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Annual Conference Transcript  
Keynote Address by LTG H.R. McMaster

LTG H.R. McMaster  
U.S. National Security Advisor

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Begin Transcript

MS. FLOURNOY: Hello, everybody, again. I'm very sorry to deprive you of your coffee break, but we had a treat in that General McMaster was able to join us a bit early and we thought we would welcome having a chance to have a good conversation with him.

It's really an honor and a delight to welcome H.R. McMaster to speak with us today. As you all know, he is a revered military strategist, a student of history, and very much of a change agent throughout his career. He has spent his entire career in service to this country. His current role, as you know, is as national security adviser to the president, but he brings a real breadth and depth of experience to this job from his combat experience in the First Gulf War, to really demonstrating that counterinsurgency could work in parts of Iraq, at least at certain points in time, to Afghanistan, where he helped to shape the NATO operation there and also the effort to combat corruption, to his service back here at home with the Army and trying to help the Army envision the future and develop new and innovative concepts for dealing with that.

He's also the author of an award-winning book that many of you have read, "The Dereliction of Duty," which candidly explores some of the civil-military issues in the Vietnam War. But, most importantly, he's a good friend and colleague to many of us here. And, again, we're delighted to have him with us today. So please join me in welcoming General McMaster. (Applause.)

So we have been talking about a broad range of threats today. And the list is long when we talk about national security challenges. So I wanted to start with, from your perspective, what do you see as the most consequential challenges that we face as a nation.

*Bold.*

*Innovative.*

*Bipartisan.*

H.R. MCMASTER [National Security Advisor]: Well, thanks, Michèle. What a privilege it is to be here. I love CNAS, the great work that you do, and it's great to see so many old friends here as well. So thank you for the privilege of being with you.

Well, it's hard to pick just one threat, isn't it? I mean, it really is. So I think if you – maybe the way to skirt around your question is to group threats together into I think two major groups. And these are problem sets I think that threaten our vital interests and threaten our security. And the first of these I think are hostile nation-states and revisionist powers that are challenging the United States and our allies in new ways. And these are revisionist powers on the Eurasian mainland – landmass that are challenging U.S. power at the far reaches of American power in the strategic behavior that Wess Mitchell and Jakub Grygiel have characterized as probing.

And I think what they're endeavoring to do is collapse, weaken at least, the post-World War II and post-Cold War political, economic, and security orders and replace them with new orders that are more sympathetic to their interests. And, of course, I'm talking about China and Russia. And in the category of hostile powers, the most immediate threat is the threat from North Korea, which is on the threshold of having nuclear weapons that can target the United States – (off mic) – nature of that regime. It is a very significant threat and something that we have to resolve.

And so the second category, though, are transnational threats associated with transnational terrorist organizations, as we know, that often overlap with transnational organized crime networks. And what makes them particularly dangerous is that they also now have tremendous destructive capability, whether you can see that in a mass murder attack in Kabul or if you see what they've done going back to the mass murder attacks in our own country on September 11<sup>th</sup>, what some have called the democratization of destruction.

So the threats to national security I think are more diverse maybe. Maybe it's the diversity of the threats that is the greatest challenge. And so what we need is we need a competent system – a competent process that brings together expertise across all the departments and agencies to frame our national security challenges and problems and develop intelligent, integrated strategies to protect the American people and protect our vital interests.

MS. FLOURNOY: Great. I want to ask about a very immediate challenge, and is vis-à-vis ISIS and Syria. So as we have succeeded in starting to make progress and really push ISIS out of key territory in Eastern Syria, we have a growing competition between the regime and its allies, Iran, Russia on the one hand, and U.S.-backed forces, Syrian opposition forces on the other. And there have been a couple of incidents recently when we brushed up against each other, where U.S. forces took defensive action to either – you know, to shoot at a Syrian aircraft or an Iranian Shia militia convoy. Can you talk about how you see the broader campaign in Syria? Are we still focused just on ISIS? Is there a debate about going beyond that to also push back against Iran and the other forces supporting the regime? What are the objectives? How do you see our strategy there?

