

[Transcript] The Realignment / 368 | Thom Shanker: Welcome to the Age of Danger - New Superpowers, New Weapons, and New Threats

Marshall here. Welcome back to The Realignment.

Today's episode is speak with Tom Schenker. Tom's the director of the Project for Media and National Security. He was formerly the New York Times' Washington Bureau of National Security and Foreign Policy editor. Tom's the author with Andrew Hoenn of the Rand Corporation of Age of Danger, keeping America safe in an era of new superpowers, new weapons and threats. The basic idea undergirding this conversation is that after 20 years, defined by an age of terror after 9-11, we're transitioning to what they call an age of danger, focused on great power rivalry, nuclear threats, and the distinct possibility of black swan events like COVID-19 in 2020 that force us to throw out the entire playbook and assumptions that. Tom and I discuss how the US should posture itself during this transition moment with plenty of callbacks to mistakes we made during previous transition moments. If you enjoy the conversation, you can support the show and purchase a copy of the book at our bookshop storefront which is linked in the show notes. Also, you can find the link to The Realignment's supercast subscription which gives you access to Saga and my twice monthly AMA episodes. We're going to record the next one this upcoming week so if you'd like to submit your question or give us any comments or feedback, it's a great time to submit that as well over the weekend leading into Wednesday. Huge thank you to the Foundation for American Innovation for supporting our work. Hope you enjoy the conversation.

Tom Shanker, welcome to The Realignment.

Thanks, it's a real honor to be here. Thank you for having me.

Yeah, I'm glad to chat with you. There are a lot of books in the genre that you and your co-author Andrew have written in but this one really resonated. It's a quick read and also raises just a bunch of questions that I want to just really go through you over the course of this conversation. Let's start as big picture and mission oriented as possible though. What would you say is the central aim of US defense policy right now or what should it be? For example, my contention would be

that a good organizing principle is that our objective is to deter conflict in Asia and Europe.

That's the central question. Those are the central issues. That's how I would frame it.

How would you compare, contrast, frame it yourself?

Right, so that's a perfectly logical one but what our book says is that it's very hard to have very specific constructs like that because the future will always come at you with the unexpected. Think about three years ago, who would have thought that a pandemic would kill a million Americans and counting compared to the 3,000 who died on 9-11?

Now, each one of those deaths on 9-11, Marshall, was a tragedy but I think the American military prepares sometimes within two constrained a limit of risks and what we argue is the military in particular and the nation's national security apparatus has to widen its aperture and be open to all kinds of risks. Okay, so this is where the history that you go to with the book is so helpful. I guess my perspective on that is I agree from, I agree with everything you just said. That said, I think if you look at the past 20 years, the lack of a strong mission principle beyond, let's say, George W. Bush in 2000 saying we're not going to do the Clintonian interventions framework actually led to the Afghan and Iraq wars quickly getting ahead of everybody. That's just why I think on a baseline level, I think just having a broad concept is useful. So how do you deal with the fact that it is just easy to, even on a historical basis,

just lapse into all these different areas if you're not constrained enough?

So I agree with everything that you said and one of our arguments in the book is that by the Bush administration's laser-like focus on terrorism, it's zoom-like focus on terrorism. It stayed in Iraq and Afghanistan for what I think we all agree now for far too long and didn't pay attention to a host of other risks, rising China, competition with Russia, climate change. So actually, you and I are very much in agreement even if we're kind of approaching it from opposite ends of the rope. Yeah, that's interesting. Just I guess the reason why I wanted to start with that question is if you're looking at a lot of the, let's just say, generational turnings we're going through when it comes to U.S. defense policy, if I'm obviously like a think tank fellow, I do a podcast on all of these issues. So I'm thinking very in the weeds in these issues whenever I talk to just like a listener or someone out in the public, they themselves will say something like, well, we have a \$1.25 trillion budget. We'll get into that, obviously. It's not quite clear what we're doing with that budget. It's not quite clear why we should be doing X, Y, and Z. So how would you help frame this to this once again, somewhat jaded millennial and Gen Z cohort who are thinking of these astonishing price tags and the amorphous nature of the threats you're describing in the book? Right. Well, I'm hardly Gen Z. I'm an old bald guy. But I agreed with what you said in describing their concern. \$1.2 trillion is so much money. And Andy and I make the case that perhaps it's not being spent correctly because it's investing in old systems that aren't really applicable to current and future threats. And we make the case that the Pentagon is quite belatedly adopting an understanding of the threats that appeal to Gen Z. Climate change is a perfect example. The Pentagon is hardly your liberal tree-hugging organization, but it realizes that in 20 or 30 or 40 years with rising oceans, important military installations in Virginia and California and Washington will be underwater. And there's just not enough money to raise that land up. Similarly, climate change prompts incredible forced migration. One can imagine a billion people moving north from Africa toward Europe in the next 20 or 30 years. That's a climate change problem, but it's a national security problem. And the Pentagon is only belatedly really adopting, dare I say it, a Gen Z perspective on world threats.

