband, and for someone like me, who grew up in Massachusetts, Paul Tsongas was a household name. And he started his career in the House, well not started his career, but that was an important part of his career. How involved were you in his congressional campaigns?

TSONGAS: Well I was involved in virtually every campaign that he participated in. And so, having grown up in the Air Force, and meeting Paul as a college junior, he was at that point, an intern in Washington, DC. I was off the Hill, but I also was in Washington, and we met at a party, by happenstance. And I

always say it's the only party he ever willingly went to in his life, but thankfully, he did.

But his ambition when we first met was to eventually run for Congress. I don't think he, at that point, he envisioned himself as ever running for the United States Senate or certainly not the presidency. But in order to do that he had to start very locally, and he ran for the city council. At that time, I was living in New York City, but I would come up every weekend to go door to door for him. Then he ran a reform campaign for county commissioner, pledged to eliminate county government, and took some major steps to do that.

Again, I was always very much a part of the campaign, primarily in terms of being out meeting voters and talking about what he wanted to do. Paul walked the county, and I would catch up with him and walk with him at different times even though I was working at the time. But we would try to coordinate. So when he ran for Congress, I took on a very independent role. I had a schedule that I would go out, we would target particular communities or events that he couldn't attend that someone needed to go to, and I would often fill in for him, as did his sister on occasion. So it was very much a family effort in which we just focused on different parts of the district, and I would do that. And similarly, I did that when he ran for the United States Senate.

I actually had someone whose job it was to schedule me all across the Commonwealth [of Massachusetts], and I would go out, and I would speak about Paul. At that time there was a lot of local radio. So I would go to local radio stations and would be interviewed. I'd meet with voters—literally wherever there were voters, I would go. Often had one person with me, and

we would just travel the state. So I got a lot of experience participating in the campaigning side of politics and was happy to do that in every round. It was my pleasure to do that, and I always felt very proud of Paul and the candidate that I was out there supporting and advocating for.

WASNIEWSKI: Did you live back in the district while he was in the House? Or did you move to DC?

TSONGAS: It was really a different era. In that era, both in the House and the Senate, the legislative workweek was really a full week. Now we're in an era where we're literally here three-and-a-half days a week. And so as a result, most family stayed back in their districts, because the Members, the Senator or the Member of Congress, have to make their way back because their families are there, but also because they need to connect with voters. But when Paul was in office, it was a full week and so most families because of that moved here so they could spend those five days a week at least with their loved one.

So we did live here. We lived here for 10 years. Both while Paul was in the House and the Senate. Our kids went to school here, started school here, went to school here. And Paul would then travel on the weekends, so often be gone on the weekends but always home at a pretty reasonable hour at night. Again, because they were here all week, they weren't going into late hours as we now do. Paul would be home by 6:00 or 7:00. He would head into the office about 8:00 or 9:00 in the morning, so he could walk the kids to school, help read a story at night. So we lived here, and we lived in a neighborhood that was peopled with Members of Congress. So it was a very different lifestyle than it is now for Members.

WASNIEWSKI: Yes. And he was part of that Watergate Baby class, too, elected in '74, and can you talk a little bit about the culture of the House? You've alluded to at least the family aspect, but how different the culture of the House was then?

TSONGAS: Well, it was quite different. Among other things, it was Democratically controlled. It was nowhere near as partisan. When Paul came in, he was part of a, as you said, that Watergate class—very, very young Members of Congress, many of whom stayed on for a good number of years, and then some made their way to the Senate. I think it's only just recently that the last Member of that class has left the Senate.

So we were young, we were energetic, I think in many ways, we didn't fully appreciate what we had achieved to be so young and to be in such important and significant roles, in terms of managing the political life of this country. But it was heady, very, very exciting. And something that I think, looking back, it was a change that was needed. There was no doubt about it. It was a change that was needed, and it brought out lots of people who had an ambition to run. As I see, we're seeing it again. The cycle is sort of coming back around as people so deeply concerned about the politics of our country—lots of people who might not ever have imagined running are now running.

JOHNSON: So we jump forward now to 2007. Matt and I were wondering what motivated you to run for Congress?

TSONGAS: It had been 25 years since Massachusetts had elected a woman to Congress [Margaret M. Heckler]. And in fact, we had only elected three totally. I understood—having lived with Paul in those many years—I understood the opportunity afforded by being a Member of Congress. I always saw it was one of the best jobs in the world. It's multifaceted in terms of the

opportunities it creates for making a difference in the lives of your constituents, your communities, and your country.

So I had great respect—and still have great respect for what is possible—but it was also true that as I said, Massachusetts hadn't sent a woman to Congress in 25 years. And as I often say, we can't win if we don't run. I literally, just on the spot, decided that I was going to run for office—twofold. I understood what was possible. I'd spent my life committed to my communities. And again, I felt women's voices were needed to be at the table, and that would not happen if we didn't run. As challenging as it is to run and win, nevertheless, we have to take advantage of those opportunities when they come along.

JOHNSON: Did anyone recruit you, or was this solely your decision?

TSONGAS: I wouldn't say people recruited me. Over time, people had suggested about lots of other offices that I should run. And so, in this instance, I wouldn't say there was recruitment, but I knew that it had been 10 years since Paul had passed away, it had been 15 years since he had run for President, it had been 23 years since he had served in the Senate. So I knew I needed to reach out and make sure that I would be taken seriously and that I would be a viable candidate. I had to test that I would be willing to raise money because that is one thing that has really changed: the amount of dollars, or at least at that point, had really changed. The amount of dollars you have to raise to be a viable contender are significant. So I had to make sure that I was not only willing to do—that I was one, willing to do that, but secondly, that people would be receptive to it. But I also had to reach—since it had been those 10 years since we had been in a campaign that I could assemble a good team of people to help me run.

And so I first turned to Dennis Kanin, who had been Paul's campaign manager for every time he ran, for the two times he ran for the House, one time he ran for the Senate, and also campaign manager when he ran for the presidency. And Dennis was very willing to help me, and it's so important that he did.

