Notes: This transcription is smooth format, meaning that we do not transcribe filler words like um, er, ah, or uh huh. Nothing is rewritten or reworded. Transcriber notes such as [*cross talk*] are italicized and contained within brackets. A word that the transcriber could not understand is indicated with a six-space line followed by a time code like this \_\_\_\_\_\_ [0:22:16]. A word that the transcriber was not sure of is **bolded**. Punctuation is to the best of our ability, given that this transcript results from a conversation.

**Key:**

Inboden William Inboden, Executive Director of the Clements Center for National Security

Inman Admiral Bob Inman, Centennial Chair in National Policy at the LBJ School of Public Affairs

Sasse Senator Ben Sasse, Member of the Armed Services Committee

AQ Audience Member

Inboden: --a great example for the country. Anyway, it’s now my honor to bring up a man who truly does need no introduction, a Texan and American icon who you already heard from earlier, Admiral Bob Inman. [*applause*]

Inman: Thank you. I have the great pleasure of introducing you figuratively, literally to a shooting star. Born in 1972, came on my radar when he just finished his Ph.D. at Yale, and we were able to attract him to come to the LBJ School. I realized pretty quickly what a hot property we had because every other day, the White House Presidential Personnel Office was calling. They wanted to borrow him to do projects for the Attorney General. Then he came back. Then they wanted to borrow him to give advice to a new Secretary of Health and Human Services, and that turned out to be an Assistant Secretary role. And he came back but had not then able to keep the tenure clock rolling, and he wanted to keep that pace, and it was a wonderful opportunity to go back to Nebraska to rescue a floundering school that was dear to his family. It was more than a modest success, and it propelled him onto the United States Senate. In looking back over all those adventures, this is a true intellectual, son of an uncommon beast in the U.S. Senate these days, by the way. [*laughter*] What he brings, he’s frankly, serving as a conscience of the Senate; maybe not deliberately, but certainly from the sidelines observing. So we’re very privileged to have him here. I introduce to you Senator Ben Sasse. [*applause*]

Sasse: I need to call the Admiral back up here. I don’t think I’m allowed to tell Bobby Inman stories because I saw that Nancy’s here, but this is a disappointment for me. I was going to spend half my time telling stories about the Admiral. He’s a really special guy to me, not just because he pursues a 17-year-old boy trying to find a homecoming date, but he would never let me off all the times I tried to leave Texas. And it isn’t that Austin isn’t a wonderful place; it’s that I’m a Nebraskan and it’s sort of a violation of our religion to have a Longhorn refrigerator magnet, which we have at our house. Our 5- and 3-year-old girls were here for a couple of years young in their life and were just trying to develop proper fealty to Nebraska religion. This refrigerator magnet, one of them came to love Texas as her “second favorite team.” If that had ever come out in my campaign, I would have had no chance to win. The other one decided you can’t be both Texan--you’re either lukewarm or you’re with the Lord or against, and we had this refrigerator magnet, and every time the little girls would walk by the refrigerator, they would flip it back over from the horns up to horns down, because they weren’t a competition.

Anyway, I had to leave to go back home to Nebraska, and the Admiral would not let me off; he just kept pursuing me. I love UT, I love Austin, but it’s mostly because of this guy. So in front of all of you, I’d like to just take a minute--there are a lot of big wigs in the room--I’d like to just praise the guy who’s responsible, the architect of University of Texas at Austin’s engagement in this role and in this field. So if you’d join me, please. [*applause*]

He’s going to say something else, but I’m not giving him the microphone yet. We’re going to hand out an award here today, and the fact that a former junior faculty member has been allowed to help announce this award has me pretty excited. If we could make him blush, that would be a real life achievement for me, of a former mentor.

We are here to announce the establishment of the Inman Chair in Intelligent Studies. [*applause*] Here, here. **[TIME CODE 0:05:00]** He’s used to having the microphone and he wants it back, but for some of the students in the room, because there is so much affection for Admiral Inman across the generations, I don’t usually read biographies, I memorize them; you can’t memorize his, it’s too long. So I want to just do a speed round. He left this campus in 1950, went off to more than three decades of service to his country in the Navy, and culminated in these posts, any one of which would have been a capstone to a career: Director of Naval Intelligence, Deputy Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Director of the National Security Agency, Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence Agency. And each of these institutions when he left, was more resilient and more committed to the Constitution and the rule of law than when he arrived. Over 31 years of teaching at this institution, he has prepared literally thousands of students for responsible citizenship and public service. And the Admiral also then went on to steer the LBJ School--that’s how I got pulled to Austin--to build the Strauss Center, and be one of the core architects of the Clements Center, and more recently, to launch UT’s Flagship Intelligence Studies Project. UT is the premiere public institution in the United States for research and teaching on intelligence. I have lots of anecdotes I’d like to tell, but I’m not going to spend the time on it. He wants the microphone back, and I know how to defer to a mentor. [*applause*]

Inman: Thank you. In my haste getting through, there was one more story I had wanted to tell. It relates to what’s just gone on. As Ben was leaving, I was complaining about losing him. He said, “Well, this classmate of mine, who’s over in London with the Legatum Foundation, who is interested in coming back to the academic world, and that’s how we got Will Inboden here. [*applause*]

Sasse: Who’s all coming up? Greg is coming up and Steve Slick, who’s the first to hold this chair. [*applause*]

Inman: You did surprise me. I don’t like surprises. [*laughter*]

