

70th Annual Kermit Roosevelt Lecture: *Leadership in an Uncertain World*

General Robert B. Abrams

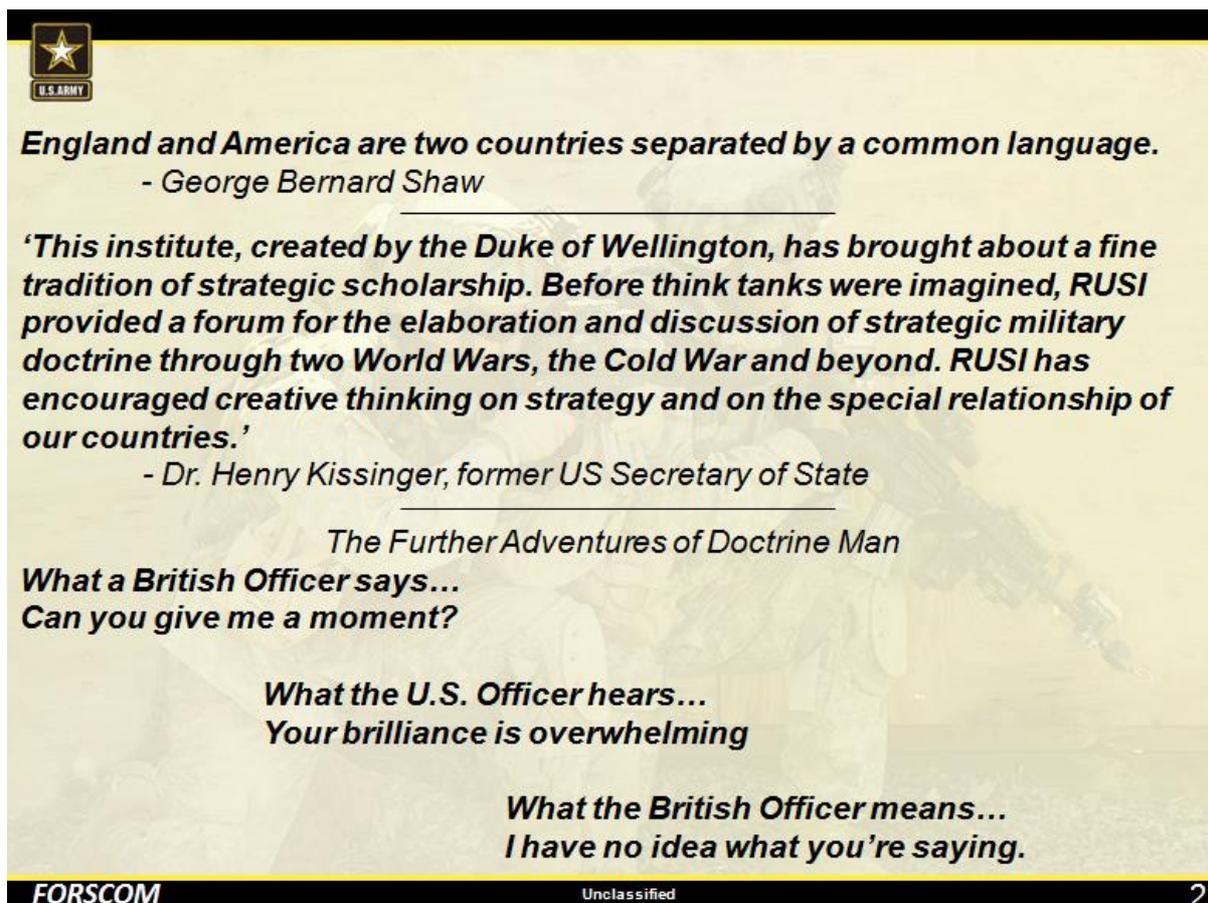
Commanding General US Army Forces Command



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Let me start by saying this will be a little non-traditional and I have to warn you that during the Q&A I am going to get off my chair and I will work the audience. It is not some kind of passive-aggressive behaviour, the truth is I am hearing impaired, so if I can get eyes on your lips then I will be in a much better position to hear your questions. So do not take that for anything other than what it is.