You know, that is such an interesting place to take things for a second because I get what you're saying. If you just look at basic polling, Gen Z, middle-aged millennials such as myself are going to hold issues like climate change at the top of the priority area. However, if we look at the 1970s, let's say this immediately after the Vietnam War, you're looking at 1975, 76, 77. Obviously, nothing we're experiencing right now despite all of the troubles in the, you know, war on terror is remotely comparable to the end state or Vietnam policy. There was still a Cold War, 58,000 Americans died, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. That said, the army and, you know, Marines, Air Force, Navy, et cetera, had recruiting crises. The actual structure didn't work. And I'm not sure that telling, let's say Gen X or baby boomers, quote unquote, well, we're going to focus on a political trend or an issue that you're interested in. I'm not sure that would have addressed the crisis of confidence that the military faced at the time. So I guess comparing these two eras, how would you compare the kind of, let's say, recruitment troubles we're experiencing right now, debates about, and this would go in either direction, I'm not trying to take a stance issue, wokeness in the military, I'm sure there was a 1970s equivalent. How would you, it would probably be like drug, like drug use and like those different issues. How would you answer from that perspective? It's so interesting because this is the 50th anniversary this week of the Paris

Peace Accords that ended the war in Vietnam. And if one thinks about the lessons of Vietnam, it's sending hundreds of thousands of Americans into a culture that the American leadership didn't understand to fight a war with uncertain changing and amorphous ends. Gosh, that sounds a lot like Iraq, doesn't it, Marshall? And so actually, the lessons of Vietnam are incredibly relevant today. And your question about veterans is fascinating, because Vietnam veterans came home and they were, I mean, the phrase spat upon is a little overly stated, but they were ignored by the American public. They were ignored by the traditional veterans organizations. The opposite is happening today. Veterans come home and they're first to board airplanes, they get discounts at Target, that's sort of that example, they get discounts at Kmart. And I think both sets of veterans would say both of those responses are wrong. Veterans shouldn't be spat upon, but they also shouldn't be put on this false pedestal that lets the 99% of America that doesn't serve say, oh, I said thank you for your service. So I'm done here. So it's really interesting to compare and contrast. And think about too, for Gen Z, the campus protest movement in the 60s played an incredibly important role in ending the war in Vietnam, without a doubt. Those were cataclysmic times. And you look today at Black Lives Matter, the abortion rights protests. So even though the issues are very different, I think campus activism has a lot of hereditary importance for today. I guess how does the, and this isn't quite what you go into in the book, I think it's deeply relevant during a hyperpolarized time as we're at the end of the long 60s, but how does a defense department respond to that dynamic? You learn all sorts of things on the path of becoming a four-star general or admiral. What you don't learn is how to navigate, let's say, how do you debate an issue like Black Lives Matter during 2020 in the middle of a recruiting crisis? So how do you see this very outward facing institution reckon with a society that is in its own form of a people?

Well, and you're putting voice to a question that I guarantee is on the minds of every general from the joint staff across the services. The military is drawn from the American public, but it's not a broad section of the American public. As I'm sure you know, the recruiting figures are highest in rural New England, the South, rural West. That is hardly a picture of America, and these soldiers, these troops come in carrying the biases and experiences of where they are raised. And I can assure you military leadership is deeply concerned about the polarization in American politics, infecting the ranks, whether it's hard-right extremism, racism, misogyny, and that is the real concern. And it's curious that the army recently readopted it's, you know, be all that you can be motto after several decades of not using it because they really are trying to say the military can be a place for you to grow and mature and evolve. And for decades, the American military really was a very positive engine of social change. I mean, the military led the way in desegregation. I'm not sure you can say the same today, but it really was a place where, you know, immigrants and people of color could come and have a bit more of a meritocracy than they could in the rest of society. And the military has to get back to being a positive engine of social change without falling prey to the polarization.

What you can easily say is, you know, the repeal of don't ask, don't tell, and the obviously integration preceded the legalization of gay marriage nationwide. So there is just this tradition of the military being this force that has to reckon with often like social, cultural questions, the country bases. I want to go back to something you said earlier. You talked about a focus on old systems that aren't applicable. And this is really going to take us

a bit later in the conversation into a debate about what happened during the 2000s, because I thought of what you just described in the sense that I could definitely agree that, let's say, during the 2000s, there's all this focus on what's happening in Iraq and Afghanistan is less focused on what's happening with China. Like that said, we have a war in Ukraine where Heimars are now, you know, Cold War relics that no one would have thought of two or three years ago are making a deeply, deeply, deeply active impact on the battlefield. And we're actually having to ramp up production of Heimars in, you know, in Arkansas and other states to produce them. You know, this was a this was a product project that basically fizzled out, if not for, I think it was the UAE trying to get purchase orders together in the late 2010. So given what I just said, how do you think about this debate over what technology is outdated, what technology is relevant, given the Ukraine example? Well, that's an absolutely insightful point. And it's a good thing that those Heimars were in the inventory to be sure. It also shows, though, the unpredictability, because who would have thought that Heimars would be so so valuable? I would just make the case marshal that for \$1.2 trillion a year, the military should be able to do more than one thing. And while it's, you know, building new Heimars, it needs to be thinking creatively about China and Taiwan, where so far, we're just throwing legacy systems at them, you know, like we have a dozen aircraft carriers, we have some set number of destroyers. And every war game, the Navy and Air Force run, all we do is lose faster. And so there's some really deep thinking about these new systems. And one of the issues we write about in the book is how the Air Force is experimenting with an asymmetrical advantage that the US might have over China, which is to field thousands and thousands of drones to create sensor grids, attack grids, command and control grids, each drone is not very expensive. And China would absolutely wipe out its arsenal of missiles, trying to take them all down, whereas China has more than enough missiles to sink five aircraft carriers. So we have

