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## Lieutenant General Ret. H.R. McMaster, USAFA Assembly Keynote Address: National Security and American Polarization: The Competition for Truth

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National Security and American Polarization: The Competition for Truth**

**Cover Page Footnote**

Keynote address presented at the United States Air Force Academy Assembly October 13, 2020

Lieutenant General Ret. H.R. McMaster, USA\*

USAFA Academy Assembly Keynote Address

National Security and American Polarization: The Competition for Truth

October 13, 2020

Thank you for the great privilege of joining you for the Academy Assembly and thanks, especially, for your decision to serve your country and your fellow servicemen and women during what, I believe, is a time of growing danger to American security, prosperity, and influence in the world. But I am confident that you will make significant and lasting contributions across a career of service and help build a better future for generations of Americans to come.

The crucial challenges we face today include those that revisionist powers China and Russia propose; growing transnational threats from pandemics to jihadist terrorists; hostile states such as Iran and North Korea; and the potential for proliferation of the most destructive weapons on Earth and destructive technologies that have made space and cyberspace competitive domains with implications for security across our planet and in the physical world. But the most pernicious danger to our future may lie closer to home, and that is why our society is in danger.

It is in danger because it is diminishing our confidence and I was very glad to see the topic you chose for this year's Academy Assembly. Political polarization affects not only our ability to overcome crucial challenges to our security, prosperity, and influence in the world, but also our confidence in who we are as a people and in our democratic principles, institutions, and processes. We all have a role in overcoming it. As a historian, I try to understand how the recent past produced the present as the first, and essential, step toward making projections into the future. So I thought I'd begin with a description of how we lost confidence in our ability to conduct a sustained and effective foreign policy before recommending how we might improve our confidence, in part, through rebuilding our strategic competence. And we could all work to understand divisions in our society and suggest what we might do as military professionals and citizens to overcome those divisions and restore the pride and confidence necessary to come together as Americans and strengthen our nation from within as we cope with challenges that originate abroad.

Our strategic competence has diminished since the end of the Cold War. I witnessed that loss. In 1989, I was a captain in the 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment, headquartered in Nuremberg, Germany. Our regiment patrolled a stretch of the Iron Curtain, along 375 kilometers of the West-German/East-German border and 365 kilometers of the German-Czech border, and Eagle Troop portrayed a portion of

that border around Kohlberg. This is the town where Martin Luther translated the Bible into German; the town that is also home to what I believe are some of the best beers in the world. That November, the Iron Curtain parted and the Berlin Wall fell. The throngs of East Germans who flooded across the border presented our scouts with bouquets of flowers and bottles of wine. There were hugs and tears of joy. The East German government withered away. The Soviet Union collapsed. America won the Cold War. But then came a hot war, far away from the Iron Curtain.

In 1989, Saddam's first decade as dictator was coming to a close. He should have been fatigued. In 1980, he had started a disastrous eight-year war with Iran that killed over 600,000 people. Since seizing power in 1979, he had murdered over one million more people, in a population of 22 million, including an estimated 180,000 Kurds and a genocidal campaign in which he used poison gas to massacre entire villages. But in 1990, Saddam felt more underappreciated than fatigued. Had he not defended the Sunni Muslim and Arab world against the scourge of Iran's Shia Islamist revolution, [and did] not Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and other states owe him a debt of gratitude and cash to pay off his war debts?

On 2 August, the first of over 300,000 Iraqi troops poured into Kuwait to make that small, but wealthy, nation Saddam's 19th province. President George W. Bush and his team got a coalition of 35 nations to agree that the annexation would not stand. Those same troopers who were patrolling the West German/East German border in November 1989 arrived in Saudi Arabia just after German reunification day, almost exactly one year after they watched the Iron Curtain part. Three months later, Eagle Troop was leading the so-called "left hook" to crush Saddam's Republican Guard and kick open the door to Kuwait with a blow from the western desert. By 26 February, 1991, the 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment had been in Iraq for three days. We had initiated our attack after an extensive air campaign that degraded Saddam's army significantly. Eagle Troop had nine 70-ton Abrams tanks and 12 Bradley fighting vehicles. We also had three of these new devices called GPS. They worked sporadically so scouts navigated mainly by dead reckoning in a flat, featureless desert. Most importantly, though, Eagle Troop had 132 soldiers who were well-trained and confident: confident in their equipment and confident in each other. We were soldiers bound together by mutual trust, respect, and affection.

