

# Heritage Lectures

No. 1146

Delivered February 4, 2010



Published by The Heritage Foundation

February 24, 2010

## Building a Robust National Defense

*The Honorable Howard P. "Buck" McKeon*

**Abstract:** *The power of American values is even greater than its military or economic might. However, says Rep. "Buck" McKeon of California, time and again we've seen the Administration reject notions of American exceptionalism and only reluctantly assume the role of the world's lone democratic superpower. Drawing on his experience as the Ranking Member of the House Armed Services Committee, Rep. McKeon describes what this means for winning the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, detaining and prosecuting terrorists, engaging both allies and adversaries, and investing in a robust national defense. He calls for a National Defense Education and Investment Act to increase funding for basic defense research and ensure we maintain America's technological edge.*

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Thank you to The Heritage Foundation for hosting me this morning and giving me an opportunity to share my views on how President Obama has performed as Commander in Chief over the past year and where I believe we need to push the President to do better in the year ahead. Heritage is an invaluable resource to the Congress; your Hill presence, policy papers, and many events really help us do our job.

I would be remiss if I did not take a moment to acknowledge the thousands of America's sons and daughters who are currently bravely serving in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere around the world. They are doing heroic jobs—and have been for nearly a decade. As always, they deserve our prayers, respect, and support.

### Talking Points

- The rejection of American exceptionalism has permeated American national security policy. At its core, this view holds that America should never lead alone, that it must aspire to do less and acquiesce to the will of others more. This cannot continue.
- While all Americans want our troops in Iraq to return home as soon as possible, we should not draw down forces if it means risking the security of our troops and mission success.
- We have a responsibility to defeat our enemies wherever they are, not "treat and release" them as if they were run-of-the-mill domestic criminals.
- When U.S. dominance is in question—by allies or adversaries—global stability is at risk. Engagement must be from a position of strength.
- Cuts to defense investment in the midst of two wars is unacceptable. One percent real growth in the defense budget over the next five years is a net cut for investment and procurement accounts.

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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/hl1146.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/hl1146.cfm)

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Center for Foreign Policy Studies  
of the  
Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis  
Institute for International Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
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When it comes to protecting the American people and our values, we must begin with the end in mind. We strive for peace, security, and vibrant freedom. Our people must be protected from those whose only aim is to destroy our way of life.

Make no mistake: Americans yearn for peace, but to achieve it we must fight those who want only war. So, we must ask, how do we move from the conflicts of today towards our goals for tomorrow?

As you consider my comments this morning, I would like for you to answer these questions: Are we adequately equipped as a nation—and as a military—to handle challenges posed by Iran, China, and the unforeseen conflicts of tomorrow? And as importantly, are our *leaders* equipped with the convictions necessary to properly defend America's values and America's people?

In Washington, we generally move from one election to the next. Planning generally means looking forward six months. By long-term planning, politicians usually mean “what's it mean for my next election?” Unfortunately, those who wish us harm across the globe are not bound by two-, four-, or six-year cycles.

In the defense community, we focus on what went wrong in the last war—or the war we're currently fighting. But this fails our nation—and espe-

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cially our next generations, for whom we fight. Who is thinking about the war in 2015? What about the war in 2030? Is our country doing what it needs to do today to win the war in 2015 and 2030?

The pace of the world's technological and political change grows exponentially every year. We cannot afford to forever play catch-up and ever hope to keep up.

Make no mistake: Our ability to keep the peace today is inextricably linked to our ability to keep pace with tomorrow.

## The Current Political Climate

As we all know, President Obama came to office promising change. He promised to change our politics. The American people have been troubled to find that he instead is trying to change our principles. As a result, support for the President's policies is waning, and the political winds are blowing in a different direction.

More importantly, the President's misdirected domestic agenda has distracted him from his vital role as the leader of the free world—and pushed national security into a small corner at the White House.

## The End of American Exceptionalism?

Today, Americans and all people yearning to breathe free deserve *leadership*. We need a President who—like the greatest Presidents in our history—recognizes the power of American values is even greater than its military or economy. And we need a leader who has the courage to not just fight for those values on the battlefield, but also from his bully pulpit.

Time and again we've seen this Administration reject notions of American exceptionalism and only reluctantly assume the role of the world's lone democratic superpower.

We must never give up on our belief that America is truly great, and that we have the responsibility to help make others great, too.

Our military is a force for good in the world. Our troops responded when an earthquake hit Pakistan and a tsunami hit Thailand. Our military was called into action once again to help when an earthquake hit Haiti. Thousands of our Marines—who were spread around the country—were recalled, equipped, and on their way to Haiti within three days, after just returning from a December deployment.