MR. MCMASTER: Well, to address the beginning of your question, we have to be very clear that the reason we're in Syria is to destroy ISIS, to eradicate ISIS as one part of a much broader campaign against ISIS and transnational terrorist organizations that threaten the American people and our allies. And the aspect that is most relevant to Syria is to deny them a safe haven and support base in the so-called caliphate, you know, which spans parts of Syria, parts of Iraq, and into Afghanistan with ISIS in Khorasan, for example. And in other areas – pockets of them in other areas where we've been very successful in Libya, for example. We are being successful with our partners in Syria.

We're being successful with our Iraqi partners in Iraq. We're being very successful with our Afghan security force partners in denying them the safe haven support base. There's still a lot of work to be done though. In Iraq, as you know, in Western Nineveh Province, in the Euphrates River Valley, in Anbar Province in Iraq, and in the middle of the Euphrates River Valley, which is the area that's contested now between Raqqa, their so-called – you know, their declared capital, which is about to fall, and down to Qaim at the border crossing in Iraq.

But the other key aspects of defeating ISIS, as we know, have to include cutting them off from other sources of sustainment, of support and of strength – financing and especially access to this perverted ideology which they use to recruit people to their cause in the region and beyond into Europe, our own nation, Southeast Asia, and so forth. So this is one part of a much larger campaign and we're in Syria for ISIS.

But, as you mentioned, the situation in Syria could not be more complex. It getting more and more complicated and it's getting complicated in part I think because of the destructive role that Iran is playing in the region. And so what you have is you have ISIS being able to gain control of territory and populations and resources because of the weakening – the weakening of states associated with civil wars, civil wars that are sectarian civil wars.

And Iran is feeding this cycle of sectarian conflict in an effort, I believe, to keep the Arab world perpetually weak and to put into place weak governments in the region, weak Arab governments that are dependent on Iran for support while Iran grows militias and illegal armed groups that lay outside of those governments' control, that can be turned against those governments if those governments take action against Iranian interests. This is sort of a Hezbollah model applied more broadly in the Middle East. And so Iran is a great source of perpetuation of conflict, perpetuation of human suffering, perpetuation of this really political and humanitarian catastrophe across the greater Middle East.

Moreover, what Iran has been doing is not only engaging in this destructive activity. About 80 percent of the effective fighters in Syria are Iranian proxy militias. And so we have to recognize that that is an important role they're playing is that continuation of violence but also they play a very sophisticated subservice role to keep governments weak and to infiltrate and subvert state institutions. We see that's a continuous effort in Iraq, for example.

But even more recently, what we see are efforts to seed these illegal armed groups, these militias, these proxy forces with more destructive weapons, especially rockets and missiles.

And, of course, they've been doing this with Hezbollah from Southern Lebanon for a long time, but now you see these sort of capabilities in Yemen and other places.

So to answer your question, Iran is a problem. Iran is a problem that we all have to cope with. And I think you saw a great deal of consensus during the president's very positive trip to Saudi Arabia, during which leaders of 56 Muslim-majority nations convened, were convened there, and there was broad agreement on, A, the problem of transnational terrorist organizations like ISIS that employ this – (inaudible) – ideology to perpetuate violence and hatred and murder of innocents, but then also Iran, who is seen as an equal part of this security problem.

MS. FLOURNOY: So if I could just draw you out on – the administration has talked about the need for pushing back harder on Iran's support for terrorism in the region, for their, you know, proliferation, their nefarious activities. And yet we do have this challenge of having U.S. trainers and advisers on the ground in Syria and in Iraq. What's the strategy for pushing back on Iran that also manages the risk that we have, you know, some forces on the ground, but they're certainly not combat formations that were – you know, are prepared to deal with a direct conflict with Iran?

MR. MCMASTER: Well, there are a broad range of non-military actions available. And what you've seen is really the ability for us to work with others to sanctions the regime and to sanction entities associated with it around these illegal activities, whether it's the support for illegal armed groups or its missile program, and then there are other really key actions to take I think are diplomatic to isolate Iran – and they're isolated themselves, you know, from any degree of – any degree of support.

