

Foundation for Defense of Democracies
Conference | Rising to the Threat: Revitalizing America's Military and Political Power
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Welcome Remarks by Mark Dubowitz and H.R. McMaster

Speakers:

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Lieutenant General (Ret.) H.R. McMaster, 26th U.S. National Security Advisor, and Chairman, CMPP, FDD

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DUBOWITZ: My name is Mark Dubowitz, and I'm the CEO of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. And it's really a pleasure to welcome you all to the wharf and to our conference, which is entitled "Rising to the Threat: Revitalizing America's Military and Political Power."

We have a great lineup of distinguished officials and experts who we really look forward to hearing from today.

And before we get started, I really want to extend a special welcome to the members of the United States Armed Services that are here today. Certainly goes without saying, but it shouldn't, that because of your bravery, as well as the sacrifice of you and your families, we as Americans are free and we're safe. So please join me in -- in thanking the many veterans and service members joining us today.

(APPLAUSE)

I would also like to welcome our other distinguished guests. We're privileged to have with us ambassadors and senior diplomats from more than 30 countries, as well as officials from Congress, the White House, the Departments of State, Treasury, Defense, Homeland Security.

And I'd also like to acknowledge the many members of the press who are here today and the audience joining us via livestream. So whether you're here in person or you're online, please be part of the conversation on Twitter. Our hashtag is #CMPP.

We're also pleased today to be joined by members of FDD's national security network. And this is a network comprised of more than 400 mid-career professionals, including folks who work in the executive branch and Congress and military veterans, active duty military. Really a remarkable group of women and men who really give me great confidence in our country's future. So I'd certainly love to welcome them all.

FDD, we're a research institute. We are exclusively focused on national security and foreign policy. We're nonpartisan and we accept no funding from foreign governments.

Since our doors opened, just after 9/11, we've provided research and analysis and policy options to government officials and congressional staff and the media on current and emerging threats and how the United States should respond to those.

We believe the U.S. must respond to threats more effectively, integrating all tools of American national power. And for that reason, at FDD, we've established three centers on American national power.

The first is our Center on Economic and Financial Power, which is chaired by Juan Zarate. Our second is our Center on Cyber and Technology Innovation, chaired by Samantha Ravich. And today's conference marks the formal launch of our third center, which is the Center on Military and Political Power.

And this is a center -- a critical center that really seeks to promote an understanding of the foreign policies and national security strategies and the range of diplomatic and defense, intelligence and other governmental capabilities that are essential to ensure that the United States and our allies preserve the peace, promote prosperity, and advance American influence.

There's no doubt that the freedom, security, and prosperity of Americans and our democratic allies is under serious threat by adversaries who are determined to reshape the world order in their vision, undermine our interests, our values and displace the United States in our position as the guarantor of the liberal global order.

Now more than ever, decision makers need timely and rigorous and relevant research. And this is exactly what CMPP, and indeed all of FDD, seeks to provide.

We're very proud of CMPP's board of advisers. It's chaired by Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster, and other distinguished advisers on this bipartisan board include Secretary Leon Panetta, former Senator Kelly Ayotte, Deputy Secretary Bob Work.

And also folks who are here on the board of advisers who are here today and you'll hear from: General Ed Cardon, former State Department Chief Strategist David Kilcullen, former Deputy National Security Advisor Nadia Schadlow, Ambassador Eric Edelman, and former National Security Advisor to the Vice President John Hannah.

We're very pleased that the center's senior director is -- has come on board, Brad Bowman. For those of you who know Brad, he's an incredibly effective and entrepreneurial and experienced policy expert, and really combines incredible experience: congressional, military, academic; he worked as a national security advisor to members of the Senate; active duty military officer and pilot; and taught at West Point and Georgetown University.

So before getting to our program today, allow me to comment really briefly on an area many of you probably know has been a major focus at FDD, which is the Islamic Republic of Iran.

May the 8th is an important date, because one year ago, the United States withdrew from the nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. And today, the administration is

implementing a maximum pressure campaign to protect the interests of the United States and our allies, and ensure that the world's most dangerous state sponsor of terrorism and a massive human rights abuser never obtains the world's most dangerous weapons.

We'll be hearing from both administration officials and experts today on -- on Iran and -- and many other issues.

All right, with that, I'm pleased to introduce the Chairman of CMPP, Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster.

Now, H.R. is one of those rare people whose life has been so uniquely impactful that he only goes by one name: H.R. So in that respect, kind of like Rocky, or Madonna or -- or Prince.

(LAUGHTER)

And I -- I think it -- it really is a testament to -- to H.R.'s -- to his life, that incredible life of - - of service to our nation. He's a graduate of West Point. He has a Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. He spent 34 years on active duty.

