

# Heritage Lectures

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## Recommitting to a Strong National Defense

*The Honorable Eric Cantor*

**Abstract:** *The President of the United States is Commander in Chief, but Congress is responsible for raising and supporting Armies and for providing and maintaining a Navy, and no treaty may enter into force without the consent of two-thirds of the Senate. It is time for conservatives who believe in peace through strength and the righteousness of our cause to stand up and serve as a check and balance on the Administration's policies. America needs to turn back harmful treaties like START; once again fund weapons research and development not just to meet the threats of today, but to meet those of tomorrow; fight for missile defense; and update its nuclear warheads. Everyone wants peace, but history shows that the blind pursuit of peace at any cost only makes war more likely.*

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Thank you for the kind introduction. It's a pleasure to have the opportunity to participate and offer my contributions to Protect America Month.

I want to start by acknowledging the tremendous job by civilians and law enforcement in their vigilance surrounding the failed terrorist plot in Times Square this past weekend.

We are gathered here today to make a sober assessment of the condition of our national security. It's time to remove the blinders of political correctness from our eyes. It's time to cast aside wishful thinking. We must see the world and our enemies not for what we hope they are, but for how they truly are.

As we ponder defense policy for our nation, it is instructive to peer through the lens of former Soviet

### Talking Points

- America is at its best when its national security strategy is based on peace through strength and the application of firm moral clarity to our foreign policy.
- American deterrence has been the single most important impediment to war, global instability, and the spread of nuclear weapons.
- While the Administration takes extra precaution with our enemies, it has shown far less restraint with our democratic allies—free nations who need our support now more than ever.
- Now is the time for America to rededicate itself to the strategy of peace through strength and recommit to standing up for democratic and peaceful allies.
- America needs to turn back harmful treaties like START, once again fund weapons research and development, pursue missile defense, and update its nuclear warheads.

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dissident Natan Sharansky. In 1978, Soviet authorities jailed Sharansky on bogus charges of treason and shipped him off to the Gulag in Siberia.

Sharansky and his compatriots faced years of extreme persecution, both mental and physical torture. Their captors did everything to break them down to elicit false confessions—only they failed. No matter how dark and desperate their everyday existence, Sharansky and his fellow prisoners found a ray of light in the form of America.

A bold U.S. President named Ronald Reagan came to power with the intention to expose the Soviet Union. Unlike his predecessor Jimmy Carter, Reagan dared to stand up to the Soviets from a position of both military strength and moral clarity.

Sharansky eventually would be freed in a 1986 U.S.–Soviet prisoner swap, but in an interview a few years ago, he recalled that his “brightest, most glorious day” came in 1983, when Reagan proclaimed before the entire world that the Soviet Union was an Evil Empire. “For us,” Sharansky said,

that was the moment that really marked the end for them, and the beginning for us. The lie had been exposed and could never, ever be untold now. This was the end of Lenin’s “Great October Bolshevik Revolution” and the beginning of a new revolution, a freedom revolution—Reagan’s Revolution.

## Two Pillars of America’s National Security Strategy

What should we take from this proud chapter in American history? America is at its best when its national security strategy features two vital and mutually reinforcing pillars.

*First*, the notion that we achieve peace only from a position of strength.

*Second*, we apply firm moral clarity to our foreign policy. There should be no question about where America stands: We honor our commitments to democracies and other allies who share our desire for freedom, peace, and human progress.

In the years since World War II, hewing to this two-legged strategy has ushered in an unprecedented era of American prosperity. It has given us the most fearsome military in human history. It has

brought us a range of economic benefits, including making the dollar the world’s *de facto* reserve currency. And it has cemented America as a force for good throughout the world.

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The fear of American military might has long deterred ill-intentioned nations from attacking us. At the same time, peaceful nations have restrained their own massive arms buildups because aligning with America gave them protection under the U.S. defense umbrella.

Make no mistake: American deterrence has been the single most important impediment to war, global instability, and the spread of nuclear weapons. But today we live in an increasingly dangerous world. America faces the twin threats of nuclear proliferation and terrorism. Warning signs abound, whether they be the failed attacks in an airplane on Christmas Day or in a parked car in Times Square.