It has truly been an incredible honour and a privilege to be the US representative as part of the Kermit Roosevelt Lecture series. My wife and I arrived Sunday and we have had a whirlwind tour. This is my fourth speaking engagement this week. I have spoken with the army in Tidworth and I was up in Harrogate yesterday talking to the Army in the north; between I spoke to the Staff College.




England and America are two countries separated by a common language.
- George Bernard Shaw

'This institute, created by the Duke of Wellington, has brought about a fine tradition of strategic scholarship. Before think tanks were imagined, RUSI provided a forum for the elaboration and discussion of strategic military doctrine through two World Wars, the Cold War and beyond. RUSI has encouraged creative thinking on strategy and on the special relationship of our countries.'
- Dr. Henry Kissinger, former US Secretary of State

The Further Adventures of Doctrine Man
What a British Officer says...
Can you give me a moment?

What the U.S. Officer hears...
Your brilliance is overwhelming

What the British Officer means...
I have no idea what you're saying.

FORSCOM Unclassified 2

Figure 1

I have opened every presentation with that quote from George Bernard Shaw (Figure 1). What I have learnt this week, as my first official trip here, is that we *are* 'two separate countries divided by a common language' and I have had to learn an awful lot while I am here. I am particularly reminded, of yesterday; I spent about two hours with a very seasoned, senior Sergeant Major from the Royal Irish Regiment and I stopped him at least twenty times to say 'excuse me, but what exactly did you just say?'

Be that as it may, it has just been terrific, the interchange with the officers, the non-commissioned officers and the soldiers that I have had the privilege to meet with this past week. It is heart-warming and it is indicative of this special relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom, and in particular the United States Army and the British Army. Yesterday I was up in Harrogate, and there must have been five hundred people in the auditorium and I said 'who here has served alongside an American soldier since you have been in uniform?' Ninety per cent of that room put up their hands.

If you had asked the same question in 1945 you would have had a similar answer. But if you had asked that question in 2001 there might have been fifteen hands in an audience that size. I made the comment that we are at that same point when Mrs Kermit Roosevelt said that ‘of all the things to honour my husband in his service in both of our armies, I want to ensure that this special relationship, forged in the crucible of ground combat, that we do not lose it’. So this lecture series was started as one way, to ensure that we maintain that very close, special relationship.

When I think back to my predecessors in the lecture series that have been here, it is a bit daunting but I will give you my best shot today. I am acutely aware that my two immediate predecessors in US Army Forces Command, General Mark Milley and General Dan Allyn, were the last two speakers here for the Kermit Roosevelt Lectures series. So you will see no chart, no PowerPoint that tells you who I am, what my mission is, what my priorities are and so forth. I am going to go on the assumption that this audience generally knows what that is.

In preparation for this I asked my team to look for some historical literary references to really catch the audience’s attention right at the beginning... so raise your hand if you know who Doctrine Man is? Be proud, it’s fine! Okay, for the rest of you, he is real. In the three previous audiences, at least seventy per cent of the non-commissioned officers, junior officers, field-grade officers knew who Doctrine Man is. He is not fictitious, he is in the social media space and he has got quite a few followers by the way.

Doctrine Man’s purpose is to promote professional military discussion of strategy, the operational art and occasionally comment about the institution. He has been known to poke a little fun at us (Figure 1). There is this thing when we talk to each other and sometimes things are misunderstood, so my goal is that no one ask me to ‘give me a moment’. That will be a bad message to me; I will take it the wrong way.



Figure 2

So let me talk for a second on the world we live in. In our words we describe this as a volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous world. If we had taken a snapshot just three years ago much of this would have been different. It would have been challenging but it would have been different.

So we have non state actors; you can see there in the upper left, everyone knows who that gentleman is (Figure 2). I am working clockwise. Does everyone recognise those three gentlemen? They were plastered on the front page of every newspaper in the western world, probably in the eastern world as well.

There is a lot of activity in the cyber domain today. I love speaking with junior officers in particular because they will say almost anything to a general officer in a large group; they will shout it out and they are uninhibited. I (recently) asked an audience, 'who do you think are the largest players in the cyber world today?' They threw out some examples; some said Russia, some said China and there was a small pause and then the United States, and you know there is probably some truth to that.