Informationally (sp), I think we can do a lot better. I think one of the big things we could do is just pull the curtain back on Iran's activities and point to them and say, these are the people who are enabling the Assad regime to commit mass murder of innocent people using chemical weapons and barrel bombs. These are the people who are perpetuating sectarian conflict within Iraq, who are subverting and hollowing out state institutions and functions so they can in effect capture those institutions and keep the Iraqi state perpetually weak. These are the people who are continuing to pose a threat to Israel and undermine the Lebanese government's ability to foster a multi-sectarian coalition government and to strengthen that state.

And so I think continuing to point out Iran's activities is really the first step. And maybe they'll conclude, now that you have – of course, you have the Iranian state and then you also have power bases that lay largely outside the political entities' control that run these sorts of operations. But I think it should become apparent to the Iranian state and the Iranian people that Qasem Soleimani and the IRGC are operating every day not only against their interest, but against the interests of humanity.

MS. FLOURNOY: So if I could take you now all the way over to Asia, to North Korea, I think when we ask a lot of people what's the threat that's keeping you up at night right now, it's North Korea: their pursuit of an ICBM capability, their pursuit of the ability to put a nuclear warhead on top of that ICBM. This is a regime that has made it pretty clear that they view their

nuclear weapons arsenal as their survival card, that what's standing between them and the potential for a regime change.

So the administration has suggested that they're going to take a new approach to North Korea. Explain what are the objectives? What's realistic? What's a different strategy?

MR. MCMASTER: Well, first, I think the objectives are what the objectives have been for many years, which is to denuclearize the peninsula. And this is a problem, as you know, that's been passed down for many years by good, smart, well-meaning people who felt that they still had some space – some space to negotiate, to enter into negotiations under some sort of a freeze for freeze or reduced pressure environment.

But what we see now are really two fundamental things that have changed. One is the threat is much more immediate now. And so it's clear that we can't repeat the same approach – failed approach of the past. And the second is the recognition that previous approaches have not worked. And so the definition of insanity would be to continue to do the same thing and expect a different result; the same thing being entering into some sort of a negotiation prematurely, before the North Korean regime has indicated any change in its behavior, entering into long, drawn-out, painful negotiations that deliver an unsatisfactory agreement that locks in the status quo as the new normal and then allows the North Korean regime to immediately break that agreement and continue with its nuclear program and its missile program.

So the president has directed us to not do that and to prepare a range of options, including a military option, which nobody wants to take, right, because everybody understands that the severe danger of this situation is the threat to the South Korean population who's held hostage. And we have President Moon visiting tomorrow to talk about the approach. I think there have been a lot of – there's been a lot of talk about divergence, but we're very, very closely connected with our allies, our South Korean allies, our Japanese allies in particular. And there's a recognition that there has to be more pressure on the regime and I think what you'll see in coming days and weeks are efforts to do that because what everybody wants is to resolve this without a military conflict.

A big part of this is determining the degree to which China is willing to help. And I think one of the key elements of this strategy is that decision – the decision about how much China is able, really willing to help, and, of course, our great secretary of state has the lead on that diplomatic effort. We know there almost 90 percent of trade comes through China. China does have the ability to help.

Three key points that came out of the very successful summit with President Xi at Mar-a-Lago between President Trump and President Xi were three significant points that I think demonstrate a shift in Chinese thinking and we have to wait to see the degree to which they can act on that shift in thinking.

The first of these is that the North Korea problem is not a problem between the United States and North Korea. It's a problem between North Korea and China and the world. And

China recognizes that this is a big problem for them. The second was the Chinese leadership's recognition, and I think very frank and candid recognition that China does have a great deal of control, a great deal of control over that situation, mainly through the coercive power associated with their economic relationship. And the third key thing that came out of that is that denuclearization of the Peninsula is the only appropriate and acceptable objective. No freeze for freeze and, you know, trying to put the monkey back on our shoulder by saying this is really an issue between you and North Korea.

So there are prospects I think for a different approach. This is something that's not going to be decided in the next couple of days or weeks even but what we have to do is prepare all options because the president has made clear to us that he will not accept a nuclear power in North Korea and a threat can target the United States and target the American population. Of course, he's equally concerned about our allies in South Korea, the South Korean population in particular.

