

MAY: Thank you for joining us today for a special discussion marking the release of Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster's latest book, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World*. I'm Cliff May, founder and president of FDD, a research institute exclusively focused on national security and foreign policy. We are nonpartisan and we accept no funds from foreign governments, never have, never will.

I'm honored to welcome back to FDD's virtual stage, our colleague, and friend, H.R. McMaster. H.R. serves as the chair of FDD's Center on Military and Political Power, working with Bradley Bowman, and his team to shape our analysis of the defense strategies, policies, and capabilities necessary to deter, and if necessary, defeat threats to the freedom, security and prosperity of America and other free nations.

If you've read his bestseller, *Dereliction of Duty*, you're familiar with H.R.'s thoughtful, substantive, and intellectual approach. *Battlegrounds* lives up to this expectation, and then some. As a historian, as well as a soldier and strategist, General McMaster explores the development of the complex challenges facing America in the 21st Century. He ties in his experiences as National Security Advisor to President Trump, as well as his 34 years of service in the U.S. Army, including deployments to both Iraq and Afghanistan.

General McMaster has noted, including in a recent *Foreign Policy* episode I hosted with him, and a column I wrote this week, that this is not the book people wanted him to write – that would have been a gossipy tell-all focusing on President Trump's unique persona. Instead, his purpose in writing this book was, "To help transcend the vitriol of partisan political discourse and help readers understand better the most significant challenges to security, freedom and prosperity. This book should be required reading, not just for what we call, "the policy community."

FDD is pleased today to be joined by Catherine Herridge, a real reporter – not an accolade I give easily – an award winning, senior investigative correspondent for CBS News, covering national security and intelligence. She's reported on some of the most significant national security stories of our time. We are indebted to her for agreeing to host this conversation with General McMaster.

A quick note before jumping in. After today's session we encourage you to visit our website for more events, podcasts, news and analysis – FDD.org, and feel free to engage with us over Twitter @FDD. Now it is my honor to turn the floor over to Catherine to begin the conversation.

HERRIDGE: Cliff, thank you, and thank you, FDD. And of course, General McMaster, congratulations on your book *Battlegrounds*. To begin with, let's set the table for folks. What do you see as the single greatest threat to U.S. national security?

MCMASTER: Well, Catherine, what a pleasure it is to be with you and with FDD. I admire the work that FDD does so much.

Well, I think the greatest threat to our security, our prosperity, our freedom, is the Chinese Communist Party and how aggressive the Chinese Communist Party has become, not only in stifling the freedom of its own people by extending and tightening its exclusive grip on power in its effort to perfect this technologically enabled Orwellian police state within its own borders, but it's exporting its authoritarian mercantilist model in a way that threatens the order that we've established since the end of World War II, an order that has been immensely beneficial to humanity. I think competing effectively with an increasingly aggressive Chinese Communist Party should be our top priority.

HERRIDGE: You have a phrase to encapsulate the threat from China. It's the "three Cs." What do they stand for, and how do they apply in this scenario?

MCMASTER: Well, it really gets to the pernicious nature of this threat. The three Cs are a co-option, coercion, and concealment. What the party does brilliantly, especially with its unique form of economic aggression, is entice countries and companies into its orbit by the draw of the potential lucrative nature of the Chinese market, access to the Chinese market, or what seemed to be benefits, oftentimes only for the ruling elites in certain countries, but benefits of Chinese investment in other countries.

The latter part of this form of economic aggression is accomplished mainly under the One Belt One Road program. This is when China finances major infrastructure projects, many of which are really unnecessary and will never realize a profit, to indebted a country. And that debt trap, once it's set, is used to coerce that country to supporting China's foreign policy, or to give China preponderant influence over strategic geographic locations or access to data as China puts in place the communications infrastructure associated with fifth-generation communications.

U.S. companies, we've seen many examples of this, where, to do business in China, you have to compromise your values and really act against universal rights that we should all respect.

HERRIDGE: I think one of the most high-profile examples of that is the Hollywood example. They've had a lot of criticism for effectively censoring the content in order to have access to such a large marketplace.

MCMASTER: No, that's correct. It's a lot of self-censorship. Then, of course, if a company has the temerity of calling out Chinese abusive behavior, even an employee, this is the situation with Daryl Morey, the general manager of the Houston Rockets and the NBA example, about how the NBA lost tens of millions of dollars, maybe more than that, I think maybe over 100 million dollars, of access to the Chinese market in retaliation for him supporting protestors in Hong Kong. And of course, we see the Chinese Communist Party has been emboldened since then, since that coercive effort, and they've passed this national security law on Hong Kong and are repressing human freedom in a more brazen way.

HERRIDGE: I just want to stop you for one second, because if you look at a lot of the media coverage, it's always been about the national security threat from Russia, not from China. So in your view, what is it about the Chinese threat? I'm getting to this idea that this is a multidimensional threat, right? It's playing along several tracks here in this country.