The fact of the matter is that the cyber domain is a contested domain today. It was not that way ten years ago, I am not even sure it was that true five years ago, but it *is* a contested domain today. It is a domain that is contested twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. There are campaigns being conducted in the cyber domain for a variety of different reasons, so if you want to unpack that a bit during questions and answers, I will be happy to address whatever questions you might have.

If we are working around the picture the next image is something we did not think we were going to see again post-1991. That is a column of tanks moving into another country in Eastern Europe. If you had asked me three or four years ago if I thought we would see that, I would have said 'I do not think so'. That is just one of the conventional threats that are out in the world today.

The next picture is of refugees. I am certain that this audience is aware; the audiences I spoke to earlier this week paused on this one. I asked them 'how many refugees came from the Middle East to the European continent in 2015?' There was a pause, they just knew it was a lot. The estimate is about a million. That *is* a lot and that has contributed to this complex, ambiguous environment that we all live in today.

The next picture there are these guerrilla forces who are all over the world. This happens to be a particular group in Syria; they are non-state actors that are challenging the status quo, who are challenging the balance of power and challenging nation states for their own purposes.

Coming next in line there, I am certain everybody – even though this is not in your hemisphere – will recognise, one of many new islands in the South Pacific. These are being created, literally being created, from the ocean. It is quite startling to be honest with you how many of these are now in existence that did not exist three years ago and now some of these have been weaponised. So there is the military element of national power that has been presented on these new islands in the South China Sea.

Then coming around the image (Figure 1) you have got transnational crime and all that is associated with it. That is nothing new by the way but the significance is that the transnational crime syndicate is a network. On that network travels not only illegal narcotics and drugs, today that same network is used for human trafficking. It is the same network that can traffic non-state actors that want to get into and gain access to other countries. It is the same backbone, it is the same series of people getting paid by different people with different aims once they reach their destination, but operating on the same networks. These are tried and proved networks that have been able to move drugs for the last thirty, forty, fifty, sixty years.

Then coming around clockwise there, that is the face of an insurgency on the African continent. We have those popping up in places we really did not understand or see coming, and they have gained more prominence in the last three years.

None of this is a news flash to you; that is not my intent. My intent is to say this is the world we live in, but what is significant is the *rate of change* of this volatility. This uncertainty, the complexity and the ambiguity is steadily increasing. I used this analogy the other day, the old story of boiling a frog. If you take a frog and put

him in boiling water, the moment you put him in, he will jump out immediately and take immediate responsive action.

But if you take the same frog and put him in nice 70 Fahrenheit, lukewarm bath water and gently turn up the heat over time... you will cook him. He will not move, he will not jump, his senses are not capable of dealing with these subtle changes in temperature. So when I think about this world that I just painted for you, sometimes I feel like the boiling frog. We are sitting around and we are watching the temperature rise and we are holding on to whether we are going to jump out of the boiling water and take appropriate action for self-preservation. Again, none of this is secret to this audience.

As the Commanding General in US Army Forces Command, I am the force generator for the United States Army. That is all Active Component forces on the continental United States and all of our National Guard and all of our US Army Reserve, regardless of where they are located – about 800,000 soldiers. I am the one that the Chief and the Secretary of the Army turn to for generating trained and ready forces to fulfil our commitments as part of our national security strategy and our national military strategy across the world.

People ask me about ready forces and our chief has been quoted; about a third of our forces today are at the highest level of readiness and there is a lot of demand for our forces. What I tell our soldiers and our leaders is that in this uncertain world, today more than ever, we have a premium on readiness. It is not about readiness for a known mission that is scheduled that we are going to perform: ten months from now to deploy to this location to perform this mission.

This is about readiness today, readiness this week, to go to a place that we had not planned for, to fulfil one of our commitments, whether that be as part of a treaty, for one of our partners, a friend or some other reason. This is the premium; this is where our focus is. I will talk about where we are focussed on in the future in just a second.