MS. FLOURNOY: So if we can come back to Europe, you have spoken and written quite eloquently about the strategic value of our alliances. When the president went to Brussels, he was pretty tough on the allies. He's been very consistent in his concerns, some would say complaints, that they're not doing enough, they're not carrying the burden adequately. He pushed again on the notion of 2 percent of spending, GDP for defense spending. But he refrained, noticeably, from at the summit reaffirming the U.S. commitment to Article Five and NATO's defense.

So where does the president actually stand on our commitment to NATO's defense, the burden sharing issue aside?

MR. MCMASTER: Okay. The president is absolutely committed to our treaty. We are signatories of the treaty. And he said we will never abandon those who stand with us. And he was very clear in saying everything but that explicit phrase everyone was looking for for some really odd reason. Chancellor Merkel gave a speech just before it. I don't think she said explicitly, and I reaffirm my commitment to Article Five. And I think, as you know, the president said it in response to a question in a recent press conference. There's never been any doubt – never been any doubt in the president's mind, anyone's mind, our allies' mind about the commitment to Article Five. It is a manufactured sort of controversy.

I think what is clear, you mentioned the president's tough on our allies, you know, he is tough on our allies, but it's tough love, okay? It's love. The president knows more than anybody, more than anybody that an alliance in which each of the members shares responsibility, shares burden is an alliance that's almost like a – you know, a true or false choice, A or B choice. Is it stronger or weaker than an alliance, you know, in which the members don't share the responsibility?

Of course, the alliance is getting stronger because of President Trump's call on each of our allies to share responsibility. One of the reasons the president – among many reasons, the president's traveling to Poland next week is to thank a NATO ally for meeting the goal of 2

percent of GDP committed to defense. Many others are doing the same thing. The president recently hosted Romania, who's also meeting that goal of 2 percent from the Wales conference.

And so I think that – those who say the president is weak on alliances, the president's making alliances stronger.

MS. FLOURNOY: So just to push back a little bit on the notion of a manufactured crisis, you know, a lot of – when it comes to reassuring allies, a lot of this is how do they perceive things, how are they feeling – how are they receiving the message. And I can tell you that they are not feeling very loved at the moment. (Laughter.) They're feeling the tough part, but not the love part. So if that's really truly the president's stance, I mean, to mention the Polish – the trip to Poland, he has the G-20 coming up, you know, what are the opportunities both in words and in actions in terms of doubling down on our reassurance initiatives, our deterrence initiatives in Europe? What are the types of things you would encourage him to think about in terms of showing Europe that, hey, the U.S. is still committed?

MR. MCMASTER: Well, what I would just say is the president's already doing it. The United States is already doing it. The United States has budgeted over \$1 billion additional dollars in the European Reassurance Initiative with a rotation of our troops to bolster our defense along the frontlines in Southern and Eastern and Northern Europe. We are becoming even more and more interoperable with our allies across all services and as a joint force.

So I would just say, look at our actions. I don't feel any degree of anxiety among our allies. I mean, we all have differences, but we have agreement on 95 percent of the issues. And at least I can speak for my counterparts, many – (off mic) – for emphasis on sharing responsibilities and sharing burdens, and the NATO secretary general is one of those who said, thank you for – and to you then the president for continuing to emphasize the need to share burdens and responsibilities. But those who aren't fulfilling the 2 percent, you know, goal of GDP from Wales, they might not be feeling as much love, you know, as the others.

MS. FLOURNOY: So continuing our tour of the world, Afghanistan. There's been reporting that the president has chosen to delegate the authority for troop levels to Secretary Mattis. But sort of whatever the increase may be, it begs the larger question of how are we defining our objectives in Afghanistan at this point in time? What is the larger strategy into which some military plus up would fit, because the situation on the ground is certainly not what we would hope it to be? It's stalemated. The Taliban are probably stronger now than they have been since the beginning of the war. How do you see the broader objectives and strategy in Afghanistan?