MCMASTER: Well, it is multidimensional. The Chinese authoritarian model allows the party to achieve a high degree of coherence and unity of effort, because there really is not a private sector as we would understand it in China. All Chinese companies have to act as an arm of the party, and this is under a program called military-civil fusion. There is no distinction between the development of cutting-edge technologies that'll be important to the emerging data economy and technologies that are applied to the People's Liberation Army to give them a differential advantage over ours and other militaries.

I mentioned that the One Belt One Road program. Then a third strategy is Made in China 2025. This is China's effort to really dominate in high-end, high-tech manufacturing and to be able to dominate the future data economy as well. Associated with that is a sustained campaign of industrial espionage, People's Liberation Army, PLA, infiltration of many of our research activities in the United States, public sector and private sector and in academia, and the extraction of that technology and application to Chinese industry, but also the People's Liberation Army.

HERRIDGE: This, though, represents a very significant shift for the U.S. government, correct, in the last couple of years, this posture?

MCMASTER: Catherine, it is. I think it's the largest shift in U.S. foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. I remember very soon after I took over as National Security Advisor, we held a Principals Committee meeting of the National Security Council, which is essentially the president's cabinet. What we wanted to do was frame a new approach to China in advance of the president's meeting with Xi Jinping, which was scheduled for the first week in April of 2017.

What I did at the outset of the meeting, to just set the tone in terms of how significant this meeting was, is I read passages from previous strategies and policies aimed at China, strategies and policies you could characterize as policies of cooperation and engagement. I just made the observation that we were about to affect the most significant shift in U.S. policy since the end of the end of the Cold War, from cooperation and engagement to competition, the recognition that we have to compete effectively in arenas of competition, Catherine, that we vacated based on flawed assumptions. Foremost among those assumptions is that China, having been welcomed into the international order, would play by the rules as it prospered, would liberalize its economy, and then ultimately liberalize its form of governance. Well, the party has done the exact opposite.

HERRIDGE: Who really drove that policy shift? I don't want you to get into discussions that are privileged, but was this really driven by the president or was this a strategy shift that he embraced that you proposed?

MCMASTER: No, it was really driven by the president. You could see that in the president's campaign speeches even before he came into office. I think it was really the president's sensitivity to large sectors of our society that were left behind by transitions in the global economy, and disadvantaged by China's unfair trade and economic practices. The president, I think, during his campaign, drew on that discontent in parts of America, and he put it top on his agenda to make good on his promises to change the approach to China.

HERRIDGE: One of the things said, this sort of strikes me as we're talking about it, is that China has effectively been able to drape itself in a lot of terms that we associate with democracy, but of course it is not a democracy. It's a communist party. Has that been a very specific promotional attitude of the Chinese or deliberate messaging campaign of the Chinese?

MCMASTER: Catherine, absolutely. That's the third C of concealment. China tries to portray even its most aggressive actions as just normal business practices. You see this with Xi Jinping's speech just a few days ago when asked about the campaign of cultural genocide in Xinjiang. He's like, "Oh, no, the people love it." This is a "benevolent" program to intern over a million people into concentration camps, that they're adding on to right now for additional capacity, as well as the other actions that are taken against Uighurs, the destruction of 8,500 mosques, the damaging of 7,500 others. Uighur birth rates are down by an estimated 60%, and this is from forced abortions and sterilizations. It's appalling. And the party has the gall to just say, "Well, this is just normal."

You also see, Catherine, in the area of the environment and global warming and climate change, everybody lauds Xi Jinping because he'll give a speech and say the word, "climate" or, "environment" 19 times in the speech, but China is constructing 50 to 70 coal-fired plants a year, and doing so not only within China but across Africa. For example, in Kenya, the plant that they're constructing will be the largest carbon emitter in Kenya, and it's right next to a UNESCO World Heritage site. He talks environment, but he's destroying whole ecosystems in the South China Sea –

HERRIDGE: You're talking about a fundamental duplicity in the messaging.

MCMASTER: It is, Catherine. That's been applied, as well, to these so-called strategic dialogues over the years with the Chinese Communist Party, typically on issues of trade and commerce and then issues of security. What the party is really good at is they've perfected a form of diplomatic-speak in these meetings, where they can speak for an extended period of time on the ubiquitous 5x8 cards that they carry with them and say absolutely nothing, and just create the illusion of progress while they continue to consolidate their differential advantage over us by acting like they're playing by the rules, but violating those rules every day.

HERRIDGE: I want to bring you to COVID-19 and this principle or idea of concealment. As a reporter, I often construct timelines so I can better understand events and the context and marry that up with what people are actually saying and doing at that time. And I'm struck by the significance of the timeline in mid-January of this year. The Chinese officials come to Washington, they signed phase one of the trade agreement, but within days of that, we have confirmation from the WHO of the likelihood of human-to-human transmission of the COVID virus. Is it possible that China, if you accept that China minimized the severity of COVID-19, is it possible that that was driven by a desire to maintain their bargaining position in these trade talks?

