



AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

**9/11 AND THE FUTURE OF US FOREIGN POLICY:
A SPEECH BY VICE PRESIDENT RICHARD B. CHENEY**

INTRODUCTION:

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SPEAKER:

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**10:00 AM – 11:00 AM
WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2014**

EVENT PAGE: <http://www.aei.org/events/2014/09/10/911-and-the-future-of-us-foreign-policy-a-speech-by-vice-president-richard-b-cheney/>

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TULLY FRIEDMAN: I think I saw some of the press clap. Good morning. My name is Tully Friedman, and I'm chairman of the board of trustees of the American Enterprise Institute.

We're delighted to welcome again to AEI my fellow trustee, the former Vice President, the former Secretary of Defense, the former White House Chief of Staff and former Congressman Dick Cheney.

The vice president joins us on the eve of the 13th anniversary of 9/11 and at another critical moment for the nation. With Russian troops on the move, much of the Middle East in collapse, and when our own secretary of defense describes a new enemy – ISIS – as beyond anything we've seen, we have a lot to discuss today and we'll begin with the talk by the vice president followed by a moderated Q&A session.

Thank you for joining us at AEI today.

FORMER VICE PRESIDENT RICHARD CHENEY: Thank you, Tully. It's great to be back at AEI. I've spent time here over the years as a fellow, as a trustee, as an out-of-work politician, and it's always a great pleasure to come back. Being a fellow and a trustee at AEI has always put me in the company of some of the people I like and continue to admire most in the city. The American Enterprise Institute is one of those places where serious matters receive serious attention, and that's the spirit that brings me here this morning.

President Obama will be speaking later today on the situation on Iraq and the Middle East which has quickly become the most pressing of many national security issues. Among all the various concerns and issues that compete for our time and energy in Washington, nothing matters more than the security of the United States – nothing. Everything else we do depends on our safety from the dangers of the world.

And of all the things our federal government attempts to do these days, the one obligation that only it can do is to defend the nation. It is a defining duty of the president as commander-in-chief under Article Two of the Constitution and the test of leadership that matters more than any other.

The finest of our presidents have measured up to that test and I've seen some of them in action. It's been my privilege over the years to play a part in some of the more critical national security decisions we've faced. There have been five Republican presidents since Dwight Eisenhower. I worked for four of them and worked closely with the fifth, President Reagan, as a member of the House leadership during his term in office. These five leaders, I've observed, accomplished great things, often overcame great difficulties and the same could be said of others in my lifetime going back to Roosevelt and Truman.

Next year, we'll commence the eighth decade of what we still call the postwar era. In that time we've seen one of the supreme achievements of human history: a structure of security formed in the years after the Second World War and underwritten, guaranteed, and defended by the United States of America. What makes it all real in the end is the fact of American military superiority. Without that, we would be just one more nation with good intentions and strong opinions. It is not some arbitrary cycle of history that made the postwar era what it has been. It is American power and American leadership.

Before we credit the wisdom of even our best statesmen and diplomats in this long era, always remember where the greatest credit truly belongs. It belongs to the generations of men and women who gave the best years of their lives and laid down their lives in brave service to our nation.

Against this backdrop, and five and a half years into the presidency of Barack Obama, a few fundamental problems are evident. He has served in office now longer than 26 of his predecessors. So it's hardly too early to draw conclusions about his conduct of foreign policy and about the basic ideas and assumptions that he has followed.

We know what those notions are, because at times the president has been not only clear about them, but quite emphatic. He has demonstrated his own distrust for American power as a force for good in the world. Five years ago this month, he put it this way to the United Nations. Quote: "No world order that elevates one nation or group of people over another will succeed," end quote.

This is one sample from a whole collection of such sayings seem to regard American influence as a problem to be solved in the world, rather than a solution to be offered. However we interpret President Obama's words, they are a far cry from John Kennedy's vision of Americans as, and I quote, "the watchmen on the walls of world freedom" with "the military, the scientific, and the economic strength to do whatever must be done for the preservation and promotion of freedom," end quote.