MR. MCMASTER: Okay. So it's a great question. So what we see as objectives in Afghanistan, I think it's clear that these are objectives shared by all of our partners who are involved in supporting the Afghan government and the Afghan people is to deny a terrorist safe haven and support base – a safe haven and support base that we know was already a support base used geographically, geographically that were used to attack our own nation on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. And we've seen what happens with precipitous withdrawal, without consolidating gains

and making, you know, these fragile military gains permanent in terms of consolidation politically with withdrawal from Iraq precipitously and the subsequent fall of Mosul in 2014.

So what's required is to deny terrorist safe havens and support bases, and that's a key element of the president's broad approach against transnational terrorist organizations. To do that, I think what we have to do is address deficiencies in the strategy that are exposed by your interaction with determined enemies, right? War does not ever progress linearly. And I think what the Taliban and their sponsors have taken advantage of are disconnects between what we're doing militarily and what we're trying to achieve politically.

Saying to the Taliban, hey, let's talk with you about some kind of a political resolution to this conflict, but we're leaving. I mean, how does that work? And let's come to a political solution, but you're winning militarily in part or you're making gains militarily in part because we've disengaged from the conflict prematurely.

So the key thing is nobody is questioning the fact that this is an Afghan fight. We have to become more effective militarily at supporting the Afghan forces, you know, who had 6,700 Afghan soldiers killed in action last year – 6,700. So that should give you no doubt about their determination. What we require is an effort to be able to support them better. The Taliban have also taken a lot of losses. And so they – even though they made gains, the Taliban are not invincible either. The key is more effective military operations led by the Afghan Security Forces – Afghan army and security forces broadly, police and so forth, but more effective support for them. But the key is to connect that, connect what we're doing militarily to what we want to achieve politically.

And that takes really I think four main areas of focus that the president has asked us to look at. He said, don't look at this myopically. Develop a regional solution that takes into account all of the regional aspects of the conflict.

The second is to ensure that Afghan forces are effective militarily, but also are getting on a path to become stronger institutionally, such that they can shoulder more and more of the burden of the conflict and become stronger against the regenerative capacity of that Taliban which lies across the border in Pakistan.

The third thing is to ask others to help, to do more, right? This is everybody's fight, and our NATO and coalition – near allies, coalition partners are stepping up.

And the fourth key thing is to address the problem of sustainment and support for the Taliban Haqqani network and others and to ensure that their leadership – I mean, their leadership can't enjoy safe havens and support bases and not be under pressure. So how can it be that Taliban leadership, for example, could be sending their children to private schools while they're giving directions to fighters who are destroying schools in Afghanistan? And so something has to change about that.



MS. FLOURNOY: So they say in Washington that real policy is made in budgets. So I wanted to ask you about the president's budget request. It proposes quite a significant increase to defense spending, \$54 billion over the BCA levels, but also pretty – equal in the context of the State and AID budgets, I would argue, fairly draconian cuts on the diplomatic and development side. So what is the rationale for that at a time when you look at Syria or Iraq or Afghanistan or even the global CT fight, the counterterrorism fight, the diplomatic elements, these other softer elements, if you will, the integration of those indoor strategy is pretty important to his success. So what's the rationale?

MR. MCMASTER: Well, the key thing is to look at how much all budgets have grown over recent years and to get on a course to have a sustainable level of resourcing in the out years. And so each of the heads of the departments and agencies are making the assessment based on the president's budget on how they get to that sustainable level of funding over time. In connection with the defense budget in particular, the effect of the Budget Control Act has been very severe, as you know, on all the services.

And then also, all the services are addressing a bow wave of deferred modernization associated with cuts in recent years. And that combined with a lack of predictability in the out years based on the Budget Control Act has really undermined our ability to have the kind of force we need in the future. Our forces are ready today for any contingency, but without addressing this bow wave of deferred modernization, and some issues in capacity, size of forces as well, we may not be prepared as well as we want to be to obviously deter conflict preferable or respond to crises.

But on your point about the need to integrate what we're doing militarily and to what we need to achieve diplomatically and from a development perspective is well taken and all of the departments and agencies are assessing how they can get sustainable levels of funding in the out years.

