The Long View from Aspen
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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bFi40EelSQ&list=PL7fuyfNu8jfP8TWSJzPCsyScNGwbW6xbQ&index=35

Speakers

- Condoleezza Rice, Co-Chair, Aspen Strategy Group; Tad and Dianne Taube Director and Thomas and Barbara Stephenson Senior Fellow on Public Policy, Hoover Institution, Stanford University; 66th U.S. Secretary of State, U.S. Department of State
- Robert Gates, Principal, Rice, Hadley, Gates & Manuel LLC; 22nd U.S. Secretary of Defense, U.S. Department of Defense
- Mark Esper, 27th Secretary of Defense; Partner, Red Cells Venture Capital
- Jake Sullivan, Kissinger Professor of the Practice of Statecraft and World Order, Harvard Kennedy School; Former U.S. National Security Advisor
- Moderator**:** Steve Clemons, The National Interest

Clemons
Hey everybody. Thank you so much for being with us with what I think will be one of the most interesting and exciting sessions some years ago, a book that David Ignatius and I were both involved with. He was an interviewer of big nip Brzezinski and Brent Scowcroft. And the title of the book was called America and the world conversations on the Future of Us, foreign policy. What was extraordinary about that book, in time is big and Brent didn't agree on everything. They criticized each other. I remember when I was trying to get this book done, and the reason David was so important is that neither one would sign off on any sentence that the other wrote. And it was a fairly serious thing, but kind of laid out from their perspective, their fears about foreign policy going off the rails, their fears that America's national security equities wouldn't be managed in the right way. And they were future oriented. Some of their criticism was was directed at the Bush administration, as at the George W Bush administration at that time. And I want to in the spirit of that book, where they would have a conversation with all of you. Were the differences between you, the look of the future, the future of the administration. We can have that kind of conversation. So as we start and think about what has happened, and I'm going to be probably overstate a few things for effect, we've had a lot of concern in the United States, among many citizens, not all of them, that American foreign policy is no longer serving them, that the institutions are broken, that they have not come together to focus on an agenda that feels like an American agenda. We can debate whether that's right or wrong, but nonetheless, you had kind of a revolution in this last election where a number of people who are not here today said a strategic classes exist in Washington and that strategic class is no longer working towards benefits. I want to start with you, Secretary Rice, Condi, and ask you, what's legitimate in that argument? Was the American foreign policy institutional architecture broken? I also know you may want to respond to some of the issues from the earlier panel, but help us with that.

Rice

Well, first of all, thanks a lot, and that's a pleasure to be on with these gentlemen. Look, I think that the last 80 years or so of American foreign policy dating to the end of World War II have been by and large successful. The United States of America, with its allies, after World War II created an international economy that was not going to be zero sum. It was going to be positive sum. We weren't gonna have to fight over resources. We weren't gonna have beggar thy neighbor trading policies. The international system, the international economy was gonna grow so it wasn't a matter of dividing up a fixed pie. I know that there's a lot of talk about the recession of democracy, but, you know, I used to teach a course at Stanford called the role of the military in politics. I always had some Latin America junta that I could talk about. So there has been progress in that way. And we have to recognize the collapse of the Soviet Union. We have to recognize, at one point, the integration of China into the international system. So I think it's been successful. Have there been, however, problems in what has been created as a result? Yes and I think that's the response that you're getting. And I would start with the sense that for any number of people, they have found their voice in an argument that the globalization did not favor or benefit them, and our tendency has been to say, “Oh no, no, you don't understand. You can now buy cheap goods made in XYZ country.” And they say, “Yes, but if I'm an unemployed coal miner in West Virginia, I have no prospects.” And so I think we do have to recognize, partly, it's the failure of the American educational system with any number of people. Partly it is that certain kinds of jobs fled and skills didn't keep up. And so as we defend what I think has been a pretty successful 80 years, we do have to recognize that there was some carnage in large parts of the country. And what I've said is that when you have that happen, you get the Four Horsemen the apocalypse, as I've called them: populism, nativism, isolationism and protectionism. And so rather than just begging at the moon…

Clemons
And you say they tend to ride together.

Rice
And they tend to ride together.

Clemons
Are the four horsemen here?

