

# A Time to Lead: America's Need for International Strategy

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When I go through airports I'm stopped almost every time and asked "What's going on and what should we be doing about it?" What's going on is that the casualties are going down in Iraq, the Iranians are making nice to us, but the International Atomic Energy Agency just said Iran is about a year away from getting a nuclear weapon, and do we think we'll get our troops out? Are we going to bomb Iran? And what should we do about Musharraf in Pakistan? It's the usual jumble of Middle Eastern issues and you can't answer those questions in airport chit-chat. If you don't understand how we got to this point, it's pretty hard to describe how we're going to get past this point. So, bear with me a little bit and let me talk about how we got started. It didn't begin, by the way, with the birth of Mohammed or the founding of the State of Israel. The dilemma that we're in right now in the Middle East actually began in 1989. That's the year that the Berlin Wall came down. It was the European year of miracles. It's when the yoke of Soviet communism was thrown off in Eastern Europe. In that year and the next year that followed all of our assumptions about the world had to change. People my age, and I daresay some of you are my age, those especially who served in uniform, never thought we'd see the end of the Cold War. It was just accepted that Germany was going to be divided for as long as mankind lived. On one side, there would be the terrible hordes of the Red Army and the East Germans and they'd be armed and ready and they would attack on a Saturday night and in two hours break through the minefields and within three days sweep through the English Channel and destroy freedom, and on the other side were the brave Americans and Germans and Belgians and Dutch and British and French and everybody who was prepared to resist. The whole mission of the United States Armed Forces and the West was to deter a Soviet invasion of West Germany and Western Europe, to prevent the Soviets from using their nuclear power to blackmail the rest of the world, and to contain the expansion of communism.

Well, that was the world as we knew it and we never thought it would change. American Ambassador George Kennan in the late 1940s wrote a paper that was published in *Foreign Affairs* called *The Sources of Soviet Conduct* and he predicted that if you just hung on long enough eventually communism would collapse of its own internal contradictions. Although we believed him, we didn't expect it to actually happen in our lifetime. And suddenly in the twinkle of an eye it was over. I was the commanding general of the U.S. Army National Training Center at Ft. Irwin. I was a one-star general and the German Army sent a German one-star general to go through all the bases in the United States and explain to us the Cold War is over and thank you very much for having been in Germany to help us. Of course, we were training our units on how to fight the Soviets on the desert. We had a Soviet-motorized rifle regiment laid out there – Soviet tank battalions and so forth, visually modified equipment using Soviet-style command and control techniques and suddenly this guy shows up and says it's all over. He said pretty soon the

Soviets are going to pull their forces out of Germany and maybe even out of Poland, and Eastern Europe, and he said Germany will be united as one country. He came through in March of 1990 and said by the end of 1990 Germany will be united. When he left I thanked him and I immediately ran back to my office and called Military Intelligence in the Pentagon. I wanted the truth. What this really going to happen? Of course, military intelligence said “No, it won’t happen.” But it did. A few months after that the three presidents of Belarus, Ukraine and Russia met and over drinks -- actually over two nights of drunken bashing – Boris Nikolayevich decided that Mikhail Sergeyevich should no longer lead anything called the “Soviet Union.” They simply refused the union agreement and the Soviet Union itself fell apart and became eleven independent states. The United States won the Cold War without ever fighting the Soviets, directly at least. Also, we established the virtues of capitalism, freedom and market democracy. We had so thoroughly defeated our adversary that our adversary fell apart. We didn’t even have an adversary after that. There was no enemy and, of course, there was no reason then to have a strategy. So when we won the Cold War, America lost its strategy and that, my friends, is the source of the difficulties we’re having in the world today. We simply couldn’t conceive of, put together and explain to the American people a real strategy for the 1990s. It wasn’t that we weren’t trying. I came to Washington in the spring of 1994. I was brought up there as a three-star general to run strategic plans and policy on the Joint Staff. When I got there I didn’t know what I was going to do; there was no Soviet threat. We had 1.2 million men and women under arms in the active forces and more in the guard and reserve and we were still buying new aircraft. We were still recovering from the Gulf War and we were still training our forces to fight the Soviets, but what was it really all about?