Sasse: Nancy, will you protect me later? I believe he doesn’t like surprises and I’m going to be in trouble. Because time is limited, I won’t do a ton of warm-up act, but I do just want to restate that point about how special the programs at this institution are. In my current capacity and calling, I have lots of invitations to visit different schools and places to speak, and basically, when you’re 46--some people made some weird noise when the Admiral said I was born in 1972. I do no-shave November every year. I’m a former college president and I was young and students persuaded me to start doing no-shave November every year. My wife told me, “There is no chance you can go up on a podium in front of the Admiral and look as goofy as your face looks right now. You have to shave.” So I won’t tell a whole bunch of stories about my affection for this place, but as somebody with young kids, having to split geography between rural Nebraska and Washington, DC, I don’t take a lot of speaking invitations because I don’t want to go to third cities; I want to be at home where we’re raising our kids, or at my day job in DC. But when there’s a chance to be with these scholars at this program, you want to be here, because this is a premiere institution. So let me just begin by saying thanks for the invitation. It’s a true honor. So thank you for the organizers. [*applause*]

What I’d like to talk about today is our foreign policy imagination. Maybe the first thing I need to do is define the word “our,” because I don’t mean by “our,” chiefly academic experts, really important part of our conversation. I don’t mean exclusively full-time, life-long, career foreign policy makers. I definitely don’t mean primarily politicians. By “our,” I really mean the American people, because I think one of the crises in our foreign policy making in our time is that we don’t really have a shared sense of what we’re trying to accomplish in foreign policy. I say that, not for the purposes of blame laying, but because I think if we don’t accurately assess the problem we have in the lack of a shared “we” when we talk about American foreign policy, **[TIME CODE 0:10:00]** we can’t actually make much progress on it.

So I want to be clear that I’m going to say a bunch of critical things. I think I’m going to end on an aspirational, optimistic note, but I’m going to say a bunch of critical things about where we are in our foreign policy making right now. But the goal is not to lay blame, but rather, to say, “How did we get to a place where so many Americans seem so susceptible to, or open to more isolationist visions of the world. Why is there such an impulse among 320 million Americans to disengage from the world?” Unless we do an honest reckoning about that, I don’t think many of the other things that are discussed at a conference of really big brains and really thoughtful people doing really important work, I don’t think it will actually translate to much of the policy making that we actually execute in the world. So I want to apologize in advance for pieces that may sound a little bit tonally pessimistic. But I think it’s in the service of accurate diagnosis will actually lead us to better foreign policy making over time.

I think clearly, one of the lessons of 2016 is that a whole bunch of people came to recognize, a whole bunch of people who focus on foreign policy, came to recognize that the public wasn’t necessarily coming along over the course of the last few years and few decades, and I think we should pause and have an honest conversation about how we got there.

I think that many of our citizens, across 320 million Americans, believe that since the end of the Cold War, the United States has failed to articulate any shared foreign policy vision that’s bigger than this or that administration’s re-election plan. I think inside the community of folks who dedicate themselves to the calling of thinking about foreign policy, there actually aren’t really deep cleavages between the two parties. In domestic policies, obviously, the cleavages are incredibly deep. In the rhetoric on cable news consumption, the cleavages are very deep. In the foreign policy community, they’re not nearly as deep and yet, for most Americans, I think, one of the things we learned in 2016 is an assumption that American foreign policy is largely defined by potential course corrections that happen around an election, which probably means the reservoir of shared ideas about what we’re doing in the world is insufficient.

It takes a big foreign policy vision to draw 320 million people together across a continental nation with this many differences into something that amounts to a shared vision of America’s role in the world that’s sufficient to warrant sending other peoples’ kids into harm’s way. It’s an existential way of thinking about the problem. Government is not another word for things we choose to do together; community is another word for things we choose to do together. Government is a coercive institution, and if you’re going to send people into harm’s way, and despite not having a draft or whatever you could say, it’s an all volunteer force, government is a coercive institution, and if we’re going to make decisions about sending other peoples’ kids into harm’s way, we have to have a shared reservoir, we have to have a foreign policy vision, we have to have a shared imagination of America’s role on the global stage that’s big enough that it passes over elections, as if elections are not the primary inflection points in American foreign policy.

Now, to be clear, I want to let you know right at the top, that I am a zealous advocate for American engagement in the world. I think the drift toward a more isolationist position is a very bad thing. And yet, I want to work hard to empathize with so many of our citizens who don’t believe what I believe, and what I presume the vast majority of people in this room believe. I think that American global leadership is indispensable, not only for the benefit of our neighbors, but for American interests. I think American values and American interests diverge less than we often pretend they do in our rhetoric, because of one of the most powerful things America has to advance our interest is that our values are values that people all across the globe actually aspire to. There are really important philosophical and dorm room debates to be had about the idealistic and the realist ends of a continuum about American foreign policy. But when the rubber actually meets the road, that gap is less for us than for almost any other nation, because our single greatest asset for realist foreign policy is the idealistic underpinnings and core of the fact that we are a nation that believes in universal human dignity.

I think that when hell breaks loose across the world, it inevitably boomerangs back home. So when the U.S. doesn’t lead, inevitably, chaos follows. I think the U.S. will be sucked in to all sorts of things that we don’t envision right now if we continue this drift toward more disengagement from the globe. I think the lesson of the last two world wars and of the Cold War is that the U.S. cannot avoid the world, the U.S. must ultimately **[TIME CODE 0:15:00]** lead a system of alliances, or the consequences for us will be much worse than our neighbors often imagine in the short-term, when disengagement seems to be appealing.