MCMASTER: Catherine, I think that's plausible. It's a plausible explanation. Of course, we won't know until there can be a real investigation, which China has resisted. China, of course, as you know, subverted the World Health Organization, repressed its own doctors when they tried to raise the warning about COVID.

Your reporting on this has been really great. I think it's an example, as well, of what we need to counter the aggression of the Chinese Communist Party, is investigative journalism to pull the curtain back on this behavior so they can no longer conceal their actions and conceal their motives as well, so we can deal with the party in a clear-eyed way. Of course, this is what the party fears more than anything. It's why they've kicked out journalists. It's why they're continuing to build the great firewall to keep all information out of China that is not officially sanctioned by the party.

In the chapter in *Battlegrounds* entitled "Turning Weakness Into Strength," I think a way for us to think about how to compete effectively is take what the Chinese Communist Party perceives as weaknesses, rule of law is a weakness to them, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and strengthen those, bolster those in our own societies as a counter to the Chinese Communist Party.

HERRIDGE: The timeline is fascinating to me. You're talking about, really, seven days between the signing of the deal and recognition that human-to-human transmission is likely, and then you have the construction of hospitals in Wuhan. The timeline is really worth investigating.

On COVID, do you believe that China has deliberately sought to exploit the vacuum that has been created by the pandemic?

MCMASTER: Absolutely. I think what the Chinese Communist Party sees now is what they think is a tremendous opportunity, and what they've always seen as really a fleeting window of opportunity to realize their goals of national rejuvenation and taking center stage in the world. I think the goal is to create exclusionary areas of primacy across the Indo-Pacific, and challenge the United States globally. I think COVID-19 has increased both their confidence and their sense of urgency. You see that with the Wolf Warrior Diplomacy oriented on the United States, and you're really adding insult to injury associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, but also the bludgeoning of Indian soldiers to death on the Himalayan frontier, and aggression along that border, the repression of freedom in Hong Kong, the pursuit of what would be the largest land grab, so to speak, in history in the South China sea, the aggression on Taiwan and against Japan –

HERRIDGE: Africa as well. I think they've really sought to expand their footprint in Africa.

MCMASTER: Exactly, Catherine. And what they're doing in Africa is not only creating these servile relationships economically with the debt trap under One Belt One Road. But they're also, in certain regimes, corrupt regimes, authoritarian regimes in particular, is they're exporting this surveillance state model enabled by Chinese artificial intelligence technologies to repress freedom there. And Catherine, I'd just like to make one quick point about this. There is, I think, a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of this competition. You often hear the interpretation, "Well, this is really like a U.S./China problem," or to put it really simply, "Donald Trump is just so mean to China that they're acting out." Well, this isn't a U.S./China problem. If you look at the broad range of aggressive actions, this is a free world/China problem. And I think the administration now is doubling down on its efforts to galvanize an international effort to deter and to counter Chinese aggression. And I think that's going to be immensely important for whatever President, whichever President is sworn in on January 20th.

HERRIDGE: I interviewed President Trump earlier this year and was glad for that opportunity, and specifically asked him what accountability would look like with China over COVID-19 and allegations that they concealed or minimize the severity of the virus. And I was surprised when he said that it was going to go beyond the bargaining table, which to me said it would be beyond the trade talks. What do you think for this President accountability would look like?

MCMASTER: Well, I think accountability begins with the end of self-delusion, and maybe treating China, like we would treat any other country who foisted a pandemic on the world by denying us the best shot at coping with a pandemic is to prevent it by being able to contain it at its source before it becomes a pandemic. And this was a very deliberate effort by the party that denied the world the opportunity to do that. And I mentioned the subversion of the World Health Organization, but what China does broadly is they infiltrate these international organizations. They talk the talk, but then they subvert these organizations and turn them against their very purpose. And so, I think that we would begin to compete much more effectively if the world would just realize the actual nature of the Chinese Communist Party, the ideology that drives and constrains its leaders, and a recognition that they pose a grave threat to our security, our prosperity, and our freedom.

HERRIDGE: A decision to minimize COVID-19, who would make that call within the communist party? How high up would it go? Pardon me.

MCMASTER: Well, I think it would go all the way because Xi Jinping has done a very effective job at consolidating power. I mean, he has gotten rid of any opposition. Typically, what you would see in the Chinese Communist Party, in the post-Mao period, the post-Deng Xiaoping period, is that you would have the heir apparent along there with the chairman of the party at the top. Xi has purged anyone who was under the auspices of a counter corruption campaign who might be a challenger to his maybe rule for life. And I think it's really worth watching the continued consolidation of this power going forward. FDD is a great organization that is doing that. And then in 2022, you have the next Chinese Communist Party Congress. And it's there that Xi Jinping, I think, wants to announce that he's going to be the leader for life, the next Mao.