I got there on a Tuesday, and on Friday night I looked at CNN—the first thing I learned was to watch CNN—and on CNN you could see the scenes in the African country of Rwanda as Belgium and French troops conducted a non-combative evacuation operation in Kigali. I was leaving the office at 6 o’clock and I see this shooting going on in these places and there are Africans and there are obviously European soldiers and they’re fighting, and I asked my executive officer, “What is that? A movie?” He said, “No, it just came on CNN. We don’t know what it is.” We called the European Command, we called the embassies. Nobody knew what it was. I finally put it together with the State Department, we worked all night and we figured out it was actually the French and the Belgians who had invaded Rwanda. It was the start of the Rwandan civil war that saw 800,000 men, women and children hacked to death with machetes while the world stood by and did nothing. I was up all night that Friday night and my wife said, “Where are you? Is this what this new job is going to be like?” This is my long-suffering wife here. So, I got home about 6 o’clock, I took a shower, got cleaned up and said, “I have to meet the Secretary of Defense at 9,” I was going to accompany him to Korea. Well, I’d been to Korea—I’d seen the war plans and I thought this was going to be another typical argument about “you Koreans have to pay more for American soldiers to defend you.” What had happened was that the North Koreans had a nuclear reactor and they had taken out the first set of nuclear fuel rods and they weren’t going to let people check them. We didn’t know whether they had reprocessed the fuel rods. They might have enough plutonium out of that to make a nuclear weapon. There was no way of finding out and we were getting ready to take them to the U.N., put a blockade in place. They said, “If you consider a blockade against us, we’ll consider it an act of war.” Our generals in Korea said, “If they say it’s an act of war, they mean it. So give us more troops in Korea.” We were about to go to war with North Korea. I went home Saturday afternoon shaking my head. I couldn’t believe it. I mean, no one knew about it in the press.

I got called to come into a meeting on Sunday and I sat in the back of the White House Situation Room which is supposed to be all high-tech but there was just a little conference table and wood-

paneled walls. There were no gauges, screens, meters, just a bunch of people sitting around talking. There was the Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State, National Security Advisor, Vice President's National Security Advisor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and I'm sitting there up against the wall trying to follow the conversation. What are they talking about? They're talking about how to shoot down Serb aircrafts over Bosnia and not violate international law, and I'm thinking, "What! Now we're at war over Bosnia?" I knew there were these people called "Serbs" and "Croats" and there was this country called Yugoslavia that was breaking up, but we were actually engaged in a hot air war.

On Monday morning a guy came into my office and he said, "General, I work for you. I'm not allowed to tell you this, I'm representing you on this study, it's highly classified but I feel like I owe it to you. We're planning to invade Haiti." I was stunned.

I came into the job on Tuesday, I thought there was nothing to do and then I find out we were in two wars, getting ready to have a third war and preparing to invade Haiti—all in one week. We lurched from crisis to crisis to crisis. Every weekend there was a special White House meeting. Saturday there would be a bunch of phone calls, on Sunday it would be frantic—"What are we going to say to Tim Russert on *Meet the Press*?" and we'd have these long phone conversations on Sunday morning before people could go on and, of course, we were being beaten up on the Hill because every time someone would go up to the Hill Congress would say, "What is the strategy? What is the strategy?" and, of course, there was no strategy.