to be able to do the traditional issues like Heimars, which you so accurately pointed out, they have to put enough mental power and money into thinking anew about how America's advantages

can deter a future, a current and future rival like China.

You know, you're particularly the best person to ask this question, because obviously you're writing a policy-oriented book now, but you were actually writing and covering US defense policy at the New York Times, among other publications. Why aren't they doing both? Because it's just because, you know what I mean? It's easy for us to say, okay, guys, it's 2007, you need to get MRAPs to protect Marines and soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. But come on, you also could think about addressing great power conflict. And I say that a lot, but it's not that simple.

So from your actual reporting background, what is actually happening in the room that prevents someone from actually walking and chewing gum at the same time? Right. There's two voices at the table. One side says, change is really, really hard. The other side says, try irrelevancy, it's even worse. And so that's the debate that goes on. And there are people who are arguing that these legacy systems are adequate. And again, they're very important in Ukraine, as you pointed

out, but they're not going to be sufficient in China, Taiwan. And it's really hard. And there are just these equities, the shipbuilders. And in Congress, I mean, it really is a case for leadership. And one of the points we make in the book is we talk about the national security machine,

but it's not a machine, it's people. And there's never been a more important time for the people and the leaders of the national security machine to lead with integrity and honesty and a lack of polarization and not looking for expedient political ends, but what is really best for our country. And that should lead them to the sorts of new systems I was describing to deter China. So let's talk about the leadership and personnel angle, because once again, to your point, so much of this story is deeply about individuals and their choices and their individual leadership. I always harp on this story, but I think it's such a fascinating story in how you could see all the different alternate histories here. You think of, you know, Donald Rumsfeld as this person who, for good or for ill, will good on history is leading a very poor, in my telling, performance in Iraq. Yet there's a different Donald Rumsfeld, the Donald Rumsfeld of literally September 10, 2001. Usually people will say September 10, 2001, they're referring to the before times. But again, once again, if you could tell this story, I think it'd be very helpful. There is literally a different Donald Rumsfeld who's focused on a different set of issues and who I think would actually take a lot of sympathy from readers of this book, who I think would say, we weren't happy of how he was performing in 2003, 2004, 2005. So just actually tell the story that I'm alluding to with September 10, Donald Rumsfeld and lessons for leadership that we should take from that. Right. Well, I can tell that you're a very reader of history. On September 10, Rumsfeld, who had already become in just nine months one of the least popular members of the Bush cabinet, he gave a speech to the entire Pentagon community, you know, video hundreds in the room, where he talked about how it was time to transform the Pentagon. It was time to transform the military. It was time to leap ahead and create a more agile, leaner, efficient military. And he was saying goodbye to old systems, goodbye to calcified leadership. It was the kind of speech that is, I mean, it was the platonic ideal of a forward looking smart leader speech. And then as you said, 24 hours later, his building or a section of it was burning any rubble. And he became a wartime secretary. And I think we look back on the campaign plan for Afghanistan as a, you know, as just a masterpiece, a flawed masterpiece to be sure, but small numbers of special forces, very few boots on the ground. And America's preponderance of air power had won the war by December, January, February. And then what happened? They invested too much again, like Vietnam, they didn't understand a country. And there was a hubris that America could remake Afghanistan into a Jeffersonian democracy. And oh, by the way, within a year, they had already forgotten about Afghanistan. And because they were so confident that the quick victory in Afghanistan could be transferred to Iraq, they took their eye off Afghanistan and moved all these resources to Iraq. And we know the history after that. And if I might add just one last footnote to that, you mentioned the MRAPS earlier. And those are these heavily armored vehicles that saved the lives of troops from roadside mines, which became the signature guerrilla weapon in Iraq and Afghanistan. I remember Rumsfeld was speaking to some troops about to cross into Iraq in Kuwait. And these troops were complaining back in 2003, 2004, they didn't have enough armored vehicles. And Rumsfeld said, well, you go to war with the