Compare those presidential declarations, and it's more than a difference in time that we're dealing with. They are two radically different outlooks on the world and on America's responsibilities in it. And when you have a president whose primary concern is never to, quote, "elevate" America, it's no surprise that we also have a defense secretary in a serious state of alarm. "The world," as Secretary Hagel said a few weeks ago, "is exploding all over."

I'm here to tell you that there's a connection between these problems – between a disengaged president and some very volatile situations abroad. In a few hours, we'll hear what he has in mind for the terrorist onslaught currently in Iraq. We can hope for – and we should look for – signs of a forceful, bold, and immediate strategy to defeat ISIS. We can say already, however, that such a plan would mark an abrupt and dramatic departure from his record thus far.

This is the same president, after all, who not long ago was assuring the nation that “the tide of war is receding.” Those words suited his purpose at the time, in 2012. And yet of course that was the very time when dangers now obvious to all were gathering. In fact, all that receded from Iraq and elsewhere was American power, influence, and leadership. And if you think that American withdrawal marks an ebbing of conflict and a return to peace, then consider the new jihadist caliphate and all that will now be needed to clean it out.

A few months ago I traveled through the Middle East visiting with old friends in governments in Arab nations and in Israel. Again and again I heard the same question – just what is Barack Obama doing? How could he so carelessly sacrifice America’s hard-won gains in the region, walking away from friends, leaving violent enemies to fill the void? Like many in our own country, these friends of America cannot understand why the president was so insistent on withdrawing American leadership just when it was needed most.

A policy of nonintervention can be just as dogmatic as its opposite, and this president has seemed at times only more sure of himself as he is disproved by events. Syria is just one example. After the regime used chemical weapons against thousands of children, the administration took a stance of what you might call principled indifference: we cared – went the message – just not enough to do anything about it. And never mind the high-minded warnings and meaningless red line.

So often, President Obama responds to crises abroad by announcing all the things he will not do; and here, again, we can only hope the pattern ends tonight. Too often, threats and aggression have been met with stern declarations of inaction by the United States, supported by lengthy explanations of our inability to shape events. And inaction by America spells opportunity for our adversaries; as in the case of Syria, where we saw the Russians move in for their own advantage.

Meanwhile, of late, Vladimir Putin has moved in to take Crimea, subjected Ukraine to coercion and intimidation, and generally worked to frustrate American objectives at every turn. This all goes down, as the administration likes to put it, as “19th-century behavior,” an expression of disapproval that never seems to quite translate in the Kremlin.

They play a rough game over there, and they don’t much care to which century we ascribe their conduct. The test for some players in this world is simply this: can they get away with what they want to do? If they can, they will. End of discussion.

We all know, for example, what the mullahs in Iran want most of all: to acquire nuclear weapons. Try to imagine life in Israel, or anywhere else for that matter, if we and our friends ever permit that day to come. The regime in Iran gives close study to every sign, in every context, of American resolve – or to its absence.

Draw a bright red line for Assad and then let him pass right over it with impunity, and your problems don't end in Syria. In Tehran, too, they've been watching you tested and they're not impressed.

Whether it's outright enemies like the regimes in Iran and North Korea, or strategic rivals like Russia and China, hostile people are drawing conclusions from the choices we make. They take note of the hard things we do as the preeminent democracy, and of the hard things we finish. This has been a fact of life for every American president going back to FDR, and the finest of them knew how to choose a message of strength. I think of Truman and Kennedy handling crises in Berlin; Nixon standing by Israel in the Yom Kippur War; or the Reagan military buildup of the 1980s – American resolve in unmistakable terms.

Or I think of 2003 a few days after Saddam Hussein was taken into American custody. Among others who were paying attention was the dictator of Libya, who let it be known that he would continue to – that he could come in and take away his entire inventory of nuclear components, which he did. What kind of weapons might Gadhafi have had by 2011, if he hadn't surrendered his nuclear materials to us long before? And when the uprisings came his way, with real trouble outside his compound, how might the dictator have maintained his power?

They watch what our leaders do, the enemies of America, and they listen to what our leaders say. And a few of our most single-minded enemies might well have wondered why, in recent years, President Obama was talking about the terrorists being on the run, in retreat, when precisely the opposite was happening.

