Online Book Event

“H.R. McMaster: Battlegrounds”

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FEATURING:
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Welcome, everybody, to CSIS this afternoon, or whatever time it might be in whatever Zoom-land you’re in. My name is Seth Center. I’m the director of the Project on History and Strategy here today. And I’m really thrilled that everyone’s with us, and I’m thrilled that we’re joined by H.R. McMaster. I have to say, it was a big bummer to work for you. I had spent my career trying to get to the NSC as NSC historian, and then I got to the pinnacle of my career and my boss’s boss was a historian, and a better historian than me. And so, you know, I don't think I had anything to help you with, and I'm just glad that you didn't kick me out on day one.

I will say, I learned some pretty important lessons H.R. McMaster when he was national security advisor. I learned how to approach strategy, frame problems, define clear objectives, use history to inform and understand current challenges. Probably the most important thing I learned was the importance of integrity and leadership in an organization, the way in which confidence and vision play out, and the power of character to change an organization overnight.

I think those are all important lessons. And I think what’s most striking is what many of us witnessed serving alongside General McMaster in his many different capacities over his career. Everyone can read out it in his new book, which is really both a dense analysis, a serious history, and a serious series of policy choices and, most importantly, as everyone who knows General McMaster would expect, it also has plenty of withering and insistent criticism to go along with the analysis. So, General McMaster, thank you so much for joining us today. We really appreciate it. Terrific to have you.

Hey, Seth, it’s great to be with you. And let me just thank you publicly for the tremendous contributions you made on the National Security Council staff. And I mean, what you're doing here, at this podcast and at CSIS, but what you've done at the National Security Council staff was really a tremendous example of applied history. And I think you helped make our policies and strategies wiser. Certainly, you did – you did tremendous work on the National Security Strategy. But really I drew very heavily on your insights, and also your insights not only in connection with the issues of the day but about how to structure the NSC process. So, Seth, I can't thank you enough for your extraordinary service to our country. And it was a privilege to serve with you, and it's a privilege to be with you for this program. Thank you.

Well, it’s great to be here. And I should show the book. It’s terrific. If you missed Colbert, you can – you can catch it here. So I do want to start – and thank you. That was very kind of you to say.

I do want to start with the big question of grand strategy. Reading this book, experiencing what we’ve experienced over the last couple years, what’s most remarkable to me is the intensification of a series of threats at the same time, both in a geographic and a functional sense. We have rising tensions with great powers, regional rogues, the question of how technology is changing these competitions. And it seems to me that this is one of the most challenging times
both to articulate the strategic landscape, and then to frame a strategy. So why don’t – how do you understand that incredibly complex situation?

Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster: Well, Seth, I think what we’re seeing now are the outlines of critical competitions that will determine our future – will determine whether our future is one of freedom, prosperity, and increasing influence for free and open societies, or a period in which the U.S. and other free and open societies are less free, less safe, and less prosperous. And these competitions are not new. And the approach I try to take in “Battlegrounds” is to understand, first, how the recent past produced the present before then making a projection into the near future.

And the story is really one of complacency after the Cold War, and a belief that we didn’t really need to compete the way that we did during the Cold War. And because we had vacated some critical arenas of competition, we got behind. We got behind, and then we got disappointed in the 2000s. That period of increasing optimism, complacency, gave way to a period of strategic shocks – especially the mass murder attacks of 9/11 – and disappointment, such as the unanticipated length and difficulty of the wars in Afghanistan, and Iraq, and the financial crisis.

And it kind of took the wind out of our sails. We lost confidence, and we shifted from over-optimism to pessimism and, I think in large measure, resignation about critical challenges – crucial challenges that are important to our future and challenges with which we have to remain engaged, and engaged in a reasonable, sensible way, and in a way that is driven by a reinvigoration, I hope, of our strategic competence.

Seth Center: Would you – do you think – you know, there’s a tremendous amount of pressure to want to rank threats, rank challenges. And a lot of that comes out of the need to allocate resources. Also, I think just a natural desire and tendency to have clarity. Are you interested in that frame of reference for thinking about the challenges we have, or is that an unhelpful way to approach the problem?

Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster: Well, Seth, I think it is important to prioritize, right? Because if everything’s a priority, nothing’s a priority. And as you know, when I first arrived quite unexpectedly in the West Wing in February of 2017, I began with a list of 16 – I think it grew to 18 – first-order, crucial challenges to our security. And we organized efforts around 16. Well, some people might say, well, how can you have 16 priorities? That’s a lot. But you know, when you’re a country with global interests – and today’s threats, as you mentioned, are not narrow, right? These are – these are threats that often overlap. And we have to be able to do more than one thing at a time. We have to cope with more than one of these challenges at a time.

The way that I think about this is certainly in connection with geostrategic threats to our – to our influence, our security, our prosperity, and geoeconomic threats, but functional threats that kind of cut across these geostrategic competitions. Those involving space and access to space, cyberspace, and what is a continuing competition as we all know with various forms of cyberwarfare
underway every day.

