

**Keynote Address
LTG Michael Flynn
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Thank you for that kind introduction, Preston. And thanks for the opportunity to join you and recognize the unique contributions of our Special Operations Community in the global fight against Islamic Extremism, as well as the many other threats to freedom that we face.

We have a number of senior leaders here tonight. We have members of Congress, many officers from our partner nations, Industry leaders...I see a lot of friends here tonight. Thank you all for attending.

NDIA has done a lot of great work to bring us together for this event. We appreciate your support for the warfighter and for the critical partnership with industry in keeping America strong and secure. NDIA has been doing this for a long time and doing it very well.

The Association fosters the development of the most innovative and superior equipment, training and support for our warfighters and first responders, essentially providing an unfair advantage our warriors richly deserve against the enemies we face.

Thank you.

Tonight we gather to honor a number of people who have made long-standing contributions to the SOF Community.

As has already been stated, Honorable Tom O'Connell and Ms. Irene Sanders are two that epitomize everything we believe in...service, sacrifice, honor and integrity.

Tom, Irene and all the awardees, we are all very proud of your contributions to our nation's security.

Lets give them another round of applause.

All of these individuals have dedicated themselves to ensuring our nation is secure and that our nation is able to meet the challenges of an increasingly complex and uncertain world.

To all of you, it is your inspirational leadership that makes all of us better.

So in that spirit, I want to spend the next few minutes to share my thoughts on the importance of American leadership as well as highlight some of the systemic challenges that threaten to undermine our capacity to lead.

Before I walk through my points tonight, I want to state something that I strongly believe.

There are solutions to these complex problems.

For instance, in the case of the menacing--grotesque Islamic extremists the world faces, the United States must:

- 1) Clearly define this enemy (I'll speak to this a bit later)**
- 2) We must articulate a clear, unambiguous strategy and ensure everyone understands it,**
- 3) We must better organize ourselves to achieve that strategy**
 - ✓ Nationally and Internationally**
- 4) We must create a single unified & international "chain of command" (probably civilian led) and,**
- 5) We must tell the American public this is likely to last for decades**

We live in a dangerous world marked by rapid technological change.

Nearing more than a decade of conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. is now facing a wide range of expanding threats from both state and non-

state actors, including the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), other affiliates of core Al Qaeda, as well as a broad array of extremist organizations committed to the destruction of freedom and the American way of life.

At the same time, the U.S. military has shifted its strategic focus from large-scale contingency operations to naval operations in the Pacific, to building partnership capacity, and to conducting special warfare in remote areas and failing states where extremists have gained new footholds.

Above and beyond these pressing challenges, the advent of global internet connectivity and mobile devices is now providing billions of people—including our adversaries—with the ability to learn, plan, communicate, and fight with a precision, speed, and security formerly only enjoyed by states.

Furthermore, virtually any ideology—no matter how frightening or outrageous—is now able to proliferate around the world at the stroke of a key.

There are many sincere people in our government who, frankly, are paralyzed by this complexity and so actively choose or passively accept a defensive posture—reasoning that passivity is less likely to provoke our enemies and that specific threats can simply be anticipated, discovered, countered, or recovered from.

Such thinking, while well-intentioned, does not recognize the scope and breadth of change that is occurring within the international system.

To be clear, the United States Defense and national security apparatus is being disrupted and it no longer enjoys the massive capability advantage to which we have grown accustomed.

In truth, the only way to operate effectively within an infinitely complex environment is by orienting all decision making to a core set of principles—or a more apparent logic of action that enables realistic

assessments of our enemies, our objectives, our means and of our methods of engagement.

President Ronald Reagan understood this. He was clear about the Soviet threat and their political ideology of communism and he led the country to deal with that adversary with the right balance of engagement and soft power. But that wasn't mere realism or pragmatism.

As scholar Robert Kaufmann has shown, the foundation of Reagan's thinking was a core set of principles founded on a strong commitment to American ideals and recognition of both good and evil.

Those timeless principles are equally applicable today---and should guide our thinking and choices for the emerging threats of the 21st century (and we're already into the 2nd decade of that century).

I'll touch on each of these truths in order.