army you have, not the army you may have or might wish to have. And while that was a statement of fact, the lack of empathy of the Pentagon chief talking to troops about to cross the berm and risk their lives under his orders was just, it was just wrong. Rumsfeld was out. Robert Gates came in 2006, and he took it his mission to save the mission in Iraq, but also to save the lives of troops. And the MRAPS program cost billions of dollars, was one of the fastest programs in Pentagon procurement history from idea to deployment. And I talk to people all the time whose lives were saved, whose limbs were saved, because Gates didn't say, you go to war with the army you have, he said, I'm going to get the army what it needs. That's the difference in leadership Marshall that you're referring to. And whether you are a podcast host, or a retired journalist, or a CEO of a company, that leadership matters. Yeah. And I want to go back to the Rumsfeld speech, because you all quote it in the book. And it's not just because on the one hand, I was hearing you're telling him, and I could imagine someone thinking, okay, so he's just talking about his policy priorities. He's very much a Revolution and military affairs guy. Obviously, he's going to talk about these weapons systems, but the attack is a deeply ideological one that many people left, right, and center would actually resonate with. There's a world where there's a president AOC, and her secretary of defense is saying the following, which is basically what he's saying, which is there is the enemy of America's safety right now. It's not Russia. It's not China. It's not Saddam Hussein. He's explicitly saying this. It's slow thinking. It's the status quo. It's an entrenched bureaucracy. So I just think it's so important that people understand that there's just a deep nuance in defense policy that gets missed when we reduce this to a critique of the military industrial complex and everyone wants their weapons systems. Because this was a guy, and you made this point when he was, you know, he was tremendously unpopular. I think I read this in, I recently read George J. Bush's Jean Edward Smith biography, but there was just like, rightly, it was wide conventional wisdom that he was going to be the first cabinet officer out. So it's not just that he's unpopular. He's just not working. He was, you know, the youngest defense secretary ever back during the, during the Ford administration, but he just, he's just not working. He's going to be out. So I guess what I'd ask you is, what was he doing wrong when he tried to enact change? Like, did you have something like what did he do wrong between January and September? Was he too aggressive? Was he too brusque? Did he not understand the way, was he just too old while to the way the world had changed? Like, what do you think about this? That's a fascinating question. I haven't thought about it in just that way. So thank you for asking me so I can exercise my mind a little bit here. I don't think he was too old. I mean, he was still playing squash with his military assistants and often beating them, although I think they probably let the boss win. I think his approach was too heavy handed. He'd go into briefings and these generals and colonels and the budget folks would come out describing how they had been wire brushed. To be sure, he was the defense secretary, but I think there is a style of leadership where you bring people around to your point of view rather than beat them over the head into submission. So the army, which actually had a chief at the time, Eric Shinseki, who also was about transforming the army. But for some reason, Rumsfeld and Shinseki became political enemies inside the building, even though they both had the same long term goal, which was reforming the way the military fights make it more agile, leaner, more lethal. But I think Rumsfeld's leadership style was just so antagonized people

that he had a difficult time convincing them that he was right. And clearly that was going on inside the Bush cabinet as well. I'm curious if you're talking about these different leadership models, Rumsfeld's, I think Rumsfeld's background is just fascinating because you could just say he's easily probably one of the best qualified secretary of defense ever. He was a Navy pilot in the 50s. He's a congressman. He was the head of the Equal Opportunity Office during the Nixon administration. He's the ambassador to NATO, I believe. He's a CEO. He's incredible, incredible career. That's genuinely worth studying. There's double good books just about how examining the question of how could someone just so qualified, such an impressive leader just fail so long. That's another conversation, but I think it's worth thinking about. But I guess what I'm basically asking is what would you say is an example of an effective transformational leader in this category? I think Secretary Gates, as I mentioned with the MRAT program, I think that there have been a series of great defense secretaries after Rumsfeld. I mean, Gates was extraordinary. I think followed by Leon Panetta, again, sort of a pentathlete, a congressman, ran OMB so he knows how money is spent. He was a White House chief of staff, so he knows how to beat people about the head and shoulders with CIA director and then came to the Pentagon. So I think there are just people in time that fit better. I mean, if we wanted to do counter history, counterfactual history, what kind of defense secretary would Rumsfeld have been if there wasn't 9-11? Or even if there was 9-11? Because, again, the war plan for Afghanistan was a masterpiece. But then they got sucked into democracy building and all of that. But what happens

if there had been a 9-11 in Afghanistan, but Iraq had been off the table? So I think there was a bit of imperial hubris. Not that they were building an empire, but I think there was a bit of hubris that somehow infected many of the people around President Bush, including Cheney and Rumsfeld, that after Afghanistan, they could do no wrong. I think that was the problem. And I think the secretaries who followed Gates, Panetta, Ash Carter, Hegel, Hegel of Vietnam veteran, by the way, they came in with much more humility. And I think the mark of a great leader, a powerful leader, is the proper amount of humility. I guess what's interesting here is in your description of these figures, and it's not a surprise that the Defense Department goes this direction. You're very much not describing outsider figures. You're describing figures who often were members of Congress, who had worked within corporate America, had deeply, I say, establishment, not in a pejorative sense, but just an establishment background. I wonder how you assess just the contention that we need more outsiderism to enact the type of changes that you all are advocating for and describing. It's absolutely vital. And for example, in our chapter on storms about climate change, we talked about it earlier, that the climate change is a national security risk. And most of the people who've driven that policy inside the Pentagon have been activists, think tank people like you, academics who came in for short periods, tried to get the Pentagon turned in that direction, and then went back into the academic or private sector. But you're right, there's not been a counterintuitive defense secretary in modern memory. They tend to go to insiders of different stripes. And I think outside thinking is required. And there are, and that's the importance of the think tank world and the policy world. It's people outside who are writing white papers and doing closed door meetings, they can try and say, you need to look at it in a fresh way. I appreciate you being willing to let me go very, very off book. I want to get back to the book for a second, because I think the concept is great. It's a great discussion. Thank