And then of course there are economic competitions, as we can see. There are competitions that involve these interconnected problem sets of climate, and energy, and health security, and water security, and food security. And we’re coping with the pandemic, right, which was – you know, which is a crisis that began abroad, but obviously had severe implications here at home. And once these threats – I think whether it’s jihadist terrorism or Covid-19 – once they reach your shores, you usually have to cope with those challenges at a much higher cost than if you had been able to cope with them closer to their origin.

Seth Center: So, this raises an interesting question. If you think about where your thinking was in 2017 when you came into the national security advisor role, and where we are now with the really extraordinary intensification of the global pandemic and how that has changed the – in many ways, the landscape of the debate. Would you have written the book or structured the hierarchy of interests differently?

Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster: You know, Seth, I don’t think I would have. You know, I was writing as the pandemic was just declared a pandemic, and you could begin to see on the horizon how destructive it was going to be, not only in connection with, you know, the human suffering that it would inflict on people here in America, but also the effect of a recession associated with it. And we began to also see the beginning of social unrest, you know, against the backdrop of increasing polarization that we see in our society, and then obviously laid bare and widened by the murder of George Floyd and the civil unrest that followed, concerns about inequality of opportunity and unequal treatment.

So this is a period of crisis. I think it’s bound to lead, as perhaps it must inevitably and it should, to a period of introspection to understand better how we strengthen the fabric of our society, and how we emerge from these sort of triple crises stronger. But what I’ve seen Covid-19 do internationally is catalyze competitions that were already underway, magnify them in terms of their consequences. So I think it’s immensely important today that we have conversations, we bring Americans together to talk about these challenges, to demand from our elected leaders a better foreign policy, a sustainable and sound foreign policy, and then work together across, you know, all political persuasions – because none of this should be partisan – on solutions that will help, I hope, build a better world for generations to come.

Seth Center: You’ve described a really interesting phenomenon, which is that a global health crisis has intensified competitions. I think there was a certain amount of expectation, or at least hope, in the spring that it would forge a new kind of cooperation and we could move away from the trajectory of competition. Do you think the fact that it didn’t reflects policy choices by statemen and -women, or do you think really the competition dynamic is now structural, that we’re trapped?

Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster: I think the competitive dynamic is structural. But it has been for a long time, we just haven’t acknowledged it, right? So I think for a while we began to latch onto
terms like global governance and convince ourselves that such a thing was actually not only realizable in the future at some point but ongoing. And this was I think a carryover of some of the flawed assumptions of the 1990s, and particularly the belief that an arc of history had guaranteed the primacy of our free and open societies over closed authoritarian systems. You know, great-power rivalry, that was a relic of the past. And America, because of our – of our, you know, innovative economic system and our tremendous technical military prowess was entering an age of tremendous security and dominance in terms of our power, and so forth.

Of course, none of those assumptions turned out to be true. These competitions have been ongoing within international organizations and between countries – countries who have much different visions for the future. The Chinese Communist Party in particular helped foist Covid-19 on the world. I mean, it’s just a fact. They suppressed news of human-to-human transmission, they punished the doctors who were trying to blow the whistle on it, they stopped internal travel before international travel, and then kind of added insult to injury with wolf warrior diplomacy and the range of aggressive actions you see – you see the Chinese Communist Party undertaking now.

Subversion of the World Health Organization was part of this story, but now bludgeoning soldiers to death on the Himalayan frontier, the suppression of human freedom in Hong Kong, increasing – intensifying aggression in the South China Sea, an area where if they succeed will be the largest landgrab in history. The more jingoistic and threatening language and actions toward Taiwan and even Japan and the Senkakus. So I would just say that acceleration of various forms of aggression by the Chinese Communist Party is just one example of how the pandemic has catalyzed competitions that were already underway.

I’ll just give one other example quickly, which is that of Russia. You know, this was supposed to be a big year for Putin, right? 2020’s been bad for everybody, I think we’ll all agree, right? But it was maybe especially bad for him because he was supposed to roll out the rewrite of the constitution that would allow him to stay in power at least till 2036. It was going to be the tremendous celebration of the Soviet Union’s victory in the great patriotic war. It was going to be a time for him to consolidate his power internally, to maybe experience a higher degree of economic growth. He was hoping for a rise in oil prices.

Well, guess what he got? He got a – he got a pandemic, which was a disaster for an already stagnant Russian economy. The collapse of oil prices, protests in the eastern part of the country, a poor response on Covid. So what has he done? Well, he’s become more aggressive in some ways, right? Poisoning Navalny, and then the movement of Russian troops into Belarus recently under the auspices of an exercise. So you know, I think that the intensification of the offensive in Idlib, initially, until it stalled out based on the Turkish actions – you know, aggressive actions in Libya in support of Haftar’s forces, which also – which also sort of petered out.
But I think that – I could go on about this, but I think in all the challenges that I cover in “Battlegrounds,” what I see at this moment is that these challenges have been catalyzed and are intensifying.