And then we looked to see if we could recruit other people to help manage this campaign, whether we would be taken seriously. Deval Patrick had just run successfully in Massachusetts for governor, and he had brought a whole new group of people together, so I wanted to reach out to them to see, to sort of assess how they viewed my candidacy. And just did that: old friends, new friends, I did try to do all that before I firmly decided to run. But I think it would take an awful lot to deter me.

JOHNSON: Did any of those people that you just mentioned offer memorable advice or helpful advice?

TSONGAS: I can't remember it offhand, but I'm sure it shaped how we moved going forward. It was also true that Dennis had participated in a lot of campaigns along the way since Paul's run for the presidency. I had someone by my side who was very familiar with how political campaigns had evolved and kind of how you make your way in a different era.

WASNIEWSKI: And you had to run in a special election, too. Can you talk a little bit about how that's different from a typical campaign?

TSONGAS: Well what's really different about that is you're a standalone election. You really have to get people's attention because the bottom line in the end is getting people out to vote when it's not in the normal cycle of things. So, that was really a challenge we faced. But the hardest part, I think, in any

campaign, whether it's a special or otherwise, is the primary side of it. Because there were five candidates, you're basically—it's like a family fight—you're fighting with people you don't want to fight with—everybody wants to win—and so it is hard fought. This one certainly was hard fought. But in the end, the real challenge was getting people out to vote, both for the primary itself, and then for the general election. And so much of our effort had to go into that.

JOHNSON: Was there one point in either the primary or the general election that was what you'd consider a turning point or something where you knew you had a really good chance of winning?

TSONGAS: I never took that for granted. I absolutely never took that for granted. This district is not an easy one, by any means. It's 50 percent Independent, 35 percent Democratic, 15 percent Republican. And so, given that, there's nothing automatic about any of it. So that's true in the primary as it is in the general election. So I never, ever took it for granted. I knew that this would be a fight to the end, and in fact, it was, because in the end I won by 51 percent. So my margin has grown over time, but I think it's a testament to the district and how you have to earn it. And you have to earn it not only in the near-term, when you're trying to first get elected, but you have to keep earning it over time. And I think that's something we all should learn as we serve in Congress.

WASNIEWSKI: And as you mentioned earlier, it had been almost 25 years since a woman had represented Massachusetts in Congress. So to what degree was gender an issue in that first campaign?

TSONGAS: Well, I think historically—I don't think any of us can think gender isn't an issue, given just how long it's been and how few women are currently in

Congress—although those numbers are certainly growing. And the fact that there had been so few in Massachusetts, and I think there are still states that are deeply resistant to electing women. As I was thinking about running, I understood that. I understood that there were barriers, and I sought out those who'd done some analysis of this.

There's a woman, Barbara Lee, in Massachusetts, who has committed tremendous resources to researching what those obstacles are. I sought her out and paid attention to them. Some of them are things you wish weren't the case—just little things that we have to be mindful of—and others are harder to grapple with. But I always knew it was an issue, but I didn't focus on it overly. You have to—man or woman—you have to earn people's votes. And, yes, I understood that my being a woman might make it harder to earn that vote, but I just, I didn't obsess about it. I just paid attention to the research, did the little things that might make it easier, made sure I understood the issues, and worked hard at it.

EMILY's List endorsed me, which I was so grateful for, so they provided a lot of assistance, primarily financial assistance, which was important. But also, they helped train me on debate techniques that were one, just how do you become a better debater, but second of all, how do you think about those things that might get in the way, as you are a woman? And I paid attention. I didn't disregard any of it.

WASNIEWSKI: And you had mentioned earlier that the big difference between the 1970s and early 2000s was how much campaigns cost and fundraising. Were there any barriers, fundraising, particularly for you, because you were a woman?

TSONGAS: Not that I noticed. I'd have to go back and look at the final numbers. We raised well over $2 million. And the other thing that was interesting about

this race in 2007 was there were two women in the race. And I always felt that was a good thing. I don't think, as now, as I'm no longer going to be, I'm not seeking re-election—there are five women out of the 13 candidates. There should not just be one woman in any of these instances. We have to earn it, and we're all going to bring something different to the table, and as are all our male counterparts, and the voter just has to sort of sift through all those things and make a decision. There were two of us in the race, which out of our five candidates, I always thought that that was a really good thing. And then I forgot the rest of your question. {laughter}

WASNIEWSKI: Oh you answered it, about fundraising, and particular barriers.

TSONGAS: Well so, on the fundraising side, no. That's why I said when I first got started, I had to be sure I was comfortable with getting on the phone, doing those things, going to events. You have to learn your way, having never done that before. That was the one thing I had never done before. So I really had to see if I had a comfort level with it. But I realized it was key—if you can't do it, it makes it that much harder; if you're unwilling to do it, it makes it that much harder. And I was determined that I would do those things if it was necessary to getting elected. But it is something that has changed.

So I think campaigns have become much more of an industry, at least in 2007, which was not the case when my husband first ran for Congress. We did our own polling. We wrote our own brochures. TV wasn't the issue it is now in a House race. In the Senate race, yes, but we didn't have to raise a lot of money for that.

You had smaller staffs; you had fewer people, too. Actually, that's the other thing that has changed: is that as our country has grown, I now represent about 725,000, 730,000 people; Paul represented 425,000 people. So we've

almost doubled the population of our districts, which tells you why funding becomes so much more important, to reach people. But even as I'm saying that, the times are changing. So now you have Facebook and Twitter and ways in which you can reach voters that, on a daily basis, that didn't exist to the degree they do now, in 2007, didn't exist back then.

I know that in my last campaign, we produced our own brochure. We printed it. So some things are coming back as we're making our way through these changing times. But there's still a heavy emphasis on how much a particular candidate raises, as people sort of measure their viability. But in the end, I'm not sure if it means as much as it might have at another time.

JOHNSON: Did you learn any lessons from when you were involved in your husband's campaigns in the 1970s that helped you when you made your own run for Congress?