The goal in both instances was to take many innocent lives. Yet with each close encounter, my fear is that the country goes on heightened alert only as long as the media tend to cover it. All too often, that means hours and days rather than permanently.

Equally concerning is that the Administration and other elected officials tend to give these warnings due attention only in limited spurts. Many of the same critics who groused about how we failed to “connect the dots” prior to 9/11 are today repeating the same pattern. As a result, America is at risk of slipping into the type of false sense of security which prevailed before that September morning.

Meanwhile, we see volatility in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Iran’s aggression and thirst for nuclear weapons poses a mortal threat to all our allies in the Middle East. North Korea’s belligerence has our friends in its region feeling uneasy. And new global powers, principally resource-hungry China, are expanding their influence and rising up to challenge American supremacy.

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The sands are shifting. The global balance of power is under fire from a range of actors who hold values antithetical to our own. For our allies around the world, it's decision time.

- Can they rely on America to keep them safe?
- Or should they develop their own nuclear weapons?
- Or should they start to cozy up to Iran, China, and Russia out of fear they will be attacked?

We have arrived at a critical crossroads, with America's long-term security interests hanging in the balance.

My message to you today is this: Now should be the time for America to rededicate itself to the strategy of (1) peace through strength and (2) recommitting ourselves to standing up for democratic and peaceful allies.

### **Abandoning Peace Through Strength**

Yet, at the very moment when our enemies are advancing and our friends are nervously watching, this proven U.S. national security strategy appears to be in a rapid state of retreat. After 16 months, many of the Obama Administration's policies reflect a fundamentally different ideological approach to foreign policy and national security.

To be clear, the President deserves credit for not caving to those on the left who called for a withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan, and behind the scenes, we have made progress eliminating al-Qaeda through drone attacks in the Afpak region. But these efforts, unfortunately, have been the exception rather than the rule.

Last year, President Obama, when he traveled to Cairo to address the Arab world, apologized on behalf of America. He vowed to reinstate the "same respect and partnership that America had with the Muslim world as recently as 20 or 30 years ago." But what does America have to be sorry for?

- We are the nation that has always represented the highest aspirations of the human spirit.
- We gave the world the gifts of freedom of speech and government of the people, by the people, and for the people.
- It is America where millions line up to come in search of a life of freedom and opportunity.
- Since 1991, American troops have deployed on at least five different occasions to liberate Muslim people: in Kuwait, in Bosnia, in Kosovo, in Afghanistan, and in Iraq. And let's not forget our humanitarian mission in Somalia.

America can't win the battle for hearts and minds in the Muslim world by apologizing and by banning terms like "war on terror" and "radical Islam." Such self-flagellation only encourages our enemies. It blurs the moral lines and undermines us in the struggle of ideas.

Al-Qaeda knows very well that it has a soft underbelly: Our job is to exploit it. In 2005, Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's number two, wrote an internal memo warning that killing fellow Muslims risked losing the hearts and minds of Muslims everywhere. It was prophetic. Al-Qaeda's brutality drove the Iraqi people to rise up against al-Qaeda shortly after.

Instead of apologizing to the Arab world, President Obama should launch an international campaign to expose Islamist terror attacks on fellow Muslims. Every time the Taliban blows up innocent Muslim women and children in Pakistan, or al-Qaeda strikes in Iraq or any other Arab country,

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we must broadcast to the world the faces of the victims and point out their killers. In the battle of ideas, we win when the people of the Middle East see that the real threat to Muslims is neither America nor Israel nor Britain—but ruthless Islamic terrorists.

## A Dangerously Naïve Moral Relativism

The problem with the Obama defense and foreign policy philosophy is that it seems to abandon the proven strategy of peace through strength. Its policies bespeak a naïve moral relativism in which the United States bears much responsibility for the problems we face around the world. In this view, our most vexing issues can be resolved by adjusting our own behavior in order to compromise with our enemies.

Accordingly, the only way to stop rogue states from pursuing nuclear weapons is for us to rein in our own nuclear arsenal. Similarly, the theory goes, the way to prevent Islamic radicals from hating us is to pick fights with a democratic ally like Israel.

If Iran wants to threaten the world with nuclear weapons, so it goes, it must be because President Bush refused to engage with it. And if Syria endangers our troops in Iraq and funds Mideast terrorism, we should somehow offer it more carrots and less sticks to convince it to change.