By the estimate of Seth Jones at the RAND Corporation, quote, “Since 2010, there has been a 58 percent increase in the number of jihadist groups, a doubling of the number of jihadist fighters and a tripling of attacks by al Qaeda affiliates.” In other words, while the president was claiming the tide of war was receding and core al-Qaeda had been decimated, the threat was actually increasing. From Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, over to Pakistan, all the way down to Somalia and Nigeria, in various places under various names, a whole new wave of jihadists was on the rise.

Likewise, we have the recent account of General Mike Flynn, who just stepped down as director of the Defense Intelligence Agency. He said, and I quote, “When asked if terrorists were on the run, we couldn't respond with any answer but no. When asked if the terrorists were defeated, we had to say, no. Anyone who answers yes to either of those questions either doesn't know what they are talking about, they are misinformed, or they are just flat out lying,” end quote.

The general's point is that the terrorist threat, far from receding like a tide, has been advancing and multiplying. And the RAND report was done before the rise of ISIS and the establishment of a caliphate – a new terrorist safe haven covering vast territory in the heart of the Arab world.

ISIS is now attracting thousands of radicals from Europe and potentially hundreds from the United States, eager to join in the slaying of non-believers. A fair number are doubtless intending to return home to Britain, France, and elsewhere – that is, unless their Western passports are canceled, which ought to happen. These are but a few of the features that make the situation today one of the most dangerous we have faced certainly in my lifetime – and far more dangerous than the administration has been willing to admit.

When the president speaks today, we need only to listen carefully for a true understanding of the nature and extent of this danger. And let me suggest a few markers to keep in mind, the basic signs of serious strategic thinking.

A realistic strategy has to recognize that ISIS is a grave, strategic threat to the United States. The situation is dire and defeating these terrorists will require immediate, sustained, simultaneous action across multiple fronts. Phasing in our actions will not suffice. Such a strategy will only prolong the conflict and increase the casualties.

ISIS does not recognize a border between Syria and Iraq so neither should we. We should immediately hit them in their sanctuaries, staging areas, command centers, and lines of communication, wherever we find them. We should provide significantly increased numbers of military trainers, Special Operations Forces, an intelligence architecture, and air power to aid the Iraqi military and the Kurdish Peshmerga in their counteroffensive against ISIS.

As we work to defeat ISIS and prevent the establishment of a terrorist safe haven in the heart of the Middle East, we must move globally to get back on offense in the war on terror. This means first recognizing and admitting the size and scope of the threat we face. Al Qaeda is not diminished, nor is the tide of war receding. Wishing doesn't make it so. Our president must understand we are at war and that we must do what it takes, for as long as it takes, to win.

Winning will require allies. Across the broader Middle East, we have to reassure our friends and allies that America will not abandon them. After five and a half years of an administration sending regular messages of retreat, withdrawal and indifference, we have lost credibility and the trust of allies that we need to win this war.

We must now demonstrate through increased intelligence activity and cooperation, military assistance, training, joint exercises, and economic support that we know they are on the front line of the war on terror. We should do everything possible to defend Jordan against ISIS. We should immediately provide the support that the government of Egypt needs to fight the terrorist insurgency in the Sinai.

We should recognize that the Muslim Brotherhood is the ideological source for most of the radical Islamist terrorists around the globe. We ought to designate it as the terrorist organization it is, and we should provide full backing and support for those governments across the Middle East who are standing against the Muslim Brotherhood.

We should make clear that a nuclear-armed Iran is an existential threat to Israel and to other nations in the region as well. We should refuse to accept any deal that allows them to continue to spin centrifuges and enrich uranium. The regime in Tehran must be made to understand that the United States will not allow that to happen, and that we will take military action if necessary to stop it.

To avoid repeating President Obama's arbitrary and hasty withdrawal of residual forces from Iraq – the tragic error that gave us the caliphate – we should have the drawdown of our troops in Afghanistan halted. The terror and chaos in Iraq today will only be replayed in Afghanistan if we now abandon that country.

I might add that by now, with all that's happening in Iraq and well beyond, we should hear no more talk about treating the fight against terror as a matter for law enforcement. The idea that terrorists are just criminals of a different stripe has been a dogma of this administration from the very beginning, and it's time we put it to rest once and for all.