So I’d like to do three or four things together in our 35-ish minutes together, today. First, I want to diagnose why so many of our neighbors seem to be open to a policy of retreat.

Second, I want to join with the efforts of all those who are trying to name the next era of global engagement for the United States, because clearly, every acronym report that’s come out in the last 18 months has talked about the return of great power of conflict, and they’re right. But we haven’t done the translational work of explaining that to the American people, persuading them, and bringing them along. We are clearly in a long-term tech race with China, and I think it’s just as clear that we, the American people, don’t know that fact in common, or haven’t embraced that as an American calling.

Third, I’d like to sketch a few concrete steps that I think we can take together as we try to think about how we modernize our intelligence, our defense, and our diplomatic efforts for the digital era.

And fourth and finally, I want to leave you with some encouragement that, despite the fact that we have all sorts of really big, and in some ways, unprecedented challenges--the Admiral mentioned that Will Inboden came when I left, and Will has been one of my best friends on the earth for a quarter century now, and it’s sort of funny to me that you all think he’s wise in anything he does. [*laughter*]

When you think about the community of people that come together to do national and global security studies, one of the jobs of a historian is usually to say, “Hey, hold up, everybody.” We’re all emphasizing the discontinuities, and one of historians’ jobs is just to be boring and say, “Actually, there’s more continuity than discontinuity in this moment.” The vast majority of the time there’s more continuity than discontinuity; humans just always emphasize the discontinuity because we think we live at the inflection point of human history, because we’re narcissists. So we’re here, this must be the biggest moment that’s ever been. But it’s usually not true.

But I think there is a pretty good case to be made, that this is one of the inflection points in 230 years of American history, and that’s just because our security considerations are necessarily going to be downstream echoes of the fact that we are living through a digital revolution, and the digital revolution is truly changing everything. All of our economics for all of human history past have been about atoms, and the vast majority of our economics for human history forward are going to be about bytes. And that change has all sorts of implications for defense, for diplomacy, and for intelligence. And so we need to be able to talk about some concrete steps that we can take together, and in the midst of that, I actually think there is as much opportunity as chaos, but only if we lead it.

So, to begin. I’d like to look, sympathetically, at the position of many of our neighbors who are increasingly skeptical of the post-World War II consensus of U.S. global engagement and U.S. global leadership. There is a lot that’s wrong around the globe, and a lot of our citizens think that in the places where the U.S. is engaged, they aren’t exactly sure what they get out of it. They aren’t exactly sure what the U.S. gets out of it.

So let’s do a quick survey. We’ve endured nearly two decades of war, and there’s no resolution in sight to our engagement in the Middle East. In Afghanistan, the Taliban is so bold that not only do they repeatedly spurn any attempts at peace, they attack the head of the American forces in that country just last month. Lieutenant General Austin Miller was unharmed, but three other Americans were wounded, and just this week, we lost three more Service men to the Taliban.

American allies increasingly choose to free ride under our security umbrella instead of contributing meaningfully to their collective defense. American troops are currently deployed in three-quarters of the nations on Earth, 150 of 200, including many countries that have very significant economic and military resources. And many of my constituents ask, “Why are we there? Why aren’t they paying their fair share?”

The global financial system that the U.S. built increasingly seems, in the eyes of many of our citizens, not to be working in their favor; it’s regularly exploited, again, by free riders, but especially by bad actors like China; traditional jobs are increasingly being outsourced, and many American workers think that the financial system benefits some elite. Maybe it’s 1%, maybe it’s 10%, maybe it’s 25%, but they don’t think the American financial system benefits the median worker.

We have a broken immigration system, and we have weak border security. The inability to assimilate new immigrants in an orderly, lawful way is undermining our national cohesion. I want to say, clearly, I am a defender of America’s traditional immigration tradition, but we should admit the fact **[TIME CODE 0:20:00]** that we are living at a point in American history with one of the highest percentages of foreign-born residents at any point in all of U.S. history. We have just over 13% of those within our borders today are foreign-born. The high water mark was 14½% from 1890 to about 1920s, coincidentally, the last massive economic disruption.

The move from rural America, to industrial, urbanized America is parallel to what’s happening in the digital revolution, and the ways that our borders are treated and the ways that we think about immigration are also very parallel that were huge consequences in the ‘19 teens and ‘20s of that immigration system.

We should be having a national conversation about whether what we’re doing is making it possible for the millions and millions of newcomers to become part of a single American community. And again, our refusal to secure our border is a refusal to take seriously the national security implications of a porous border. We have lots of intelligence that our adversaries around the world, are well aware of how porous our border is. Regularly, people in Washington exaggerate particular threats in the moment; but in the long-term, we have lots of adversaries that are well-aware of the porous nature of our northern border, our southern border, and our visa overstay system.

We could go on, because the list is much longer, but I think we can sum it up this way: the dissatisfaction of the American people is a result of a failure, not necessarily of individual experts in your domain specialties or in your regional expertise, but it is a failure of America as a whole to persuade the people that we have a coherent, long-term foreign policy vision that should bring together all the different parts of our national security apparatus into one definable strategy. We should review briefly the history that many of them feel.