America leads like this, time and time again, for two simple reasons: first, because we can; but second, and more importantly, because we must. We can help because America remains home to the greatest economic and military resources in the world. But we must help because America remains home to the most compassionate, giving, and selfless people in the history of the world. These are indisputable facts, proven time and again.

I yearn for the days of an American President who proclaimed around the world that America is a “shining city upon a hill.” I fear these days have passed. This is certainly a change—in my view, unwelcome.

### Rejecting America in Decline

I take issue with a declinist vision of our country, not only because every fiber of my being believes in our nation’s greatness, but because of the impact it is having on our standing in the world. I’m increasingly concerned that the rejection of American exceptionalism reflects a fundamental view of this Administration that has permeated American national security policy.

At its core, this view holds that America should never lead alone, that it must aspire to do less and acquiesce to the will of others more. In other words, we must do less with less.

What I’d like to do for the remainder of my remarks is give a number of concrete examples where I think we’re seeing the declinist vision permeate policy and offer, at the same time, an alternative approach.

### Ending or Winning the Wars We’re In?

Let me start with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Al-Qaeda, operating from safe havens provided by the repressive Taliban in Afghanistan, planned and launched the attacks on our homeland on September 11th. Because of its history as a crossroad between east and west, north and south, an Afghanistan controlled by the Taliban would once again be a refuge for al-Qaeda terrorists—and would place our citizens and allies at a greater risk of future attack.

In Iraq, we found a country in the heart of the Middle East, ruled by a ruthless dictator who coveted weapons of mass destruction and regional domination. While the going has been rough, our forces have delivered freedom to a people who had never known it during their lifetimes. A secure and stable Iraq at peace with its neighbors and itself will be a great ally to the United States.

Like almost all Republicans, I support the President’s decision to surge in Afghanistan. I believe that

with the additional forces—combined with giving General McChrystal the time, space, and resources he needs—we can win this conflict. We do not have a choice. We must defeat al-Qaeda and the Taliban. This means taking all necessary steps to ensure that al-Qaeda does not have a sanctuary in Afghanistan or Pakistan. This is also the President’s objective.

It is my fervent hope that the President’s December 1st speech, and the subsequent testimony from Secretary Gates and General McChrystal, concluded the war debate in this country.

Yet, the President’s decision to provide 30,000 additional troops (fewer than General McChrystal requested) and to begin drawing down our forces in July 2011 gives me pause about his commitment to seeing this conflict through to victory. General McChrystal has assured me that he can live with these constraints, but we must ensure the pace of withdrawal is based on conditions on the ground. Either we are committed to investing the resources—and the time—needed to win this war, or we are not.

The emphasis on ending the conflict—rather than winning—reveals that we have a reluctant wartime President. With all of the President’s major domestic policy announcements, he has a pretty straightforward formula he uses to win over public support: give major speeches and travel throughout the country to rally Americans behind his plan. How many speeches and events did he do just on health care, climate change, or jobs? On Afghanistan, however, he didn’t follow this formula, and public support for the mission waned.

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A reluctant wartime President, I fear, abstains from using words like victory and winning—because he is more committed to ending the conflicts we’re in rather than winning them. This is the risk of a war strategy driven by an unchecked declinist national security policy. So far, it has not undermined our effort in Afghanistan. Now to the conflict in Iraq.

Despite then-Senator Obama's opposition to the war in Iraq and his public doubt over whether the surge in Iraq would work, we have a chance in the coming year to redeploy from a secure, democratic Iraq capable of defending itself, that is an ally of the United States. The strategic significance of such an outcome is self-evident. The success of our incredible service men and women is indisputable.

While all Americans want our troops in Iraq to return home as soon as possible, I fear that the President's redeployment schedule may be too aggressive. We must continue to ensure that the President makes decisions on troop withdrawals in Iraq based on conditions on the ground. Again, there seems to be more focus on ending—rather than winning—the conflict. We should not draw down forces if it means risking the security of our troops and mission success.

### **Risking Our Security at Home**

Iraq and Afghanistan are not the only theaters of the Global War on Terrorism. As the Christmas Day terrorist attack reminded us, al-Qaeda and its affiliates continue to threaten the homeland.

Arguably the greatest example of the perils of a declinist policy is the President's mishandling of the war on terror and the Guantanamo detainees.

Let me share an example to illustrate this point. The Nigerian who attacked a U.S. airliner on Christmas Day trained in Yemen in an organization known as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula or AQAP. One of the spiritual leaders of AQAP, we know now, is an American-born cleric who radicalized Major Hasan, the U.S. Army psychiatrist who killed 13 at Ft. Hood.

Now, this organization with ties to the Ft. Hood massacre, which planned and organized the Christmas Day attack, has in its leadership a former Guantanamo detainee.