And so, it's very centralized, Catherine. I think maybe initially, I mean, who knows, maybe initially in Wuhan it was the provincial Communist Party leadership that repressed it because if you're in that a system, you don't want to deliver bad news to your boss. I think Xi Jinping is in a bit of an echo chamber. But I think it's clear as it was undeniable that there was human to human transmission early January in your timeline. The sanitizing of the market, either for genuine effort to stop it or as a cover because it originated somewhere else. I think after that, Xi Jinping was complicit in the repression of the news of it, the subversion of the World Health Organization, the punishment of the doctors who tried to raise the warning, I think it goes right to the top.

HERRIDGE: And to be balanced, the WHO rejects that they have been somehow co-opted by the Chinese. Before we move on to Russia, I just want to note that if folks are interested in more literature on China, you can go to FDD's website. There's the *Dangerous Illusion of Restraining U.S. Power* by Jonathan Schanzer and Mark Dubowitz, and they also have a standalone China Program and some scholarly work called *Below the Belt and Road* by FDD advisor Elaine Dezenski, which highlights a lot of the issues – picks up on a lot of the issues that you've written about in your book and we've been talking about here. I want to pivot to Russia. In the big picture, Is Russia really competing on the same battlefield or playing field as the United States, or is it in effect a country that is in serious decline?

MCMASTER: Catherine, it is a country that's in serious decline or at least stagnation. And this is why the threat from Russia is a bit different. China is trying to take center stage, challenge the U.S. globally. Russia can't do it. The Russian economy is the size of Texas's economy or Italy's economy. As you know, they've been hit hard by COVID. It had a very poor response, especially in rural areas. Putin's increasingly unpopular these days, especially in the East where he removed a very popular leader, and the collapse of oil prices have constrained Russia further. But Russia's approach is much different. Russia has recognized these limitations, and is engaged in a sustained campaign of political subversion against the West. And Catherine, you probably figured out I have an affinity for alliteration. And I think that Russia's strategy is one of disruption, disinformation, and denial.

And so what Russia wants to do is to drag everybody else down. Everybody else in particular being the West, and especially Europe and the United States, and to do so by shaking our confidence. Shaking our confidence in who we are as a people, and shaking our confidence in our democratic principles and institutions and processes. And ultimately, Russia wants to polarize our societies and pit us against each other so we defeat ourselves. Under Putin's theory of victory, he's the last man standing in Europe. And Catherine, he's doing a pretty darn good job of it, and he's doing a pretty good job because we're doing it to ourselves. We are, in many ways, creating the vulnerabilities in our society that Putin exploits.

HERRIDGE: Well, there's the expression you can't defeat the United States from outside. You have to defeat it from within, which is the effect of these divisions. When you look at the issue of election interference, specifically 2016, and we're getting a taste of what they will do in the coming weeks, what's this all about at the end of the day? Is it really about preferring one candidate over another, or is the goal to undermine confidence in the democratic institutions, the Office of the Presidency, and just the voting process in general?

MCMASTER: I don't think Russia thinks it can determine the outcome of the election, and also, I believe it doesn't care. It doesn't care who wins as long as we doubt the result, and as long as we doubt the legitimacy of whoever's elected. And I think what's interesting, and I tell the story in *Battlegrounds* of the 2016 election in some detail, and really, I fit it into this overall campaign of political subversion against us. And what's interesting about the 2016 attack on our elections is the Kremlin had already a full up campaign for Hillary Clinton victory. I think they were surprised as most everybody else was by a Trump victory.

And they had a campaign in place to say, "Hey, Hillary Clinton won because the election was rigged. Donald Trump should have won." But then as soon as Trump won, they shifted it to, "Hey, well Trump would've won the popular vote if it wasn't rigged." And so, it's really to diminish our confidence in our democratic process in the election itself. And then of course, what they did is as the Russians started to fund and support through its bot and trolls and in this cyber-enabled information warfare to support the resistance movement, the Not My President movement. But then on issues of race, they support both sides' extremes of the issue and others as well.

HERRIDGE: They support activity online, which, if we had to really make it very simple, is about creating divisions and gaps and exploiting the scenes in our society.

MCMASTER: That's right. And what makes us so vulnerable is the old Pop Polarization that we have, the vitriolic nature of our partisan discourse these days. But it's also social media, Catherine, and the way that these algorithms that are designed to get more advertising money through more clicks for these social media companies, it presents people with more and more extreme content. And so, these bots and trolls from the Internet Research Agency, this front organization for Russian intelligence, the GRU and SVR, they show more work extreme content. They create false organizations. They appropriate organizations and provide more extreme content.

And so, we're participating in our own demise by allowing ourselves to be pulled apart from each other and not coming together. And Catherine, one of the purposes of this book is I hope what it will do is help people have civil, meaningful discussions about the challenges we're facing, and work together across the political spectrum. I know we're talking about the Great Power Competition, but I often think about 9/11. I mean, Al-Qaeda didn't attack Democrats or Republicans. They attacked Americans, and we have to come together on issues of foreign policy. And I hope that will be the beginning of a reversal of this polarization, and help us regain our confidence in who we are.