Rice
Well, they are riding together in a lot of places, not just the United States. But I just want to make two other quick points. The first is, so recognizing that we have to have, I think, a really internal look, ask hard questions about how that happened, why that happened, and how we're going to repair whatever caused this reaction to globalization. I will also say that I will, and Nick Burns was just up here, the defection of China is a big part of the story, because the Chinese actually took from the system and didn't contribute in the ways that we thought they would. But lots of reasons. The second point I would make is, not only do we have to look at what happened and why it happened, but we have to recognize that we're probably not going back to exactly that system. And so what are the elements that we need to preserve going forward. And I would just mention three. The first is alliances. You heard, I think, very good arguments about

why alliances are so important. Secondly, I do think you have to preserve some of the apparatus for the carrying out of American foreign policy, and you're gonna ask me about that later. And then finally, I think we really do have to look and see, how can we recreate in the American people a sense that the United States of America is better when it's engaged in the world, when, in fact, we aren't having things done to us, but we are shaping it. The way that I put it for Americans is: Great powers don't mind their own business. They try to shape the international system. So if we don't shape it, others will.

Clemons
Thank you, Bob. You know, there's been a lot of talk here on this stage today about alliances, how important they are. I'm sort of interested in the question of what alliances should be directed at solving. What are the issues out there? I read Peter Bergen when I was at the New American Nation. Peter Bergen was one of my colleagues who interviewed Osama bin Laden before when the CIA couldn't find it. If you read what Bin Laden said, it's very interesting. He said he was trying to engineer an overreaction by the United States, a deep set of attacks and presence within the broader Middle East to create a reaction. It raises the interesting question about alliances and also their blind spots. Were we blind to the, you know, did Bin Laden sort of win as you sort of look at the mess in the Middle East, the mess around the world, the challenges to American power and its role in the world, the degradation of the sense that alliances matter. So I want to talk about alliances more specifically than we just need them for a rainy day. Have we been directing them in the right way, and do we have blind spots?

Gates
Well, I think there's a long history going back at least before the end of the Cold War, but even after the end of the Cold War, of in fact, alliances strengthening and becoming more powerful. I mean, you didn't have to go to Afghanistan too many times to run into the Danes and the Dutch and the Australians and the Brits and host of other countries, all helping, all having their own sectors, all working, trying to work together to beat back the Taliban and give the Afghan people the future. So that was, I think, the first out of area, major operation for NATO in a consequential way, where NATO actually was there as a as an entity, there was a NATO representative and, and, you know, the coordination could have been better, particularly on non military things, but, but I think the fact that the Allies showed up and endured significant sacrifices was really testimony to the strength of the NATO alliance. For the first time in 100 years, or almost 180 years, Sweden wants to be a part of NATO I think the last coalition they were in was against Peter the Great and and all of a sudden, Finland wants to be a part of the NATO alliance. So I think, I think there's a vitality to the alliance today that in some ways was missing in the early days after the end of the Cold War. And then when you add to it the commitments that everybody's made in terms of military spending, infrastructure spending, and that infrastructure spending, by the way, it's not building shopping malls, it's strengthening bridges so, and M1 tanks is going to go across them and things like that. So I think the notion that the alliance is weakening and is facing a problem is, it's not true.

Clemmons

The question again is, are there blind spots? So you can also argue that there was a military fatigue. We saw recruitment, you know, maxed out in a lot of ways. You saw a lot of Americans serving and what they were framing as forever conflicts. You saw people begin asking the question, why are we spending so much money over there and not over here? So those are the questions that I think also came with you look at the, you know, those military engagements, you know, they were decades long. Was that smart?

Rice
Of course, it wasn't actually our longest war. Just to be clear, our longest war is still Korea, where we only have an armistice and where we still have 10s of 1000s of American forces deployed. So I, with all due respect, I hate the notion of longest war. We have to be historically accurate about that.

Clemmons
I just said it long wars.