At 4:07 p.m. on the 26th, we encountered a much larger defending enemy force of Iraq's Republican Guard. We achieved an early advantage in that fight and followed our initial blows with an assault that destroyed that force in approximately 23 minutes. Our fight was a lopsided victory in a larger battle at a war that were lopsided victories. In retrospect, though, those successes that I had the opportunity to bear witness to in Bavaria and at the Battle of 73 Easting marked the end of an era. American leaders across both political parties had reason to be confident. But overconfidence led to complacency. Many forgot that the United States had to

compete in foreign affairs and embraced three flawed assumptions about the emerging post-Cold War era.

First, some believed that an arc of history had guaranteed the primacy of free and open societies over authoritarian and closed systems. The expansion of liberal democracy was inevitable. Second, some assumed that the old rules of international relations were now irrelevant. Global governance in a great power condominium would displace rivalry. Third, some asserted that America's unmatched military prowess would guarantee full-spectrum dominance over any potential enemy. What some called the revolution in military affairs had ended military competition. All three assumptions were false. From Vladimir Putin in Russia to the Kim family regime in North Korea, autocracy is alive and well.

Jihadist groups from Al Qaeda to the Islamic State have bypassed the United States' superiority in conventional warfare and engaged in asymmetric warfare, and a new great power competition emerged as the Chinese Communist Party leadership spoke the language of cooperation while conducting one of the greatest peacetime military buildups in history, suppressing freedom at home, exporting its authoritarian model, and undermining international organizations and the rules-based international order.

Hubris is an ancient Greek term defined as extreme pride that leads to overconfidence and often results in misfortune. In Greek tragedies, the hero vainly attempts to transcend human limits and does not listen to warnings that portend disaster. Consider this from the preface of President Bill Clinton's December 2000 National Security Strategy: "As we enter the new millennium, we are blessed to be citizens of a country enjoying record prosperity with no deep divisions at home, no overriding external threats abroad, and history's most powerful military. Americans of earlier eras may have hoped to one day live in a nation that could claim just one of these blessings. Probably few expected to experience them all. Fewer still, all at once."

At the turn of the century, we were set up for a Greek tragedy. U.S. leaders failed to appreciate that the Gulf War seemed easy, mainly because of Saddam's ineptitude, and a very narrowly circumscribed political objective: just return Kuwait to the status quo ante. Give Kuwait back to the Kuwaitis. Meanwhile, as my friend and fellow historian Colonel Conrad Crane observed, our enemies and adversaries learned that there are two ways to fight the United States military: asymmetrically or stupidly. Al Qaeda chose the former and on September 11th, 2001, 19 terrorists used box cutters and airplanes to commit mass murder attacks that took the lives of nearly 3,000 innocents and inflicted trillions of dollars of losses on the American economy.

Those flawed assumptions of the 1990s stemmed from what we might call strategic

narcissism, the tendency to define problems as we would like them to be. Strategic narcissism encourages the conceit that others have no aspirations or agency, except in reaction to U.S. policies enacted. It generates policies and strategies that are based on what the purveyor prefers rather than what the situation demands. Today, strategic narcissism fosters a sentiment among many in both political parties that after long and costly wars, U.S. disengagement from overseas challenges would be an unmitigated good.

The excessive optimism of the 1990s shifted to extreme pessimism due to the financial crisis of 2008 and the unanticipated length and difficulty and cost of the wars in Afghanistan and the wars in the Middle East. Pessimism generated a bias toward resignation and an associated tendency to view retrenchment or withdrawal as the best way to reduce costs and advance American interests.

For example, the Trump administration has recently portrayed the decision to withdraw small contingents of U.S. forces that are enabling Afghan and Iraqi forces to bear the brunt of the fight against Jihadist terrorists as protecting rather than jeopardizing hard-won military gains.

Those decisions overlooked the lesson of the Obama administration's complete withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011. U.S. disengagement at that time created ideal conditions for the massive Islamic State offensive in 2014, which eventually allowed the most destructive terrorist organization in history to control territory the size of Britain. The most adamant advocates of disengagement are archetypes of strategic narcissism. They believe that the United States is the principal cause of the world's problems. Our presence abroad, they argue, creates enemies. Our absence would restore harmony. The United States, therefore, is to blame for antagonizing Russia and China. America, they believe, causes jihadist terrorism because U.S. presence in predominantly Muslim countries generates a natural backlash. The United States drives nuclear proliferation, they argue, because states like Iran and North Korea need those weapons to defend against an aggressive United States. But the historical record makes clear that American behavior did not cause Russian and Chinese aggression, jihadist terrorism, or the hostility of Iran and North Korea. Disengagement would not solve any of those challenges, despite the ahistorical nature of their argument. Calls for American withdrawal are bound to gain adherents these days as the nation emerges from our triple crises associated with the pandemic, economic recession, and social unrest sparked by the murder of George Floyd.