Since the end of the Cold War, they think they’ve seen administration after administration flip back and forth with every election and every presidential transition. When the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union collapsed, we heralded this as the end of history, the final triumph of liberal democracy over other political and economic systems, and as a vindication of the American way of life. In the 1990s, President Bill Clinton enjoyed the peace dividend of the Cold War--economic growth, world-wide stability, and a military draw down. We had a quick and relatively painless war to push Saddam Hussein back out of Kuwait, and then, America’s most significant military engagements over the next two decades were in places like Bosnia and Serbia: tiny, perennially dysfunctional corners of Eastern Europe. There were individual tragedies and hardships to be sure, but overall, and against the backdrop of history, this was an unbelievable decade of peace and prosperity, and many American policy makers began to talk like we could believe the happiness of a post-Cold War peace dividend would last forever.

One single event ended that happy simplicity. Obviously, on September 11, 2001, we found a new enemy, but it was a non-state actor; it was a pocket of madmen associated with no state, wearing no uniform, and willing to kill in the name of religion, and dedicated to taking ordinary Americans. Not men and women in uniform, again, but ordinary citizens with them, into their death. American foreign policy was quite understandably reoriented in an instant toward this very real and very urgent threat. And again, our purpose here is not blame laying.

Al Qaeda, the Taliban and later, the Islamic State, posed a unique threat to the American Security System, and to that of our friends and allies. But as many of you in this room have written, many times, there were political and national security and intelligence community conversations that acted, at that moment, as if non-state actors were the only challenge we had to orient our defense establishment to, and the American people bought into that mission. There was a period, if you look back, when was the last consensus in American foreign policy? It’s 12 to 18 months right after 9/11. The people were told that non-state actors were now much more important than any state actors we had to deal with.

Unfortunately, that effort to combat non-state actors and think about how we would build resilience in our systems against them was never integrated into any long-term vision of Americans’ role in the world, or of our responsibilities for managing the international system. And it caused us to take our eye off the threat, posed by rising powers, or resurgent powers like Russia, and rising powers like China.

So now we, as a nation--again, not necessarily each of you as individual scholars and experts--but we, as a nation, find ourselves surprised, yet again. The people are surprised to learn that Russia’s aggressive expansionism is a threat to us, not only in its own neighborhood, but across Europe and into the Atlantic, as well as by China’s heavy hand over not only it’s Pacific neighbors, but far afield in places like Africa, where we have an increasing number of countries **[TIME CODE 0:25:00]** that could be considered vassal states of China, and increasingly now in Central and South America. Who would have thought, in 1990, that we would ever need to have another conversation like updating the Monroe Doctrine for the 21st Century?

Right now, when you think about the push/pull variables along our southern border and in Central America, we’re pretending like a lot of these are traditional states. A lot of these are narco, drug gangs that have essentially seized states, and we didn’t have any conversation 25 years ago with the American people about being prepared to think about what the collapse of these regimes might look like.

So here we are at home, in the eyes of the people, I think, regularly stumbling from agenda to agenda, seized by short-term political interests of candidates seeking office, and watching each one be trashed, and four years later, to be replaced by an out-party that makes the same arguments that their party made when they were the out-party. There isn’t a consensus about what America’s doing, there isn’t a consensus about what Republicans believe and Democrats believe that can be distilled to something the American people can unpack; there tends to just be those in power and those trying to displace those in power. That’s not a sufficient reason for Americans to think they should pay tax dollars and send their kids into harm’s way.

We have lost any overarching vision, or better, we’ve lost any sense of a shared narrative of the American role on the global stage. Ultimately, this is unsustainable, and the American people are right to say that this is not working. President Trump, to his credit, actually intuited some of these problems. He thinks of his mandate as being in part disruption, and he thinks of himself as being called to, called BS on the tendency of some foreign policy experts to recycle old, tired rhetoric, and occasionally to pretend that old framings of problems are always relevant to whatever is developing on the global stage, as if we can use the same rhetoric in 2018 that we could use in 1988.

Candidate Trump sensed, and maybe this is actually a rare core belief for him--because when you back and you listen to him on things like the Howard Stern Show over decades, this seems to be something that was not just political opportunism like many of his positions, but rather, something he seems to believe in his gut. He seems to sense that a lot of the American people wanted someone to stand up and call BS on a foreign policy establishment that, in the eyes of the American people, wasn’t translating to them.

Again, I want to be cautious here. I don’t agree with most of the critique, but at the level of translation to bringing along 320 million Americans, I think the critique has lots of merit. Unfortunately, I don’t think President Trump actually has any solution to any of these problems. He wants to be a disrupter, but it’s not clear disruption toward what end.

And so, right now, the suggestion that we should return to isolationism should cause American citizens to say, “What has happened every other time we’ve tried isolationism? It has never been good for the American people, let alone for our allies and our neighbors.”

America First, is an attempt to retreat to1920 slogans. It didn’t work then, and it won’t work today. The great lesson 100 years and a month from the end of World War I right now, the great lesson of the inner-war period, where we won the war and then lost the peace, helping to produce the next war, the great lesson of that period is that you will be woefully unprepared for the probability of the next war, and then ultimately for conducting the next war, if you think the last war’s victory means you can exit the global stage.

Obviously, we have a better analogy to us. The period after World War II is the one we should be aspiring to, unlike the one after World War I, which is the way we’re talking right now. The period after World War II saw us win a war, but then also decide to win the peace by organizing allies around a system that, in realest prudence, advanced our idealistic visions to talk about what we believed we should announce on the global stage, and what our allies and we should build together.

Instead of retreating after that victory, America set out to build a new global order designed to prevent yet another catastrophic war. We established and led institutions, such as the U.N., that were dedicated to securing diplomatic solutions to simmering conflicts. We established new financial institutions and trading regimes, and we were dedicated to ensuring a single, global financial order. The GAT established a rules-based trading order that endures to this day in the form of the WTO, and most importantly, we formed security alliances, such as NATO, arguably the most important and significant alliance in two millennia, with friends that were dedicated not just to shared interests, but to shared values.