HERRIDGE: This gray zone warfare, information warfare, I mean, the Russians, they've been at this for a long time, right?

MCMASTER: Yes, since the 1920's. Absolutely.

HERRIDGE: There's an expression, "The Russians have a pair of twos and play them to the best of their ability, and we have a full house, and sometimes we don't play. We back away from the team."

MCMASTER: Right, right. Well, Catherine, this is a big theme in *Battlegrounds* is that how we vacated these arenas of competition in the 90s based on what turned out to be, in retrospect, at least some flawed assumptions. I mean, we were confident. We had to a reason to be confident. It was the end of the Cold War. We'd won. The Soviet Union collapsed. We had the overwhelming victory over Saddam Hussein's army in the Gulf War. And these three assumptions were basically, first of all, that there's an arc of history that guaranteed the primacy of our free and open societies over closed authoritarian systems. A corollary to that is that the Great Power Competition, that's a relic of the past. And the third was that our technological military prowess would leave us unchallenged, and our security would be inviolable. We would enjoy a period of unprecedented peace and so forth. And I think it's clear in retrospect that that was overconfident, maybe hubristic, and it was a setup. It was a setup, I think, for many of the frustrations that we experienced in the 2000's.

HERRIDGE: We talked earlier about China's extra-territorial ambitions. What does Russia's look like, and what shape does it take?

MCMASTER: Yeah. Well, Putin, since he came in in the year 2000 with the failure of reforms in Russia, after the 1998 financial crisis, Boris Yeltsin was a lame duck. He comes in. He gives the speech. That speech is pretty instructive in 2000 because he lays it out.

HERRIDGE: He describes what he's going to do, and then he does it.

MCMASTER: He absolutely does it. And in fact, I think he gives himself a period of about eight years to try to regain strength internally, and then what do you have in 2007? You have the denial servers attack, cyber-attacks on Estonia. What do you have in 2008? You have the invasion of Georgia. Then, of course, this culmination of what we see today, the annexation of Crimea, the invasion of Ukraine.

He wants to restore novo-Russia, a greater Russia territorially, but he wants to be a player on the world stage. He can't play a constructive role, but he can play a destructive role. Why? Because he's unscrupulous and also because it's easier to tear something down and to create mayhem than to try to impose order.

This is why Russia, I think, has been the key enabler in the serial episodes of mass homicide in the Syrian Civil War. This is why Russia is playing a destructive role in perpetuating the conflict and the insecurity in Libya as well. You see it now in Belarus, trying to stifle calls by the Belorussian people to have a say in how they're governed and to coerce them. He wants to tear everything down.

Catherine, I tell this story of this proverb or this saying in Russia of a peasant has one cow, and he's jealous of his neighbor who has two cows, and a genie appears to him and says, "You can have anything you want." He says, "Oh, great. Kill my neighbor's cow." What Russia's trying to do in large measure is kill our cow, drag us down.

HERRIDGE: Yeah. It's a policy of deliberate destruction or division. You described it to me earlier as Russia operates in these bubbles. They try and establish a footprint. Just explain that.

MCMASTER: From a geo-strategic point of view and from a military point of view, Russia's been effective at establishing positional advantage and then employing weapons systems that are designed to take apart what they see as our differential advantage. This is typically long-range missile capabilities, maybe tactical nuclear weapons capabilities, and tiered and layered air defenses. This takes away some of NATO's and America's advantages.

They've done this in Kongrad in the north around the Baltic Sea, for example. They've done it now in the Caspian Sea in area, Black Sea, in Syria, and now across to North Africa toward –

HERRIDGE: With these different bubbles, if you will, they've created a very important strategic ring sort of encircling Europe, parts of the Middle East, correct?

MCMASTER: That's correct, and this is one of the reasons why they're perpetuating this humanitarian catastrophe in Syria, because they need Assad in power to guarantee Russia's interests in a post-civil war Syria. That has everything to do with an air and a naval base there.

I think it's way past time for our Arab friends, for Israel, and others to impose costs on Russia for that. Catherine, what cuts against this, and I talk about this in the Middle East chapters, is a lot of Americans these days, they see the Middle East basically as just a mess to be avoided, and so we're always announcing our departure from the Middle East. Countries in the region are hedging, so they're susceptible to what we might call, again, more alliteration, Putin's Potemkin Peace Plan, in which he says to the –

HERRIDGE: And now we're on to three P's. Right?

MCMASTER: He says, “Hey, in exchange for guaranteeing my interests in a post-civil war Syria, keeping Assad in power, what I’ll do is I’ll work over time to diminish Iranian influence in Syria.” Well, it’s a lie, because the Assad regime is more reliant on Iran than they are on Russia, but he gets away with it because the countries in the region are hedging against what they think could be another U.S. disengagement from the Middle East.