All that we achieved in protecting the country after 9/11 came from the understanding that terrorists are not just common lawbreakers and terrorism is not just street crime on a bigger scale. Despite years of criticizing those policies, President Obama himself has lately been pointing to the Bush-Cheney security apparatus as evidence that he's keeping America safe. This is a quote: "Since 9/11," he said at a fundraiser last month, "we have built up a security apparatus that makes us in the here and now pretty safe" – nice to hear, especially from someone who used to speak so disparagingly about the steps we took after 9/11. After years of saying that America had lost its way, abandoned our values in building up that security apparatus, now he's invoking it to give assurance that we are prepared.

I know something about that apparatus. I was one of its architects. And President Obama seems willfully blind to one of the key facts about the post-9/11 security apparatus: it is not self-sustaining. Those programs and policies must be kept strong and current.

The Obama administration has failed utterly in that task. After five and a half years of dismantling the apparatus we put in place, he cannot honestly claim that same apparatus will now keep us safe. And this is the most critical measure we could apply to the president's remarks today: Any serious strategy has to include a major new commitment to restoring our nation's military preparedness.

We simply cannot pursue a comprehensive strategy against terrorism at the same time we're sending pink slips to captains and majors in the combat zone. And yet this and more is happening.

In this very time of hasty withdrawals, continuous disengagement, and such self-congratulation for all of it, we have also seen dramatic and devastating drawdowns in the

military power of the United States. Ours is the power that underlies so much else, yet even this has been taken for granted during these years. We're nearing a crisis point in the decline of American military power. It has to be addressed, and right away.

The administration should be aware of this by now because the bipartisan National Defense Panel – appointed by the president's own defense secretary – recently warned of untenable reductions in force levels. It's a bipartisan group chaired by John Abizaid and by Bill Perry, former secretary of defense. And they did a superb job and I commend it to anybody who's interested. If we take almost any element of our defense capability, and it has been reduced in some cases with further reductions to come, Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marines – all of them have been subjected to irrational budget cuts having nothing to do with the strategic needs of national security.

Soon, for instance, we'll actually be looking at an Army and Marine Corps with authorized strength levels beneath what they were prior to 9/11. Of the Army's 40 brigades, only four are combat ready. Meanwhile, we've seen crucial programs and weapons systems delayed or cancelled, either arbitrarily or else by the flimsiest of rationales. Under this president we are in the midst of a systematic pullback of defense investment in ways that will severely hinder our force structure, projection power, and general ability to meet and deter threats.

It was one of the highest honors of my life to have the opportunity to serve as secretary of defense. There is no finer group of people anywhere than the men and women who wear the uniform of our nation. We need to do everything we can to make sure that every expenditure is justified, but the defense budget is different from every other part of our federal budget. In most other areas, you start with questions like, what do we have and what can we afford? When you are looking at the defense budget of the United States, you start with the question: what do we need?

But that kind of careful thought is not what is driving the massive defense reductions now underway. And whatever the thinking behind these decisions, it bears little relation to a strategic environment that is complex, demanding, and becoming more dangerous by the day.

Look around: other major powers are seriously adding to their military capabilities, some with a view to exploiting what they regard as America's new vulnerabilities. We've got, among other problems, nuclear-armed countries with uncertain political futures. There is still a constant threat of WMD proliferation, which can be effectively countered only with American leadership and American power. We've got all this and more besides going on in 2014, and we're investing in defense as if the dangers of the world were all in quiet retreat.

Of course, they are not, as the next commander-in-chief will likely appreciate from day one in office. That next president, unless we start matching our military investment with the threats and challenges we face, will also find that his options have narrowed dramatically. All the capacities we need to shape events, protect our interests,

and work to peaceful ends may not be there. Even the wisest, boldest calls in the Situation Room will not come to much without the assets to follow through, whether by land, sea, air, space, or cyberspace. And when the next Congress convenes in January, I can think of no more urgent business than this: leaders in both parties working together must ensure that the highest priority in our federal budget is the defense and security of the United States of America.