First. There is no substitute for American power. Human nature is imperfect and prone to violence and conflict. Because of this reality, leaders and nations can reduce----but not eliminate---the danger of war.

This truth is not very popular in some circles. There are people who believe that history is irrevocably progressing towards an ever-improving future.

They think that human beings are naturally inclined to good and that violence can be addressed—and even eliminated—simply through education or through some form of enlightened leadership.

I don't subscribe to this idea. While I am a firm believer in the application of all elements of national power and never telegraphing which ones you may or may not use, the reality is that just since 1960, there have been over 30 insurgencies, conflicts, and wars and, in 2/3rds of these cases, the bad guys won.

Vindicating America's national interest requires the capability and credibility of American power and cannot be abandoned to the good intentions of the world's populations. Coalitions are valuable and should be cultivated whenever possible, and new ones must be formed.

But, we are fundamentally responsible for securing the future of our people and we can pursue this goal boldly in the knowledge that doing so has the derivative effect of improving the lives of people around the globe.

Second. A strong defense is the best deterrent. President Reagan (as well as other predecessors such as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt) all understood that the greatest dangers to the United States do not arise from the vigilance or the arrogance of American power, but from unpreparedness or an excessive unwillingness to fight when fighting is necessary. I love the George Washington quote, to be prepared for war, is one of the most effectual means of preserving peace.

Another by our first President that is appropriate for this audience, he said;

"There is a rank due to the United States, among nations, which will be withheld, if not absolutely lost, by the reputation of weakness. If we desire to avoid insult, we must be able to repel it; if we desire to secure peace, one of the most powerful instruments of our rising prosperity, it must be known that, we are, at all times, ready for war."

Retreat, retrenchment, and disarmament are historically a recipe for disaster.

For that reason, we must always be ready to deploy what Winston Churchill called "overwhelming power." This posture will deter most aggressors most of the time and, when even the best deterrent sometimes fails, it will still defeat them at the lowest possible cost and risk.

Third. Regime types matter. A prudent foreign policy is attentive to the types of regimes and their ideologies when discerning friends, foes, opportunities, and perils. Again, Reagan distinguished sharply between stable and liberal, democratic regimes on one hand, and totalitarian regimes—often animated by a wicked ideology—on the other. He rightly considered the former to be more reliable allies.

That said, we need to be clear about who we fight.

Reagan made history when he called the Soviets an evil empire. He was right about it then and in the annals of history, that statement will always matter.

Calling our enemies what they are is vital.

Many today don't like that type of clarity. They want us to think that our challenge is dealing with an undefined set of violent extremists or merely lone wolf actors with no ideology or network.

But that's just not the straight truth. Our adversaries around the world are self-described Islamic militants. And that means ... as the President of France has rightly said ... that our fight is with Islamic extremists using terrorism as their means to fight.

Although that movement has a lot of variation, it is fueled by a vision for worldwide domination achieved through violence and bloodshed. They want to silence all opposition. They hate our ideals and our way of life.

They'll take any action to accomplish their objectives---whether that means suicide bombings, beheadings, or mass executions. ISIS proves that point.

It does us no good to refuse to admit what is plainly true.

So long as we lack the intellectual clarity to accurately define our enemies we will also not have the necessary capacity to defeat them.

You cannot defeat an enemy you do not admit exists.

Relatedly, and my fourth point: We must think—and act--geopolitically.

A prudent foreign policy considers threats, interests, and opportunities based on the imperatives of world politics rather than vague notions of cosmic justice or “international morality.”

While those ideas are fine for the ivory tower, they are not rooted in the real world that we all live in today.

And since resources are finite, even a nation as powerful as the United States must prioritize wisely, without losing sight of its principles.

We should assail isolationism, any form of American withdrawal, and the fallacy of moral equivalence. But we should also not believe for a second that exporting democracy the world over will work either. However, we should also never be ashamed of our American values.

This principle has immediate applications today.

We have often ignored religion, culture and politics in our strategy. General Charlie Cleveland, our Commander of US Army Special Operations Command, has talked about this and he’s right.