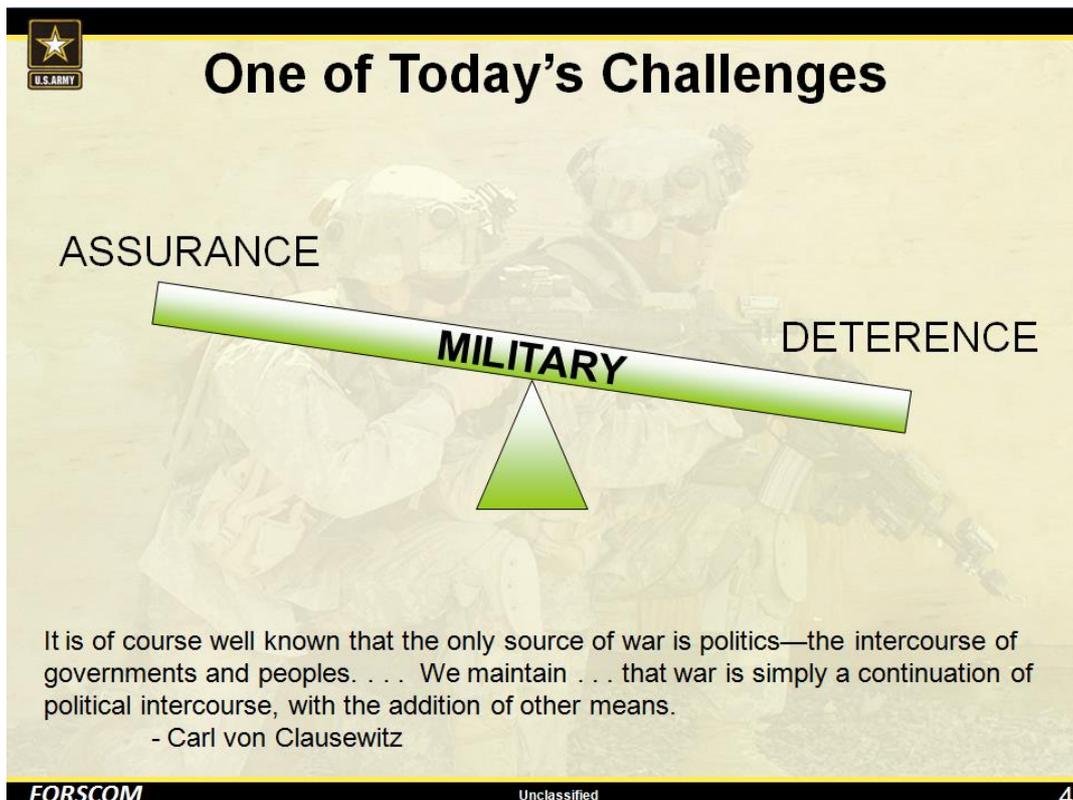


Figure 3

So I thought it was appropriate to throw this up on the chart (Figure 3), really to spark a little debate; I will see how the Q&A goes. This is one that, as the force generator, we spend a lot of time thinking about because we have to support, in accordance with our national security and military strategy, the six geographic combatant commands.

They all have desired end-states that have been given to them, approved by our President, ratified by orders, and sanctioned by the United States Congress and implemented through our civilian leadership through the Secretary of Defence through the unified command plan. And in there is a good dose of both of these: assurance measures and deterrence measures. It is not an either/or proposition; in accordance with our national military strategy we are required to do both. As a force generator, there is a bit of a tension between assurance and deterrence.

So let me talk a second about assurance and again this will sound a little academic, but I am being precise with my language for a reason aside from being on the record. Treaty alliances are at the top. We signed these treaties; they are signed by our executives, the senior executives and the head of state. They are ratified by countries' governing bodies, whether that is a parliament or the Congress of the United States, and they are legally binding in international law.

So when we have a treaty and part of the treaty is that we will provide forward presence to assure that government and the people of that country, or more than one country because we have multiple treaties, that represents a signed, sealed and delivered commitment from the government of the United States that we will be there in accordance with that nation's wish, generally in the size and capability that they desire to be assured. They want to be assured as part of that treaty that we are with them.