At the heart of all these efforts was the recognition that a peaceful and prosperous world would **redown** to the benefit of median Americans. If we did not create that world, no one **[TIME CODE 0:30:00**] else would’ve created that world in 1946, ’47, ’48, ’49, ’50. Had we not created that world, the world would have suffered and America would have suffered.

We need to think again about how we persuade the American people of the values of an American-led force and an American-led order. And so the contours of the era in which we now find ourselves are becoming clearer by the day. The theme of this conference says it well: the end of history has come to an end.

As many of you regularly write, and write well, we are returning to great power competition that has defined the international relations order for centuries. We need to be preparing for another long contest of nation versus nation, and the only way you prepare for a long contest with a nation against another nation is by persuading the nation. And right now, we have not been doing that.

We all know that Russia is on the move. So before we got to China, let’s just admit that Vladimir Putin is hard at work trying to make Russia great again. He and his circle of kleptocrats are looking for opportunities to re‑assert Russia’s traditional role as the hegemonthat can dictate the fate of Europe and the Far East. Over the past decade, we’ve seen that Putin is willing to take big risks to make that happen: annexing Crimea, invading Ukraine, actively contributing to the atrocities of the Assad regime in Syria, cyber attacks across Europe, and of course, the campaign of disinformation and hacking that disrupted the 2016 elections here at home, and that is already being plotted for the 2020 elections.

I should just say parenthetically, because I got to pop in for a little bit of the panel at 11 a.m. Steve, you praised Richard Burr and Mark Warner--genuinely American heroes. At a time when the House Intelligence Committee could not conceivably send two leaders forward to say anything that would comfort the American people, you saw it here. Richard Burr and Mark Warner are two guys who don’t lie. They’re two guys who actually think they have a calling. They like each other, and they think it’s their duty to demonstrate to the world that they want to have shared facts. We are heading to an era where deep fake technology is going to cause real chaos. It’s going to destroy human lives, it’s going to **royal** financial markets, and it might well spur military conflicts around the world.

And when deep fakes technology produces an audio or a video of some global leader saying something, or ordering some attack that didn’t happen, or you’re going to see pictures of some attack that didn’t happen, you’re going to have to actually have flesh and blood humans that have a little bit of reservoir of public trust who can step to a camera together and say, “I know that looked really real on your TV screen; it wasn’t real.” And Richard Burr and Mark Warner are two of the only people in America who can do that right now. So thank you for inviting them. [*applause*]

Putin’s a disastrously evil man, but let’s not overstate his powers. He presides over an economy that is collapsing; he has a shrinking, aging population and an economy that is built largely around a single resource. But, he is playing his bad hand very, very well, and he will be able to increase his winnings if the United States foregoes our role in Europe. It is long past time to be proactive in our efforts against Putin’s aggression. We should not be reactive.

That said, the thing we need to orient the American people around is the long-term fight with China. Xi, and the Communist party leaders, have created a hybrid system of Communism and techno-mercantilism that brings together almost absolute state control of enormous economic powers. It has been said that present day China is what Stalin always intended to create, but was never able to manage. China is already making more and more expansive claims. They’re taking control over strategically important sea lanes and trade routes in an effort to exercise control over more than $5 trillion of global annual trade, as well as military routes used by neighboring countries and by the United States Navy.

China is making massive investments in the developing world, especially across Asia and Africa, but increasingly also in Central and South America in an effort to crowd out American economic power. China wants to make itself the partner of choice in the developing world, especially in those parts of the world that have historically been understood as belonging to America’s sphere of influence. The massive Belton Road Initiative is not only a massive project to expand Chinese economic power, but it’s a way of fracturing the sovereignty of nearby states and turning them into outposts of Chinese interest.

In the Western world, China uses its Confucius institutes as propaganda outlets for party interests. And here, I won’t go far afield, but I would just like to praise the leadership of the University of Texas for being one of the serious institutions in the country who recognizes the **[TIME CODE 0:35:00]** threat of some of the Confucius institutes. There are many places in the country where academic leaders have been very naïve about that. I see people trying to applaud over here. Let me affirm that, as well. [*applause*]

Back at home, China has dedicated itself to being the globe’s go-to high-tech manufacturer by 2025, and its leader for artificial intelligence by 2030. If China can corner the market on AI, it will hold the whip hand over the next generation’s tools that are needed for national economic growth, as well as for military and national security. China doesn’t want to end up in an open competition with the United States. China’s goal is to win the battles of the future before they actually occur on the battlefield. It is willing to play a decade’s long, maybe even a century long game to reclaim what it sees as its historic position as the middle kingdom, that is, the center of the world.

Right now, most countries on the globe don’t want to be on team China. They know that it is bad for them, but many of them will also tell American leaders that they can’t wait very long; they know that the future, in the Pacific particularly but globally, is going to be American-led or Chinese-led, and when we abandon the global stage, we strengthen China’s hand.

It’s worth pointing out that China is not doing this alone; it’s getting a leg up from many American companies in Silicon Valley. Many have shown a willingness to help the Communist Party perfect its security state in exchange for access to Chinese markets. We should say this clearly: there are American tech companies that are tacitly undermining America’s national security community at precisely the time when public/private digital technological partnerships are going to become essential for our economy and for our politics.

