

Remarks by  
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At the Business Executives for National Security  
Eisenhower Award Dinner  
Onboard the Intrepid Sea Air Space Museum  
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***Note: prior to these remarks, Gen. Petraeus was presented the BENS Eisenhower Award by Joseph E. Robert, Jr., Chairman of the BENS Board of Directors***

... It's oft said at occasions like this that this is a humbling experience. And I can truly say that with enormous sincerity tonight for a whole variety of reasons. One is that, first of all, it's an extraordinary honor and one that I can truly accept only inasmuch as it is done on behalf of all those great men and women who are serving in harm's way throughout the Central Command area of responsibility and indeed throughout the world right now.

Well, I've been commander of Central Command for not quite three weeks now, just long enough to spend some quality time in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, London, Washington, and now New York, meeting along the way some incredible U.S. troopers who are making a tremendous impact. But as was noted earlier I've spent much of the past five years either deployed in Iraq or helping our military adapt its doctrine, leader development programs, training exercises, and processes for preparing units for deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan. And given all that, I thought I might share with you some thoughts on what those of us in uniform have learned from our experiences in the past five years or so.

As you'd imagine we've done a fair amount of deep thinking about the lessons learned as my team and I have embarked on our new responsibilities.

As I relate some of what we've learned in recent years, please do keep in mind that much of this has indeed been based on the experiences of those relatively junior – but now very experienced – commissioned and non-commissioned officers who have turned the big ideas of senior leaders into operational reality on the ground.

So what have we learned – or re-learned, as has sometimes been the case?

Well, we've learned that in campaigns such as those in Iraq or Afghanistan, the decisive terrain is the human terrain. The traditional focus on the high-ground, bridge-crossings, key infrastructure and so on remains very relevant, of course, especially in the mountainous areas of Afghanistan. However, the terrain that matters most is the human terrain – the people. Clearly, we have to understand the people, their culture, their social structures, their religions, how systems that support them are supposed to work and how they actually work, and so on. And our most important tasks have to be to secure and serve those people, as well as to respect them, to facilitate the provision of basic services: the establishment of local governance, and the revival of local economies. We've learned that the only way to secure the population is to live with it. You can't commute to the fight in a place like Iraq. We have to put our forces together with those of our coalition partners and our host nation counterparts in the neighborhoods we're striving to

secure. Often, this has been where the violence is the greatest. But when we do that – and the people realize that we’re there to stay with them – over time they typically begin to provide information on the enemy, and often, they even volunteer to help hold areas once we have cleared them.

We’ve recognized yet again the importance of pursuing the enemy relentlessly: taking away his sanctuaries and safe havens, denying him the ability to plan and conduct deliberate operations, and forcing the bad guys to respond to us, even as inevitably we have to respond to the enemy, which is a highly adaptive adversary, even if extremist in beliefs and barbaric in activities. We’ve revalidated the need to develop and carry out a comprehensive effort, one that employs all available means and assets – not just military action – one that is designed to achieve unity of effort, and one in which the capabilities provided by our civilian partners are sometimes even more important than those of our military elements.

Thus, while we highlight the importance of military action, we also recognize that, while military action is necessary it is generally not sufficient. We cannot in fact kill or capture our way out of industrial strength insurgencies. Rather, we have to employ all the tools available to us: political, diplomatic, economic, and so forth, in addition to military assets. And it is for this reason that Secretary Gates and a number of us in uniform are leading proponents for more spending for the State Department and other civilian agencies that are so important to the endeavors in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and elsewhere around the globe.

We’ve learned that it is vital to be first with the truth; to get accurate information to the chain of command, to local leaders, and to the press as soon as is possible. In so doing, we have come to appreciate the importance of beating the bad guys to the headlines. We learned of the need to have an active information operations campaign, but one that avoids trying to put lipstick on pigs or spinning. In fact, we explicitly adopted an approach as part of the surge that strived to avoid that, and featured a commitment to let the facts on the ground speak for themselves and to acknowledge setbacks and mistakes, even as we sought to turn our enemies’ bankrupt messages, extremist ideologies, and indiscriminate violence against them.

We’ve recognized the centrality of intelligence in all that we do. And while there have been important breakthroughs in each of the intelligence disciplines – in human intelligence, in signals intelligence, in imagery intelligence and so on – we’ve learned that the most important breakthrough of all has been the fusion of all forms of intelligence and ensuring that all our elements share intelligence and work together. We cannot allow the walls that used to exist between intelligence agencies, and often between even special mission units: Special Forces, conventional elements, coalition forces, and host nation ministries. Working together is not optional. It is imperative.

We also re-learned the importance of living our values, an approach that distinguishes us from our enemies and ensures that we stay true to the ideals for which generations before us have sacrificed so much. The fact that our enemies torture, lie, or kill indiscriminately is no excuse for us to compromise on what we know is right. In fact, while our enemies may achieve short-term results from violating accepted international norms and law, they inevitably undermine their cause by doing so as well, and it is up to us to exploit the vulnerability this presents.

We've learned once again about the importance of encouraging initiative; about the need to establish a climate in which leaders post signs like the one I found in a company command post in west Baghdad that said, "In the absence of guidance or orders, figure out what they should have been and execute aggressively." That's the spirit we seek to foster. After all, it is those at small-unit level who turn the big ideas conceived at strategic level into reality on the ground, and those responsible for doing so must feel and be empowered to do just that.

We've seen once again the wisdom in the observation of Roman philosopher Seneca the Younger, that luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity. Intellectual constructs, such as those supporting the promotion of reconciliation, helped us enormously in Iraq, as have a number of other items of strategic guidance, and we're now working hard to ensure we have the right constructs for our operations elsewhere in the Central Command area of responsibility.

We've been reminded through hard experience that it's imperative to continue to learn and adapt; to constantly assess our situation; to identify and share lessons learned and best practices; and to strive to ensure that our units are learning organizations. What works today may not work tomorrow. We must remain alert to that reality.

We've learned frankly to have a bit of intellectual humility in establishing our goals. It's not to say that we shouldn't strive to foster democratic institutions or to share the values we hold so dear; that's important. It is to say that we should be realistic about our ability to transform cultures that are products of very different experiences and traditions than ours.

Above all – and most important among all our lessons – we have learned once again that there are no finer, more flexible, more innovative, more determined, nor more courageous soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, and Coastguardsmen than those who wear our country's uniforms. Their commitment is truly inspiring. It is the greatest of privileges to serve with these great men and women, and it is, again, on their behalf that I accept this award this evening.

Thank you very much.