Gates
And the fact is that, you know, our our major military involvement engagement in Iraq was essentially concluded by around then 2008, 2009 and thanks in no small part, to the deal President Bush cut in December of 2008 that basically put forward a path for the US withdrawing from Iraq and and of course, we make decisions. Decisions were made later to pull down our forces in Afghanistan. Like there were a lot of us who felt that some residual number of those forces should have been left there for reasons we can go into later, if we have time, but, but I think that, I think that the bottom line in terms of the American people is, first of all, the conflicts did go on and and there didn't seem to be any resolution. I think that, I think we, frankly, got out of trouble, if you will, in Iraq when the Iraqi political process began to work and we began to draw down our forces. And people could say, okay, that one's winding down. Afghanistan was a longer, longer deal and there were alternatives there, and I've written about it and so on. But I think, I think that the bottom line for me as a historian is, Americans have always hated war. We're not an isolationist country, but we are country that just wants to be left alone. And if you are going to fight a war, then a fight a war where you count the length of the war in hours, as happened in 1991 or you count it in terms of a day or two, such as the attack on Iran, by the by the B1's, and the submarines and so on, or the B2's. So Americans are not uncomfortable with the use of military force. They just don't want it dragged out. And I think here, we tend to fail in messaging to the American people, explaining why we're there and what the what the consequences are of not being there, and to be and to be perfectly frank, we don't get a lot of help in that explanation process from the Congress in terms of helping educate the American people, because they are the ones that go back into the districts to help explain what the United States is doing in any given place on any given issue.

Clemmons
Jake, when you when you served both in the Obama administrations and the Biden administrations, who were, you know, a foreign policy guru for a long time, and you could tell in the architecture, of some of what you were dealing with, the withdrawal from Afghanistan, a

foreign policy for the middle class, you could sort of feel like you were trying to address things that were broken, that weren't working out public, feeling like it was economic cost to them to be involved. And I'm just interested, as you look back, you feel like you achieved your goals. And two, looking back with the benefit of hindsight, what could you have gotten better, particularly in the Biden administration?

Sullivan
Well, first, I'll start Steve with just taking on a bit your opening premise, which was, in 2024 there was an election, and that election said the American people are no longer interested in the world.

Clemmons
Not Americans, just a lot.

Sullivan
Or a lot of Americans. I mean, I think if you go back to 2017 or the 2016 election and the Aspen Security Forum in 2017 people would have said the same thing. “American people have spoken. They're saying they're not interested in being engaged in the world anymore.” Then, of course, four years later, Joe Biden was elected president. Nobody got up on stage in 2021 and said, “Ah, the American people have spoken. They all want to be deeply engaged in the world.” So we tend only to read the signals in one direction. And I think that's not right. I actually believe the American people continue to believe in principled engagement in the world, and continue to believe that our fate is tied to the fate of people elsewhere. And I think you can see this no more clearly than in the sustained support that the American people have shown for Ukraine. You look at every opinion poll going back to February of 2022, right up until July 2025, and a strong majority of the American people stand behind that. And in fact, it's President Trump who has shifted on this issue in recent days, not the American people. I do believe…

Clemmons
How long do you think he'll hold that position?

Sullivan
I'm the last person to predict what he will and won't do. But I think basically now the logic has become clear. He started by saying, I'm going to blame Zelenskyy, I'm going to say Ukraine started the war, and I'm going to pressure him, and that's going to get me to the end, because he truly believed Ukraine was the obstacle to peace. Well, he tried that strategy, and it became abundantly clear to everybody up to now, and including him, that Putin is the obstacle to peace in Ukraine. And so I think now that he recognizes that he's going down a track, which I think is right to try to increase support for Ukraine and hopefully increase pressure on Russia. I can't say how long that will be sustained, but what I can say is strong bipartisan majorities of Americans believe it is right for us to be engaged in support of the Ukrainian people, and they see the larger logic for why. Now, one of the things we tried to do in the Biden administration was make the long term investments in American strength and capacity through investments at home, through investments in diverse and resilient supply chains, through investments in our

alliances that would ultimately deliver a more vibrant, more inclusive, more capable economy over time. I think the biggest challenge we faced is time. That those kinds of investments are playing out. They're playing out as we speak today and will for the next many years, but election cycles are in four years. And I, you know, I read the book *Abundance* with great interest, because my lived experience as national security advisor was there are so many obstacles to the United States being able to build at speed, at scale. Dimitri asked on the last panel, why did we solve the rare earths problem? We've seen it through multiple administrations, the Obama administration, the Trump administration, the Biden administration, and the answer is, we made progress. We put a lot of effort into it, right from day one and right to the end, both by ourselves and with allies, as Kevin Rudd indicated, but it is very difficult, absent a jolting moment like what China just did with the rare earth export controls to move our system to deliver the kinds of capacity of building and defense industries just become this open.