HERRIDGE: Just on that point, we’ve had, with the Abraham Accords, we’ve had a significant, is “re-engagement” the right phrase?

MCMASTER: I think an extraordinarily successful diplomatic initiative. There are some people who never want to give the Trump administration credit for anything. This is something we ought to, I think, give the Trump administration credit for, because there’s very rarely good news out of the Middle East, and when it does happen, we ought to take a minute to celebrate it.

I think this is very important, because countries in the region even more broadly than the Bahrainis and the Emiratis, certainly the Saudis, I think, are in this camp, think that the greatest threat to their security comes from Iran and Iran’s four decade-long proxy war that they’ve been waging against the Great Satan, us in the region in particular, the Little Satan, Israel, and the Arab monarchies.

The Arab monarchies see their interests aligning more and more with Israel, so now they’ve joined Jordan. They joined Egypt in normalizing relations. This could be tremendously important to breaking the cycle of sectarian violence and reducing drastically the threats to Israel and convincing, maybe, at some stage, an Iranian government to stop its permanent hostility toward us. I think this is an immensely important initiative and one that ought to be expanded upon.

HERRIDGE: On that subject, this administration made the call to take out General Soleimani. For those who aren’t familiar with him, who was he, how much power did he exert in Iran and outside of Iran, and what has his death or his killing meant?

MCMASTER: Well, he was the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard’s Corps, Quds Force, which is the Force that is known as the Keeper of the Revolution, the revolutionary ideology, but in particular, the effort to export that revolution, an effort that really began at the very beginning after the 1979 revolution. But then after the Iran-Iraq war, this is when Iran doubled down on its aggressiveness in the region. They call it a Forward Defense, but it’s offensive.

What Qasem Soleimani did is he is responsible for, I think, more deaths than any other human being in the Middle East, including the heads of the most brutal jihadist terrorist organizations, because his organization perpetuates this cycle of violence in a region.

What Iran wants to do is keep the Arab world perpetually weak and enmeshed in this large scale sectarian violence and civil wars so they can apply what we might call the “Hezbollah Model” to the region, where they have governments in power, weak governments in power, that are dependent on Iran for support while they grow these militias and other terrorist organizations outside of that government’s control that can be turned against that government if it acts against Iranian interests.

They’ve been successful for this over decades, and the IRGC and Qasem Soleimani in particular, who was very, very effective, very well connected across all sorts of terrorist and militia networks across the region, these Iranian proxies.

They've been effective at escalating this proxy war with impunity. Right? We've never really imposed costs on them because they work through these cutouts of these militias and terrorist groups.

HERRIDGE: They probably deny that we –

MCMASTER: Why this strike was so important, Catherine, is because it communicated to the Iranians, when you attack us, when you kill our soldiers, as they've been doing in Iraq, killing over 600 Americans, and through their proxies during the war in Iraq, the communication, okay, now we know the return address. We know the return address.

I think it was an important action to restore deterrents at a time, by the way, at that moment, Qasem Soleimani was traveling through the region and marshaling support for a major attack against U.S. interests in the region, and he was killed with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the commander of one of the most potent proxy forces in Iraq. Those who had been most responsible for the attacks on our embassy in Baghdad just a week prior.

I think, Catherine, this was the righteous use of violence against an enemy of all civilized peoples. I hope it restored a degree of confidence. It's hard to prove a negative, but I think it was certainly the right decision.

HERRIDGE: At the time, there were a number of predictions that thousands of Americans would be dead in retaliation for the loss of General Soleimani. That has not happened.

MCMASTER: I think because the Iranians know that they would pay a much higher price. I think it's important. I think it's important to communicate that strong message to the Iranians. No matter what administration comes in, I think it would be really, really a huge mistake to try to turn the clock back to 2016, to resurrect something like a JCPOA, which was, I would characterize it as a political failure masquerading as a diplomatic victory.

I think what is important is to keep the pressure on Iran and in *Battlegrounds*, I argue that we have to force them to make a choice. We have to say to the Iranian leadership, which is really the Supreme Leader, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, "Listen, you can't have it both ways anymore. We're not going to treat you like a responsible nation until you stop being essentially a state that supports terrorist organizations and perpetuates violence across the Middle East and beyond."

HERRIDGE: We've talked to you about Iran in this framework of being a disrupter, a nation that tears down other nation and supports weak governments in the region, and this is almost the same strategy you have described with the Russians. Is this why they are natural allies in the region? Is that a fair assessment?

MCMASTER: I think it is a fair assessment, because the Iranians create problems for America. It's interesting about Russia. I mentioned this, and I write about this in *Battlegrounds* as I did this confidential meeting with my counterpart, Nikolai Patrushev, and I said to him, "Why is it that you act against the United States even when it cuts against Russian interests?" This was the issue with arming and supporting the Taliban. That's not in Russia's interest to do that, except that it complicates the situation for the United States.