you so much. No, of course. But I can't brag about reading and then not actually talk about the book because that would just, you know, you're at GW, so I'm sure you're used to students. And there are various tactics, did not just read the chapter titles. I want to speak to a descriptor that you really offer around understanding what the US defense apparatus, which is just kind of comparing it to a machine, but basically saying that there are two aspects, the warning machine and the action machine. I want to really go through both. Can you just start by describing what the warning machine is and what the action machine is, how they differentiate? Of course, we tried to come up with a framework Marshall where, I mean, we wrote this book for general interest readers. I mean, people like you probably didn't learn much. People at the Pentagon won't learn much, but we think this debate is so important for the general public to be involved in. So we wanted to come up with an easy way to break down this \$1.2 trillion. And so we divide the entire national security structure into the two machines, the warning machine, the action machine. The warning machine, it's not just the intelligence community, it's everybody in government who sees things, thinks about them, assesses them, maybe worried about them, and then reports back to headquarters. Then the action machine is the side of the house that takes us in information and either acts on it or doesn't act on it. And the scenarios we can go through history, there's times when the warning has been very accurate and the action machine acted accordingly. There have been times when the warning machine was accurate and the action machine either didn't believe it or for political reasons didn't feel like acting. And there are times when the warning machine played an uncertain trumpet, right? Maybe, maybe not. And there are times when the warning machine just misses it. Yeah, I'd love to go through some of those examples. I mean, obviously, the warning machine, the two contrasting examples over the past literal 20 years would be the warning machine and intelligence around Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, and then obviously predicting that Putin was going to invade Ukraine before February 2022, despite the skepticism from Ukrainian sources, etc., etc. I think what's just interesting to me is that in both cases, you kind of have the same intelligence that, oh, and then obviously you could add the bad intelligence around, the bad analytical intelligence around how long Kabul and the Afghan government would hold out after the U.S. announcement of withdrawal from the country in 2021. What's so interesting is you spend a lot of time describing reforms to the warning system, those immediate post-911 reforms. So on one level, so I guess you get out another success in that there hasn't been another major domestic attack. I've spoken to a decent number of Bush administration officials, and I did not understand until recently how deeply personally they were convinced there were going to be other 9-11 style events coming right down, right down the pipeline. I think it's important to note that that did not happen for good or for ill. So I guess what I'm asking you is, how can the same intelligence apparatus, that post-911 one, make those three different correct calls and errors? So I think good stewardship, stewardship of the homeland, horrible call, or not enough declarative call when it came to Iraq, horrible call in Kabul, but then a proper call with Ukraine. Exactly. Well, partly it's the personnel. I mean, think about the CIA director ahead of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Director Burns, who was an American ambassador to Moscow, knows the country as well as anyone. So I think he has this fingertip sense of how to use intelligence. I think it's interesting. I

think there's many arguments to be made that the CIA director should be a long-time analyst or operator, but there's another argument to make that the CIA director should be a career consumer of intelligence. And that's what Director Burns is, somebody who used intelligence through his long and distinguished State Department career. So he brought a different smart sense of what was important. And I also think that Ukraine and the Russian invasion was a smaller target to keep an eye on than global terrorism. And again, even before 911, it was a surprise, absolutely. But there were lots of people who had been studying al-Qaeda and knew who bin Laden was. Maybe most Americans didn't, but there were people who knew something

was coming. In fact, Steve Hadley, the deputy national security advisor, we found the documents. He had ordered the Air Force to mount weapons on drones to hunt bin Laden in Afghanistan no later than September 1, 2001. So there were people focusing on this, but just not focusing the right way or the entire system was not focusing on it. I guess the question for you, how would you assess then the status of the warning machine today, especially moving forward into the age of danger you're describing in the book? Right. So I think pieces of it work very, very well. You cited the example of sharing intelligence on Putin's invasion of Ukraine, which no kidding was going to happen, even though even Ukrainians doubted it.

Even on the collapse of Kabul and the vanishing of the Afghan security forces that you mentioned, the only people who didn't know that was going to happen were people who had not been reading the quarterly reports from the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction.

Because for years, he'd been writing that billions of dollars spent to train the Afghan security forces was being wasted. He'd argued again and again and again that trying to create an American-style military in Afghanistan requiring aircraft and lift and logistics that only U.S. troops and contractors could provide was not sustainable. So once first Trump and then Biden announced that we were leaving, the system just collapsed. That was entirely predictable and somebody predicted it. His name was John Sopko. He's a modern Cassandra. He was cursed with the power of prophecy, but doubly cursed that nobody believed him. I guess the question would be, where is the break? So I want this to be very lesson-oriented, right? What is the lesson? Because if it was a little insects, the lesson is, read the Inspector General's reports. Is the lesson but sometimes that's the actual answer? Is that the actual answer that you need to have a process where the relevant information from the relevant actors gets to the relevant person?