TSONGAS: I always enjoyed the reaching out and engaging with constituents or the voter. I just always enjoyed it. I learned so much from it. Seeing people in their lives, in a district that's highly diverse, if you can't do that, you just can't represent well. Given that we all come from a particular walk of life, where we have to be able to put ourselves in other people's shoes. It was always the thing I truly enjoyed about it. That was the one thing I knew that I could do as a candidate, that I just had this long history of doing that. And so that piece of it was very, very familiar.

WASNIEWSKI: For much of the 20th century, a common path for women to get to Congress was to succeed their late husbands—there was something called the widow's mandate. So I'm curious to know, what was it like for you to be in this unique position of running for Congress and being elected to represent the

same district that your husband had, but 30 years earlier? What was it like to be part of that tradition?

TSONGAS: Well, there's no denying that having been a part of all of Paul's campaigns, and being so proud of what he'd achieved in each office he'd held, and seeing that, as I would make my way out in the district, how—the deep affection people had for him and the great respect that they had for him was something I deeply appreciated. I know that it would be very hard simply to run for Congress, if, with absent either one, having that great history behind me, but also, the experience of having been part of it.

I often say when Paul ran for, in the initial instance, when he ran for the city council, his name, the Tsongas name was the name on the side of a dry cleaning truck because that's what his family's business had been. And I always felt that while Paul stood for himself and did everything, and I had such great pride, I was proud that I'd always been part of that, of helping to make that name what it was in whatever small way I did. Then I was grateful that there was nothing—he had never done a thing to bring that name down. Everything he had done had made it—it's a name in which I could always be so proud. I would hear that everywhere I went. But I also knew that I had to become my own self and be my own self and be sure that people understood that I was running for my own reasons and to make that case.

JOHNSON: One question that we've been asking all the Members in this series is to describe their district. So can you tell us a little bit more about your Massachusetts constituency?

TSONGAS: Well, for when we're doing redistricting, in which you're trying to make the case for keeping your district together, I always described it as a revolutionary district because it's very historic. It's home to the American Revolution, the

first shot heard round the world was in Concord, Massachusetts. It's home to the Industrial Revolution, with Lowell, Massachusetts, was a planned industrial city, as were other cities of the Merrimack Valley as well as going out into central Mass, were very much a part of that. It was home to one of the most significant labor strikes, the Bread and Roses Strike, in Lawrence, Massachusetts, which really led to the enactment of some of the first important labor laws.

It was home to [Henry David] Thoreau, who I consider our first environmentalist. And it Jack Kerouac was a renowned literary figure, who I think sort of changed modern literature in certain ways. Then it elected the first woman to Congress from Massachusetts in 1925 [Edith Nourse Rogers]. She still holds the record as the longest serving female Member of the House. That record may soon be overcome by another Member [Marcia Carolyn (Marcy) Kaptur], but there's a lot of history there.

It's also incredibly diverse. My husband was first generation Greek American. Lowell, Massachusetts, is rooted in waves of immigrants who came to fuel the Industrial Revolution, and that is true across the district—so, tremendous diversity, as well as great history in it. There's a pride of place, I often say about, in Massachusetts, and not so true in every state. I don't think, you can cross an invisible line, and you know you've gone from one community to another. So as much as we're rooted in the Industrial Revolution and manufacturing that made this country so great, it's also home to 900 farms. So there's a rural element. I've had the great honor of really representing an extraordinarily diverse district. There's about 37 cities and towns from which I have learned a great deal.

JOHNSON: And with redistricting that took place while you were in office, which happens for so many Members, how do you approach that, and how do you continue to reach your constituents and be the best possible Member?

TSONGAS: Well, I've always had a sort of hands-on approach, where I really felt I needed to be out there, be engaged, get to know these communities as best I could, given that there are so many of them. With redistricting, we brought in communities from central Massachusetts that, in many respects, continue to share the history of these post-Industrial cities. So we added Fitchburg and Gardner: smaller communities, but still rooted in manufacturing and, sort of, the struggles of how do we compete globally—and also home to different waves of immigrants. We added some rural communities along the New Hampshire border that have more of a farming tradition as well. And so, I just made a point of getting out.

I've done something called "Congress on Your Corner." I think I've done about 70 of them since I've been elected where we let a community know I'm going to be in the area and invite constituents to come down and meet with me one-on-one—always have had great attendance at those. So we just started doing that out in these districts. I just make sure that I'm getting there as often as I can, and then use technology.

One of the things that has changed and makes it possible to represent as many people as we do, is if we use technology wisely. So I can have a tele-town hall. A tele-town hall is something where you call in, out to constituents. You say, "Congresswoman Tsongas is going to be on the line for about an hour, an hour and a half, two hours, to talk about the issues of the day, please stay on the line, and if you have a question, we'll try to get to you." We can't always get to everybody because thousands of people will stay

on the line. But we looked for representative questions, both good and bad. I always say, I don't want to just get the good questions. We need to answer the bad questions—not bad, but the challenging questions as well, where constituents might really disagree with me.

We've done town halls, more traditional town halls, when we were debating the Affordable Care Act. We had several town halls in which I had over 1,000 people come. Not all of them very happy, as we've seen more recently with the effort to repeal the Affordable Care Act. People have strong feelings about healthcare; I respect that. So we did those town halls, but we also did seven tele-town halls so that I could really respond to people's concerns. So we've used traditional ways, and ways that have been made possible by the recent changes in technology. But again, we are living through times of such change and partisanship that I really feel the strong responsibility to be as responsive as I can and to make myself as available as I can.

WASNIEWSKI: So we want to ask a little bit about your House service, of course. And one of the things, as a winner of a special election, you came in without the benefit of a freshman orientation, and you had to get up and running very quickly. And we're curious to know, how did you do that? How did you put an office together and assemble a staff and some of the basics?

TSONGAS: That's true. When you come here and you inherit the Member's office that you—physical office that they've left behind—so you come into this very empty space. They throw some books on the table and say you're off and running.