This is why I think countries like Israel in particular, others, should be imposing more costs on the Kremlin until they stop aiding and abetting the Iranians in this case.

HERRIDGE: How far advanced do you think Iran’s nuclear program is, and what would be the effective deterrents at this state of the game?

MCMASTER: Right. We don’t know for sure, but I think what the Iranian regime should know is that the free world is committed to ensure that that regime with its revolutionary ideology does not get access to the most destructive weapons on earth. This is a regime that has been responsible for so much murder, so much human suffering. I don’t really think that they would feel constraint, necessarily.

HERRIDGE: How do you sort of pressure them to that position, thought? They’re not –

MCMASTER: I think the economic pressure is immensely important, but I think in many ways, the clock has been turned back on this one to 2006, 2007. I think we ought to use all means that we have available to block Iran’s path to a nuclear weapon. That will take a big international effort. It will take an effort that combines all sorts of activities and actions.

Then, I think it’s probably clear that the Begin Doctrine is still in effect. I think Israel, faced with an Iran that is approaching a threshold of nuclear capability would probably attack Iran. This is something that would be bad for Iranians, bad for the region, and I think what we all should hope for, maybe, is a change in the nature of the regime. Not like regime change, Catherine, like Iraq in 2003 or Afghanistan in 2001, but a shift in the nature of the Iranian regime such that it is no longer permanently hostile to the United States, Israel, the Arab monarchies.

Then, Iran could be welcomed back into the international community, but to do so, to do so before there’s that change, it allows the regime to reap all the benefits, economic benefits, financial benefits, and the state controls those profits, and then it allows them to intensify their proxy war against us.

I think isolation, recognition, getting the leadership to recognize that there’s a cost for their behavior, there certainly would be a cost associated with the pursuit of nuclear weapons.

HERRIDGE: On one level, it’s sort of a policy of more engagement, it sounds like, with Iran, or maybe I’m misinterpreting that, versus what you describe with China, which is a rival or competition.

MCMASTER: I don’t think engagement with the Iranian leadership is inherently bad. As long as there’s not relaxation of the sanctions on the regime, until they change their behavior, and until they’re transparent about the dismantling of this nuclear weapons program. It’s so funny, Catherine, they talk out both sides of their mouths, so they’re like, “Oh, we never had a nuclear weapons program.” And then when sanctions are reimposed, they threaten, “Hey, we’re going to restart the program, oh, by the way, that we said never existed.” So, they just can’t be trusted.

I think it’s worth remembering that the ink was not even dry on the Iran Nuclear Deal when the regime started to announce, “Well, here are the sites you can’t get access to.” So, I think that the important thing about the Iranian regime to remember is they’re not trustworthy, that any kind of an agreement with Iran has to be based on that premise, and to recognize really two things about the regime, the ideological nature of the regime, and the ideology of the revolution, which is still alive and well among those who ruled the country. And second, that they’ve been waging a proxy war against us for 40 years, and any kind of negotiation, any kind of deal that doesn’t recognize those two realities, it’s not going to be in the interest of the United States and our allies.

HERRIDGE: Yeah. That's right, I'm just going to throw this out there, I don't know what your thoughts are going to be on it, as a wild card question, but in recent weeks and months, there have been a number of suspicious explosions at key sites in Iran. Is it your view that this is a series of unfortunate accidents at these sites, or that it could be the work of foreign agents or intelligence services?

MCMASTER: Well, whether it's divine providence, or if it's the work of intelligence agencies, I don't really know, but I think it's good. It sets back the Iranian regime's effort to develop, or get to a threshold capability to develop the most destructive weapons on Earth. I think it ought to be welcomed.

HERRIDGE: I always go back to the timeline. The timeline and the locations, I think, is worth revisiting. Anyway, before we close out, we're going to talk about Afghanistan. What are your thoughts on the current state in Afghanistan, and whether you had found a way forward when you were National Security Advisor? Maybe we start there. What was it, and have we continued to adhere to that strategy?

MCMASTER: Well, Catherine, this is the biggest disappointment, I think, in the Trump administration's foreign policy. I think we're pursuing an unconscionable policy of partnering with it, that we partnered with the Taliban against the Afghan government, and in so doing, to get this deal so we could withdraw, we made so many compromises, we made so many concessions. We pressured the Afghan government to release 5,000 of the most heinous people on Earth, and then we constrain them in such a way that – You know what the Taliban negotiators and saying to their Afghan counterparts now? “Hey, we defeated the United States and we defeated the world's superpower, and we're talking to you, so you've got to make concession to our terms, right?”