Clemmons
I feel like I have this role here in part of thinking of family members of mine in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, who don't buy this explanation. They think they fought the Cold War through generations of people who serve the US government. Somehow China came on top. So as they look at all of these questions, of all the do good things that you know, we've allegedly done to solve this problem, address that problem, move slowly, they now see someone up there who, you know, bombed Iran, probably with Joe Biden's war plans, snapped his finger, said, stop the war. They're seeing a muscularity in an instant decision making. And someone doing this and we don't know how this will all turn out, but it just, I just want to kind of, in a friendly way, challenge the some of the premises of where you're coming out on rare earths and others because…

Sullivan
Well, I would say on that issue, the Trump administration took a good step with MP materials. Is that going to solve our problem in one year? Two years? No, we need to do a lot more, and we're gonna have to see that from this administration. They haven't done enough. So just on that issue, they're confronting the same challenge that we did that's quite different from a course in military action. When it comes to reshoring industries here in the United States, something that we were aggressively pursuing in the Biden administration is Trump snapping his fingers and factories popping up and getting built in a month or a week? No, we still contend with very difficult challenges of building at speed and scale, and it takes more than a statement or a speech or a tariff to get that done, that is painstaking work, and recognizing that the United States as a collective national enterprise, not just our government, but our private sector, and not just our federal government, but every level of government has to come together.

Clemmons
You wish President Biden had bombed Iran instead of Donald Trump using your war plans to do it?

Sullivan

Look, what I would say is that during the transition, we handed off to the Trump administration, a situation in which Iran was at its weakest point since 1979. Hezbollah had been functionally defeated. Assad had fallen. Its air defenses had been destroyed. And twice, Iran had tried to hit Israel with large salvos of missiles, and twice, with American help ordered by President Biden, Israel defeated those attacks. So Iran was weak and vulnerable. In my view, a weak and vulnerable Iran was susceptible to a very good deal that would lock Iran's program in a box for decades, not just set it back for a couple of years and today, after the bombing, what do we need? We need a deal, which is what I think President Trump will pursue, because the only way to permanently end Iran's nuclear threat, I believe, is through diplomacy.

Clemmons
Mark, we all know your story. With the administration you left, there were tense times, et cetera, but I do think there's something you have a lot of insight in both. You've been in business, you've worked in government, you were Secretary of Defense. And I think if I were out there giving speeches around the United States to talk about America's biggest problem in foreign policy and national security, my answer would have been inertia. Answer would have been inertia, that the likelihood that whatever we were going to do tomorrow was so path dependent on what we did yesterday. And so no matter who you want to give credit for or blame to, inertia has been gut punched hard, and now everyone has to scramble and fight for whatever. You know, I was listening to Jake on the defense production side, you know, in the United States or Europe, and it's fairly pathetic when you look at what's needed in the world. How are we not doing more? So I'm interested both in your business mind, but also serving what do we do now where inertia has been gut punched? How do we begin constructing something that's going to be far more effective in terms of securing America's national security interests in the future?

Esper
Yes, I think one of the accomplishments of the first Trump administration, certainly from DOD, was a recognition through our national defense strategy in 2018 that we were now in this new era of great power competition. That the era of counter terrorism and counterinsurgency was behind us, Great Power competition focused on China, my priority, then Russia, and then, of course, you had North Korea and Iran. And we defined that fairly well, and started making that pivot back to what we would call high intensity conflict from my days in the army, a veteran of the Gulf War, that was high intensity conflict at that point in time, but, and I recall a story that I talked about my memoir, when I became Secretary of the Army in 2017 and we were quietly preparing the ground because we thought we might be going to war with North Korea. We were moving equipment and personnel and munitions to the theater. And when you looked at the munitions tables, you could see that we, you know, didn't have enough for a long war, if you recall, and I remember asking to the staff, my general staff, what's the plan? And their answer was, will simply order more. Now I had the virtue of working at a major defense company. I knew at the time that in terms of the weapons we produce today, it's not Rosie Riveter in the 1940s cranking out 155 millimeter shells every single day coming off the line. That many cases, these weapons are millions of dollars and take several months, if not years, to build. And so there was that, that recognition in time that we didn't fully grasp the sense of what it takes to conduct a long war in an era of great power competition. And then, voila, you know, years later, 2022,