He's perhaps one of our nation's most preeminent warrior scholars. He's fought on the frontline of our nation's wars and he helped formulate National Security Strategy in the White House as the 26th Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs.

He authored *Dereliction of Duty*, which was an incredibly impactful book when it came out, and I understand he has another book in the works due out next year. H.R. is also -- anyone who knows him here, he's a wonderful guy, incredibly down-to-earth and a great patriot. And we're really proud to have him as CMPP's Chairman as part of our FDD family.

So H.R., thank you for your distinguished service to our country, and we're eager to hear from you today. So please welcome H.R.

(APPLAUSE)

MCMMASTER: Well, thanks for that generous introduction. And you know, to be compared to Prince, I mean, that's -- that's awesome, Mark.

(LAUGHTER)

I mean, you know what? That -- maybe that's what I can use to distinguish myself as a National Security Advisor, right? I mean, you're not going to be the smartest -- that's got to be Dr. Kissinger, right -- so, but, maybe I can be the funkiest, right? You know, in -- in -- in U.S. history.

But I -- I'll tell you, I just want to tell you what a -- what a privilege it is to be at FDD. And when I first came into the job as National Security Advisor, of course, you look for the best analysis that you can find to help you think more clearly about challenges to national and international security. And invariably, I found that analysis at -- at FDD.

And I think what distinguishes FDD from I think a lot of the other analytical work that's out there is, they go beyond describing the nature of the problem or the challenge. And they make clear, realistic recommendations about how we can overcome challenges to national security and secure our nation, our homeland, our way of life, and -- and enhance American prosperity.

So thanks -- thanks, Mark, for the privilege of being with you and -- and thanks to, Cliff, too, for all your great work over the years and the whole FDD team.

And I think, I'm -- I think that this center for military and political power is actually going to be extremely important right now in -- at this point in our history. And that's because I think all of us recognize that we are in very important competitions; high stake competitions that require us to think more clearly and to be much more effective at integrating elements of national power with efforts of like-minded partners to overcome these challenges.

And -- and I thought what I might just do is -- is, by way of introducing what is a tremendous agenda today with -- with really wonderful panels and -- and speakers, is to just give a quick overview of what we saw as the greatest challenges to national and international security, and why we thought it was very important as -- as -- as the national security team came together in February of 2017, to -- to affect some fundamental shifts in our National Security Strategy and in our foreign policy.

And as I went to the job in 2017, I really felt as if we were at the end of the beginning of a new era, and we were behind. We were behind because we clung to fundamentally flawed assumptions about -- about national security and foreign policy; flawed assumptions that -- that we should have realized long ago were not valid.

But I think because of -- of hopefulness, you know, hopeful aspiration, instead of really looking at the world realistically, we -- we -- we perpetuated these flawed assumptions, and as a result, we built vulnerabilities, I think, into our defense capabilities, and we were just not effective in critical competitions in which our security and our prosperity and our influence was at stake.

And so those assumptions I think had a lot to do with the end of the Cold War and overconfidence at the end of the Cold War. This was maybe understandable after the breakup of the -- of the Soviet Union. It was understandable after the victory in the Cold War, and then also the demonstration of America's technological military prowess during the Gulf War, the overwhelming military victory over -- over Iraq.

And I think all these experiences combined to generate this overconfidence and false assumptions associated with it. For example, I -- I believe that -- many believe, and we know that many believed, that there was now an arc of history that would guarantee the primacy of our free and open societies over closed authoritarian systems.

A corollary to this, after the collapse of the -- of the Soviet Union, was that great power competition was a -- a relic of the -- of the past. Now the most optimistic believed that what would emerge in this post-Cold War period would be a -- a condominium among the powers who would

work together in -- in -- in almost an exclusively cooperative way and through international organizations to help solve the world's most pressing problems.

And of -- of course, we know now that these assumptions did not -- did not bear out. But what they did is they -- they -- they generated, I think, some real weaknesses in -- in our -- in our defense, in particular.

If you remember back to the, sort of the defense set of assumptions around this, it was -- it was really that we were going to have -- this term was used all through the '90s -- "full-spectrum dominance." Remember that? You couldn't open a defense document without seeing the word "dominance" in there.

And -- and the idea was that -- that future wars, if they're fought at all, would be fast, cheap, efficient, waged from -- from standoff range. And -- and we also believed that we wouldn't have any peer competitors, right? Who -- who would have -- you know, who would have the temerity to challenge the -- the -- the United States and our overwhelming -- overwhelming military capabilities? I mean, the phrase was "no peer competitor until 2020."

And so what we -- we forgot is what -- we forgot what -- what Conrad Crane is fond of saying, is that, you know, there are two ways to fight the United States military: asymmetrically and stupid, right? And that you hope that your enemies pick stupid, I think like -- like Saddam did in -- in 1991, but that's not always going to be the case. And so of course, that was brought home to us in a very devastating way with the mass murder attacks against our country on September 11, 2001.