The young woman who'd been my communications director I thought would be a great chief of staff. She had had some experience here on the Hill. She had worked for Congressman [Steny Hamilton] Hoyer, Congresswoman

[Rosa L.] DeLauro, so she came with some knowledge of the Hill but in a very narrow path: she'd worked primarily on the communications side. But she and I were a team from the beginning, and that was very helpful.

Then we also had the good advice, the sage advice, of again, Dennis Kanin, who'd served here for 10 years alongside my husband. Times had changed, but, nevertheless, we had somebody we could go to for advice. And we kind of just put it together. Looking back now, it's hard to know exactly how we did it because, again, I often was reminded of when I went to college. I started out at Michigan State University and then I transferred to Smith College, and there was something, and because you're not coming in with a class, you're—it's somewhat, but you're dropped into a class, it's somewhat like being a transfer student. You kind of have to just figure it out on your own. But we did. But we did.

We were careful. We were fortunate to hire some good staff right away—I shouldn't say that any of them were not good staff, but in the end, you don't quite know what you need in your staff, and that takes a while to figure out. So it took us a while, but we had a core group that I think was really helpful. We had a core group in the district that was very strong, and here, it took us a few efforts, but we assembled a core group that has—I've learned really in the course of being here that our staff is critical because there's so much you have to do. You have to have a confidence in them. You have to have a good give-and-take. So that just took a little while, but we got there.

WASNIEWSKI: And were there any Members who were here who gave you advice or served in kind of a mentoring role at all?

TSONGAS: You know, if I look back on how I, sort of the way in which I have served, I can't say that there was any particular mentor, but people often ask who

mentored me, and my answer has always been, I lived with the best role model you could ever have. So I think by virtue of having been so much a part, not only of Paul's campaigns, but sort of there as he was navigating, it served me well. It served me well. His voice was always somehow in my head.

One of the things I've often said is when you first get here—and it's because I had watched Paul grow into the office—you don't arrive as a Member of Congress, you've earned the right to become one. That becoming takes time, and it takes a lot of hard work on the part of the Member. There is a lot you have to learn. We're citizen legislators. We come with this particular avenue of professional interest that we've had, our own experiences, but we get here, and we have to deal with the whole of it. You just can't do that overnight and learn everything you need to learn overnight to do your job and do it well. So I was aware of that.

I remember when Paul first got here because it was such a large class, I don't remember what committee he wanted to be put on, but they ended up putting him on the Banking Committee, which is now Financial Services. And I remember him coming home and saying, "I don't know a thing about banking; this is not where I want to be." It changed the course of his political career because he actually found he enjoyed the work and he learned a lot as a result of it. I knew there were these things that come along that you couldn't have anticipated but grab your interest and off you go.

And actually, I had another Member mention that to me, "Don't think you have to go down this one path because you're going to be exposed to so much. Give yourself some time to sort of see areas that you might not have expected, that draw your interest." I think there's a lot of truth in that. So, yes, it was daunting when we first got here, but I was fortunate that I'd been

in Paul's universe as he was navigating the same things and had seen how over time you grow into the job that you've fought so hard to earn.

JOHNSON: Did your predecessor in the district, Marty [Martin Thomas] Meehan, did he offer any advice to you?

TSONGAS: He was always very encouraging. I think one of the things that I've always appreciated, and that I will honor as I'm no longer in office, is that he wasn't out there second-guessing in any way what we've done, what to do, or how not to do it. He would offer advice when sought. But nevertheless, he understood. He himself had gone through this—that we each come as our own person. And every Member of Congress does their job differently. I mean we do. It's just, I think, something I've learned. There are certain things we all have to do as Members. But how we do them, that we bring our own personalities, our own districts, our own interests, the committees we serve on, really do shape how we hold this office. And so, a combination of if there was advice, it was always quietly offered and given a wide berth to do my job as best I felt it should be done.

JOHNSON: When you were elected in 2007 did you find that the House was a welcoming place for women Members?

TSONGAS: You know, we all get here the same way. That's the bottom line. We all have to get elected. And anybody who's ever run for election for the House of Representatives knows that it is not an easy job to get elected in the first place. So there's that meritocracy of being elected in the same way. That's number one. As we often say, we're all paid the same amount, so there's none of that sort of hidden positioning of one gender over another.

But it is an institution that's been shaped by men. And I used to say, when I first got here, the thing that struck me, the only time we're called together is when we're called together to vote. So we're all off in these different worlds, and then the bells go off, and we rush over. When I was newly elected, I would rush over too quickly and get here and spend 20 minutes waiting for the first vote to end. But the thing that struck me in those first weeks or two that, as we were rushing over to vote, I said it was like going from the playing field to the locker room. The only thing that was missing was the snapping of the towels. There was this kind of physicality and energy that I think reflected the fact that it has been historically shaped by men only and that women had not been part of it. Had we been part of it from the outset, I do think there would have been a different kind of aura on the floor of the House.

But that being said, if I look at the Armed Services Committee, for example—because on the Democratic side, we honor seniority—there are seven subcommittees. I think the lead Democrat on three or four of them now are women. If I look at—I was fortunate to come into an institution that was led by the first woman Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi. If you look at the major committees, what they call the exclusive committees, on the Democratic side now, a good number of them are, the lead Democrat is a woman. So whether it's Appropriations or Financial Services, I'm trying to think of some of the others. But women are in leadership positions: Appropriations, Financial Services, there's a couple of others. But so as we're the lead voice on a lot of these issues, it becomes less and less of an issue.

That being said, there should be more of us here. Issues go unaddressed or get neglected otherwise. I've seen it on the Armed Services Committee, where women—I can't say I did it by myself but simply as a member of the Armed

Services Committee working with my colleague Mike [Michael R.] Turner from Ohio—where we've really taken on the issue of sexual assault and working across the aisle have really pushed for change in the military. But issues, if we—that often-told story of how the National Institutes of Health: their trials didn't include any women until women Members said, "Really?" So there are issues that go unaddressed, absent our being there. And then I think being here, we bring a different way of doing things that can sometimes be more productive. But so I think it's so important.

WASNIEWSKI: Can you talk a little bit about the Women's Caucus and your general impressions of it? How often does the caucus meet? What do you typically discuss?