I got called to see my boss after 8 weeks, General Shalikashvili—he was a Polish American who came to this country when he was 16 and he rose to be the highest ranking man in the armed forces—he's a great guy but he called me in and said, "Wes," and this is a Monday morning and I guess Mrs. Shali had been kind of upset over that weekend, he said, "Wes, we hired you because you're supposed to be so smart. You are the strategist. So tell us what is this strategy that has us working all weekend, every weekend?" And, of course, there wasn't one. There was no strategy so he said I had to create one. So, we did it the way Democrats create strategy, we wrote papers. Man, did we write papers. Those papers went back and forth around Washington and around Washington and around Washington and in a year and a half we produced a strategy. It's on the Internet today. You can find it if you look up "dod.gov" or "usgov.dod." Anyway, the Pentagon website. It's called the National Security Strategy of the United States: A Strategy of an Engagement and Enlargement. You would think it's an advertisement for a men's pharmaceutical product. I don't think anybody ever read it. But you don't write a strategy, you have to live a strategy, and you have to get people to understand it.

During the Cold War we had a strategy and Democrats and Republicans both understood it. It was a strategy of deterrence and containment. Now Democrats and Republicans, they don't always agree about everything and in this case Republicans always said, "Let's get more weapons, let's talk tougher, let's push them around a little bit, let's show them they have to respect us." And Democrats are always like, "Well, can't we talk nice to them and maybe we could make a nice agreement and maybe they would like us and maybe we could get fewer weapons." But there was still a core of agreement and it carried through from Truman to Eisenhower to Kennedy to Johnson to Nixon to Carter to Ford to Reagan all the way through there was a strategy. But in the 1990s there wasn't one, and we couldn't create one. America was taking advantage of the greatest global opening the world had ever seen. Everything came together at once. There was a North America Free Trade Agreement, the end of the Iron Curtain in Eastern Europe, the creating of cellular telephones, the emergence of the Internet, fiber optic cable—there was an explosion of trade and communications and technology. We created 22

million jobs in America and we were totally consumed with this enormous American economic resurgence that no one had suspected was there. We actually reduced the budget deficit, we actually reduced the number of people living below the poverty level and middle income Americans actually had an increase in their real wages. The only problem was we had no national security strategy. It wasn't that we didn't use forces. We sent forces to Rwanda for relief. We put 25,000 troops in and stopped the fighting in Bosnia after the negotiations, we struck at Osama bin Laden when he bombed our embassies, we went after Saddam Hussein. In my case I was an AO commander, we fought a 78 day war against Serb ethnic cleansing; 78 days, 36,000 air missions, 23,000 bombs and rockets were dropped, we prepared a ground invasion, we put 30,000 NATO troops on the ground—we were into this big time and we broke Slobodan Milosevic's will.

If you were in Europe people thought it was a war. I mean, you could see the bombs falling every night, flames burning, refugees coming out. There hadn't been anything like it since the Second World War. Back in the United States there was hardly a murmur. I came home about a month after it stopped and I was in my hometown of Little Rock, Arkansas, and the newspaper reporters asked, "Wasn't there some bombing or something going on over there?" It's just the way it is.

Some of my friends were over in Chicago that summer and I remember they said, "Oh, we like your country. We had such a great time. We went to Chicago. We went to that big department store, and there were people who came up and showed us how to shop and what to buy and they were so friendly they even invited us to their homes and we went and had dinner with them at their home. But it was very strange because when we got to their home they didn't know where we were from. They didn't know where our country was, they didn't know what its capital was, they didn't know anything about our politics, and we know everything about America and your politics because you're very important to us but we must not be important to you."

Of course, that ended abruptly on 9/11 and the wealthiest nation in the world, with the greatest armed forces in the world, was struck and shocked and angered, and we struck back. Of course, we went after Osama bin Laden, as we should have, in Afghanistan and our armed forces, using special operations techniques and precision guided munitions, made pretty short work of the Taliban. The problem was we didn't have a plan to really go after Osama bin Laden. The administration had already made up its mind—it was going to invade Iraq instead.