MS. FLOURNOY: I want to ask a question about Russia's influence operations with a future-oriented perspective. So it's clear, whether we've watched what's happened in Europe in recent years, what happened in our own election cycle, what they just tried in France and what they're likely to try in Germany. President Putin is using a whole suite of tools, from cyber attacks to fake news to propaganda and other forms of influence operations to really undermine democracy, to sow disunity in the Transatlantic community.

So the question I think – my assessment is we're going to see more of this in the future. So the question is what kind of toolbox do we need to be developing as the United States and what kind of strategies do we need to be developing to impose some costs on Russia for this kind of behavior, potentially deter them in the future, or at least render their efforts less effective?

MR. MCMASTER: Well, this is a great question. And this is a big part of the national security strategy that we're developing for the president. This is a charge that he's given us, transnational terrorist organizations, and with Russia's disruptive behavior and really

sophisticated campaign of subversion that combines, it combines cyber capabilities with propaganda and disinformation. The sowing of conspiracy theories, the weakening of societies.

And so what we have to do is develop a broad range of tools and easy access to those tools so they can be integrated into strategies to confront Russia's and others' destabilizing behavior, because there are others engaged in these activities as well. The second is to deter aggression, Russian aggression, aggression from others who are using these sort of sophisticated – employing these sophisticated campaigns.

But then also to look for and to try to identify areas of cooperation. So, as you know, the relationship with Russia has not been good. And so the engagement with Russian leaders led by Secretary Tillerson is aimed at really achieving those three things. And so we'll see where it goes. But you're absolutely right that we have to become more effective at competing against adversaries, at confronting them, not just on physical battlegrounds but on battlegrounds of perception and information in cyberspace, through illicit financial and other illicit flows, the use of organized crime networks, and this is a big area focus for us. And our transnational threats team is working across all the departments and agencies to not only craft strategies to cope with us, but we're already implementing key decisions on how to compete more effectively.

MS. FLOURNOY: One of the themes that's sort of run through the conference today is the fraying of the international order that the United States helped to architect in the wake of World War II under pressure from resurgent powers, rising powers, non-state actors, and so forth. I think there is a broad sense that to strengthen and adapt that order, the U.S. has to play a role – a leadership role.

A, do you share that assessment? And, B, how does that square with the America First strategy that you – that the president's articulated and you wrote an op-ed about, you know, helping to unpack. How do you see those things coming together?

MR. MCMASTER: I think they're absolutely compatible. And I try to communicate that along with Gary Cohn from the National Economic Council in that op-ed. And the title was "America First Doesn't Mean America Alone." Actually, it's a phrase we stole from Vice President Pence when he traveled to Europe and gave a great speech at NATO, a speech that also was a critical speech to understanding how America first bridges into our engagement with allies and partners.

And so the president's asked us to develop a national security strategy and integrate a strategy to address our national security challenges with three things in mind: protect the American people, promote American prosperity and interests, and provide American leadership. So the president has asked us to ensure that we don't try to lead from behind, that we don't avoid providing leadership. But it's leadership that it's strengthened by responsibility and burden sharing, emphasizing common interests and then integrating our efforts with our key allies and partners.

One of the things that we've done is by getting out of the tactical business, by devolving authorities back to departments that they've had in the past, we've been able to restore a longer term vision within the National Security Council that is aimed at framing opportunities around, first of all, an understanding of the nature of the national security challenge. Obviously, that is aided by our tremendous intelligence community that helps us understand the problem, but then asking what vital interests are at stake. What vital U.S. interests are at stake?

Based on those vital interests, then we establish goals, goals associated with that national security challenge, a challenge maybe might be, say, for Russia, how to confront Russia's destabilizing behavior, deter aggression, but find areas of cooperation that we can work on based on common interests. If that's a challenge, then we ought to have goals associated with that challenge. And then the development of objectives and an idea, a concept of how the departments and agencies can work together.

This is the kind of guidance that the president's cabinet is developing through the National Security Council process, then giving that guidance down to the departments and agencies where policy coordinating committees come together and work on and then deliver integrated strategies to combine the elements of national power and to accomplish those objectives and achieve those goals.