TSONGAS: I think the Women's Caucus played a, was a very important organization at its formation. And not to say that it isn't today, and I periodically participate in it through the Women's Caucus. For a year or two there, I was tasked with, other Members with, sort of bringing attention to the issue of women in Afghanistan and the gains that had been made for them and how best to protect them.

But as an organization, it's not something that I have routinely participated in. I think there's new energy in it now and a kind of an organizational effort to rethink it. But it's not something that I have, as I said, gone to on a daily basis. It may also just be reflexive: there's so many more of us now, at least on the Democratic side, not enough on the Republican side. But it's just not something that you—although I think, in its early stages, it was important. And for those who do participate, may well still be. It's not an organization that I have participated in on a regular basis.

JOHNSON: You mentioned Nancy Pelosi and the fact that she was the first woman Speaker when you came here. What was it like to serve with her, knowing that history was being made, and also, how would you describe her leadership style?

TSONGAS: Well I felt so proud to be sworn in by Nancy Pelosi. As the first woman in 25 years elected from Massachusetts, it was a thrill to be sworn in by the first female Speaker. And to come in at a time—I could not have imagined the historic times that we would, that I would be part of, as I made my way into Congress. When I first arrived, we were just beginning to see the first signs of a recession, but as we all know, we made our way into the great recession that required a tremendous response from Congress. I saw unbelievable leadership in Nancy Pelosi, in terms of bringing together the Democratic Members of the House in order to address that and stop the freefall in our economy so that we could rebuild from a much lesser place, bad as it was. Had it not been for that, we would have been in a much worse place—and then all the follow-on legislation that was passed in concert with a Democratic President [Barack Obama], which was very fortunate.

The Affordable Care Act—I saw the way in which she engaged us as Members, sort of routinely, kind of understanding what people's issues were and trying to find a way to move people ahead and solve those problems in a constructive way. So again, a very proud moment when we finally were able to pass that bill and in no small part due to her incredible leadership among the House Members. And even as we've been in the minority, I've just seen the way in which she's been able to hold a very—we were strong-minded people—and been able to hold us together so that we can exert as much leverage as possible, given that we are not in the House, we're not in the Senate, and we don't have the presidency. So I'm a great admirer of her and

her leadership and her effectiveness, both as we were in the majority and in the minority.

JOHNSON: Did you feel like there was a special bond, or a certain kind of energy coming in at that time among the woman Members, having the first woman Speaker?

TSONGAS: I think there was this, yes, I think there was this great pride that we'd come to this moment, and I think we all know, in whatever place we are, that we're serving as examples. Because we don't want to be, if we're the first, we don't want to be the last. I'm sure that that is something that Nancy Pelosi has always had in mind. That you want to do your job in a way that makes it easier, not harder, for others who come behind us.

WASNIEWSKI: Your career also overlapped with two other Speakers, John [Andrew] Boehner and Paul [D.] Ryan. Obviously, a different experience, your party was in the minority at that point. But what were your general impressions of their Speakerships, and was the Speakership different? Had it changed over the course of your career?

TSONGAS: I think both Speaker Boehner and Speaker Ryan are having to deal with a party that doesn't agree with itself in very fundamental ways, and that's an extraordinary challenge. I think as much as we have differences on our side of the aisle, I think they're of degree, more than—and we all know in the end, or at least there's this basic respect for the fact that we, in the end, we have to compromise in the best interest of moving this country ahead.

I do think that Speaker Boehner and Speaker Ryan have had to wrestle with Members who are less willing to compromise and who are so deeply attached to their point of view that it's very hard for them to give, and I think also, come too often from districts where there's no room to give. And that, I

think, directly implicates the way in which we redistrict, in which we draw the lines of our districts, that they're drawn to be so clearly about one party or another, that it gives Members who are elected from those districts—we all reflect our districts. So they come up out of those districts and reflect those districts in genuine ways. But it just means you're sending people to Congress from those districts that don't share that philosophy. We see it again today, as again we're confronting whether or not government will stay funded.

WASNIEWSKI: We're about an hour in, and we're doing well timewise. We're about two thirds of the way through our questions. But do you need to take a break at all?

TSONGAS: I'm fine.

WASNIEWSKI: Okay.

JOHNSON: You've mentioned a few times—and Matt and I certainly have studied this—it had been 25 years since a woman had been elected in Massachusetts to Congress. Why do you think it was such a challenge for women to serve in Congress from your state?

TSONGAS: Well among other things, when we elect Members, we tend to elect them for a long time. So you had incumbency that—just long-term incumbencies. And so, as the times were changing, and the conversation was really ever more about electing women to Congress, just the opportunities didn't come along. I think that's number one.

Number two, and I think the fewer women you have out there in elective office, people just don't see that example. But if you look at a state like California, where so many women have been elected across the board, it's a

state that's become very comfortable with the fact that women serve and serve very well. So just hadn't been that many instances.

I don't think it's an accident that the Third District—the then-Fifth—the Third District of Massachusetts that I was able to successfully run there, given that longstanding history of a previous Member, Edith Nourse Rogers, who served from 1925 to 1960. While it had been a good number of years ago, it was sort of in the water that women can serve and can serve quite well.

I think the other thing was, even as I was serving my district, I looked at the numbers. Many of our state senators were women. Many of our state representatives were women—very different from other districts, if you started to compare. So among other things, you have a field of candidates who are going to come forth and consider running. We may have been kind of—and we're close to New Hampshire, which at the time, I think had been very successful in electing women because we share the border with New Hampshire. It doesn't seem so far-fetched that we would send a woman to Congress as we did.

But in the meantime, the times have changed, and we've elected yet another woman to Congress in now the Fifth District, Ed [Edward John] Markey's district, Katherine [M.] Clark. We elected Elizabeth Warren. So change, once it started to come, has been coming pretty quickly. And, as I said, in my district now, there are five women running, and we see potentially other races across Massachusetts, other primary races in which it's predominantly women coming forward. You see women now energized and recognizing that this is something that they want to do and can do and are compelled to do.

