



American Security Project

**Remarks by Jim Ludes, Ph.D.
Executive Director, American Security Project
Rotary Club, Orlando, FL
October 7, 2010
(As Prepared)**

Scope of the Challenge

Friends, to put it simply, American power is in crisis. Economically, we face continued turmoil and uncertainty. Politically, we are distracted by persistent partisanship. Our military is overextended by two wars and decades of mismanagement. We continue to under-invest in America's human capital even while we face a diverse array of challenges from terrorists, nuclear proliferators, energy dependence, rising powers, environmental decline, and broad revolutions in communications technology and commerce. In the twenty-first century, the United States risks becoming less powerful, less competitive, and ultimately less secure.

We find ourselves in this mess for a lot of reasons: for too long we have lacked leaders willing to take the long-view on important issues. For just as long, the American public has been subjected to a steady stream of distortion and misinformation in the form of talking points repeated ad nauseum on talk-radio and all three cable news networks. It's a disservice to our democracy. The truth is that we need more dialogue and less diatribe.

But it's more than that. Our institutions are failing us, too. Across society, whether we are talking about our schools, our businesses, our churches, or our government, we are let down time after time.

Now, we can respond with new laws, new regulations, new rules.

I'm not convinced that's what's at issue. We really don't lack too many of those. Really, what's lacking is the commitment of individuals in positions to affect change, to demand better and to deliver.

In the U.S. military, the willful neglect of recurring problems would constitute a dereliction of duty.

Today, in our society, I'm afraid, we as citizens are all derelict.

So today I'd like to talk about these issues with a decidedly national security focus.

I want to talk about the war in Afghanistan—and what I see as profound failures across the U.S. government.

I also want to talk about how we respond to our national debt—an often un-appreciated threat to our security.

And finally, I want to talk to you about our politics.

I'll talk fast.

Tackling Tough Issues

When I sat down to think about this talk, I tried to brain-storm a few issues that I could use to demonstrate my point about the failure of our governmental institutions to tackle tough issues. There are lots of possible examples to consider, beginning with the Congress and its members' list of abdications, including:

- The fact that the United States has been at war in Iraq and Afghanistan for nearly a decade—without Congress declaring war. It's an abdication of Congressional responsibility embraced by both political parties. As a result, whether a Democrat or a Republican is in the White House, or either party is in control of the House or Senate, we have seen unquestioning complicity by the U.S. Congress in the conduct of these conflicts. That's not the system of checks and balances our founders envisioned.
- Congress has further failed to address the legal foundation of our fight against terrorists. Even in the last two weeks, with governments warning of possible imminent attacks in Europe, and U.S. authorities increasingly worried about radicalization occurring on American soil itself, a Federal Judge refused to seat a witness in a terrorist trial because he had been tortured while in U.S. custody. I can't fault the Judge for his reading of the Constitution—a document that defines not just who we are and what we'll do—but what we won't. The failure here lies at the hands of both parties in Congress who over 9 years have failed to resolve in law how to prosecute and where to detain terrorism suspects.
- At the same time, Congress has chosen to ignore climate change, energy policy, immigration, and on and on and on.

This is not a new story. American society has slowly been drifting in this direction for years and years. And it's not just the U.S. government that's failing. Do I need to remind anyone here about the accounting scandals that shook Wall Street with Enron and MicroStrategies and so many others nearly a decade ago? Or the oil that poured out of the Earth and into the Gulf of Mexico this summer? Or what of our religious institutions, so many of which are plagued with corruption, and hypocrisy, and abuse? Or what of our schools? Despite all the talk of “No Child Left Behind” and all the talk of education reform, can we say our schools succeed when 25%—one in four—of all students fail to graduate on time?

Fundamentally, ladies and gentlemen, we are witnessing a profound failure of institutions. And this is critical. Because our society is based on institutions—we build and operate our democracy on institutions that are stronger than individuals. That's why there has been no American Caesar, no DeGaul, no Putin, or worse. That's why the election of 2000—something you might remember—didn't lead to barricades in the streets. It's because of our institutions that

we are able to “provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty.” It’s been that way since the founders set on paper the principles and values by which we have governed for the last 221 years.

But today, we face enormous challenges that our elected legislatures and the federal government are unable or unwilling to address because of persistent partisanship and institutional failures. Whether we are talking about deliberations over how and where to try terror suspects, what to do about climate change, or how to reduce our national debt, we are stymied again and again by political paralysis and the politics of “No.”

No new taxes.

No cuts in spending.

No leadership.

No action on the big issues.

Let’s take one under-appreciated issue: the national security implications of national debt. Instead of Congress actually balancing its finances the way the rest of us do every month, the President had to appoint a blue-ribbon commission to make recommendations about how to reduce the deficit.

The plan seems simple enough: bring responsible leaders together and force them to make the compromises necessary to tackle one of the most imposing strategic challenges facing the United States. But it’s not that simple. It concedes that there is not enough political courage and foresight in all of Washington, DC to make the choices necessary to get our own fiscal house in order.

Unfortunately, the White House was right in its calculation as the reaction from Congress showed. Some Republicans, sensing an election year gimmick, balked at giving the White House cover on a political hot-topic this year. And in a perverse spasm of bipartisanship, both Democratic and Republican lawmakers reportedly pressed the White House to support a statutory budget commission whose recommendations would, in effect, have the force of law.

A statutory commission with such sweeping authority is not unprecedented. For several decades, Congress has relied on this model to close excess military bases. After study and review, the commission makes its recommendations. If a resolution of disapproval is not passed in both houses of Congress in a certain period of time, the recommendations take on the force of law.