Seth Center: I think one of the beautiful things about this book is you do actually walk through how we got here in each key battleground, particularly the stories of China and Russia. I think you laid out the basic thesis of complacency helping to explain how we arrived where we are. Were there – let’s take Russia and then China. Were there lost moments when we could have, in the ’90s or the aughts, when a different course could have changed the situations with Russia or China?

Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster: Yeah, I think so, Seth. I think it was – I think it – probably, you could say, even though there were definitely reasons for hope that China having been welcomed into the international order would play by the rules, would liberalize its economy and, as it prospered, liberalize its form of governance. But it should have been clear from the very beginning that the Chinese Communist Party wasn’t playing by the rules, especially in the years that followed the accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001. So they reaped all the benefits of membership, but then used their statist economic system and their mercantilist policies, and their nontariff barriers to access to their market, and their forced transfer of intellectual property and sensitive technologies, combined with a sustained campaign of industrial espionage. I could go on, OK, we get the picture.

I mean, we knew it, but we kept holding out this hope that they would become, in the word of Bob Zoellick – you know, aspirational words of Bob Zoellick – a responsible stakeholder, right? This carried on through the 2000s. During this period where we lost our confidence, I think, in large measure. And I think at one point some key people in our government during the Barack Obama administration were essentially engaged in activity that was really managing our decline vis-à-vis China rather than competing with a country that was exporting its authoritarian closed model – it’s intensifying the exportation of that model now – in a way that would profoundly disadvantage not only the United States, but also – but also the free world.

I think with Russia you could say the same after Putin came into power in 2000. He kind of laid it out in his new year speech and when slowly about consolidating his gains internally – political gains. But certainly after the denial of service attacks against Estonia in 2007, the invasion of Georgia in 2008 – the first time when a conventional military invasion was coupled with all sorts of cyberattacks – cyber-enabled information warfare, but attacks on infrastructure as well, of course leading, you know, eventually to the – to the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Ukraine. But really, what’d we do all that – during that time? We were disengaging from Europe, in large measure. We continued our troop drawdowns in Europe, like we’re doing today, based on kind of this happy view of history that we invented, I think, in large measure based on our tendency, what I call in “Battlegrounds” strategic narcissism.

I could go on with others, right? I mean, look at the growth of al-Qaida in the
'90s, right? The first attack on the World Trade Center, I think it was '94, right? That you had the attack on U.S. embassies in Africa and the Middle East. In 1998, President Clinton fires a few cruise missiles, you know, a calls it a day. And so I think there are many examples in the book, by telling the story of how the recent past produced the present where, at least in retrospect, Seth, we can see – we see that we had some opportunities to put in different policies, different strategies that could have had a fundamentally different outcome. Now, as a historian, I try to understand those decisions on their own terms, and through the lens of the time. But I think, nonetheless, we can learn from missed opportunities to make adjustments sooner.

Seth Center: I just froze for a minute. Sorry about that, sir. So let’s play a different scenario. In the China situation, for instance, it becomes clear very early on that the aspirations are not coming to fruition, the WTO decision is not proving to be as beneficial as we would have imagined. What is the policy or course of action that would have – would have been better than what you described as sort of aspirational hope?

Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster: Well, I think there are two dimensions to this. One is to defend against various forms of Chinese Communist Party aggression – forms of aggression I think really follow a pattern of cooption, coercion, and concealment. Co-opting countries and companies by the lure of access to the Chinese market, the lure of short-term profits, the lure of Chinese investment in their countries and in their companies. And then once you’re in, right, they use that coercive power to get countries, companies to conform to their worldview, to support their foreign policy, and then ultimately to try to create these servile relationships so that China can create really exclusionary areas of influence in a way that disadvantages the United States and others.

Now, we should have recognized this earlier, right? And we have so many cases in point these days of companies that were lured into China to do business, their intellectual property’s taken, their know-how is taken – Chinese companies produce goods at artificially low prices, dump them on the international market, drive that company that was lured in by the short-term markets out of business, right? I mean, we have to remember – I mean, gosh, there were, like, 32 solar panel plants in the United States – companies in the United States. I think it’s down to two now, right? And there’s a reason for that.

And so, I think that we should have seen that we were at a competitive disadvantage, taken some defensive measures, made some better decisions. Certainly, we should not have financed the growth the PLA, either through U.S. research, right, that is then pilfered by PLA scientists who were inside of our research and development programs and funneling the results of that research back to do really two things. To try to gain a position of relative advantage in the emerging data economy, but then also to gain a technological advantage over us from a military perspective.