I went through the Pentagon a few days after 9/11 and an officer there told me, "Sir, we've already made up our mind that we're going to invade Iraq." And this is before we ever struck Afghanistan. I said, "But why?" and the general told me, "Well, sir, I don't know why. Maybe it's because we're not any good at fighting terrorists but we're good at taking down governments and if the only tool you have is a hammer maybe every problem has to look like a nail." I came back about six weeks later and I asked him, "But we're now in Afghanistan and you said we were invading Iraq. Is that still on?" He said, "Sir, it's worse than that," and he held up a piece of paper and said, "I just got this down from the Secretary of Defense's office this morning and it says we're going to invade and overthrow seven governments in five years." I said, "Seven governments in five years? What governments?" and he said "Well, starting with Iraq, then Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Iran." I said, "Is that piece of paper classified?" He said, "Yes, sir," bringing it over and I said, "Stop. I don't want to see it." Because I was on CNN, I just didn't want to have responsibility for seeing a document like that that I might then somehow blurt out. So, I never saw the document, I don't know whether it was a concept plan, a warning order, or a flight of fantasy. But I know this: that all through the media, the neo-

conservative movement was spouting about how they were going to destabilize these nations in the Middle East.

I remembered then talking to Paul Wolfowitz when he was the Number three man in the Pentagon in 1991 after the Gulf War, and he told me then that his vision was that we only had five or ten years to knock off these old Soviet client states in the Middle East before the next great superpower came along. 1991—I remember I was stunned. I said to him, “Well, what do you mean knock them off?” He said, “You know, we could use our military forces.” And I said, “But only five or ten years?” He said, “Well, it could be 15, nobody knows.” I said, “Who’s going to be the next superpower, China?” He said, “Could be. Don’t know.” Then the conversation sort of drifted off. That was the Wolfowitz plan and it was resurrected after 9/11 by Vice President Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz, then Deputy Secretary of Defense. It was never briefed to the American people, Congress didn’t vote to approve that plan, no money was set aside for it, yet it guided, I would assert, the expectations and reflected the intention of many of those who had very high influence in this country.

It was as though a coup d’etat had taken place—you might say a policy coup—and a president who’d come to office arguing for a humble foreign policy as a compassionate conservative talking about bringing our troops home and not pressing our will on others, had suddenly turned around overnight and was behind what turned out to be an aggressive military campaign and probably the most arrogant type of foreign policy in American history—at least certainly since the 1900s when we went into the Philippines at the end of the Spanish American War.

There was no doubt that it was a policy that had the support of the American people at that time, at least as far as the American people understood it. Public opinion was overwhelmingly in favor of going into Iraq. I was one of those who testified in front of the Congress and warned that there was going to be some untidy consequences of that and I was cautioning Congress to think again, ask the tougher questions, and don’t jump too soon on to something. Because my experience in the military is you shouldn’t use force unless it’s the last, last, last resort. It never works out like you think it will, it always costs more, takes longer, has unpleasant side effects. You just never know what’s going to happen and every time we use force in the Middle East something unpleasant has happened.

My friend Ken Adelman, who is on the International Crisis Group Board of Directors with me was at the same time going out there telling everybody this is going to be a cakewalk. We’d be in Baghdad in three weeks, no problem. It’s true. I knew we’d be in Baghdad in three weeks. We had spent 12 years preparing to attack Saddam Hussein’s pitiful armed forces. He didn’t have half the strength that he had at the Gulf War, we had cut him from 50 divisions down to 25 divisions, we pretty much clamped down on all military modernization and we were prepared and ready to go. The problem was what happened after we got to Baghdad? So now we know. It’s been four and one-half years, 4,000 Americans killed, 20,000 wounded, 100,000 or more Iraqis killed, \$800 billion with total obligations, maybe more. The casualty count and the violence is starting to wind down and I’m all for it.

I love the men and women in uniform, they’ve done a great job but, boy, what a horrible job it was to have done. We let a country that we didn’t have to actually invade because they weren’t an immediate threat to us, we invaded them and then we weren’t prepared to handle the consequences. It’s been a real object lesson for the United States of America. When you go to Washington today you don’t hear many people talk about moving along to Syria and Lebanon and Libya and Somalia and Sudan next. But you do hear talk about Iran.