You would think that this would make the President reevaluate his Guantanamo policy; that the President would see the perils of closing Guantanamo and the risk of returning detainees to countries already riddled with ungoverned spaces and al-Qaeda cells.

The simple truth is that relaxing our Guantanamo policy puts Americans at risk. We can draw a bright and terrifying line between releasing those war criminals and harm to our people.

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Yet, there was no reversal of policy or even a review. It was only the result of congressional pressure that the Administration announced it would stop transferring Guantanamo detainees back to Yemen.

In fact, it is the President's strident position on Guantanamo that I find most alarming. On the same day the President acknowledged that his Administration failed to prevent the Christmas Day attack the President stated, "we will close the Guantanamo prison which has damaged our national security interests" and added that Guantanamo "was an explicit rationale for the formation of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula." In other words, the President used the Christmas Day attack to justify his failed Guantanamo policy. This is utterly, totally, and completely backwards. And it represents a dangerous new policy of "Blame America First" that must end immediately.

Instead of blaming the enemy, the President chose to blame our nation's security policies. Instead of recognizing that terrorists targeted America long before Guantanamo Bay held enemy combatants, he attempted to re-write history to the benefit of our enemies and the detriment of our people. Put bluntly, the President believes that American policy was a root cause of AQAP's attack on the homeland.

I believe differently. I believe that America is a force for peace in the world, not a cause of strife. I believe that we are the target of militant radicalism, not its source. And I believe we have a responsibility to defeat our enemies wherever they are, not "treat and release" them as if they were run-of-the-mill domestic criminals.

Treating Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and the co-conspirators of the September 11th attacks as criminals and prosecuting them in federal court

in downtown New York reveals how misguided moralism endangers American lives and unnecessarily wastes hundreds of millions of dollars. We have a military commission system in place and a courtroom in Guantanamo to handle these cases. It's time for the President to reverse his decision on trials in federal courts.

Whether we continue to hold detainees in Guantanamo, as I propose, or move them to Guantanamo North in Illinois—as the President hopes to do—the problem remains the same. No amount of self-flagellation will appease those who sympathize with al-Qaeda. Like it or not, the war against al-Qaeda is global. So long as our objective is to defeat al-Qaeda—as it should be—the detainee problem will persist. Closing Guantanamo only imperils our security.

No more Mirandizing terrorists. No more trials in downtown Manhattan. No more terrorist transfers to Yemen. The American people need a new terrorist detainee policy.

### **Decline in Our Global Standing: Alienating Allies and Engaging Adversaries**

Our war on terror policies are not the only casualties of declinist policies; this attitude also affects how we engage countries worldwide. Part and parcel of a declinist foreign policy is faith in diplomacy and the international system. Thus, challenges to the international order replace threats to our national security, and engaging adversaries becomes our principal endeavor. The 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) is replete with such rhetoric.

Whether dealing with a former adversary like Russia or a present-day adversary like Iran, I'm concerned that engagement has translated into weakness. We cannot let this approach compromise our commitments to friends and allies.

For example, the so-called Russia reset policy should not signal a willingness to reset our commitments to transatlantic security. Unfortunately, this is the signal we've sent. When we gave up our European missile defense interceptors before negotiating the START treaty—or when the President calls for a world without nuclear weapons—we not only threw away our best negotiating leverage with the Russians, but we also emboldened the likes of Vladimir

Putin and other leaders who will be able and eager to fill a power void with their own projections of influence. Thus, European allies fear a declining U.S. role in Europe will only invite future Russian aggression. This does not bode well for the security of emerging democracies in Georgia and Ukraine.

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Similarly, when we engage Iran and North Korea diplomatically, we must do so taking into account the over 30 allies who rely on the U.S. nuclear security umbrella. In other words, engagement with adversaries cannot indicate retreat.

Likewise, whatever steps the Obama Administration takes to prevent Tehran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, the approach must be credible enough to prevent Iranian domination in the Persian Gulf and proliferation in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. This Administration has spent a year trying to engage Iran with little to show for the effort. The President spoke of “growing consequences” for Iran last week. It remains to be seen what this means. In my view, it is time to try something new.

When U.S. dominance is in question—by allies or adversaries—global stability is at risk. Put bluntly, the Obama Administration's predisposition thus far to engage with adversaries—past or present—has not made us safer. The Teddy Roosevelt mantra of speaking softly and carrying a big stick still has a place today. It should not be out of vogue.