And what does power sharing with the Taliban look like? Is that mass executions in the soccer stadium every other Saturday? Is that every other girls' school bulldozed? Some of the best work on this has been by FDD and the *Long War Journal*, and I think that the best allies on this are at FDD. And what FDD has done, and others have shown, that we've created, in Afghanistan, what the enemy would want. This is what I call in the book, strategic narcissism. Our tendency to define these challenges as we would like them to be, rather than they really are. And in this case, it's saying that there's a bold line between the Taliban and Al Qaeda. That just doesn't exist. These groups existed –

HERRIDGE: This is a real departure from what you were, correct, you were suggesting in 2017.

MCMASTER: Well, and what the president approved, and he, President Trump gave, I think, a speech in August or September of 2017 that really for the first time announced a reasoned, sustainable, long-term strategy in Afghanistan that could be implemented at a cost acceptable to the American public. That didn't exist, and I know that there's this theme of war weariness and so forth that has taken over the narrative in the United States, but I think that it hasn't been an almost 20-year war in Afghanistan. It's been a one-year war, 20 times over, and what the American people deserve, because they need to understand what is at stake and what is the strategy that will deliver an outcome consistent with our priorities, with our –

HERRIDGE: Consistent with the investment, if you know anyone who has served in either Iraq or Afghanistan, consistent with a considerable investment that's been made, not only financially, but in terms of the people that we've lost.

MCMASTER: Yes, absolutely, Catherine. And so, we should remember that 10 of our courageous service men gave their lives in Afghanistan this year, but we should also recognize that 30 Afghan soldiers and police die every day trying to preserve the freedoms that Afghans have enjoyed after we helped depose the Taliban in 2001, because they had given a

safe haven to Al-Qaeda, who committed mass murder against us on September 11th. So, we should remember that Afghans are bearing the brunt of this fight now, and are deserving of our support. The other aspect of the strategy that's really regrettable is the failure to recognize the role that Pakistan has played, and how Pakistan's support for these groups really allows these groups to regenerate, and essentially, what is a terrorist ecosystem? That is extremely dangerous, not only to the region, but to the world.

HERRIDGE: Yeah. So, what's the likely scenario once these deals are completely done?

MCMASTER: Well, what I'm afraid of, what I think is most likely as well, is that the Taliban will regain exclusive control of large portions of Afghanistan. Those portions that they gain control of will be lucrative for them, because of illicit trade, especially in narcotics and opium. They'll be able to use that money to resource recruiting efforts, training efforts, planning efforts, and these groups will become much more dangerous. The Taliban will declare victory as it establishes control of territory. This is the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Other jihadist terrorist groups will be drawn to that territory, and then we'll realize that this was a false promise. Actually, by the way, the only thing the Taliban agreed to is to not allow safe haven for groups that are plotting directly against us. Not against other civilized peoples in the world. And as we know, these problems don't remain contained in one particular location.

HERRIDGE: Well, we've really come to the end of our discussion, and we haven't talked about Al Qaeda, but I think it's worth reminding people. I had a piece of advice years ago from a British intelligence officer when I worked overseas, who said, "Terrorism is like water, it takes the path of least resistance. And it's a thinking enemy. You move one way and it moves another." They're always seeking to exploit the seams, and we forget that Al Qaeda has, over the decades, a tremendous ability to reconstitute itself in those vacuums, whether it's been Yemen after 9/11, Syria as well.

MCMASTER: Right, and you know, Catherine, I think this is a great argument for staying engaged, but not for the U.S. to solve these problems. Not for hundreds of thousands of American troops to be there. We should recognize that the vast majority of victims of these jihadist terrorist organizations have been fellow Muslims, so it's important for us to work together across all of our societies to combat these enemies of all civilized people. This is why I love the name of the Abraham Accord. We're all people of the book. What jihadist terrorists try to do is they try to make this a war of religion, but these are irreligious criminals who use a perverted interpretation of religion to justify their criminal acts against all of humanity. These places today, whether it's the Euphrates and Tigris River valleys and the fight against ISIS there, or whether it's the fight against the Taliban, I would say, and other terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda in the Khorasan area, that border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, these are modern day frontiers between barbarism and civilization.

And we know that if we disengage with that problem, like we did in the nineties, right? Remember Bill Clinton, President Bill Clinton fired a few cruise missiles at Al Qaeda and called it a day in 1998. Three years later, we are on the receiving end of the most devastating terrorist attack in history. And so, you can't prove a negative, Catherine. I'm not saying that we need a massive commitment and so forth, and I know Americans are skeptical of that with good reason, but not sustaining our engagement, disconnecting from this enemy means exactly as you suggest, that they will take the path of least resistance and we will have to cope with them at a much higher cost later.

HERRIDGE: H.R., that's a wrap. It's been a great discussion. I want to congratulate you again on the book and the work you're doing, important work you're doing, on national security, which I think is making every effort to strip out the politics, which I think is very important. And the work is being done by the team at FDD as well. And for those who have joined us, if you're interested in more information, you can go to the FDD website and its Center on Military and Political Power. Most of all, thank you for the privilege of speaking with you today, and thank you everyone for joining us.