WASNIEWSKI: How would you describe the Massachusetts delegation when you were first elected, and how was your reception then as the only woman on the delegation?

TSONGAS: Well, we have a great delegation. And it's rooted in a great state. I often say about Massachusetts is that what happens in Massachusetts often tends to lead the way across the country. So this is, just to go back a step, and not just about our delegation here in Washington, but what our state legislature does. We tend to create examples that become national models. So for example, the effort around the Affordable Care Act: Massachusetts had led the way. The effort around marriage equality: Massachusetts had led the way. The effort around addressing climate change through the regional greenhouse gas initiatives—I wish it would become a model. So that filters into our legislature. And so we have people who are remarkably bright, thinking hard about hard issues, and willing to lead the way. I've always been very proud to be part of this delegation.

WASNIEWSKI: Does the delegation meet frequently? Dinners, or meals, or meetings?

TSONGAS: Well, we actually just all took a trip—most of us, not everybody could go—we actually all just took a trip to Puerto Rico because we have many people with roots in Puerto Rico, family members in Puerto Rico, have many current residents of the Commonwealth who have come from Puerto Rico, and we felt we needed to go, given the impact of Hurricane Maria. But what was interesting was that one of our Members said how rare this was for all of us to travel together as a delegation, that we don't do that, that often. But we do meet.

Most delegations have a dean, a person who's been the longest serving. We're fortunate to have Richie [Richard Edmund] Neal who takes that job very

seriously. He just pulled together yesterday a meeting with the head of the Federal Reserve Bank in Boston. It was actually a regional meeting, but he led the way to talk about the economy of New England. That's just one example of how we will come together for substantive reasons to hear about different issues that Massachusetts may be facing that have a federal connection and to educate us on it or answer our questions, whatever it may be.

We had a meeting not that long ago about the opioid crisis and to talk about what was being done at a law-enforcement level to address it. So we do meet. But it usually has a substantive focus. Then occasionally we'll have dinner meetings, but it might revolve more around a Member's re-election effort, and we'll all come together to be supportive of that.

JOHNSON: When you first came to Congress the Massachusetts delegation—Barney Frank was there and [Ed] Markey, so some veterans. Did you have a special bond with any of them or a memory that stands out that you'd like to share?

TSONGAS: Well as I said, what I really enjoyed about Barney was he said what he thought. But he provided extraordinary leadership as we were addressing the downturn in our economy and how best to respond to it structurally, to keep that from ever happening again. But I always appreciate, on the campaign side, Barney was one of the first who was willing to endorse me in a primary setting. That doesn't always happen. And I've always laughed over his saying that since he was responsible for defeating the last woman [Margaret Heckler] who was elected to Congress [from Massachusetts]—albeit she did come out of the Republican Party, he was going to do everything he could to help elect the next woman to Congress.

WASNIEWSKI: Talk a little bit about your committee service, and first of all, first off, can you describe how you got your initial assignments to Budget and Armed Services? How did you get on those panels?

TSONGAS: Well when you come in as a newly-elected Member in a special election, you get what's left. So at that point, there was an opening on the Budget Committee that they asked if I'd like to be on. And we were advised that it's a good committee—you get an overview of the federal budget, sort of the different pots of funding, and kind of the debate that's going on. So I said, "Okay, we'll do that."

I wanted to be on the Armed Services Committee for a whole host of reasons. Again, one, given the fact that I'd grown up as an Air Force brat, so I felt I had some sort of familiarity with military service. We don't have a lot of bases in Massachusetts, but we value the ones we have. They're very important to us economically. As I've learned, they are very important to the services themselves, for the research and development work they do. They meet real needs of these services. It was a committee that historically didn't have a lot of women on it. So again, I felt some gender diversity was important. My district has a great tradition of military service. Wherever I go, I meet people who are serving that have family members who have served over the life of this country—it's multigenerational in nature.

And I think also, having sort of come of political age during the Vietnam War, just knew how these issues of war and peace are so important to the life of this country and that service in a time of war changes your life in ways for good or for ill. So, for a whole host of reasons.

And then the other thing was that my predecessor, Marty Meehan, had been on this committee. We needed Massachusetts representation. On the Senate

side, Senator [Edward Moore (Ted)] Kennedy was on it, so that was a good thing. But felt we needed that Massachusetts representation because while we don't have a lot of bases, we do have a lot of companies that do work with the Defense Department—important work and that we needed a voice for that. So I sought it out and was fortunate to be assigned to that committee from the outset. I'm so grateful that that has been the case.

Then also, Natural Resources I sought, so initially I could be on three. When we were in the majority and sought that out because we had these two great national parks in the district—Minuteman National Historical Park and Lowell National Historical Park that I wanted to be strong advocates for. Although the issues are well beyond that—but was fortunate to be assigned to that committee at the outset too.

JOHNSON: For the Armed Services Committee, we know that you've been an outspoken advocate for veterans, especially with mental health issues. Can you talk a little bit about your work there and why that's so important to you?

TSONGAS: Well, one of the things I didn't appreciate about the Armed Services Committee when I first sought it out, but greatly appreciate today, is its deeply rooted bipartisan tradition. Many of the committees in this partisan atmosphere have people default to one point of view or the other. And as a result, especially in the minority, it means you're not given a lot of opportunity to actually get things done. You can, you'll be a strong voice for a point of view, but it's really hard to get things done. The Armed Services Committee has a very different tradition from that. It's reflected in the fact that I think many of the defense bills, we do one every year, report it out with near unanimous votes. And there's a deep willingness to work across the aisle.

So much of the work that I focused on there has, it's not so much about the vet—anybody who serves is going to eventually become a veteran. My opportunity is really on the active duty side of things. And I was on the military personnel subcommittee—I still am. And early on in my tenure, I became aware of a couple of issues that have really guided my time on the committee. The first issue I became aware of early on was the issue of sexual assault in the military. That was as a result of a hearing in which we had generals, four generals, up testifying, from each of the services, about their effort to prevent sexual assault in the military. I was taken aback, frankly, that it was of such a degree that we needed generals to come tell us what they were trying to do to keep it from happening.