### **Declining Defense Budget and Declining Capability**

Let me move now to my final example of the Obama Administration's declinist policy: its impact on defense programs and spending. In testimony before Congress last May, Secretary Gates emphasized the need to balance the Department of Defense, which eventually translated into over \$50 billion in program cuts. Secretary Gates assured the Congress that his program decisions shifted the Department in a “different direction.” Like many in the Congress, I believe that these cuts took the Department in the wrong direction.

To help us understand the Obama future for the Pentagon, picture the following scenario: Secretary Gates calls for more “balance” by moving \$60 billion over the next five years from within the Department to pay for programs supporting current operations; military personnel costs consume an

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increasingly larger share of the military investment accounts; migration of the enduring costs of the Pentagon and the larger force from the supplemental to the base budget occurs without top-line relief; and finally, having to face the still outstanding bill of at least \$60 billion to \$80 billion to reset our forces from the current conflicts.

The victim of a lower defense budget will be procurement and R&D accounts. Top defense budget experts testified last November that we can expect a dramatic decline for weapon acquisition funding—from 35 percent of the fiscal year 2010 budget to 24 percent in fiscal year 2020. That is a sizable and unacceptable decrease.

In my view, the Secretary’s plan for balancing the military has come at too high a cost. Congress this week received the Department’s QDR, which assumes the base defense budget will be essentially flat for the next five years. This—combined with the reality of the scenario I described above—signals a Defense Department in decline.

Let’s remember one of the core responsibilities of the Congress—Article 1, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution: “Provide for the common defense,” “to raise and support armies,” and “to provide and maintain a navy.”

### **The Need for a Higher Top Line**

I’ve been around a long time and I’ve seen us cut defense investment after wars—but never during war. Cuts to defense investment in the midst of two wars is unacceptable. One percent real growth in the defense budget over the next five years is a net cut for investment and procurement accounts.

The pressures on the defense budget that I’ve just described warrant a higher top line. When one con-

siders the current threat environment and some alarming gaps in our capability, the need for more dollars going to defense becomes critical.

The QDR seems to continue the trend—as we saw in the previous budget cycle—where military requirements seem to disappear by overstating our capability. Just take a look at the force structure requirements for fighter aircraft and ships in the QDR. At some point, these decisions will catch up to us.

This might work if we lived in a utopia. The fact is we live in a world where our enemies and adversaries strive to do us harm. This reality warrants a higher top line.

This capability gap, I expect, will lead to hollow contingency plans and could embolden adversaries. Simply shifting into neutral puts America at risk.

### **Impact on the Industrial Base**

Let me conclude with how this all impacts industry. I have a business background. I cut my teeth building my family business from the ground up. That’s how I learned what it takes to run a business in a down economy. There were times when I was the only guy manning the store, and I’ve felt the burden of meeting payroll every month. My sense is that the President lacks a team with hands-on business experience.

Declining procurement accounts and drastic reductions to research and development are a recipe for losing more American jobs. Underutilized defense industrial capacity will reduce cash through the supply chain and could lead to another round of defense consolidations like that of the 1990s.

But where will we cut this time? Satellites? Military aircraft? Shipbuilding? The result is less diversity and an increasing reliance on foreign firms to meet our defense needs. This may be the most harmful impact of a Department of Defense in decline.

A coalition of realists—made up of Republicans, Democrats, and independent-minded Americans alike—must push for increases in defense investment, particularly in accounts which spur innovation and American technological superiority. To stem decline we must invest in ourselves. Short-term, low-risk investments that spur innovation are the traditional realm of the private sector. But the

long-term, higher-risk investments required for military programs—and our national security—are the responsibility of the government. From 1980 through today, our investment in basic defense research as percentage of GDP has declined by 50 percent. It is time to invest in ourselves and create real American jobs.

We need to enact a National Defense Education and Investment Act, which would increase funding for basic defense research and ensure we maintain our technological edge. We cannot continue to take our workforce for granted. With our technical workforce aging, we are in danger of losing our intellectual capital. We need to develop the next generation of engineers and scientists that will ensure the world's greatest innovators reside here at home. We need to invest in American exceptionalism to stem the tide of decline.

### Conclusion

This morning, we have explored many topics with far-reaching implications. From winning today's counterinsurgency fights in Afghanistan and Iraq to prevailing in the conflicts of tomorrow, we need to

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invest in a robust national defense. Like it or not, global stability and our economic prosperity rest on our ability to project power.

A defense budget in decline portends an America in decline. This is an outcome we cannot accept. America in decline is not the type of change the American people signed up for, nor is it a change we should believe in. Instead, I believe our security and prosperity are strongest when we embrace and invest in an America, that as Reagan said, is “a tall proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, and God-blessed.”

—*The Honorable Howard P. “Buck” McKeon represents the 25th District of California in the U.S. House of Representatives, where he is the Ranking Member on the Armed Services Committee.*