Russia invades Ukraine. We start again providing any range of munitions to them, Patriot Missiles, HIMARS, etc, etc. 155, millimeter ammunition, which I know, Jake, you work personally on a great deal. And it just exposed the fact that we, frankly, don't have the industrial capacity. Industrial capacity that we need. And there's, there wasn't a sense of urgency, and there really, I frankly, don't think there's still a sense of urgency within the executive branch and within Congress to really address that problem by providing the authorities that are needed to produce large amounts.

Clemmosn
Who's the villain in the story? I think I want to,

Esper
I don't know if there's a villain, but there are multiple stakeholders that have to recognize the problem and there has to be leadership at the top that drives this hard. We should be stacking munitions right now, like…

Clemmons
I talked to somebody in this room, in anticipating you three, and also Secretary Rice, beyond the panel, and they said, you know, Bob Gates is a hero. He basically got involved with, like, personally directing logistics teams. And, you know, micro level, you know, not exactly something you would expect a security defensive security defense to be doing. Jake, you were credited as being the quarter master for the, you know, trying to, trying to go find all the the interceptors and the ammunition all around the world, kind of scouring things away. Mark, you know, in the same way, you know, kind of look at business. And the person made the comment that the Pentagon does what the Pentagon wants to do, and that maybe, you know, they'll be there on the other side. So I want to ask you this question about accountability and change as we look at the future as we look at the future. Because this comment, this is a very informed person who said, We've got to change the Pentagon does what the Pentagon wants to do. Model here, because our leading players across both Republican and Democratic administration have had struggled with that. So fix that problem.

Esper
So I would say, and I dealt with this with the so called Mike courts, where we went out and found 10s and 10s of billions of dollars the Pentagon does what empowered leaders are willing to take on and bear the risk to do. And Bob Gates did a great job in terms of building the MRAPs and doing that. And my view isn't right now we should be sort of, say, stacking munitions. Building munitions, stacking like cord wood for preparation for a conflict against China. There was a famous war game done by, I think, CSIS a couple years ago, and we realized that we would run out of munitions in several sets of munitions in the first few days of conflict. The same is true, not just for munitions, but for drones. That we talked about on an earlier panel, we should be stacking drones all types, in preparation for a potential conflict that may come with China, and use that as a deterrent that and our industrial capacity are going to be key to a long war.

Clemmons

Bob. Who's the problem?

Gates
The problem where we are is that we're very long on diagnosis and very short on prescription and and you're all the rhetoric about all the things that need to be done, all the things that to do, lists that need to be taken care of, all of the opportunities for smaller defense companies and and so on. That's all true, right? But at the end of the day, there are two villains. One villain is the building itself and the continued need for reform. I see the Congress is in the process of passing yet another 1000 pages of advice on how to fix acquisition. They've been doing that every year for the past dozen or 15 or 20 years. We've now had 20,000 pages of that advice. And you can see how much progress has been made in that endeavor. So you've got the Pentagon bureaucracy, which is a problem. The second, the second villain, if you will, is the Congress. And the Congress is a huge villain here. The Defense Department has not had an appropriate budget at the beginning of the fiscal year in 15 years. For those of you in business, imagine running a business where at the start of fiscal year you don't know how much money you're going to get or when you're going to get it. We are now in the middle of a year-long continuing resolution. Nothing new can be started. Oh, all those new ideas that people had, all those new programs? You can't start any of them because, because you're under a continuing resolution. You come up with a new idea that needs to be a needs to have a lot of funding? Secretary has to go to four committees on the Hill to get transferred, to get reprogramming authority, and the Congress is very long on talk and very short on delivery and and so this new bill that was just passed has $150 billion in it for the Defense Department, including, I think 40 or so, $45 billion for ships, for building 18, 16, 18 warships. Guess what? It's one year of money. How many naval contractors are going to build a new shipyard on one year money? So contracting needs to be multi-year for the Defense Department, it needs to be looking out five and 10 years. So the solutions to these problems are not a mystery. It's getting from here to there that is the problem. And political will cannot be summoned, either in the executive branch or in the Congress, and it goes back over multiple administrations to fix our defense problem. When I got to the Pentagon and December of 2006 I walked in the door and I said, “Who in this building is responsible for overseeing the needs of the warfighter in Afghanistan and in Iraq? Who comes to work every day saying, what do they need, and how can I get it to him?” And there was no such person. Everybody was managing programs of record and doing the long term stuff. So there are problems within defense. There are problems with the Congress. They are fixable problems. People know what needs to be done. They just can't summon the freaking will to do it.