I met soon after—there was a lunch for returning wounded warriors, over in the Capitol itself, and I went to it and walked into a room full of primarily men who'd been grievously injured physically, but there were about two or three women in the room. And so at that point, I was the only woman Member in the room, so I said I'm going to talk to the different male service members and then made my way over to the women. And just to see why they were there, and they talked to me why they happened to be there.

But then I said, "You know, we just had this hearing on sexual assault in the military. Is it the issue that that hearing would have suggested?" And one of the women was a nurse. She'd been deployed a good number of times to Iraq and Afghanistan, four in total, and she said, "Ma'am, I've never been assaulted, but I am more afraid of my own soldiers than I am of the enemy." And to defend herself, she always carried a knife in her waistband so that she could protect herself if needed. I have to say that, and there was another woman with her who sort of confirmed that. From that moment on, we started looking at it.

Then early on, Congressman Turner from Ohio had had an experience where the daughter of one of his constituents had been raped by somebody she was serving with. She asked her commander if she could be transferred out of the unit, so she wouldn't have to serve side by side. She felt extraordinarily threatened. That was denied, and she was subsequently murdered. So Congressman Turner and I were coming to this for different reasons. But we banded together when I was in the majority, and then as we went into the minority, Congressman Turner had the idea of creating the Military Sexual Assault Prevention Caucus and asked me to be the co-chair. And so together, every year, we fashion a piece of legislation that gets folded into the overall defense bill, in which we have chipped away at some of the issues that have led to this great problem within the military. So that's important because people who are assaulted become veterans. In too many instances, they wrestle with the post-traumatic stress disorder; they wrestle with a VA that, like the military itself, hasn't treated this issue with the seriousness that it should. It's helping to change the culture of both.

In too many instances, it can become a reason for suicide. It's not the only reason for suicide. The multiple deployments and the constant state of war and the sending of people into harm's way over and over again, especially in irregular wars where there is no hard-and-fast front line—so the threat of harm is a constant one, I think leads, has really lead to, in many instances, the hard adjustments that come in a post-deployment environment and as people are making their way into the VA. And so, that's a real issue. The other reality is, of the older veterans who, as they're aging, all the traumas of whatever war they may have experienced come to roost. So the thing I've taken away is that the experience of war is a life-changing event.

I still meet Vietnam veterans who just have never been able to get over their horrific experiences. So it's something we should take into account whenever we send young people into war: we are going to change them forever. Their innocence may lead them to want to sign up, but they're going to come back different people. And we cannot neglect them, either as they serve or in their aftermath of their service.

But the other thing that I learned too, as well, was not just the issue of sexual assault in the military, but as more and more women are making their way into the military, as more and more women need to make their way into the military in order to provide the talent pool that is needed in these very different times, there are just a lot of subtle ways in which women are marginalized, and the first place I saw that was around body armor.

We took an interest in body armor because it's very protective. One thing you learn about the military is it will do everything it can to protect the soldier on the battlefield. And body armor is one way of doing that. But it's become very heavy. We got interested in trying to make it lighter, and we've done work on that. But at a follow-on hearing, I asked about, just off the top of my head—and this is where the value of women being in office, I think, is often overlooked—but off the top of my head, I just said, "Well, have you ever developed body armor for women? Because I've met women in Afghanistan who are in harm's way virtually every moment of their service." And they said, "Oh no, ma'am, we haven't." So that year we inserted language in the defense bill that tasked the services to starting looking at body armor for women.

But then maybe two years later, I was in Afghanistan, and a couple of young JAG [Judge Advocate General] officers—they were women—came up to me

and said, "Thank you, ma'am, for your work on body armor, but did you know we were issued men's shoes?" And so, it's just these little things, there was no breastfeeding policy for nursing mothers, we wanted—I had a survivor of the Boston Marathon bombings come to me, a man who was in his 70s, who lost a limb, just by virtue of the fact that he happened to be walking by when the bomb went off. But he came to me and said, "My prosthetic is great, but I don't know that the women's are as good." So we asked the services. And he wasn't talking about the military. But it made me think, okay, let's make sure that the women in the military, if they've lost a limb, their prosthetics are serving them as well. So we asked a question and it came back, 'yes.' There's so few of them, they're very individual. But it's just asking these questions that sort of pushed the envelope and forced a rethinking as to how we're doing things or how an organization is doing things.

WASNIEWSKI: Now, just a follow on, did you feel that your own background, coming from a military family, gave you any special insight, or interest, into taking on these issues for active duty, and for retired military?

TSONGAS: I'm sure it did. I'm not aware of it, per se. I'm not aware of it, per se. But I'm sure that it did. But I think, more than anything, it must come from—I felt a strong need to run for office because I felt women need to be fully represented in Congress. And I'm sure, follow on from that, as you look at other institutions, you say, well, we need to ask, we need to do what we can. Why else are we here? We're here for the whole host of reasons, but if we don't take advantage—I would not have known in my service on the Armed Services Committee that these would be issues that I would find important to address. But once there, and once you learn about them, it's very hard. I

would never want to turn my back on them. This is an opportunity I've been given. It's not an opportunity to be squandered.

JOHNSON: We just have a few wrap-up questions. The first one in the series is why you decided not to run for re-election this year?

TSONGAS: Well, it was a lot of different things coming together. A lot of people say, "Well, it must be because of this President and just the partisan nature of politics today, and that must have been a driving force." And I say, "No, we're elected for good times and bad. And I'm here to serve throughout my tenure and do everything I can to disagree where I feel it's important to disagree." But to continue to take advantage of the opportunities I have as a Member to push for things, and hopefully achieve things—and was just fortunate to pass a bill and have it signed into law by our President [Donald Trump], that tries to get at a little piece of the opioid crisis we have here. So it wasn't about that.