So, there are – there are a whole – I think when – gosh, I mean I could go on about
what we can do defensively. But the Scarborough Shoals incident, I think it was 2014. You know, I think a stronger response there could have put us on a different path. So, I think there’s defensive measures. But I think also – what I recommend in the book is that we ought to be trying to turn what the Chinese Communist Party sees as our weaknesses into actual strengths. Strengths that retain our competitive advantages, but also make life, you know, kind of uncomfortable for the Chinese Communist Party.

So, what do they perceive as weakness? Freedom of speech is a weakness. That’s why they’re kicking out all Western reporters. That’s why they’re building the great firewall higher and higher. That’s why they’re arresting and sentencing, just most recently, to 18 years in prison anyone who has the temerity to criticize Xi Jinping and the party. This is – this is why they stifle any speech that could be construed as critical to the party. Ask Daryl Morey, you know, of the Houston Rockets about his tweet, you know, for example. And so – what’s happening in Hong Kong. I could go on.

So, we should be louder. We should be louder with our freedom of speech. We should protect really our strength of a free press, right, and strengthen legitimacy of our free press. I mean, our sources of authoritative nonpartisan information in our country, if you haven’t noticed, are dwindling. Investigative journalism is a great strength for us and it’s a great almost offensive tool to apply, for example, to China’s One Belt, One Road strategy where they set these debt traps for countries. Investigative journalists have exposed a lot of the corruption behind these projects, and loans, how it’s really robbing generations of people in those countries of the future with indebtedness, what some investigative journalists in Africa have called recently a new form of colonialism. That’s powerful, right?

And rule of law. The party fears rule of law. We should strengthen our rule of law and help others who are strengthening rule of law in their country. But what do they fear the most? I think the Chinese Communist Party fears the most the idea that people should maybe have a say in how they’re governed, right? And so we should strengthen our democratic principles, and institutions, and processes, many of which, as you know, are under duress now.

But we – not that we should go around the world, you know, trying to – trying to impose Jeffersonian democracy on people. But if citizens of a country want our help in strengthening representative government, that’s the best bulwark against the exportation of these authoritarian closed systems. And what China’s exporting now in places like Zimbabwe, and Cambodia, and so forth is this technologically enabled surveillance, really Orwellian – beyond Orwell – police state. So, I think there are two dimensions of it. Defend ourselves, recognize these are competitions, and get back in the arena. And then strengthening, which should be our competitive advantages.

Seth Center: This clearly strikes on one of your big themes, which is confidence – strategic confidence. Closely related to another theme which you’re passionate about, which is strategic competence. As a framework for thinking about doing good
strategy, how does one know if one is being a competent strategist? What is strategic competence?

Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster:

OK. Well, I think, Seth, as a historian, you might agree with me, right? It’s all about the question, right? What question do you ask upfront? And then really, what that means is we have to get better at framing complex challenges, understanding them on their own terms, applying design thinking. This is what Phil Zelikow called in large measure software, you know, of policymaking in his recent excellent work on the – on the topic. And so I think framing these challenges, understanding them on their own terms first. This term I that I use in the book, strategic narcissism, it relates to this tendency on our part to define the world and these complex challenges only in relation to us. And so we fall into the trap of being self-referential from the beginning.

And then oftentimes what that leads to is wishful thinking, right? We imagine the challenge as we’d like it to be when, gosh, we’re doing that, I think, in a way that’s appalling in Afghanistan and South Asia now. And then – and then that wishful thinking leads to self-delusion. And it leads to policies and strategies that are based on fantasy in Washington rather than reality on the ground. So ask the right question. Frame the challenge. Understand it on its own terms.

And then we have to answer the question: So what? Like, why should American citizens care, right? This is why I think we have this movement toward retrenchment and this belief that disengagement from these challenges is an unmitigated good, because leaders are explaining to the American people what is at stake. And so the way to do that is to identify the vital interests that are at stake, and then view those challenges through that lens, craft an overarching goal – imagine that. Like, you want to know where you’re headed, what you’d like to achieve, more specific objectives.

But then very importantly a step that we oftentimes skip is we skip the step of trying to understand what are the limitations on the degree of agency and influence and authorship over the future that we and our like-minded partners have? And so what we tend to do then is assume linear progress toward our objectives, because we wrote it on a plan. And that now, I guess, all that remains to do is to give that plan to our adversaries and rivals and ask them to conform to really what we see as a script, right? And so recognizing the interactive nature of foreign policy is immensely important to our competence.

And then finally I would say that we have to understand as the next step what are the opportunities to exploit, what are the obstacles to overcome and, super importantly, how to integrate all the elements of national power and efforts of like-minded partners such that we achieve a high degree of synergy in trying to make progress toward those objectives. I think that we in recent years have not
thought about our challenges this way. We have not integrated elements of national power well. We use elements of national power in their, you know, cylinders of excellence, you know, or in their stovepipes.