Clemmons
Well, let's jump there. Jake and Condi to the State Department. There's been a lot of discussion about the neutralization and dismantlement of USAID America's role in the world. I'm interested in whether or not, again these, these are subjects, again, going back to my Bartlesville, Oklahoma family, they don't really worry too much about USAID. They think it probably was a distraction and, you know, was something that was again undermining their core interest. And it's just very interesting to go back and feel that even when you go to speak to world affairs councils around the country in small towns, as I do you, can sort of feel not a complete embrace

of President Trump, but something where they say, “Wow, he's really got his thumb on something that the strategic class in Washington is not feeling.” So I want to give you an opportunity to kind of respond to what was left vulnerable to be hacked away when you left office? And Secretary Rice, I know you want to respond on the USAID issue as well.

Sullivan
Okay, I defer the Secretary of State. That's what National Security Advisors are supposed to do, right?

Rice
That’s right.

Sullivan
I'm happy to answer.

Rice
The nice thing for Marco is he doesn't have to defer again. That’s Henry Kissinger’s want as well. Look, I think I am well known, and I have every credential imaginable as somebody who believes in foreign assistance, who believes in the compassion agenda. It was a part of the creation of PEPFAR, part of the tripling and quadrupling of aid to to Africa, etc, etc, etc. But the State Department was in bad need of reform. Now, I have enormous respect for foreign service officers. I think they're among the best and the brightest, but I will just tell you a little story. When I became Secretary of State, I was asked to do a birthday message to the president of Bulgaria. It said, “Dear Mr. President, happy birthday and Long live Bulgarian American friendship.” It had 10 people clear it. So I think if you know, frankly, if I had not been fighting two wars, I probably would have tried to reform the State Department. And so I'm going to wait and see how this reform of the State Department works. I think there are too many layers in the Department of State, and when it comes to USAID, I am on record as having never favored USAID as an independent agency. In Britain DFID, as it's called, was an independent agency. Then it wasn't. Then it was, and the minister or the foreign secretary always had trouble coordinating what was done through this independent agency. The person who ran USAID for me is Henrietta Fore, I think she's someplace in the audience, right? And what I did. Yeah, she did a great job. But what I did was I made her both Deputy Secretary of State and Administrator of USAID. And we forced integration by forcing the Assistant Secretary for, say, Africa, and the assistant administrator for Africa to come together and present their budget together. So I think that, you know, I don't love the way that everything was done. I especially think the DOGE period was a bit of an experiment that ran a little wild. But I have a lot of confidence in Marco Rubio. I know what he thinks about the tools that the United States needs for foreign policy, and I also know that the State Department is…

Clemmons
So just real quick, Chris Coons and Mark Warner said they're not, we're not seeing the real Marco Rubio. Do you think we’re seeing the real Marco Rubio?

Rice
You know, I'm not going to even go there, alright? I think it's really a little bit insulting to try and talk about the real Marco Rubio. We've all known him for years, and he's a competent believer in American power and its exercise, and I think you're starting to see elements of that. But when it comes to the reform of the State Department, I just want to say I think that the State Department is badly in need of reform, and we will see how this comes out. But I'm prepared to wait and see.

Clemmons
Jake?

