

The Betty Lou Hummel Memorial Lecture
School of Advanced International Studies
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Why America Matters
Ambassador (ret.) Nicholas Burns

Congratulations to my friend, Dean Vali Nasr, for all he is doing to strengthen SAIS and to envision a new future here in Washington D.C. for this great school.

Many thanks to my Foreign Service colleague, Professor Eric Edelman, for being here. Thanks, as well, to Professor Carla Freeman.

It is an honor to give the Betty Lou Hummel Memorial Lecture this year. As a Career member of the American Foreign Service, I join SAIS in remembering her lifetime of dedication to our country and the Department of State. We should recall, as well, the legacy of her husband, Ambassador Arthur Hummel, a stellar career diplomat.

It is especially fitting to honor her in this 75th anniversary year for SAIS as she was a member of our very first graduating class in 1946.

It is also a privilege to return to this campus. When I arrived here forty-one years ago, it was with one immediate ambition—to find a way to pass the entrance exam for the Foreign Service that I had flunked as an undergrad!

I am so grateful to SAIS and to the extraordinary Professors, staff, and students I met during my two years here. To tell you the truth, I wasn't always thrilled by the impossibly early hour of our morning French classes. But it paid off during my first diplomatic assignment in French-speaking Mauritania. I might not have taken voluntarily the many Economics courses SAIS demanded. But I silently thanked SAIS for them on multiple occasions over many years.

The legions of SAIS graduates I have met in government ministries, parliaments, refugee camps, newsrooms and non-profits around the world, as well as the White House and State Department, are living testimony of how effective this school has been in its central mission.

In my time here, SAIS' Founding Fathers and Mothers were very much a presence at the school. Ambassador Paul Nitze hosted our entire first-year class for a picnic on his elegant lawn overlooking the Potomac. Our Deans and Professors were among the foremost public intellectuals of the Cold War era from the legendary Robert O. Osgood to Simon Serfaty, Richard Betts, Riordan Roett, James Riedel, George Crowell, and my advisor and fellow Red Sox fanatic, the late Frederick Holborn who shepherded my young 22-year old self through the rigors of the first semester.

The story of SAIS in this 75th anniversary year coincides almost seamlessly with the story of America as the world's leading power.

Think of the foresight of the men and women who created our school. They understood that America must not retreat back into an isolationist crouch following the Second World War as we had done so unwisely after the First.

They understood that America would have to lead in the world for the first time in its history. One of their most important insights, shared by Democrats and Republicans alike, was that America could not be defended if we withdrew back into the then forty-eight states.

When Winston Churchill warned from a stage in Fulton, Missouri in March 1946 that “from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic”, an “Iron Curtain” had descended on Europe, SAIS’ founding generation knew we could only defend America if we planted our flag permanently in alliance with others in Western Europe, Japan, the Korean Peninsula and elsewhere.

With the creation of the United Nations, we began to weave, piece by piece, the extraordinary tapestry of interconnecting regional and global institutions that formed the Liberal Order—the guardian of democracy, the rule of law and human freedom.

In the words of Princeton Professor, John Ikenberry, America became the “system operator” of the international system and the leader of the democratic West. The core ethos of this system, and of the leaders who created it, was responsibility. Americans, especially, would have to embrace a responsible and permanent leadership role as a matter of self-interest, not charity.

We all know this story. It is, without any doubt, one of the great stories and great achievements in American history. Due to the leadership of Truman and Eisenhower, JFK and Reagan, Clinton and the Bushes, of all our post-war presidents until Barack Obama, we have created the most just, stable and peaceful order in modern history.

Think of the success from the seeds planted by the generation that created SAIS and America as a global power. They produced a global economic expansion that lifted billions of boats. They produced historic breakthroughs in global health, literacy and life expectancy.

They ushered in an extraordinary change in the global power order from Decolonization and the end of empires in the 1950s and 60s to the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and with it Yalta’s cruel bargain, in the 1980s and 1990s.

They saw Germany united and the advent of the Information and Digital Revolutions that transformed the way we live and work.

It was, of course, far from a perfect age. There was Vietnam, Watergate, and genocides in Cambodia and Rwanda. We stumbled into the ill-considered 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Other examples of colossal human devastation followed: Darfur, Myanmar, Syria, Venezuela and many others in recent years.

We, the descendants of the SAIS founding generation, remain far from perfect. Custodians of extraordinary global power, we struggle with a confounding modern question. When do we intervene in someone else’s Civil War to right a wrong? When do we choose not to do so?

We wrestle, as well, with the dark isolationist gene in our national DNA. It is clearly visible today among some on the Democratic left and some on the Republican right.

There are many questions we need to answer as a nation. Are we truly committed to lead as the world's most powerful country? Or, will those who say we should pull back and raise the drawbridges of fortress America prevail? Can we even summon the energy to lead after the failure of Iraq, the never-ending war in Afghanistan and the legitimate need to pay more attention to our challenges here at home?

If the generation that founded SAIS could return today to advise an America that has shifted back and forth in recent years between engagement and retreat on issues as consequential as Climate Change, Iran, the Syrian civil war and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, they might not have all the answers. But, they would be clear about one thing.

America matters. American energy, optimism, and leadership matters to the rest of the world. And the world matters to America—to our economy, our security, our future.

One of the reasons for our post-World War II success has been a tradition of bipartisan consensus in foreign policy. When I transitioned from the George H.W. Bush National Security Council staff on Russia and Ukraine Affairs to work for President Clinton in January 1993, I marveled at the striking continuity between them on that priority issue. President George W. Bush's foreign policy priorities in his second term had much in common with some of the policies of President Obama in his first term.