The problem is that this kind of accommodating attitude toward our enemies never works. Hundreds of years of world history prove that pursuing peace at any cost—even the cost of our own freedom—is an exercise in futility. It's the mark of desperation.

What has engagement with Iran brought us? After 16 months, deadlines have come and gone, and the ruling clerics have gleefully bought themselves more time to spin their nuclear centrifuges.

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As the Revolutionary Guards clamped down on the budding opposition movement in the streets, our Administration fell silent. As if it wanted peace and calm with Iran at any cost, the White House did not offer Iran's Green Movement the moral support it so desperately needed. Instead, U.S. calls for dialogue only strengthened Tehran's hand. It's no wonder Iran blithely continues to export terrorism and oppress its people with impunity.

In a similar vein, playing nice has failed to peel Syria away from Iran. Without any assurances from

Bashar Assad, the White House lifted sanctions on Damascus and reinstated an American diplomat in that country. Syria returned the favor by transferring Scud missiles to Hezbollah. And if that wasn't enough, Assad disparaged the U.S. overture at a recent solidarity conference with Ahmadinejad and Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah.

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While the Administration takes extra precaution with our enemies, it has shown far less restraint with our democratic allies—free nations who need our support now more than ever.

- It has escalated a bogus fight with Israel in a very transparent manner to curry favor with some in the Middle East.
- It has rebuked Honduras for upholding the rule of law and broken agreements with Poland, the Czech Republic, South Korea, and Colombia.
- And during a highly publicized trip to Asia, at a time when we need India to counter the growing influence of Communist China, the President passed India by on his way to China.

## Downgrading Nuclear and Missile Defense

Most troubling is that this is happening as America's military defenses are being downgraded. Nowhere is the erosion of peace through strength more evident than in nuclear and missile defense policy.

Missile defense is modern technology's most game-changing deterrent to a potentially devastating attack. By abandoning the Third Site in Europe to placate Russia, all we have done is push back the date when we can credibly deter Iran. Meanwhile, our nuclear weapons arsenal is aging and desperately needs to be replenished, but the Administration and congressional Democrats have cut off funds to do it.

The Administration hails the renewal of the START treaty as a major accomplishment, but what does it really accomplish? As we rein in our nukes, Iran and others will try to increase theirs. Then the

White House promises that the U.S. won't respond to any biological or conventional attack with nuclear weapons.

How does taking the threat of massive retaliation off the table make us safer? It's akin to responding to a crime wave by announcing that you are pulling police officers off the street.

### **Time to Restore America's Credibility**

We know that this Administration will be around for at least another two and a half years. With the stakes so high, this will be a pivotal time for America to restore its credibility by pursuing peace through strength. That's why conservatives must win in 2010. And when we retake Congress, we will stand with defense-minded Democrats to stop the hemorrhaging of America's defenses.

Under our Constitution, the President is the Commander in Chief, but Congress is charged with the responsibility to raise and support Armies, to provide and maintain a Navy. And, of course, no treaty may enter into force without the consent of two-thirds of the Senate. It is time for conservatives who believe in peace through strength and the righteousness of our cause to stand up—to serve as a check and balance on the Administration's policies.

A Republican Congress will turn back harmful treaties like START. We will once again fund weapons research and development not just to meet the threats of today, but to meet those of tomorrow. We will fight for missile defense, and we will update our nuclear warheads.

Peace is what we all want, but history has shown that the blind pursuit of peace at any cost only makes war more likely. Humbled by the lessons of 9/11 and reminded of their value just this weekend in Times Square, today we reaffirm that our nation must never again be caught off guard.

As Winston Churchill once said, "the price of greatness is responsibility." And let it be said of us one day, as Churchill said of his contemporaries, "that there was a generation that terror could not conquer, and brutal violence could not enslave." With your help, the good sense of the American people, and the hand of Providence, we will prevail.

Thank you and God bless.

—*The Honorable Eric Cantor (R-VA) represents the Seventh District of Virginia in the U.S. House of Representatives, where he serves as Republican Whip. He delivered these remarks at a meeting of The Heritage Foundation's President's Club as part of Heritage's second annual Protect America Month.*