Sullivan
So I have a lot of spare time on my hands now. I went back and read John F. Kennedy's speech announcing USAID in 1961 and you get halfway through the speech, and he actually stops and he says, “There are many people in America who are asking, do we still need to be doing this after 15 years? Do we still need to be doing foreign assistance? Shouldn't all that money be spent at home?” And I raise that because I don't think this is a challenge facing the question of foreign assistance just from the last 10 years. This has always been the case where there is a natural intuition to think, “Wait a second, why are we spending the money over there rather than here? And, you know, are we really getting bang for our buck, and is it serving our interests?” And Presidents of both parties have stood up and made the case for why it makes sense. And I believe that the foreign assistance element of American soft power is incredibly important. And you know who else believes it's incredibly important? China, which is why, when we slashed and burned USAID over the last few months, China went in to fill in the gaps just about everywhere. So I'm one who believes that President after President has had to confront this strain of question, legitimate common sense question from the American people, and has tried to do so in a way that has been responsive as Secretary Rice was in the way that you built the F Function and brought USAID closer into the State Department, yeah, but I would just say I'm sorry, just one other point that I think is really important. That doesn't mean there doesn't have to be reform, and that reform should be real and it should be accountable. The thing that really bothers me about the past few months so both in DOGE and in the firings of large numbers of State Department officials is that these are public servants who have given their life to this country, and they have been mistreated, and I believe that we should be standing up for these folks, not claiming that they're bad and evil and wrong and lazy, which they are not. So whatever you want to say about reform and trying to do things in a different way or align priorities in a different way, that's one point, but we've got to treat the people who have served this country with respect and give respect and give them that the what they are due, which is our a deep sense of gratitude.

Rice
Jake, I just want to say I spent my life treating them with respect.

Sullivan
No, that was not criticism…

Rice
Just let me finish, yeah, treating them with respect. And as I said, the Foreign Service is the best and the brightest, but I will tell you that there is an issue in terms of some of the things that we were doing in foreign assistance over the last several years that were quite far apart from American national interest. So a look at what the Foreign Service dollar, or the foreign assistance dollars that we are spending actually buying, I think, is long overdue. I'd be the first to say that I don't like the way the rhetoric is gone, but sometimes you have to admit that it's been drifting for a while. The second point that I would make is I'm the one who said just yesterday, when I walked into a room, I loved having the American military on one shoulder, the American economy on the other, and a hand of compassion. So I'm totally there, but we have, with the American people, questions about what we're doing with foreign assistance. Why is it that years and years and years and years after we have had a foreign assistance program, we seem to have made little impact on the recipient of that foreign assistance? I will tell you about a conversation I just had with somebody who was a recipient of PEPFAR. I think, from my point of view, the proudest moment in all of my government service was when we did PEPFAR. We saved 25 million lives. This person, however, said, it's also been 20 years. Have we been developing ourselves, the capacity to do some of this ourselves, and too often, the way that we delivered foreign assistance really kept people on foreign assistance rather than building their capacity. And I would hope that now, when we're relooking how we do foreign assistance, that we're cognizant of the fact that we don't actually want to be in a country for 40 years delivering foreign assistance. We want to build up their economies. We want to build up their capacity. We want to build up their health care systems, and so that's why I say it's high time that we take a look at how we're delivering foreign assistance. If 20 years after PEPFAR is delivered, we still have countries that are not capable of doing anything for themselves, I think that's a very important question.

Clemons
I tell you one thing, time flies. When I have four of you on stage, we have four minutes just remarkable. And I'm going to try and do this. There's so many issues out there. Issues out there. We could have discussed, where should Russia sit on our strategic dashboard? What should a more robust challenge dealing with the China challenge look like? What are the component pieces? How do we deal with the emergence of AI everywhere, in terms of, you know, threats and not Where does India fit at the map? What are the other arrows?

Rice
One minute for each?

Clemons
Well, no, no, I'm going to ask. I'm going to ask, I'm going to ask each of you, you know, as you sort of look at this, and I think one of the things here to come back to the spirit of the book of like, thinking about the future in America, in the world, I just be interested to hear from each of you a priority, you know, whether it's Middle East Gaza, is it something we need to get better than we've been getting, you know, what should be the focus from your unique, independent perspective, on something that we're not solving, that we need to Solve to secure our national

security interests down the road. So I'll let you pick whatever, because there's a long list of things we didn't get to on this panel. So Mark?