So that's again a really smart question. I don't want to have ad hominem attacks on individuals. So I will criticize and blanket form the people who didn't believe the cigar reports and thought the Afghan security forces would hold. They suffered from hubris and mendacity. They believed their view

of what it should be like rather than what the facts were on the ground. And all throughout history, hubris and mendacity have led to strategic catastrophes like the collapse of the security forces in a matter of weeks when people thought they would hold on for at least some years. And of course, it didn't help when the leadership of Afghanistan fled leaving the population behind. That's a kind of demoralizing thing. And I think as well, the military, again, I have great respect for people who serve and for the leadership. But if you go back and read speeches on Afghanistan, we worked there for 20 years. We were there 20 times, one year at a time. And so every new commander

that came in, re-learned, tried to reinvent the wheel. Every commander moved the goalposts, moved the metrics. If the metric was to have this many Afghan security forces trained by December 1st, they would say, well, we didn't reach that number. But that's not really the metric after all. And unless there is a civilian leadership enforcing quality control and military leadership willing to be honest about the limits of what it can do, we're going to have these catastrophes again, because the military is a can do organization. Any lawful order they will take and they will run twice as fast as you think they can. But what the military isn't trained to do is ask, huh, does this really make sense? Should we really be doing it? And I don't mean in subordination, but just going back to your civilian leaders and saying, why is this platoon of infantrymen building a school? Why is this airborne squad laying sewer? Shouldn't that be somebody else's job? We fight wars. We're not a force for democratization.

Well, I mean, I used to be super into coin and counterinsurgency stuff. It seems like the argument for the military building schools is like, look, if you're in some corner of Hellman province and it's 2013 and troops are surging, obviously the force with the capacity and the need to integrate into the population is, for example, like the US Marine Corps. So that's why they're building schools. What would your response to that argument be? There wasn't a magical, like, hey, we obviously weren't going to send the Peace Corps into there. USAID is like in and of itself kind of a complicated agency. I'm sure your argument isn't that. I'll take a step back. Maybe you're skeptical of, like, the coin-centric arguments that that school ultimately mattered, rather than the broader security picture. But what would your response to that be?

Yeah. So I'm not skeptical of coin. It's a very important strategy. But, and I know you've heard this being a national security wonk like I am. If all you're using is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. And so the military became the hammer that pounded nails of killing bad guys, tracking down bad guys and helping girls learn how to read. Now, all three of those are important. I just don't think the military should be in the lead for issue number three. And if it's not secure enough to bring in the Department of Education or USAID, then maybe we're doing something wrong

because it's not the military job to do that. Again, we all support women's rights in Afghanistan. We all support poppy eradication, right? But is it the military's job? And when the military gets all these other jobs, maybe it's not focusing on what it needs to be focused. And, Marshall, it lets the rest of the government off the hook.

We're mostly realizing the very clear, not even below the belt pushback to my point that thank you for not bringing up is just that, well, Marshall, we ran the experiment. We built schools for 20 years. Was the government more resilient to the return of the Taliban? The answer is no. So we actually, to a certain degree, we actually ran the experiment of like this broad conception and then for a couple of different reasons it didn't work. But if that doesn't, I worked that broad into mind, bigger questions. Okay, so lots of good stuff on the warning machine. Let's get to the action machine. I think I'm really interested in this action machine concept just because a frustration I take or a point of frustration when you read a lot of the popular works unpacking the war on terror period is almost this assumption that the failures we had came down to the U.S. military. In the sense that you give these great examples in the book of the war, the Korean war starts and our outdated World War II bazookas are literally like bouncing off of Soviet tanks that are given to the North Koreans. You could think of the example of Vietnam