And I think, though, that as we went into the -- the wars in Afghanistan, and later, the war in Iraq, we were still carrying with us this burden of the 1990s, this overconfidence, this belief that wars would be fast, cheap, and efficient.

And as a result, this thinking, this -- this orthodoxy of the revolution in military affairs from a military perspective, it was a lodestone, kind of, around our neck, and it was a setup. It was a setup for the difficulties in Afghanistan and Iraq, and -- and in both those conflicts, despite very successful initial military campaigns, we had difficulties consolidating gains to get to a sustainable outcome consistent with what brought us into those conflicts to begin with. And that's because we didn't look at political consolidation as an integral part of war. Thought maybe that's an optional phase of some kind.

We were going to take what you might call, if we could -- I think this audience will get this -- the George Costanza approach to war, and we'll just leave on a high note, you know? And then, so we have to -- we have to think about how we were set up for this. And we always debate, you know, should we have invaded Iraq. I think a better question to debate actually is, you know, who the heck thought it would -- might be easy to do that, right?

And so -- so I think we -- we then shifted, though, in the 2000s to kind of the -- a new set of assumptions. And -- and we swung the emotional impetus behind our -- our National Security

Strategy and our foreign policy shifted from over-optimism, overconfidence, and complacency associated with that, to, I think, pessimism and even defeatism.

And it was because -- because of the shock of 9/11, but then, really, the -- the unanticipated length and difficulties of -- of the wars in Afghanistan and in Iraq. Then combined with the 2008 financial crisis, we began to have a real crisis of confidence.

And I think in -- in more recent years, some people at the top of the foreign policy establishment, and in maybe national security establishment as well, believe that the U.S. disengagement from complex problems overseas was an unmitigated good. Some actually believed, I think, that the greatest threat to national and international security was an overly powerful United States.

And what these two -- these two groups of assumptions, a group of assumptions associated with overconfidence and hubris or pessimism and defeatism, what they have in common is what we might call strategic narcissism and a tendency to define the world only in relation to us and to assume that ever what we do will be decisive to an outcome.

The problem with any form of narcissism is that you lack empathy. And what we need is strategic empathy, what Zachary Shore has called strategic empathy, which is to view situations and challenges from the perspective of the other.

And I think what we have to recognize, and certainly what FDD has always recognized, is that our -- our adversaries, our rivals, our enemies, they have a say in the future course of events.

And so, if you look at how we have waged the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and -- and now across the greater Middle East, I think you can't help but conclude that we are lacking, or we have lacked, in strategic competence. Because what we have done is made assumptions, assumptions that turned out to be false about the future course of events.

Who would have ever thought, for example, that it was -- it's possible to announce years in advance exactly the number of troops you're going to have in a theater of war and what -- and what you're putting in place to constrain their behavior, and then to announce the withdrawal of troops at the same time as you say, well, let's negotiate and outcome with our enemy.

And so, what we've neglected, I think, are really important continuities in the nature of war that also apply to other complex competitions. And that is that -- that these competitions are fundamentally political, that these competitions are human and are driven by the same factors that Thucydides identified 2,500 years ago: fear, honor, and interest. And if we don't address those drivers of conflict or competitions, then we're -- we're -- we're going to be prone to confusing activity with progress.

That these -- these competitions are uncertain. The future course of events is impossible to predict based on this continuous interaction with adversaries and their ability to exercise agency themselves.

And then finally, the war -- or these conflicts are contests of wills. And so as -- as this center improves our strategic competence, what I think we will also be able to do is to improve our strategic confidence. Confidence in who we are as a people, confidence in our democratic principles and institutions and processes, confidence that is immensely important in this competition between free and open societies and closed authoritarian systems.

And we have to engage our own people and the people of like-minded nations to bolster that confidence, because lack of confidence at the national level is -- is -- is analogous to lack of self-respect, I think, for an individual. And we have to explain to the American people why it's important. Why it's important for us to develop the capabilities and to -- and to commit to efforts overseas that are important to our security, our prosperity and our way of life.

So I am -- I am very excited about the opportunity to serve with this wonderful team at FDD, the wonderful team that -- that -- that Mark has -- has assembled. And I -- I'm fully confident that the work of CMPP will harness the great work that's already going on in -- in the two centers that Mark mentioned, that I relied heavily on the Cyber Center and the Economic and -- and Financial Center, under -- under -- under Juan and Samantha.

And -- and I think we'll be able to -- to really help take it to the -- to the next level and make a profound and I think important contribution to -- to regaining our -- our strategic competence and -- and our strategic confidence as a nation. Thank you.

(APPLAUSE)

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