That is one reason why President Trump's assault on this long and durable consensus has been so damaging to our country. He has taken a sledgehammer to our carefully constructed edifice of American power and purpose in the world.

He is seeking to smash nearly every building block and turn his back on the core principles that made America great since World War II.

He has made four major changes in American policy that are particularly troubling.

First, he does not believe that our alliances are critical for our future. Just last week, as the rest of NATO celebrated the 70th anniversary of its founding right here in Washington D.C., President Trump chose not to host a summit for NATO heads of government in celebration or even congratulate the allies for the extraordinary achievements of the single, greatest alliance in modern history.

Think about what a normal president would have done. A normal president would have thanked our allies-- for our victory in the Cold War, their help to us on 9/11 when I was Ambassador to the Alliance, and the resulting more than 1000 allied dead in Afghanistan, along with their efforts in the recent defeat of the Islamic State Caliphate.

President Trump did not utter one word of gratitude to our allies. Instead, he complained, once again, about their defense spending levels.

He has overturned seven decades of carefully constructed U.S. support for a united Europe by branding the European Union as a “foe” and competitor of the U.S.

Second, he is attempting to dismantle the entire global trading system. In just two years, he has sanctioned, Mexico, Canada, Europe, Japan, South Korea and, of course, China. Last week, he threatened to impose tariffs on Mexico if it did not end the transit of drugs in the next year. He is replacing the connectivity of the global age with crude walls reminiscent of the Middle Ages.

Third, as anti-democratic populists rise in Europe, Trump has effectively sided with them—with Viktor Orban over Angela Merkel, with the authoritarian Polish government over Emmanuel Macron, with Matteo Salvini in Italy over Teresa May.

Fourth, Trump has also reversed the half-century American consensus since the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 that we can afford to accept tens of thousands of legal immigrants and refugees annually. It is the right thing to do ethically in our immigrant nation. It is also the smart thing to do because immigrants make our society younger, more productive and more successful.

At California’s border with Mexico late last week, however, the president declared we were “full up” and have no room at all for those wishing to fulfill the American dream as the ancestors of every American in this room did in the past.

The Trump revolt in American Foreign Policy is a rejection of all that made America great. It is a rejection of the founding generation that created SAIS and of the bipartisan ethos that made us effective around the world. It also rejects seventy-five years of the collective wisdom of all our presidents.

Trump’s foreign policy of impulse, ignorant tweets, grievance, resentment, and fear are failing us.

We are at a turning point as a result. The Trump revolt is making us weaker, not stronger. We have become less effective, less reliable and less purposeful as a global leader.

America has become a far less powerful friend to our allies and a less powerful foe to our adversaries.

Without American leadership, the entire world order will weaken and could even crack with unforeseeable consequences for global stability and peace.

Every SAIS student understands why America matters.

America matters as the critical innovative hub of the global economy with the U.S. dollar as the reserve currency.

America matters for international security. NATO and our Indo-Pacific alliances provide security of the sea-lanes for the commercial traffic that is the lifeblood of global prosperity. Our alliances

and newfound security relationship with India are the central defenders of democracy and the rule of law.

American non-profits, universities, foundations and civic organizations are on the front lines as Americans engage the world as positive and successful bridges to every corner of the earth.

American leadership in all these areas helped to make us great in the seven decades since SAIS was founded.

The current generation of SAIS students is preparing to lead. They will confront dangerous challenges ahead--climate change, trafficking of women and children, drug and crime cartels, cyber criminals and terrorists, the threat of pandemics.

They will wage a battle for technological supremacy between the U.S. and China as A.I, quantum computing and biotechnology produce an entirely new generation of weapons of war.

They will also wage a battle of ideas as the authoritarian powers, brimming with self-confidence; challenge the West's core faith that democracy and the rule of law, human rights and freedom are the way forward, not the cruel anti-democratic authoritarianism of China and Russia.

SAIS students also have more positive opportunities in the future -- major advances from poverty alleviation to the eradication of polio and malaria to the rise of women to positions of power. In this sense, the "Newer World" the poet Tennyson imagined could even be ahead on the horizon for our students and the world they will make.

SAIS is thus challenged today to be great in its central mission—arming the next generation for the battles ahead. Training leaders to move us forward.

In the year before SAIS was founded, Winston Churchill, had this issue of generational leadership on his mind when he addressed Harvard students and military trainees in Cambridge on September 6, 1943. He had come to Harvard to receive an honorary degree after one of his wartime summits with FDR.

It was a critical point in World War II. The allies were on the offensive. The Soviets had stopped the German 6th army of von Paulus at Stalingrad. The British had stopped Rommel at El Alamein. The U.S. and its allies had invaded Sicily. Mussolini's government would fall two days later.

It was clear the allies were going to win the war.

It was equally clear that the U.S. had passed Britain after Pearl Harbor as the world's strongest power.

In this sense, we might view Churchill's visit to Harvard in September 1943 as a passing of the baton of power and leadership from the British Empire to America in that day and year.

His central message to the thousands of young people in Harvard Yard was embedded in a simple declarative sentence.

“The price of greatness is responsibility”, he said. In other words, much was riding on the shoulders of the American people to be responsible as the new global leader in the world.

“The price of greatness is responsibility.”

Churchill went on to warn about the danger of isolation for Americans: “one cannot rise to be in many ways the leading community in the civilized world without being involved in its problems, without being convulsed by its agonies and inspired by its causes.”

Churchill’s call for enlightened, wise, responsible American leadership was exactly the reason for the creation of SAIS one year later.

It remains a vital mission today for an engaged, enlightened American leadership role in the world. With the leadership of the SAIS students here today, we can be that nation once more.

Thank you.