where for a variety of like complicated reasons, like when the M16 first is put into the field, it's literally jamming. People are getting killed with the Soviets have built a superior product with the AK-47. That's a literal example of like direct failure. I don't think there's an equivalent in Afghanistan or in Iraq. Beyond just obviously needing to get MRAPs to the right people. Once we built the MRAPs, the MRAPs worked. The JDAMs that the CIA operated were using conjunction with the Northern Alliance in 2001, they worked. It wasn't a failure, quote unquote. Now what I've offered kind of like my defense of like the military's action-oriented status quo, like are there any holes in what I'm describing? Because a lot of my beef comes down to political and civilian leadership. I guess I'm basically trying to say, how would you think about this? Absolutely, you are correct. Because again, a blessing of our democracy is that the military answers to civilian leadership. We do not have a junta. We do not have a military dictatorship. And an example, I mean, two bookends, you know, that are very meaningful to me because I covered both of them. When the former Yugoslavia was breaking apart in the early 1990s, the national intelligence estimate prepared by the CIA, predicting what would happen, and it's now declassified so I'm not outing anything, you can read it online, predicted with frightening accuracy that Serbia, which would inherit the majority of the Yugoslav National Army, would use any force necessary to protect Serb minorities in all the other republics as a cover for seizing those territories. That's exactly what happened. Every president, every defense secretary, every secretary of state had that NIE. But for five years, Bosnian Muslims and Croats were slaughtered by the Serbs until Sabranica forced President Clinton's hand. And, you know, the war was over in a matter of months once the U.S. acted. So that was a classic case of clear warning, but a decision not to act. The other bookend of that is the rise of ISIS. You know, we all know that President Obama very famously dismissed ISIS as the junior varsity of terror. And the warning on that is a little trickier, to be sure. We talked to generals, we talked to other people involved in creating all of the intelligence assessments, and they all warned about a post-Saddam, post-alcated terrorist group rising in Iraq and in Syria. But it was caveated because it wasn't quite as clear. And as we all know, President Obama, for very understandable and salutary reasons, campaigned on getting us out of Iraq. So because the warning was a little uncertain, and because Obama's very heartfelt political goal was to get us out of these forever wars, he decided not to act. And then ISIS took over a swath of the Middle East, the size of Great Britain. I think another, I think another thing to add to the story you're telling too is just that, and this is why so much of the book and just the space comes down to personal leadership decisions. Aside from just the specific rise of ISIS, a huge part of that was decisions that Nouriel Maliki, like the Iraqi prime minister, was making towards basically wrecking all of the progress of reconciling Sunnis back into Iraqi society. So, you know, probably to criticize George Ruby Bush on something not to criticize him on was that he formed like a very strong direct relationship with Al-Maliki and part of President Obama's effective pull out of Iraq was in many ways like letting that leadership relationship wane. And maybe like there's very little Obama could have told Al-Maliki in, you know, 2012. But I think that there's just like a, this is just such a, I think that the quote, one of the quotes in the book is you said a lesson from this period is that the military doesn't win wars. It's a whole of government whole society aspect. I think that when we're

involved or engaged in any relationship with a country, that leader to leader relationship is a huge part of that success story that needs to be factored in. That's completely true. Absolutely right. I think the question, a question I really want to ask is the way you really portray some of the 2000s period in terms of not being able to do two things at once is this focus on the present at a deeply important level over that future prospect of great power confidence. So a question this comes to mind, all that said, we now have a then junior leadership class enlisted members of the armed forces, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, who have been put through 20 years of experience in these various degrees of conflict. If we're thinking of, let's say the CCP and the Chinese specifically, they have not fought a conflict since their effective loss to Vietnam in 1979. I'm curious to what degree is it possible that the fact that we've just been battle tested in at a literal level, if that could make a difference when it comes down to a potential conflict, as in you could spend 50 years preparing your military, but there's a difference between that and actually experiencing conflict. How would you think about this? It's a great question. I think a couple of answers. One, any conflict over the Taiwan Straits, and I'm not being ironic here, will not involve ground forces. It will evolve air and naval forces and China is rapidly producing very accurate long range missiles that could force the American Navy to stay outside the third island chain or could actually sink a carrier. Can you imagine, Marshall, what would happen in this country politically if we lost a capital ship with 3,000 sailors on board for the first time since World War II? I have no reason to doubt that Chinese technology is as good as we fear that it is. As Stalin once said, sometimes mass has a mass all its own. I hate to quote Stalin, but it's a great line. The numbers of combat aircraft and missiles China is fielding is something to worry about. You talked about the officers who've come up the last 20 years. General McConville, the Army Chief of Staff, has a very interesting take on China. He has all of the combat ribbons from Iraq and Afghanistan, all the command service you would think. He told me not long ago that the Army, as it prepares for a conflict with China, is going to be the supporting service. It's there to support the Navy and the Air Force after 20 years of the Navy and the Air Force supporting the Army. I think the last 20 years are being incorporated among the smartest of leaders to think in new ways. I guarantee there have been previous Army Chiefs who had maps on their wall about what a land invasion of China would look like. I hope those maps are there only as a cautionary note right now because the Secretary Gates said it in his farewell speech. Any Defense Secretary who again urges a land war in Asia ought to have his head examined. We haven't talked as much about nuclear conflict, but I guess something I found myself thinking. You hinted this with your point around what would the American political reaction to the destruction of a capital ship be. 3,000 people is literally a 9-11 level event. I guess my thing is if I'm in the PLA or the Chinese political leadership, I am watching how effective President Putin's saber rattling with the nuclear weapons was. I entirely think it was saber rattling. He was not going to launch a nuke off of a initial counter offensive, but at a strategic level just made sense. I guess what I'm wondering is how do you think about just the very straight-up possibility I'm offering free advice to the PLA here as a person who studies American politics. The most important thing you could do before or as you launch your invasion of Taiwan is say, this is an existential crisis for us.