I don’t want to paint a picture of doom and gloom, because I don’t believe that, and I’ll explain why in a minute. But I do think we’re at a crucial moment, and we don’t have a vision right now to guide us through the challenges that we’re about to face. We have an adversary that is willing to move quickly and quietly and cleverly, and they’re willing to operate on very long-term timelines. China knows what it wants the world to look like in 25 and 50 years. Do we? We know that we don’t. We know that the American people have not been brought into a conversation about what the globe might look like, for good or for ill. In 25 or 50 years, China has no such problem.

I think we can say with certainty, that we know the last century of American engagement in the world led to great things; but America’s refusal to lead the world will head to a much worse place in the future. A world that America refuses to lead is a world where America and its allies are in ever present and increasing danger. Every alternative to American leadership will put our interests in jeopardy, threaten our security, and endanger our freedom to promote and to live by our own values. A world where the U.S. sits on its hands is a world where China and Russia will exploit our weaknesses. That will be bad for us, again, at both the value and the interest levels. Hell abroad will boomerang home in our ever flatter world. So we need a new way forward. We can’t retreat, and history shows us that the problems the people sense are real. We can‘t pretend they’re not there, and we can’t pretend the voters will go along with vigorous engagement without being corded and persuaded, without being wooed.

Our challenge, then, is to be honest about our failures, but also about the opportunities. We have a failure of imagination. As a nation, we’ve gotten locked into a stale way of talking about this debate, and in our politics, the main place that people are exposed to it, it sounds like there’s some deep Republican versus Democrat divide. The much bigger problem is that there’s very little past awareness versus future vision casting.

We need a foreign policy imagination that is broader, more adaptive, and more creative for the digital age, one that can envision the new era of challenges we face, but also envision a world where innovation can win again. I’m a rookie in politics; I’ve only been in my office for 3½ years, and I think I’m one of eight people in the Senate who’s never been a politician before, so I want to throw a few ideas at you, but I don’t pretend that this is a sufficient menu. But I think these are examples of creative ways that we could move forward with an America together in the 21st Century. I’m going to give you a lightning round, and then I’ll pull up.

In an age of hybrid war, in which much of the contest will take place in digital networks and on servers, rather than on traditional battlefields, this means that we need to revamp along multiple fronts. There is not one place to start. So often, the debates about bureaucratic reorganization of the Intelligence Community, which I’m in favor of, but so often, those debates lead us to be incapacitated for taking any steps. We should be taking steps across most of these domains at the same time, rather than trying to figure out sequencing first.

In the Intelligence Community, we have thousands and thousands of behind-the-scenes heroes working hard to make sure that ordinary Americans’ lives can be lived **[TIME CODE 0:40:00]** in safety. Because of the nature of their work, there is not an opportunity for us to tell the story in the same way that builds imagination, like Cold War movies did. I was born in ’72, so in the ‘70s and ‘80s, I can’t think of a year of my life where the most interesting movie didn’t have some Cold War backdrop. When you think about the digital and cyber eras into which we’re heading, inevitably, lots of our heroes are going to look less like James Bond and more like spooks that are hard to tell their stories.

But we know that our Intelligence Community is not adequately equipped to meet the challenges of great power competition for the next century. One place we should start is by establishing a hybrid threat center. Again, I don’t want to pick bureaucratic fights, but for sake of argument, let’s house it at ODNI. Like the NCTC, the Hybrid Threat Center would bring together experts from across different domains in the Intelligence Community: experts in cyber, finance, info ops, and more, to provide policy makers with an aggregated vision, an aggregated view to how China and Russia, in particular, but also North Korea and Iran, how China and Russia are using asymmetric tools to influence the U.S. diplomatically and domestically, and to undercut our interests across lots of domains that we do not typically think of as political.

I think this center would place increased emphasis on open source analysis and monitoring technological trends like this bed of deep fakes technology. The center would be a key intelligence resource to help policy makers address the challenges before us more swiftly. There are so many things right now that we are better than China at, in theory and in technique, but not in operational effectiveness, because our bureaucratic and legal cultures are so much slower than our adversaries.

Additionally, given that there is not already consensus in the Intelligence and National Security Communities about the security implications of the Belton Road Initiative and its potential military power projection implications, we need a national intelligence estimate that can spur that kind of consensus. During the Cold War, the NIEs about the Soviet Union were rarely perfect. They were never perfect; but they performed the crucial task of helping thoroughly inform a policy making conversation and become a launch point for different kinds of debates. We need a doodle pad across the political and policy making communities that starts with some of these NIEs that can persuade more folks and frame up the debates.

We need something similar for China. Obviously, the Hybrid Threat Center would touch deeply on cyber policy, but most of the cyber issues are outside that. We are now a quarter century into the cyber war era, and we’ve only begun to think about what this world is going to look like. Russia’s exploits in the 2016 election demonstrated how susceptible our critical infrastructure was to attack, and yet no one thought of our election systems as a part of critical infrastructure 36 months ago. There are lots more failures of imagination like that, where information warfare is going to be conducted in the future, and we have not yet envisioned this problem broadly enough.

We need to be able, not just to parry, but to go on offense against China and other sophisticated actors, who won’t just be posting Facebook ads, but using their capabilities to undermine America’s defense capabilities, and to change numbers inside our financial institutions. Imagine the chaos when middle class Americans start to have checkbooks that don’t balance; maybe because there’s only an $18 change in lots of people’s accounts. But that kind of attack is not at all hard to imagine. The chaos that flows from it, we don’t know how to envision yet.