With crises in Iraq, Ukraine, and so much else unraveling, there is little comfort in President Obama's reminders, now and then, that ultimately things have a way of working out, and that, ultimately, the bad actors of the world are destined to fail. The terrorists, he's observed a time or two, are on the wrong side of history, a useful thought only if it is expressed in the active and not the passive mode to motivate and not just to console. The terrorists who threaten this country and our friends are on the wrong side of civilization. They will be on the wrong side of history only if we put them there.

We must deal with threats before they become grave dangers and dangers before they become catastrophes. That's where the best kind of history is made – the story of awful things that never happened because our foresight and resolve did not allow them.

President Obama likes to talk about cycles of history. I can tell you it is the leadership of brave men and women that make history. In particular, it has been the United States of America, time and again, that has answered threats, taken swift and determined action, kept the peace, and liberated millions.

In all that we now face, the worst, most self-defeating illusion is the idea that American power and leadership are optional, as if with or without us the world will somehow get by. Ask around, among friends and allies, and you'll hear otherwise. They still welcome and desire American influence in any matter where freedom is on the line or security in the balance. They still believe in American leadership as a force for good like no other. And they know their security and ours depends upon American power and will only be guaranteed with a restoration of American leadership and strength.

Thank you. (Applause.)

MARC THIESSEN: Thank you very much, Mr. Vice President.

The vice president has to leave, but he's asked – he's agreed to take a few questions, and several of you have submitted some very good ones here. We ask also that once the event is over, if you could please stay seated so the vice president can depart and then – and then we'll have everyone come out.

I will take the moderator's privilege of asking the first question.

The Washington Post reports that you received a rapturous reception yesterday up on Capitol Hill when you came to speak to House Republicans. But it then says, quote, "The young and dovish libertarians sat silently on Tuesday morning as former Vice

President Dick Cheney addressed a gathering of House Republicans on Capitol Hill.” All of the advice that you’ve just given, don’t we have to convince a lot of people in our party first?

MR. CHENEY: Yes, we do. And it was a great reception. I was impressed. They never treated me that way when I was vice president. (Laughter.) There is without a question – without question a strain of isolation, if you will, that some people call it a strong feeling against war. It’s a view you’ll find in various places of our society and there is a certain part of our party, I think, that holds to those precepts.

Now, I’ve tried to make the point repeatedly that anybody who went through 9/11 or watched what happened when 19 men armed with airline tickets and box cutters came here and destroyed the World Trade Center, took down a big part of the Pentagon, killed 3,000 of our people – a worse attack than Pearl Harbor – that it’s difficult to buy into the proposition that somehow we’ll be safe if we just stay behind our oceans and then let the rest of the world stew in its own juices. I simply don’t believe it. I’m outspoken about it, but I do think it’s – as I think about it, part of the problem, obviously, is to remind my friends on the Republican side of the aisle, as well some of the Democrats, that the issues I talk about in here are very real and very imminent.

We can’t pursue the course, for example, that says, when we get the defense budget, well, at least we got something. We do indeed need to play a very active role in the world. And I just believe those who advocate an isolationist course are dead wrong.

MR. THIESSEN: This question comes from Betsy Klein of CNN. What would you say to President Obama in advance of his speech tonight and what did you tell the House Republicans yesterday?

MR. CHENEY: Well, I’ve just told the president – I don’t know if he’s watching or he’s going to read my speech – I tried to lay out there what I think of the principal things that need to be done, especially recognition of the threat, being honest about what’s happening out there, reversal of the course the administration has been following with respect to defense spending. There are some very specific things that we need to take. The reception I got on the Hill yesterday from my former colleagues was very warm. There were – I’m sure there were probably a few in the audience who disagreed. I think the Washington Post found two of them. (Laughter.)

But, no. I thought it was a good meeting. And, frankly, part of it is I consider myself a man of the House. I served 10 years in the House, eight years as president of the Senate. And I’ve always been very clear I prefer the House. I didn’t say that when I was the president of the Senate.

But, no. It’s a fascinating time in our history and I have great respect and affection for those who serve. I spent a lot of years as a member of the Congress or part of it. And I think we’ve got some very good people there. I think we’re going to have a tough fight in the fall campaign here with respect to the upcoming election. But we will

renew our commitments to democracy and we'll have a new Congress come January, and hopefully it will be more successful than recent ones in terms of arriving at some important decisions.