So, I think all these – I describe these in the book – are related to a book I wrote on how – why Vietnam became an American war, and the lessons that I took forward with me into the national security advisor job. Quite a surreal feeling as a historian walking into what I regarded as McGeorge Bundy’s office, who was a principal character in “Dereliction of Duty.” So, I was grateful that I had had the historical experience. But I think really, it’s time for us to really work hard – work hard together, as CSIS does all the time, other think tanks, some really great strategic thinkers in academia – it’s time for us to work together to restore our strategic competence.

Seth Center: Do you think the history deficit is real? When you came in – as you rose up through the ranks and then served in a position at the White House, did you see our leaders afflicted with a history deficit? This is what Niall Ferguson and Graham Allison have said is one of the central problems.

Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster: It is. It is a central problem. It undermines our strategic competence every single day. This is why I spend so much time giving the historical background in a really compelling page-turning way – I think you would agree, Seth, right?

Seth Center: Oh, of course.

Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster: Because you can't understand the present if you don't understand how the past produced it. right? And I think because we don't understand the historical complexities from the perspective of a historian – and not from a political science or social science perspective, no disrespect intended. Some of my best friends are political scientists and social scientists. But I think without the burden of a theory it’s important to ask questions about what produced the present, so that you can be open to the complex causality of events. And in particular, the complex political and human dimensions, and social, and cultural dimensions associated with these – with these competitions.

If you don't take the approach of a historian, then I think you’re at risk of oversimplifying. I tell the story in “Battlegrounds” of my friend and often sidekick in the Middle East and Afghanistan, Joel Rayburn, who’s continuing to serve his country with distinction at the State Department. I was particularly frustrated in 2006-2007 in Iraq, when our strategy seemed to be – it seemed to be, like, a rush to failure, right? This was in the pre-surge period – 2006, I guess this was. And the strategy of accelerating a transition to the Iraqis was not really in any way consistent with what was an intensifying sectarian civil war. And he said, hey, you know, the problem is – you know, the reason why you’re so disappointed about this is because we’re – we are in I-raq, but in Washington the policies and strategies are developed for My-raq. And My-raq is whatever you want it to be.
And so I think we’ve done the same thing now with the Taliban, right? I think the Taliban, I mean, they’re separate from al-Qaida, right? We can – we can disconnect those dots, you know, in our head – to use the phrase that Tom Joscelyn uses, which is we try too hard to disconnect the dots. You know, maybe the Taliban, maybe they will be like the Grinch, you know? Their hearts will grow two sizes bigger. You know, the form of sharia that they try to impose, at least on large portions of the country, will be more benevolent.

I mean, really, I don’t believe any of that. Maybe they won’t cooperate with transnational terrorist organizations, but how could they not because these groups have pledged bayat to them. They are determined to reestablish the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as part of the overall effort to reestablish the broader califate with these Salafi jihadists and takfiri groups. So, I think we’re engaged in self-delusion even today. And we just ought to stop it, right, because it leads to bad outcomes.

Seth Center: So, is there an analogous period of our history when we were suffering from equivalent delusion? And then the question is, how do we pull ourselves out, if that’s the thesis?

Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster: Well, yes, of course there have been. You know, I think that there were periods of time in our history when we have kind of put our head in the sand and thought, hey, we can just avoid – we can just avoid these problem sets abroad. Not to argue for intervention in everything that happens abroad, but to understand, you know, when our interests really are at stake and it requires actions. I think there is a tendency for Americans to be more inward looking, to be more insular, to be more introspective. And that’s, of course, occurred, you know, in the interwar period, in the period prior to World War I. And I think that that’s not all bad, right, for us to be skeptical about, you know, foreign entanglements, to use George Washington’s phrase, right?

But I think that it is – it is important for us to recognize the changes that have occurred. You mentioned this at the outset, Seth. Our world’s more interconnected, right? The crucial challenges overseas can readily penetrate, you know, our shores very quickly, right? As C. Vann Woodward wrote, I think in 1962, the age of free security was over, right? And decades earlier than that. So I think it’s important for us to remain engaged. But the argument in “Battlegrounds” is for – you know, is for reasoned and sustained engagement, right? Not just intervention that ignores the potential costs and consequences of an activist foreign policy, but a foreign policy that also recognizes the dangers of disengagement from these critical challenges.

Seth Center: Is there a period that you take solace in, where you would think, oh, we got it – we got it right, or I really wish we were recreating the period? I think – you know, I did a wonderful discussion with Susan Eisenhower that we were talking about earlier where we looked at Eisenhower’s approach in finding a middle ground as one. But in your mind, where – what would be the positive moments
or eras?

Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster: Well, I think – I think there are many positive examples of sustained engagement paying off, right? One that I – one that I tell in “Battlegrounds,” and it’s covered in detail in a book called – now with a dirty word in the title – “Nation Building in South Korea” that I think, you know, how could you not view South Korea as a success, right? It looked pretty bleak in 1953, right? We left – the last troops left in 1950. North Korea saw that and thought, OK, America, the – later it would be the U.N. – will never challenge – would never challenge this offensive into South Korea and unifying the peninsula under the red banner.