It’s high time we include these considerations in our war on terror. In a very good after action report titled; Lessons Learned from a Decade of War, commissioned by our current Chairman of the Joints Chiefs, GEN Marty Dempsey, the very first finding essentially stated that:

Our failure to understand the social and cultural dimensions of the threats we faced led to a mismatch in resources applied against our enemies and the environments we were operating within.

If that doesn’t give reason to pause, I don’t know what does.

Five. We need to embrace American exceptionalism. Threats abroad are not addressed solely by military action. Instead, we need to understand that a successful foreign policy depends on a long-term strategy that combines economic prosperity at home, robust American military power, and the vitality of the American way of life.

I'm not a politician. I'm a Soldier. But history is very clear on this point.

As Mr. Kaufmann notes in his scholarship, President Reagan restored American preeminence by unleashing private enterprise, deregulating the economy, lowering taxes, limiting the growth of government, spurring innovation in the private sector, completing a major military buildup, and unabashedly asserting American ideals and self-interest in a way that clearly distinguished between freedom's friends and foes.

For instance, we should acknowledge now that this fight against Islamic Extremism is a sociological, psychological and cultural phenomenon, and not a military one AND, as I said earlier, we need to tell the American public, this is likely to last for decades, if not an entire generation.

Just like the clear and simple language of President Reagan, we need clear and simple language today.

Six. Different times call for different strategies. What has been properly observed is that the mark of wise statesmanship is the capacity to discern when changing times require different measures to achieve the same goals.

President Reagan knew that the United States could prudently pursue a policy of armed neutrality early in its history---but the conditions the United States faced in the 20th century called for a more vigilant, engaged foreign policy.

He understood that core principles must stay the same, but that changing circumstances require new actions and far more agility.

That was a prudent course then, and one that we should follow today.

So what does this all mean for the future?

There are many facets to this answer, but for this audience, it means that the world is globally networked; increasingly borderless, and fundamentally violent and threatening to the American way of life.

And in all cases, Special Operations, with its unique and focused Military, Intelligence, interagency, and Diplomatic capabilities will continue to be at the forefront of our nation's security around the globe.

Our SOF must continue to be well led, well resourced (not equally resourced, this is not about parity with the enemies we face, but in an unfair way—with an unfair advantage against our most threatening adversaries).

And In an era of constrained budgets contrasted with increased uncertainty and violence, these assets will be critical to managing chaos and maintaining order in the global commons.

This will require SOF to execute their entire range of capabilities (UW, FID, IO, CA, Direct Action etc...better than any other force on the planet), all while conducting persistent operations, globally, in support of U.S. National objectives.

Today and tomorrow's environment dictates innovative force structure, interoperable technology, clear and simple policy and doctrine beyond the current construct.

And NOW is the time to get rid of the wasteful programs and choose only those that actually work.

The big so what is that the complexity and the uncertainty of the international security environment is moving at a pace that is unrecognizable to most and at a speed that may be passing us by.

It is vastly more interconnected and that interconnection or

interdependence will challenge how we understand, how we exploit, and how we execute all forms of national power, but especially how we fight future warfare.

All of this is closing in on our military industrial complex right now and my big questions are;

- 1. Do we recognize how fast this change is occurring and,**
- 2. Are we changing fast enough?**

The people in this room will need to answer these questions. They are not easy answers and they will take extraordinary leadership and intellectual courage from the very top of our national security structure on down the chain.

The people of the United States deserve nothing less than our best effort and what they want is the unvarnished truth about what we are facing.

They also want to know that there are those willing to make the tough decisions on their behalf.

Because what they do know is that there are men and women serving in our armed forces, many in this room tonight, as Abraham Lincoln stated, who are willing to give the last true measure of devotion in service to our nation.

To conclude, I want to thank you so much for allowing me to offer a few comments, I do hope my comments make you think about how we support our warriors and are we doing enough for them.

On behalf of everyone, especially the leadership team at NDIA, led by General McKinley, congratulations to this year's award winners, you clearly deserve this level of recognition in front of your peers and colleagues.

Also, thanks very much for all the leaders who are here this evening, I know the demands on your time but your presence is important.

Again, Thank you and have a great evening.