So the question is “What happens now?” and what must we do. I think the violence is winding down in Iraq. I don’t know if it will stay down or not because, to be candid with you, it’s not solely the result of the military surge. It’s a combination of factors including the fact that the Saudis kind of gave up on the United States’ plan in 2005 and, I think, unofficially and privately, there’s been money changing hands underneath the table and some of these Sunni sheiks in the Aubar province have been told to shape up, take out al Qaeda, and get ready because mean Shiites backed by Iran are coming. On the other side, the Shiite community has been sorting itself out. As the Saudis told me, Sistani, the head Iraqi cleric has said he is an Iranian. Not Iraqi, he’s Iranian. And Hakim, the head Iraqi political leader behind Maliki, he spent years in Iran.

So, what you have is the settling of old scores and the grabbing and consolidation of political power. On the one hand, an Iran-backed force taking grip in Basra and moving into Baghdad, and on the other hand, in the west and in the north of Baghdad the Sunnis trying to get their act together before it’s too late and they’re totally overrun by the Shia and forced out of their own country. On top of it the United States armed forces struggling mightily to survive, trying to strike back at those that strike us, trying to encourage the Iraqis to come together and work together in trying to prevent the Turks, the Iranians and everybody else from invading the north to crush the Kurds. This is still a stew pot full of trouble.

I think the president is going to be able to say that the violence has appreciably declined by next spring because, frankly, after so many people have been killed we’re kind of running out of targets and people have consolidated their power. I know there will be those in the White House who say, “Let’s have a victory parade. Let’s bring those troops home and march them down Constitution Avenue, just like we did in 1991 after the Gulf War,” and frankly the men and women in uniform do deserve a victory parade. You can’t believe how hard they’ve worked, how much they’ve suffered, they and their families, and what incredible sacrifices they’ve made for the United States of America. But the truth is this has never been a war that was solely to be fought and won by the military because this is a part of a larger tableau of conflict in the region. When we took out Saddam Hussein we pulled out the cork in the bottle. We’ve had a 30-year cold war underway against Iran. The Iranians tried to come to us a couple of times in 2002, 2003, 2005 and said, “Look, let’s kiss and make up.” We don’t know if they were serious or not because they duke in and out. It’s the way the Iranians plan the game and you don’t really know who’s in charge or what their angle is. But we do know this: we haven’t done the duty of diplomacy that the men and women in uniform deserved.

American leadership should never be so timid, so frightened, or so arrogant that it won’t talk to our adversaries unconditionally, especially when the lives of our soldiers are held hostage in combat. In the 1990s we stopped the war in the Balkans through diplomacy. We beat Slobadan Milosevic not just because we bombed and threatened an invasion, but also because we insisted on diplomacy and we gave him a way out. In the Middle East today we need diplomacy. We need to talk to people we don’t agree with even if we know we’re not going to agree with them. We need to talk unconditionally to Iran and to Syria. We need to set up a regional dialogue in which we can sort through the various problems and issues that are there.

But there’s a wild card, and that wild card is the Iranian nuclear quest. We’ve known for years they were pushing towards nuclear weapons and they now have 3,000 centrifuges in place. These spin the uranium hexafluoride gas and throw out the heavier molecules, they keep the lighter molecules and those are uranium 235. They increase enrichment of this most-radioactive and the least stable isotope and you have to go through many stages of these centrifuges to be able to

produce the kind of highly fissile material necessary for a nuclear bomb. So, they've got 3,000—that's the magic number—that says you can produce a nuclear bomb within a year. The efficiency is not quite there yet, but they're working on the efficiency and they're a real problem. My greatest concern is that the clock is ticking and that some day in the near future some intelligence officer will be called into the White House to brief and he'll say, "Well, Mr. President, the Iranians are now within three months of having collected enough fissile material to have a nuclear weapon." They have this weapon and they can do three things with it. One, they'll set up an arms race in the region and every other country will want nuclear weapons; two, they could take those nuclear weapons and use them for a deterrent to cover themselves while they execute conventional or unconventional aggression against our friends in the region; and three, they could take that nuclear weapon and smuggle it out somewhere and it could end up on a freighter in Los Angeles or San Francisco, Chicago or New York Harbor.