And so we fought a three-year war, during which millions of people lost their lives and nearly 50,000 Americans lost their lives. But what was left at the end of the war was – you know, was a ravaged South Korea by decades of war and occupation under the Japanese empire, a country that had no natural resources, a corrupt government, an illiterate population, and a permanently, it seemed, hostile neighbor. Well, what good’s going to come of that? Well, we should probably just disengage then, right, 1953. Well, look at South Korea now.

You know, I think other examples in a sustained foreign policy must include Plan Colombia as a positive example. And then in terms of making adjustments, maybe too late. Maybe it should have been earlier. But I think President George W. Bush’s decision on the surge in December of 2006 was an appropriate adjustment. And I would say, Seth, that President Trump’s South Asia strategy of August 2017 was the first time we had a sustainable, sound strategy in place for Afghanistan – which is not a nearly 20-year war. It is a one-year war fought nearly 20 times over.

So, it’s a great question. I’ll think more about this. But certainly, there have been periods of sound, long-term approaches to foreign policy. You could say the Cold War broadly – although that, as you know, was not an uncontested Cold War consensus. That never really existed. But there are many examples – positive examples in history. I mention some of them in “Battlegrounds.”

Seth Center: I got a few really good questions from the audience. Why don’t we – why don’t I feed you a couple. Here’s one for the present. And this goes to the question of how to design a strategy for China. Should we active decouple our IT systems? I think the audience member whose name is John is thinking about TikTok or WeChat. And take the short-term potential economic pain for the long-term national interest? So how do you think about two internets?

Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster: Yeah. Well, I think we’re – it’s happened already. It’s going to happen already. And it is already happening, and it’s going to continue in that direction. And the reason is that the party has determined that it will gain a preponderant advantage not only in the emerging data economy but from a security perspective by gaining access to all the data in the world, right, including your personal data and your teenage child’s personal data, you know, from TikTok and, you know, the sustained campaign of industrial espionage and deliberate exfiltration of
data, whether it’s government records or whether it’s, you know, hotel chain records.

I mean, we see this is what’s happening. And China was attempting to accelerate that by dominating the fifth-generation communications infrastructure globally as well as gaining preponderant influence within existing U.S. companies, while denying access to U.S. companies to their market. So I would just ask the question: You know, do you expect the Chinese Communist Party to treat, you know, our citizens – right, your children, you know – better than they treat their own people? Of course not. So I think for us to be assured of our security there is going to have to be, in this area, a decoupling.

Now, that doesn’t mean the entire economies have to decouple, but it does mean in these areas in which the party is pursuing a differential advantage over us and wants to turn that advantage against our interests from a security perspective and from an economic perspective, we have to be much more vigilant. And of course, from a cybersecurity and communications and information security perspective, it’s – you know, it’s software. It’s apps, you know, like we’re talking about. But it’s hardware too, right? Remember the super micro issue, right? That’s – I bet that’s just the tip of the iceberg you know, in terms of electronics manufactured in China.

It’s actually services. It is the infiltration of companies from a human perspective. And with – you know, with agents that are working for the NSS or the PLA. And so we need a holistic look at security to secure ourselves from what has been extremely effective infiltration and espionage by the Chinese Communist Party. And again, you know, this is an area of competition we just – we just vacated, right? But we’re waking up to it. I mean, just look at the numbers of investigations and indictments since 2017 in the Justice Department. It’s staggering what that team has done under John Demers and others.

And so I think we’re getting better at it. We’re going to keep learning more about it, I think. And the more we learn, I think the more – the more resolve we’ll have to protect against this kind of pernicious form of espionage and sabotage.

Seth Center: What strikes me as you characterize the evolution of what the perception and action is, over the course of two years there’s been a fairly substantial – really a dramatic shift in our policy – not just our policy, but in action. And for you and I, who think about different theories of strategic shifts, that has to be one of the quicker – the quicker shifts on a bigger issue than almost at any other time, absent some sort of dear conflict.

Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster: Right. You know, Seth, it’s interesting you mentioned this. I don’t know if you remember, I asked you for formative documents that were relevant to big policy shifts in previous – from previous national security advisors and National Security Council staffs. And of course, you know, there’s NSC 68, right? Everybody knows that. But then we also looked at George H.W. Bush’s post-Cold War memoranda as well. And a couple of other examples.
And so on China, I remember convening the Principals Committee of the National Security Council around framing – that we put into place these framing sessions to get after what I mentioned at the outset, the need for us to spend time understanding the challenges before we jump right into what we’re going to do about it. And I remember reading from a few previous administration’s policies on China and just observing that, you know, we were about to affect what I believed at the time was the most significant shift in U.S. policy since the end of the Cold War.