If any American or allied forces intervene, we will utilize tactical nuclear weapons. Whether or not they're going to do it, if they just offered that warning, it seems to me that that in and of itself could serve as just an extreme deterrent in the American political system today. I'm curious how you think about that underlying dynamic. We could talk about drones and DF-21s, anti-ship missiles versus just saying, we'll push the button. This is existential for us. It's not existential for you. One last thing I want to add on this because you're kind of seeing from the more hawkish side of the debate, all of this focus on more Taiwan is a vital interest for us because of the semi-conductors. You're very clearly going to see in that scenario people say it was a mistake to fight the Iraq war, blood for oil, and that wasn't what happened, but that's the rhetoric. We're going to say no blood for semi-conductors, no nukes for semi-conductors. I'll stick with my computer from five years ago. That's just how I see that debate. I'm just curious what you think about this. Will you identify some absolutely, I don't want to say hot button, that's some bad analogy, but very, very important issues. The United States is entering a period unlike any in national security ever. We are soon going to be facing two completely realistic nuclear rivals. During the Cold War, China had minimal deterrence, as you know so well. We'd worry about it, but China by itself could not end life as we know it, but pretty soon both Russia and China and how we manage that dynamic is a question that still has not been answered. I think you're posing your free advice to the PLA is very, very frightening because how would an American leader respond to that? There was always debate around NATO, would we really trade Peoria for Paris? I don't think we're going to trade Tulsa for Taiwan. I think that's a very, very challenging thing. It goes back to, with my age, I grew up in the era of deterrence, and I really do not think we have answered anew how we deter China in the Taiwan Straits. I know some smart minds are thinking about that, Marshall, but there is not a clear answer. Yeah. That's why I was very specific when I referenced a tactical nuclear weapon in the Taiwan Strait. Obviously, this is where I'm extrapolating too far because that could impact your invasion route like this, this, or that, but just the very clear political case you can make from the Chinese side would be, we're not trying to nuke Peoria. We're just saying if an American carrier battle group tries to get within our sovereign territory, as would you, we will nuke that force. It's kind of an example of how clownish the Russians were. Dmitry Beyev specifically, which is that you didn't need to say, will rain nuclear hellfire upon London, this, this, or that. You just had to say basically tactical nuclear weapons are open game if this, this or that happened, and that would generally cause people to pause. Okay. So I have one last big question here, so much to talk about, but that's why folks should read the book. There was a good quote from Robert Gates that you cited where he basically said he was concerned about all the futurism. The war was a little different, but essentially just like futurism. He would, he would, he has this great, his biographies, his autobiography is so good. He had this great anecdote about how, you know, he comes in as defense secretary, it's 2007, the surge is starting, and folks were working nine to five hours, people weren't there over the weekend, this, this, or that. So part of his reaction is like, I'm coming in, people aren't working sorry they need to be. And when I'm asking, why don't we have MRAP people are talking about like Fufi 2025 crises with like China? That's his critique of futurism. Later on in the book, you cite Robert Wark, civilian marine veteran, who is talking about something he calls

the third offset, which is essentially how can we leverage like a strength of ours, our technological capabilities to like offset strengths that let's say in the case of China that the Chinese have. I mean, he's talking about how like, you know, in 10 years, if we don't have, you know, robots kicking out doors, we've really screwed up. And I guess it's so hard for me to look at the actual questions we're facing in Taiwan, the domestic questions when it comes to supply chains, the questions of political leadership when it comes to tackle nukes. I'm just not convinced the futurism itself is particularly important. So like, what would you basically say to that? Because we, I don't know about you, but when I just read about how the defense industrial base has collapsed, it's just mind boggling to me. So I'm curious what you think.

Right. A couple of things I would never pretend to speak for a defense secretary, and Mr. Gates can answer himself, but his warnings about focus on futurism as opposed to the now war, he was brought on to save two wars. That's a real today. I mean, you know, the Associated Press has an old motto, there's a deadline every minute. Well, if you're sick during two wars, there's a deadline every second. So he wanted people focusing on those two wars. Now that those two wars are behind us, I think the case can be made for expanding the aperture from today and preparing for future threats, known, anticipated and unanticipated. And I think Mr. Warke's third offset, it's funny, he gave that speech several years ago. And now all we're reading about in the paper is the danger of AI, the danger of chat GPT, and work is right. There's no human being who will be able to win a conflict against a effective machine learning AI, because the decision loop for human is seconds or minutes.

AI can make decisions in nanoseconds. Now, how you program them to follow the laws of war and all that hasn't been decided yet. But I think Warke's futurism is much akin to that a fellow who quit Google in recent days, because he was concerned about AI run amok. And so I think we do have to remember that we have to solve today's problems, we have to solve next weeks, but the future deserves

a seat at the table. I think that is an excellent place to leave it. Tom Shanker, this has been an amazing conversation. The book is Age of Danger, Keeping America Safe in an Era of New Superpowers,

New Weapons, New Threats. It is available now in the bookstores.

Hope you enjoyed this episode. If you learned something like this sort of mission or want to access our subscriber exclusive Q&A, bonus episodes and more, go to realignment.supercast.com and subscribe to our \$5 a month, \$50 a year, or \$500 for a lifetime membership raise. See you all next time.