What that is allowing for is consultation with allies and partners very early in the process. So we are framing these problems and working on these problems from a multi-national perspective. And these aren't just bilateral meetings, you know, over a cup of coffee or tea and a couple of biscuits, you know, and call it a day. I mean, we're rolling up sleeves, we're working with our partners. What are our mutual vital interests? What is our mutual goal? You know, pick a challenge.

This is also allowing us to work much more effectively with legislators, with Congress, and their staffs. And what we hope is this will begin to build bipartisan understanding around these national security challenges and allow us to advance our efforts in a way that takes into consideration maybe legislative remedies to parts of these problems.

And then, it's also helping us engage with, you know, CNAS and academia and think tanks. And I think many of you probably in this room have already been part of these discussions with our teams. And so our senior directors on the National Security Councils are bringing in their interagency colleagues and having discussions at your venues and asking first-order questions about these challenges. What are our vital interests at stake? What should our goals be? How do we become more effective at making progress toward our objectives? So I really think we have a very good process in place, we have the right people in place to do it, and we're consulting broadly with allies, partners and academia to get after these challenges.

MS. FLOURNOY: So probably the most controversial foreign policy decision the president's made to date was the choice to withdraw from the Paris Agreement. I think many people, even national security professionals see climate change now as a security issue as much as anything else. The reporting around that decision suggested there was a lot of dissent and a

lot of debate inside the administration. And I guess we all understand how the decision was made and that the decision is done.

But I wanted to draw you out on your role as a national security advisor. You've written a book about this. I think many of us have taken that lesson in trying to strengthen our own leadership styles. How do you ensure that dissent gets heard in this process? How do you – how does the president respond when dissent is heard, are there any examples where dissent or a different perspective has actually changed his views on things? I think that's probably one of the greatest burdens on your shoulders is to make sure the president gets that diversity of advice.

MR. MCMASTER: Right. Well, I think we have a very good process in place. And, you know, none of the members of the cabinet I don't think are, you know, shrinking violets, you know. And so what we're able to do is to convene them around these problems and around these decisions, solicit their advice and opinions, and coordinate and integrate their perspectives so we provide options to the president.

And in all the president's major decisions, he's presented with options and makes decisions, and then it's our job, obviously, to assist with the sensible execution of his decisions.

On climate, I didn't realize it was that controversial. I'm just kidding. (Laughter.) So I think – I didn't hear anything from my European colleagues or anything about – (laughter). I think what's important about that is to look at the president's rationale. The president's rationale wasn't anti-climate. It wasn't anti-environment. He said this is a bad deal. If you care about the environment it's a bad deal because the worst polluters get a free ride, right? If you want a fair deal for Americans, it's not a fair deal because you're subsidizing renewable sources of energy for countries that really need some renewable sources of energy, but what they really need are clean fossil fuels so they can grow their economies and employ the youth bulge that's coming up in a lot of these areas that are less developed.

So I know that I'm not going to convince anybody who wanted to stay – thinks we should have stayed in Paris that that was the right decision. But I just ask you to look at the rationale around it, and then what we're endeavoring to do now, for the president who's asked us to do this, is to develop an environmental policy and a climate policy. And I think we have some really good ideas. And if you pick out parts of the president's speech, you'll see his affirmation, his commitment to the environment.

So that's what we're working on now. And this will be obviously something that will continue to be a point of disagreement with a lot of our allies. And the president's called them right away – some of our closest allies right away who he had discussed this with prior to the decision. And they didn't like it. They told him they didn't like it. But what they emphasized with him is that we respect your decision and that we will continue to work together on those 99 percent of the things that we do have agreement on, that are crucial for us to work on.

And also that, you know, if you define that 1 percent as Paris, Paris does not equal all of environmental concerns, all of climate concerns. And we'll continue to engage and work with our allies on those as well.

MS. FLOURNOY: Well, I know that we would love to dive deeper on this and many other issues.

MR. MCMASTER: Me too. Met too.

MS. FLOURNOY: But you have – (laughter) – you have a daunting inbox to get back to. So we are just so grateful for you spending – being so generous with your time, having such a candid conversation. Please join me in thanking General McMaster.

MR. MCMASTER: Thanks. Thank you. Thank you. (Applause.)

End Transcript