And I think we’ve done it. I think it’s going to have bipartisan support. I mean, I hope it does. I hear some – I have some concern about myths that are gaining some traction about the nature of the competition with China. First among these is, hey, this really a U.S.-China problem. I think you know, among some people it’s – the interpretation is, well, Donald Trump is just such a mean person that Xi Jinping has to – you know, has to react this way. But I just would say that really the onus on this is on the Chinese Communist Party clearly. Think of all those actions I just kind of listed rapid fire of what the party is undertaking. Hey, this is a U.S. free world problem. And it’s demonstrably a U.S. free world problem.

The second – the second myth about this that concerns me is that – is that really this is – this is a problem that really leaves us only with a stark choice of being passive about it and accommodating the Chinese Communist Party, or conflict. This is the way some people interpret Graham Allison’s argument about Thucydides trap. And I believe that there’s a – you know, there’s a lot we can get done, right? There’s a lot we can get done, you know, in between passivity and confrontation. And in fact, I think that accommodation of the party was putting us on a path toward confrontation earlier.

And then the third – the third misunderstanding is, hey, this is really just an effort to keep China down, right? This is – all these talking points, by the way, are Chinese Communist Party talking points, right? And of course it’s not, right? We have to make sure we recognize that China is not monolithic or homogeneous. It’s why you hear everybody in the administration saying: Chinese Communist Party, Chinese Communist Party, CCP, right? Because we want to distinguish between the Chinese people and institutions and companies that are not directly working for the party’s agenda, right?

And so I think the ultimate goal ought to be to convince maybe even Chinese Communist Party leaders: You can have enough, right? You can realize the China dream. You can experience national rejuvenation. But you have to do it in a way that doesn’t do – that doesn’t accomplish your objectives at the expense of the freedom and dignity of your own people – I mean, witness cultural genocide in Xinjiang – or at our expense, right, through forms of economic aggression and also increasingly, you know, physical or military aggression that we see.

So I just wanted to get that out, because I hope that there is more continuity, you know, in this policy for future administrations, no matter who’s sworn in on
January 20th. But I think that this is the approach that future administrations are going to have to take – one of competition rather than – and these labels, I know, are not very useful – but rather than just cooperation and engagement.

Seth Center: We have a question from Vincent. He observes: Your book jacket is you in uniform at a former military officer. Of course, you were hammered while you were the national security advisor not for wearing your uniform as national security advisor. How do you think about your role in the broader civil-military debate and the health of that debate right now?

Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster: Yeah. Well, I mean, first of all, I didn’t want to have my photo on the cover at all. But you know, I was talked into it. And then in uniform – at first I wanted not in uniform. But then it occurred to me that really what I want – what I want to do with the book, and it’s in the author’s note up front, it’s in the preface in the front – that I want the book to generate respectful, meaningful discussions of these challenges as a way to bring us together as Americans, right? To reverse, to some extent, the polarization that we see in our polity, and especially around this vitriolic partisan discourse.

You know, I served five presidents. President Trump was the fifth commander in chief for me. And then serving in uniform as national security advisor was a no-brainer for me, right? And in fact, I think that, you know, Colin Powell carried it out pretty well, if you’re looking for a precedent. Brent Scowcroft did it as deputy national security advisor, I think very effectively, if you’re looking for a precedent. But then also I thought especially as polarized as we had become around the transition between the Obama and the Trump administration, my serving in uniform at least figuratively – I mean, you know, I wasn’t wearing my uniform everyday – would send a message. But I think on foreign policy, right, we shouldn’t – we shouldn’t engage in this kind of petty partisanship if it undermines our ability to work together, you know, across party lines, and to craft a reasonable and sustainable foreign policy.

So that’s the way I conducted myself in the job. I never felt any tension that I was compromising any way military professionalism by becoming partisan. I often had to make statements, right? I mean, the national security advisor does five things. Let’s go quick through them. You staff the president. You’re behind the president for anything having to do with foreign policy or national security. You run a process. You run a process that you design, I hope, to provide the president with multiple options. And then allowing that elected president to make decisions, and then running that process to assist the departments and agencies with the sensible and integrated implementation of those decisions and those policies.

The third thing you have to do is communicate. You have to communicate to relevant audiences the president’s policies, the decisions, which you have to do as national security advisor. That’s not partisan. That’s saying, OK, the president of the United States, my commander in chief, has made this decision, and here it is. Here’s what the policy is. The fourth is to – is to try to foster unity of effort
with allies, partners, like-minded countries, with fellow national security advisors, you know, from White House to Blue House or, you know, between offices of chief executives. And then finally to lead an organization, right? You want the National Security Staff to have high morale, to feel like they're making a difference, to be trusted and respected across the government.