It was really more I came at the age of 60. I'll leave at the age of 72. My life has changed in that interim. I first met my husband 50 years ago last summer, so we have both been part of the public life of this country for 50 years. And I felt we were young. There are a lot of other younger people out there who have an intense desire to be a part of this country's political life—time to get out of the way. I knew we would have great candidates, and that's certainly been the case. I don't think I could imagine quite as many of them but so diverse in every way and very accomplished across the board. So I knew my replacement would be somebody we would all be proud of and who would do a great job. It was just a recognition that it was time to come to a, draw to an end. There are other things in life that are just as very important

in a very more private way. And just, it was a confluence of events. It wasn't any one thing. But I'll miss it. I know I'll miss it.

On the other hand, I just knew it was time. And I think that's, as somebody asked me the other day about the numbers of people retiring, and I said, in every instance, it's very personal, just different factors may come together, but because it asks a lot of those who serve, as it should. This is not an easy job; it was never meant to be easy. But it's a great job. But you have to be willing to give it everything, and there comes a time where other things call. And I just was responsive to that, too.

WASNIEWSKI: We've asked you a lot of backward looking questions about the past. Now we want to ask you to prognosticate. This interview is for the 100th anniversary of Jeannette Rankin's election to Congress. We've asked everybody, so when we get to the 150th anniversary of Jeannette Rankin's first term, how many women do you think we'll have in Congress at that point, 50 years from now? And how will we get there?

TSONGAS: Well as I say, women can't win if women don't run. So this is not going to happen by some miracle somewhere. It's only going to happen if women make the decision to get out there and run for office, commit to all the things that that requires. It's not meant to be easy, but it's not rocket science. And a lot of it isn't learned until you do it. You have to take that on, and do it as best you can, as absolutely as best you can. And perhaps surprise yourself and win. I do think the more of us that do it—and do it in general—but the more of us that do it, and do it successfully, it just sort of begins to become part of the fabric of who we are as a country.

So I would hope that 50 years from now, that at the very least, we're 50 percent of the House of Representatives, 50 percent of the Congress. I would

expect by then we've elected a woman to be President. Maybe not in that particular year, but somewhere in these next 50 years, we're going to elect a woman because as we elect women to the Senate, as we elect women to the House, as we elect women to governorships, that's the pool from which so many of our candidates come from. There will be those who want to be President, as they should want to be President. And there will be one or two along the way that are successfully able to achieve that.

JOHNSON: What advice would you offer, or perhaps you already have offered, to women who are considering running for Congress?

TSONGAS: Pretty much what I've just said. That, first of all, it's a great job. It's a remarkable opportunity. It's something worthy of your aspiration, absolutely. You'll be able to do things that you could never possibly do. So as women look at different institutions, or different issues, and they so desperately want change, well, you have no better opportunity than by being elected to office.

And even in the minority, there are unique opportunities. So I gave the example of body armor, where I asked a question about women's body armor and learned that they never developed body armor for women. In that year's defense bill, we inserted a line—it was literally a line—tasking the services to begin to develop body armor. It's not easy because the materials don't easily lend themselves to shaping, and being protective at the same time. But it will never happen if you don't begin that effort. And there are modest changes that could take place that make a woman safer as she's in the fight. But that one bill led to change. That one line led to change.

And I use that as an example all the time—that it isn't always that 100-page bill that leads to change. Especially in the minority, you have to look for those individual modest things, but because you're at the federal level, you

affect the entire country. In the long run, you may set the stage for broader change than that. It's a unique opportunity you have to affect change, but you have to earn your way into the institution, fight hard for it, and then serve well. But it's certainly worthy of doing, and I'm just grateful I had the chance.

WASNIEWSKI: As you mentioned earlier, you've had a long association with the House and public service because of your husband's career. But we're wondering, in your career, since 2007, has there been anything unexpected that came along that surprised you about your House service?

TSONGAS: I think the most unexpected thing was that we would live through such tumultuous times. I could not have prognosticated the great recession and all that followed from it. I could not have prognosticated the opportunity to enact the Affordable Care Act because, you know, we briefly had the House, the Senate, and the presidency. Or, for example, the tremendous change around LGBTQ rights that have come along. Those substantive things have really been surprises. I could not have prognosticated the current presidency that's so divisive, and around which I find so much disagreement, and what it asks of all Americans.

But I also, having come to adulthood during the late '60s, early '70s, and navigating the Watergate crisis and the Vietnam War, and seeing that back then, the resiliency of our institutions, I've been somewhat reassured by the resiliency of our institutions today. They may get stretched very, very thin, but they're something we should all be proud of, as Americans. And yet it takes each and every one of us, and whatever walk of life we may be, whether it's as an elected official and using the opportunity I have and the authority I have here, a member of the press, or an individual just out on a rally

expressing their point of view—we have to all engage. But it's been a good thing to see the ways in which we have engaged.

So I remain hopeful that—but I also know that it's not easy. And I think especially those in public office are really called upon to be very vocal in their strong feelings, whatever they may be, on both sides of the aisle. Because this job, as much as anything else, is about what we say. And also, of course, about what we're able to do.

JOHNSON: I just had one final question. Years from now when people are looking back on your career, specifically in the House, what do you think your legacy will be?

TSONGAS: Well, a lot of the work on the Armed Services Committee. I hope one of the views I've had is that if you can change, help to change an institution. So the armed services are going to have to welcome ever more women into it in order to do the job that we've helped to push it in a different direction. That's number one. And then the armed services are such an example, they're a bedrock institution, a rightly honored bedrock institution that helps push a country around equality in all ways: LGBTQ equality, women's equality, whatever it may be that helps to push an institution. As we push the institution, it helps to push a country. And then I think back in Massachusetts, I think that the floodgates are beginning to open, and you're going to see more and more women successfully elected to office at all levels.

JOHNSON: Thank you so much.

WASNIEWSKI: Thank you so much for spending time with us.

TSONGAS: Yes, happy to do it.

WASNIEWSKI: Yes, is there anything we didn't ask you that you would like to talk about or anything we missed?

TSONGAS: I don't think so.

WASNIEWSKI: Okay.

TSONGAS: Yes, I don't think so.

WASNIEWSKI: Thanks again.

TSONGAS: Yes, thank you.