Therefore, every American political leader has said they can't have a nuclear weapon, not this government, not that country, not now, no way. So, what I'm asking for is that this administration will be honest with the American people and do its duty to the world, that it will talk unconditionally to Iran on this matter of nuclear materials and nuclear weaponry before it's so late that the only choices are either acquiesce to an Iranian nuclear weapon, or send in the United States Air Force and strike. Those are two unacceptable alternatives to me at this point before we've done our diplomatic homework.

I think I'm speaking for a lot of men and women in uniform, they can't say it. Many of them would if they could; they would tell you, "Please use every element of U.S. power before you send us in. If you can solve it with international law, do it. If you can do it with economic sanctions, do it. If you can do it by being nice and talking and setting up diplomacy, do that. Only use the military as a last, last, last resort."

We still have some other problems. We have Osama bin Laden. He's in Pakistan and Pakistani insurgencies are growing and Musharraf is getting weaker. Musharraf is no saint and he's made some big, bad mistakes and I'm not going to stand here and defend Musharraf. But I was with General Haig when we got rid of the Shah of Iran. We pulled the rug from under the Shah of Iran, we put him under pressure, we cut off his options, and we even sent a general to Tehran in 1979 to tell the Iranian generals "Don't you dare lift a finger to help the Shah of Iran. Let democracy reign," and three months later we had Ayatollah Khomeini and it wasn't any democracy that you and I would recognize. So now when I hear the criticism of Musharraf I shudder because I see the same forces at work and I ask, "How confident are we that after we show Musharraf the door and pull the support out from underneath him, that we have a better alternative that will take place in a country that has nuclear weapons, and that is wrecked by civil conflict, and that has never managed to establish a stable representative democracy?" I'd be careful what we wish for.

What the United States has to do is face up to the real challenges ahead. We have to use more diplomacy and less force. Back our forces out of the Middle East, work these problems using all of the other elements of U.S. power, bring our allies in. We have to concentrate on winning the war against the Islamist extremist terrorists, but that's not a war that you win with military forces. That's a war that you win with the battle of ideas. You take away the sting of humiliation and disrespect and 300 years of Western, call it imperialism or economic leadership depending on which side of the fence you sit on, that has made these people so overly sensitive in that region. Give them a chance to survive, treat them with respect. I was on Bill Maher the other night and I have to tell you I was quite concerned. He showed a picture of Laura Bush meeting with two women in burkas and the joke line was Laura Bush is talking about breast cancer and how do you

know these things under the burkas even have breasts, you don't even know who they are. A great laugh line. But the truth is we ought to have every American talk to a woman who wears a burka. People in those societies, most of them love their parents, they take care of their families, they honor their traditions and their obligations just like we do. They just see things a little bit differently. If we can deal with the war with a little bit more respect we'll isolate the hardcore terrorists from the masses of angry young people in Islam. We'll go after the hard core with law enforcement and with the exchange of intelligence information. We'll arrest them, we'll bring them to trial, we'll show the world with our legitimate legal systems what justice is and how the face of evil should be dealt with. And only as a last resort will we resort to military force. That's the way to win the war on terror.

We have another struggle in America. We have the struggle of global competition. We have problems that no single nation can solve. We have to work here at home on education and health care, on aging infrastructure, on new technology, on real energy policy. We have to face the issues of global warming and working cooperation with other nations. We have a lot to do. There's a full agenda and so when people ask me "What about Iraq?" I think, "I love the men and women in uniform but God help the United States of America if we can't lift up our eyes and see beyond Iraq to the many other issues which urgently need American leadership, American support, American vision and American power.

I was in China over the weekend—mighty China—they're looking for American leadership. They want America's friendship. They just want us to respect them and see them as individuals. Can't we, the greatest power on earth, live up to our own values and show the leadership what the rest of the world expects from us? I think we can.

Thank you.

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