None of those duties, I thought, you know, made it more complicated for me to serve in uniform. And I'll just finally say, by the way, I was hired on a Monday at Mar-a-Lago. I flew back with the president. I didn't live in Washington, right? So I was flown down to Tidewater, Virginia. I packed a couple bags and I started work the next day. Now, I can really probably only have made that rapid transition within my family of the Army who helped me do that, right? And if I was getting, like, a retirement physical and, like, you know, trying to find a house in Washington – we lived in the quarters at Fort McNair – it would have been crazy to do it. So it just made sense.

And finally, I'll just say, the president asked me to do it, right? And said, hey, you know, stay in uniform. Sure, you know? So I did not see it as an issue. Some people had an issue with that. I don't know why, you know? I mean, Senator McCain, who I loved, you know, he actually called me to say: Hey, I want you – I'd love for you to stay in uniform because we're so torn apart, this can help. You know, I know you'll be a professional.

And then today, I do worry. I worry that the military's getting drug into partisan politics, on both sides of the spectrum. And, hey, I respect – I totally respect my old colleagues, like the former – you know, the fellow washed-up flag officers, you know, to sign up for whatever they want to sign up, to say whatever the heck they want to say. But I think when you endorse a candidate or when you sign one of these dueling lists of generals and admirals that's all military, I think there is a downside to that. And it's beginning to maybe drag the military into politics in a way that's not healthy, right?

And as an American historian, you know, I mean, I recall back to George Washington's grandparents fled the English civil war. And our founders, you know, drew that bold line because they feared the – you know, Oliver Cromwell. So we want to have confidence in our system, confidence in the apolitical nature of our military, and confidence in the separation of powers and under the Constitution. And I just think as military officers we have a role in ensuring that, but our politicians have a role too. And some of them have acted irresponsibly in that connection.

Seth Center: You know, one of the first things you said to the staff when you took over in 2017 was you were following George Marshall's model and you did not vote, and you had not voted. And that, I think, struck the professional staff, and obviously it was an important message. Number one, is that a reasonable threshold for nonpartisan professional service? And two, is that – is professional service possible in the environment we're in for sort of mid- and low-level flunkies like me anymore?
Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster: Yes, it’s possible. We can do it. I encourage everybody to vote. Listen, that was a personal choice I made because I read a biography of George Marshall when I was in high school and I went into West Point when I was 17. And Marshall was a hero of mine. And I said: I want to do what Marshall did, you know? And it was just a way for me to studiously apolitical in a way that maybe exceeded the standard, right?

But you know, I think that all of us in our military have a responsibility to remain apolitical. I mean, one of the only summary court martials I gave to a warrant officer when I was in squadron command was because of a hypercritical inappropriate email about President Bill Clinton that was sent around. And I had to send a message, hey, you know, this is the U.S. Army. We don’t write derogatory things about our commander in chief, right?

So I think it’s important for all of us to just jealously guard that professionalism because, you know, it’s a lot easier to lose than it would be to regain it. And you know, what – when we’re recruiting the finest young men and women in our country, you know we don’t want to set up a litmus test for them, like what party you’re from. I mean, you know, Thomas Jefferson, who was against the military academy initially remember, because he didn’t want sort of a praetorian class, is what he thought initially.

He realized when he was president – this is why he founded West Point in 1802 – is that, hey, we can’t have one party dominating the office corps. We can’t have one region dominating the officer corps. We need cadets coming into West Point from all over the country. And you know what? Once you get the Army, you know, once you look at the man or woman next to you and realize they’re willing to give everything including their own lives for you, especially once you’re in combat with them, you’re not checking, like, what party they’re registered in? You’re not checking skin color, by the way, either. You know, or religion. I mean, so I think that this is an element of combat effectiveness, right, as well as professionalism.

Seth Center: Well, we’re reaching the end of our time. I think that’s a powerful message to end with. I think if there are three easy ways to remember what the entire book is about its: Avoid narcissism in understanding the international environment at all costs, number one. To restore strategic competence, you have to have empathy for your competitors, your adversaries, and your friends. And then, of course, you have to have a confident, hopeful vision of the future that you’re driving towards. I think that’s what I took away, my three points. So, if that’s accurate, you’ve done a good job.

Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster: Well, thanks, Seth. Thanks for the opportunity to be with you, and to be with – and thanks for any of you who joined today for the opportunity to talk about “Battlegrounds.” You know, you have these ideas in you, and you either have to get them out in the book or you’re just going to be a bore in social situations for the rest of your life because you want to tell people about it.
Thanks for the opportunity of hopefully not boring you too much. I mean, I hope the book has the desired effect. I hope it leads to thoughtful, respectful, meaningful discussions about our most crucial challenges. It was an exercise in self-education for me as well. I mean, I was in a great environment to write this book at Hoover and at Stanford. And I really grateful for the opportunity to do it. And I hope that all of you who join judge it to have been worthwhile. And, Seth, thanks for the opportunity to be with you.

Seth Center: It was fun, and it’s been a real privilege for the last three years. Take care.