I’m pleased to report that the most recent National Defense Authorization Act established a cyber solarium commission, modeled after Eisenhower’s Solarium Commission, which brought together public and private sector experts to formulate defense policy for the nuclear age. We need that kind of initiative for the cyber age, and it is my hope that this new commission will do this. One small point, the administration’s new NSPM13, which replaces PPD20 delegates lots more authorities to move more quickly in cyber response. That’s the example of the kind of thing that needs to flow from the new cyber solarium commission consensus about what those steps are to empower the actual war fighters, including in the digital space.

I don’t want to have a big debate here, partly in the interest of time, but partly because everybody in this room is smarter than I am about it, but about the bureaucratic organization, about what the lines of information flow to the President should be in cyber space. Right now, it’s pretty clear that at NSC, there’s not clarity about how information should get to this president or future presidents who will be avid consumers of intelligence about the cyber domain.

My view is that we’re going to need a lot more de-layering in the community; but even if we don’t de-layer inside the IC--when I talked to Senior Intelligence Community leaders from other countries, especially 5Is countries, the BCG and McKenzie guy “deep in my soul” often asks a first principles question: If you were going to build your intelligence community from scratch today in the U.K. or in Australia, **[TIME CODE 0:45:00]** how many agencies should there be? The answer is usually four or five. I’ve heard three. I’ve never heard any number bigger than five. We have 17. Nobody thinks this is the right system. There’s also no way we can do the bureaucratic re-org fast enough to let it proceed operational effectiveness. We’re going to need to walk and chew gum at the same time.

We know that deep fakes technology is here to stay; we also know that the tech community isn’t going to know how to authenticate quickly and we know that many journalists in our de-centralized system, it’s a power of the market system, but in our moment where deep fakes are going to roll out, there’s no one actor that’s going to be able to build a consensus about what the ethics of journalistic integrity will be in that moment. So the government is going to have to build technical capabilities to become better at spotting increasingly difficult to spot deep fakes technology.

It won’t be long before hackers with even relatively simple tools will be able to create audio and video of recent events and remarks that never happened. We must get ahead of that by establishing legal structures for dealing with the activity that has the potential to devastate millions of lives rapidly.

We know that China is extorting intellectual property from American companies, especially in the tech sector. We should have the GAO assess all collaborative technology initiatives between the U.S. and China so that we understand more what we’re losing and how rapidly, and where our biggest exposures are where we have not already lost technological fights. We should be directing the chief information security officer of OMB to provide annual reports on where China is intentionally causing vulnerabilities in our supply chains. Perhaps, most importantly, we need an offensive and defensive cyber doctrine that more clearly distinguishes between the two doctrines. Being on the front lines in the cyber war era will be crucial to taking seriously information warfare capabilities, not just on defense, but on offense. To that end, we should be reconstituting the U.S. Information Agency for global media and establishing some sort of political warfare agency as the locus for our offensive activities and information operations across the globe. We need a hub that coordinates these types of activities.

We know that the leaders of our adversaries hate transparency. We should make Xi and Putin’s finances eminently clear to their people and to the world. We should use government agency’s social media reach to amplify the work of NGOs and others who expose the corruption of authoritarian regimes. We have a giant bully pulpit and we should use it. We should fast track asylum claims by whistle blowers who expose corruption in authoritarian regimes, and we should figure out ways to reward more of that work by our friends abroad.

We should have the NCSC produce an unclassified report on China’s influence and propaganda activities in the United States, especially on American campuses, and we should be shouting this to the American people. Finally, we need to talk more honestly with our citizens about the value of alliances. In the last 24 months, we’ve heard a lot about the cost of alliances. Alliances are really costly. The only thing more expensive, to quote Secretary Mattis, “is not having alliances.” We need to be rebuilding the institutions that support these alliances. When we pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, we ceded economic influence to China. We should be re-engaging. Nobody was happier about the U.S.’s retreat from TPP than China.

I have some angst about the Build Act, particularly the way the balance sheet works; but the U.S. Public Sector should be finding more ways to encourage private sector investment across Asia as a counterweight. We need to think about the Pacific more as a direct relationship, and as a multi-lateral institutional relationship than simply a hub and spoke alliance system that we’ve had of late. China and Russia are flexing their muscles in the Pacific, and we need something that approaches a NATO for Asia to bring together more of our bilateral alliances into actual multi-party partnerships.

The bottom line is that many of our existing institutions, such as the U.N. Security Council, have grown sclerotic, and we make a mistake when we let the American people think the only two choices are between a reflexive defense of old institutions, or a global retreat. Many of our old institutions don’t work anymore. The first conversation we should be having is about what kinds of new institutions we need to build, and the, we should tell the Americans the peace dividend that comes from our healthy new institutions when we scrap some of the old ones.

The word “reset” has often become a bad word, but we do need some sort of an institutional reset, because right now, the American people think the choice is retreat or defense of every institution that exists today, many of which have actually outlived their usefulness.

This is just one speed round menu of possibilities. None of these are a silver bullet, obviously. Many of them require serious tweaking, and some of them may sound good in theory but not actually be operational. That’s fine. What we need is more debate about the new kinds of institutions **[TIME CODE 0:50:00]** we need to build for global engagement. We need to start imagining new ways of seeing and organizing the world to advance our interests.