It’s an ingenious device. Public comment periods built into the process provide members of the House and Senate the opportunity to posture and pontificate while knowing they will never have enough votes to stop the process from proceeding.

It’s also a complete abdication of constitutional responsibility. Instead of grappling with great and difficult issues, members of Congress are eager to cede the authority vested in them by the Constitution to a panel of unelected, unaccountable oligarchs.

In the case of a statutory deficit commission, Congress would be abandoning the principle of self-rule—authority over our own taxes and our own expenditures—that inspired our founders to seek independence from Britain 234 years ago.

Too many in Congress, both Democrats and Republicans, favor an expedient solution that is inconsistent with our form of government and dangerous to our Constitution. If we conclude that our elected representatives are unable to decide what we should pay in taxes and what we should spend on programs, then someone will soon ask “What do we need them for?”

The challenges facing the United States are not too big to solve. Nor is the United States too big to fail. Leaders have to lead and accept the electoral consequences of their actions. Anything less will lead to paralysis or, worse, a diminished democracy.

So How Do We Make Our Institutions Work Better?

I wouldn't blame anyone if they we're looking for something a bit stronger than coffee right now. But I still believe our institutions can serve us well. They require leadership, first and foremost, perhaps a bit of humility in our elected leaders, and a willingness to learn from history. Let me give you an example—ripped from the headlines, and from the archives—of what works and what doesn't.

Afghanistan

The decision-making process of the Obama administration is under assault after revelations in Bob Woodward's most recent account of a White House at war, *Obama's Wars*. Frankly, it should be, because as depicted by Woodward—and that's an important caveat—the President allowed policy advocates in the Department of Defense to arbitrate his consideration of alternatives.

Woodward recounts that the President sought "options" in Afghanistan. That's a pretty loose term. Options could refer simply to the number of troops being committed to the fight, to the mix of capabilities deployed, or--what I think Obama was asking--options for the strategy employed by the United States in securing America's national interest in Afghanistan.

In the accounts of the policy review that have been leaked or reported by Woodward and others, the President was never satisfied with the various options being considered by his team. One smaller-option of 20,000 additional troops was advocated by Vice President Biden. But the military did not support it because it ran counter to the prevailing orthodoxy of population-centric operations: counter-insurgency (COIN).

According to Woodward:

"So," Obama asked, "20,000 is not really a viable option?"

Mullen, Petraeus, Gates and McChrystal all said it would result in mission failure.

But the critical question here should have been: what mission? For Mullen, Petraeus, and McChrystal--the latter two of whom are among the most prominent proponents of COIN--a smaller force increase would have been insufficient for the strategy they embraced and *advocated*.

The President's approach was inherently flawed. He asked policy advocates their opinion on an alternative policy. It would be like asking an attorney to sit on the jury weighing the guilt or innocence of her client. Few of us have the ability to perform both roles effectively.

That's why other Presidents have not relied on this model for important policy making decisions. President Eisenhower, for one, relied on what has become known as the Solarium Exercises. The question then was, "What strategy should the United States adopt to confront the Soviet Union?" His campaign had spoken of "Liberation" in Eastern Europe, but he knew that such a strategy was dangerous and potentially very costly. Yet his administration included some, like John Foster Dulles, who embraced the moral clarity of "Liberation" as a useful tool in America's foreign policy.

Faced with this division within his team, Eisenhower leveraged the institution of the Presidency. He instructed his national security council to assemble three teams of "bright young fellows," each with committed advocates of a specific policy option, to consider the costs and benefits of different national security strategies. After several weeks of work at the National War College, each team delivered its case and recommendations to the President and his national security team.

Armed with these recommendations, the President made his decision, side-stepped the ardent advocates of "liberation" and "roll-back" in his administration, and enshrined a strategy that sustained U.S. power for the rest of the Cold War.

Admittedly, Eisenhower and Obama had very different paths to the White House. But the model Eisenhower used would work for any President. It lets the advocates of policy be advocates, while the President--and his most trusted advisors--play the role of executive. And that is what we elected him to do.

There may have been no good options on Afghanistan—but what would be worse is if alternatives were never given the hearing they deserved because of a flawed process or dysfunctional institution that stifled consideration of any real alternatives.

Appeal for Bipartisanship

So the institutions of our democracy are not functioning as we need them to function. Who do we have to blame? Ourselves.

We are complicit in the persistent partisanship that makes compromise—the stuff of governance—political suicide. Look at the churn in the Republican Party. In state after state, incumbents who failed purity tests were confronted with primary challenges. Many lost. Even John McCain, the Republican Standard Bearer in 2008, faced a strong primary challenge from

the right. And it's not just Republicans. Just look at Joe Lieberman's political journey and you can see: pragmatists are being forced out of both parties.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is bad for America. Governing is about consensus and compromise. When the public enforces purity at the polls, government screeches to a halt.

And we face issues too big to be kicked down the road much longer.

So I want to end with a plea that some might dismiss as naïve and others might characterize as a fool's errand.

But I believe these are desperate times. And desperate times call for desperate measures.

Even four weeks before election day.

I plea for bipartisanship.

I quoted the Constitution, earlier, noting the essential functions of government it enumerates: "to provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty." But I didn't finish the sentence. We do these things, the founders wrote, "for ourselves and our posterity."

Politics isn't about us. It's not about winning elections. It's about our children and our grand children.

We can't keep holding candidates to purity tests in either party.

The only litmus test we should ever discuss is whether something is in the best interests of the United States.

If this message resonates with you, I want to work with you. There are big challenges to be tackled. It's time we got on with it.

Thank you.