Esper
If I could wave a magic wand and ask for one thing, I'd like to see greater cooperation and bipartisanship at the political level here in this country. And I think if both parties can come together, work together on issues of the day, then I think that is the basis, the foundation by which we solve most other problems, whether it be China, is the greatest strategic threat we face, or from our debt and deficit, which are growing out of control. But I think we need to get back to a more of a political consensus, and find people who are willing to work together to advance the agenda of the day, the President's agenda, whatever that the agenda the American people, and drive forward on that that'll show confidence to the American people and to our allies as well, that America can still lead and can still get things done.

Clemons
Jake?

Sullivan
It comes back to what I said before about the ability to build at speed and scale, because I believe that country that loses its ability to build will ultimately lose its capacity to innovate, and in doing so, I think we will fall behind in the competition with China. We have to get that right, and I think the only way to do that is to do it out of a bipartisan space.

Clemons
Bob?

Gates
For all the rhetoric, a lot of parts of government work and work well, but a lot of parts don't. And in addition to endorsing what Mark and Jake said, I would say having the leadership in the White House and the Hill and in the departments to actually fix a lot of the problems that are wrong, you know, criticize Doge and all the rest of it, and there may be a worse way to reform government than Doge, but I can't think of it, but, but there is a need for deep seated reform and restructuring in almost every element of our government has built up barnacles over decades, and so what we need is a reform agenda that empowers cabinet secretaries, that empowers leaders in Congress to work together to figure out, how do you reshape these institutions and make them work for the 21st Century? Because they're all holdovers from the 20th century and a bygone era. So there is a need for a thorough, growing house cleaning, in all honesty, in the federal government, Defense Department, intelligence community, all the other departments of government. But what it takes is a set of leaders, beginning with the President, but beginning with the leadership of the Congress that says, you know, we have an opportunity here to try and fix a lot of this. Let's see how we can do it, and do it in a sensible way that preserves what works and gets rid of what doesn't, and then prepares for the future.

Clemons

Condi?

Rice
I completely agree with my fellow panelists, so let me go a completely different way. I'm actually really worried that too many Americans don't think they've got a chance. And I think it's a combination of a little bit of globalization, a lot of jobs did leave, and the $18 an hour unskilled labor jobs are gone forever. Some of it is in our educational system, where we've got too many third graders who can't read, and we've got too many 21 year olds with a useless college degree and no and a huge debt, when maybe a skill as a plumber or as an electrician might have done better. I worry that the 35 year old who can't be retrained because we've got 37 different federal training programs, none of which work, I worry about our human potential, because ultimately, the thing that holds the United States together, and it's actually the thing that I think has been admired when you go abroad, is that we're not actually held together by nationality or religion or or ethnicity. We're held together by a creed that it doesn't matter where you came from. It matters where you're going. You can come from humble circumstances and you can do great things. And when I can look at your zip code and I can tell where you're going to get a higher get a good education, that can't possibly be true. And whatever all of us would like to see in terms of an American role abroad, in terms of the United States shaping the international system, if too many Americans are not included in that creed, we won't play a major role in the world, we will turn internal. And so I worry probably more about that. I once said that I thought the crisis in K 12 education was our biggest national security problem. I stand by that.

Clemons
I just want to say, well, first of all, thank all of you, and if you've been able to walk around on campus, I love these little banners that they have with quotes from Todd Young and Emmanuel Bone and others. There is one of Condi Rice that is out there, and it says, I often say how the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, as I call them, are populism, nativism, isolationism and protectionism. And they all tend to ride together. I think it's very important. I think one of the challenges I would put to all of you and all of us is there's a dismissiveness about the reality that that's rising. There's a view that that is a them and not us. And I would just say that one of the challenges is to invite those horsemen to the table to have a conversation and engage. And so that's my editorial comment. Please give a big round of applause to Condoleezza Rice, Bob Gates, Jake Sullivan, and Mark Esper and thank you all so much for your attention and for being here.