I’ve spent a lot of time today pointing out the failures of our imagination, ways that we’ve gotten tied up by stale approaches, ways that we’ve defended confusion and incoherence in ways that produce unpreparedness because we have not done anything to shore up and build for the next generation a sense of American consensus. But I do want to say, by way of closing, that I’m very confident in the American imagination. It’s an inexhaustible resource and in very practical down-to-earth ways, we have, unquestionably, the greatest entrepreneurs and innovators and creative thinkers on the earth. People who grow up in America, grow up in an environment where you’re supposed to challenge received wisdom, and you’re supposed to build the new mouse trap and the new app, and people across the world, and the 96% of people who don’t live in our borders know that if you’re an entrepreneurial innovative thinker, this is a place that you want to come.

When we have these kinds of risk takers, if we can align all of that power of culture and economics past, with the potential of the problems we face in the future, just as in the industrial and the space race with the Soviet Union, we don’t just win; we crush. But you have to do that in a sense that flows from a shared vision. The American imagination is limitless, not only technologically, but morally. It’s in our DNA. This is the only nation, the only modern nation that was founded on an idea. We believe in the universal dignity not just of 320 million Americans, but of 7.6 billion people. If you believe that the rights people have to free speech, to free press, to freedom of religion, to freedom of association, to the right of protest, if you think those rights don’t come to you by government, but come to you by nature, and government is just our shared project to secure those rights, it turns out, you’re singing poetry to 7.6 billion people who also know in their soul that their dignity and their rights are not granted because of the benevolence of some temporary ruler. Those rights come from the dignity of people. If we believe that, and we announce that, the gap between our idealism and our realism is small.

It is not accidental in June of 1989, before the tanks rolled through Tiananmen Square, it isn’t accidental that the last act that group of students was doing was building a giant statue of the Statue of Liberty in the middle of that Square. They didn’t do that just because they wanted to go to Silicon Valley to build a new company; they did that because they know that America believes things that are true, not just of our 320 million, but of all 7.6 billion people across the globe.

When America chooses to lead, peace and prosperity, liberty and dignity follow. Maybe not immediately or not easily, but eventually. U.S. leadership, though, is not an inherent law of the world. U.S. leadership isn’t guaranteed by fate or destiny. We, the people, are tasked with renewing it each generation. And so the question we, the people, should be wrestling through in our time and place is, when we hand the reins to someone else, will we retreat or will we do the hard work of re-envisioning American leadership on the global stage for the digital age? Thanks for having me. [*applause*] My 7-year-old just shouted, “Hey, I got a question.” Nobody wants to hear from you, Breck.

Inboden: There’s one right there.

AQ: Thank you, Senator Sasse. My question is, based on lectures I heard earlier, it seems, as a result of global order and the design of the post-World War II order, there’s free trade in order to build countries so we stop great wars. So my question is, how do we balance the need for us leading a global order with the lesser side of it, where a lot of companies are shipping jobs overseas at the expense of middle class Americans? Or is that simply by design to keep some countries--is that what the post-World War II order people had in mind, to ship some jobs overseas to keep some countries at a minimum level of dignity so that they don’t go causing great wars again and making it even worse than if we just shipped a few jobs overseas?

Sasse: Thank you. So two different buckets of thoughts: first of all, I think I am the most free-trade senator out of 100 of my colleagues, so I am a zealot on the topic, but we should differentiate between what happens when there’s more trade. So when you have more trade, what’s happening is you’re saying governments can’t stand between two willing parties, two individuals, **[TIME CODE 0:55:00**] two families, two companies, and you’re saying, instead, when these two parties just who happen to be separated by a border think this is an exchange in their interest, we’re saying more trade is government should get out of the way and allow individuals and firms to make those decisions.

The net effect of more free trade is lots more economic benefit on net. Consumers win everywhere on both sides of the border when there’s more trade, and producers win on net on both sides of a border when there’s more trade. There is more production value created on both sides of a border whenever there’s more trade, but that doesn’t mean that sub-sector production doesn’t have some implications and that there might be losers by sub-sector on the production side. So I think the right answer is, more trade and more thoughtfulness about trade mitigation policies for disrupted industries and disrupted individuals at home. That said, a lot of what we call trade in American life today is really just an excuse to try to find a bad guy to demonize for the fact that there’s more automation happening in our economy. I am a free trade zealot. I think free trade is great. It is a win-win and we should have more of it.

That said, in our political rhetoric right now, I think we’re exaggerating the influence of trade. Regularly, what is happening when industries are changing rapidly is that there’s rapid automation. We’re living through a digital revolution and that’s another way of saying humans are smart and we’re pretty good at automating tasks. When there’s a **rootanizabl**e task, we **rootanize** it.

Average duration at a firm in the 1970s when I was born, average duration at a firm for a primary breadwinner was 26 years. Average duration at a firm today for an American worker is 4.2 years and inevitably, going to get shorter over time. We have never had a civilization of life-long learners; we’re going to have to build one. At age 35 and 40 and 45 and 50, students graduating from UT next May are likely going to live in an economy where not just their job and not just their firm, but their entire industry ceases to exist.

We’re going to have to rethink the way we think about our entitlement programs, the way we think about higher education, the way we think about job retraining for a world where 35-, 40-, and 45-year-olds are disrupted. The vast majority of disruption in our economy today is coming from the incredible pace of automation, which again, on net, is economically beneficial, but really scary for the individual worker, the individual factory, the individual firm town. And so we need to rethink a lot of our policies, but a lot of times, we’re making trade as a bogeyman, carry more weight than it’s really responsible for at present. I’m booted? Thank you all for having me. [*applause*]

[*End of Recording*]