The balance of power has been shifting against the United States and other free and open societies. Much of that shift has been self-inflicted. Strategic narcissism has impelled overoptimistic policies that underappreciated the risks and cost of action, as well as pessimistic policies that underestimated the risks and costs of inaction.

There is an alternative: sensible and sustained engagement. The COVID-19 experience reinforces a fundamental lesson of September 11, 2001: threats that originate abroad, if not checked, can move rapidly across our world. Once they penetrate our shores, the cost to the American people can prove difficult to bear.

Moreover, it is much cheaper to deter Russia or China with strong alliances and forward-positioned American joint forces than it would be to bear the costs of a catastrophic war triggered by Kremlin or Chinese Communist Party aggression. It is indeed past time to restore America's strategic competence based on a clear understanding of crucial challenges to American security, and, what the historian Zachary short-terms "strategic empathy", the recognition that others exercise influence and authorship over our collective future. Empathy displaces narcissism with an appreciation of the emotions, aspirations, and ideologies that drive and constrain the other, particularly rivals, adversaries, and enemies. All of you have a role in overcoming strategic narcissism and fostering strategic empathy. Your education at the Academy is important, especially, I would argue, in the disciplines of military and diplomatic history.

Your great institution is ideally positioned to develop strategic competence by enriching the history curriculum and connecting the study of history to the interdisciplinary study of strategy. I think the initiative underway now with the Institute for Future Conflict is immensely important and the Academy should be credited for this important initiative that will be critical to restoring our strategic competence. So let's look at this interdisciplinary study of war and warfare and of strategy. What should we aim for? I think the study of history, to think in time and to reason by historical analogy. We often neglect continuity in the nature of war and are captured by change. We believe that really, the next war will be fundamentally different from all that have gone before it. The study of security studies to better understand geopolitical trends and essential elements of effective strategy. Language, geography, and area studies to understand enemies, adversaries, and populations among whom wars are fought. Sociology and political science to understand civil-military relations in our society and to help maintain the connection between our military and those in whose name we fight and serve. Psychology to understand the cognitive pitfalls associated with blunders and strategic failures. Philosophy, theology and ethics and law to develop empathy and solidify a commitment to moral and ethical conduct in war consistent with our values. Leadership to understand how to develop and execute strategies as well as provide the purpose, direction and motivation necessary to lead our military to lead our servicemen and women to maintain morale and also to maintain popular will in war.

So the study of history in the interdisciplinary study of war strategy is essential. It's essential so that the hard-won lessons learned from our recent conflicts do not, in the words of the historian Carl Becker, "lay inert in unread books". But we must go

beyond improving our competence and do our part to generate the confidence necessary to implement a sustained approach to foreign policy and national security.

George Floyd's murder and the deep divisions in our society laid bare in the wake of his murder and during the protests and the violence sparked in the midst of a pandemic have sapped confidence in our common identity as Americans. I believe in part it is a lack of empathy for one another that is catalyzing a destructive combination of identity politics, vitriolic partisan rhetoric, bigotry and racism. Lack of empathy is rooted fundamentally in ignorance. Those who know least about issues and who are strangers to their fellow Americans seek affirmation of their biases rather than knowledge. They judge their neighbors rather than try to understand their perspective.

History, I believe, can play a role here as well. We might reinforce the worn fabric of our society by considering how our past produced our present. Divisions in our society and civil unrest associated with them are not new. A broad historical perspective leads us to the conclusion that we are still coping with the legacy of slavery. As bias and vitriol contaminate the information environment today, the manipulation of history remains an important and important tool for those who want to sow division and conflict rather than foster unity and goodwill. Ignorance of history compounded by the abuse of history undermines our ability to work together and improve our nation and our society, because it saps our national pride. As the late philosopher Richard Rorty observed, National Pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals, a necessary condition for self-improvement.