MR. THIESSEN: This question doesn't have a name attached to it, but do you feel the current threat in the Middle East is contained to the threat from the militant Islamic forces or does it have broader global implications? And you touched a little bit on Iran in your speech. We now have a situation in Iraq where, actually, just recently, the US military was essentially providing air cover for Iranian-backed Shia militias. Those were the ones that were killing American troops. Can you talk a little bit about that and about the Iranian threat?

MR. CHENEY: To talk about Iraq, a broader set of concerns than just radical Islam. I'm very, very concerned – and I've talked about it frequently. I touched on it in my remarks today. And that's the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, in particular nuclear materials. And it isn't just limited to the Middle East.

We found on our watch – I always remember when Meir Dagan, the head of the Mossad, came in one day and sat down with Steve Hadley and myself and started laying down photographs. They were color pictures taken inside the reactor in eastern Syria that had been built by the North Koreans for the Syrians. The North Koreans are very much players in this business.

There'd been reporting at one point from A.Q. Khan, the father of the Pakistani program, that the North Koreans had bribed senior Pakistani officials to get the latest technology for highly enriched uranium. I think if we look at that whole area of the proliferation of nuclear capability that it's the – it is a major threat. We don't know where it's going to go.

We're just lucky, for example, when eastern Syria fell to ISIS, they didn't find a nuclear reactor at al-Kibar. It wasn't there because the Israelis took it out in the fall of '07. We were just lucky Gadhafi decided to surrender his materials after he saw what happened to Saddam Hussein. So it does have worldwide ramifications, and the future of developments in that part of the world clearly are relevant to – well, not just the United States or the neighborhood, but on a global basis.

MR. THIESSEN: And one last question. This is from Chandler Thornton, a student at American University. He asks: what is the best strategy or strategies for maintaining diplomatic support in nations throughout the Middle East and how can this support complement military action to combat ISIS?

MR. CHENEY: My experience has been – and as I mentioned, my daughter Liz and I traveled to the region this spring. I've kept up a lot of my ties back there since Desert Storm really, 25 years ago, when I worked with all of them when we were dealing with the First Gulf War.

There is a perception – and, again, these are some Israelis, Arabs and so forth – perception that the United States cannot be trusted the way we had been in the past and that we need to go in and act, to work with them closely to restore their faith in our commitments because it's been seriously eroded.

There's a deep belief, for example, that – I don't want to zero in on any one particular country, but it's general throughout the region that the United States has been supportive of the Muslim Brotherhood. And in that part of the world, the Muslim Brothers are perceived, having been founded in 1928, as the group from whence emerged Egyptian Islamic Jihad, al Qaeda, Hamas – you can go down a long list, and they can all trace their backgrounds to the Muslim Brothers. And the United States needs to convey the fact that we understand that. It's not just their concern, it's our concern as well too.

We need to keep commitments that we've made and prove to them that we have. When, for example, when Morsi was toppled in Egypt and General Sisi took over, I was – I met him for the first time during that trip and I was very impressed – the immediate reaction here was to start talking about withholding our traditional military-to-military relationship and flow of support and supplies that historically the Egyptians have received from us. That's exactly the wrong way to deal with those kinds of circumstances.

They want to know that we are, in fact, allies. They want to know that we'll keep our commitments. They want to know that we understand that they are on the front lines of the war on terror. They're the ones that are battling, in many cases every day, to survive against the most radical elements that have now taken part of Iraq, part of Syria, created the caliphate. It's a task diplomatically and militarily from the standpoint of the United States. We've got to go prove ourselves and restore those relationships which have been badly damaged by the way the United States has conducted itself over the last few years.

MR. THIESSEN: Mr. Vice President, thank you very much. I would note that this is not the first time that you've had a long scheduled speech and the President of the United States has decided to give a speech the same night.

MR. CHENEY: I don't think they're related. (Laughter.)

MR. THIESSEN: Well, we'll see what he says tonight. Thank you very much for your –

MR. CHENEY: All right. Thank you. (Applause.)

(END)