Pride in our nation should not derive from a contrived, happy view of history but rather from a recognition that the American experiment in freedom and democracy always was and remains a work in progress. For example, the Emancipation of 4 million people after the most destructive war in our history was only the beginning of a long journey for equal rights. Milestones along that journey included the failure of reconstruction after the Civil War, Jim Crow segregation, and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and “separate but equal.”

In the 1960s, the civil rights movement dismantled the legal basis for Jim Crow segregation. But cultural, economic, educational, and other forms of disenfranchisement continued. The manipulation of history was foundational to the obstruction of equal rights for black Americans, as the myth of the lost cause portrayed slavery as benign instead of cruel and the Civil War as a noble effort to preserve states' rights rather than slavery. But it is also an abuse of history to cast the American Revolution as an effort to preserve slavery rather than a righteous struggle to found a nation on principles that ultimately rendered that horrible institution unsustainable. It is indeed possible to celebrate the principles enshrined in our Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights, and also recognize that much of



our history has cut against those principles, and that work remains to realize them. We are fortunate. We are fortunate that we can make progress because our Republic was founded on the radical idea that sovereignty lies neither with King nor parliament, but with the people.

With just over, you know, I guess maybe about a month or so a month to go, before the November elections, we might ask candidates for office, or the American people might, not cadets at the Academy, to give us their answers to the following questions while also considering what we might do ourselves because we have agency as citizens in our country. How to rebuild trust in American institutions at the national and local levels, with an emphasis on police reform, police-community relations, and the rule of law? How to rekindle hope among rural and urban communities that have lost sight of the American Dream by improving education, abolishing the soft bigotry of low expectations, strengthening families and fostering new economic opportunity? How to urge our representatives in government to set an example for bipartisanship and address fundamental causes of polarization in America? How to inspire more Americans to serve in organizations, like yours, that bring people together from all racial, ethnic, religious and economic backgrounds such that, as happens routinely in our military, where prejudice gives way to understanding, mutual trust, and pride in serving the nation and one another? How to improve civic education to instill pride in the vision of our founders and the uniqueness of our democracy while recognizing, as our founders did, that the American experiment requires constant nurturing and improvement? And of course, as I mentioned at the outset, how to develop a reasoned and sustainable foreign policy to secure freedom, achieve peace, and promote prosperity for generations to come?

As we discuss all of the above, we should give at least equal time to what we agree upon before we clarify areas of disagreement. For example, we might all agree that it is right to express outrage over the murder of George Floyd and police brutality directed against minorities and also agree that it is wrong to use peaceful protests as a cover for destructive violence and criminality. And perhaps what is most in our power is to maintain our military professionalism and, in particular, that bold line between service in our military and partisan politics. Particularly disturbing to me has been the efforts on the part of politicians on both ends of the spectrum to drag the military into partisan disputes, with some suggesting that the military was with one party or another side. Our military fights to defend the freedom and security of all Americans, and we might remember that on 11 September, 2001, Al Qaeda did not attack Republicans or Democrats; they attacked Americans. We are part of a profession in which we are bound together, bound together by an oath to our Constitution. We are called to a mission far larger than ourselves or any micro-identities, including political parties. As leaders, we build cohesive teams bound together by common purpose, mutual respect, and a willingness to sacrifice for our mission, for our nation, and for one another. We are part of organizations in

which the man or woman next to you is willing to give everything, including their own lives, for you. We have no time for prejudice based on race, religion, sexual orientation, or any other category. Good military units take on the qualities of a family in which prejudice and bigotry have no place.

So while we should be concerned about the polarization in our society, we should remain confident in our principles and who we are as a people and who we are as a military profession. We can do our part. We can do our part by maintaining our professionalism, resisting efforts to drag us into partisanship, reaching out to our fellow Americans, and engaging in respectful debates, especially within our military family, about issues important to our future, rejecting demagoguery rooted in ignorance, bigotry and racism, and, of course, supporting it, defending our democracy and the Constitution of the United States.

Thank you. Thank you all of you for what you will do to help our nation rebuild strategic competence, grow our confidence, protect our great experiment in democracy, and create a better future for generations to come. What a privilege it's been to be with all of you, and I look forward to seeing where you'd like to take the discussion. Thank you.

\*Lt. Gen. Ret. H.R. McMaster served as the U.S. National Security Advisor during 2017-2018 and is a Fouad and Michelle Ajami Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. He also authored a recent book, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World* (HarperCollins, 2020).