So there are plenty of ways to let other countries know that we are with them. I like to use the four generally accepted elements of national power: we have diplomatic ways, we have information ways, and we have the military element of national power and the economic element of national power.

As a soldier, I am acutely aware that many countries, especially in the uncertain world we live in today, are happy with economic assurance, they like the diplomatic assurance, but they really want to know that they are assured we are *with* them, they want our military boots on the ground. That is what gives them the assurance that they know we are with them.

Next level down with our partners, similar arrangements, not necessarily ratified by our congress or parliament or governing bodies, not necessary legally binding in international law, but nonetheless a commitment by the government of the United States, that we are with them.

Then we have our friends, people that we have a lot of common interests with, but maybe there are some differences that we just cannot overcome with a formal relationship. Most often it is some other country's violation of human rights that typically gets in the way of having something more than just being friends or having an informal relationship.

Nonetheless when you look at the totality of our commitment to the world in accordance with our national security strategy we have a lot of commitments to assure a lot of allies, partners and friends. The reason why I stress this is because assurance comes in a lot of ways. It is not always permanently stationed units on the ground; sometimes it is just exercises, sometimes it is just planning activities.

There is a variety of ways that we provide assurance, and you are going to have to take my word for it, but it is extensive. The demand for US forces to conduct assurance activities, whether that is helping build an army, improving an army, help with an institutional capacity building a ministry of defence or ministry of the interior is increasing, it is only increasing.

Often people will say we have a very large standing armed force compared to other countries so why are you stressing this point? We have a lot of requirements and there is value from assurance, but assurance is hard to measure. How do we know that someone is assured? If you want to talk about it during the Q&A I am happy to give you my thoughts but this is part of the challenge.

How much investment is required to support building partner capacity, training, advising, assisting, and just having forward presence? How much does it contribute to our nation's national security objectives of generally keeping peace and stability and security in the world? Many will argue that less is better. Sometimes assurance can be misinterpreted as being provocative, typical American in-your-face-ness, when in fact it is intended to assure someone who is a friend of ours, a partner of ours.

For me the other key piece that I provide, in support of our commanders and the President of the United States, is a credible land force deterrent. Assurance is not universal and certainly not universally acceptable. I gave the example of sometimes our presence being misconstrued, misunderstood, otherwise twisted as being provocative. So to help with the calculus of those that we do not agree with, we have to have a credible deterrent.

So everyone is well aware of how this all started, at the end of the Second World War we developed and used a nuclear weapon; since then it has been a pretty credible deterrent. We have other members of the world that also have that nuclear weapon capability. We can argue about the purpose for these weapons, but they were first and foremost to give us a qualitative edge in a long war that was costing us a great deal.

I will not question the judgement of those leaders that made those decisions, but it did have the desired effect and it ended the war. We can argue the human rights element and so forth, but I do not really want to get into that today because that is not my point, but that was really our 'first offset'.

Our 'second offset', when we were grossly outnumbered by threats in the Cold War, was developing a whole suite of precision weapons that would enable us to strike deep with great accuracy and impunity from long distances enabled by a global network of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capability. So that gave us an offset, a qualitative advantage, to add to this credible deterrent for those that wanted to challenge us and challenge our national security.

Today there is this great debate going on in America about a 'third offset' but I do not really want to get into the pros and cons of that. My message to you is that from ground forces, my domain, a credible deterrent means we have to have a demonstrated capability and a willingness to use it. Otherwise if it is not a demonstrated capability and we have shown that we have the willingness to use it, it is a paper tiger. It looks good, parades well, but that will not change someone else's calculus if they want to engage.

No presentation to an audience like this, where we are going to talk about strategy, can be complete without a little reminder from Mr Clausewitz, that these wars people enter into are merely an extension of politics. My role, again, is force generator, providing trained and ready forces.

We are that iron fist from the ground, battle tested, that provides our country a credible land deterrent, demonstrated capability and willingness to use it. We can demonstrate that through small exercises and large exercises. There is a variety of exercises and if you want to talk about that in Q&A I will be ready.



Looking to the future...

- Sustain expertise in Wide Area Security (Train Advise Assist, COIN)
- Strengthen expertise in conducting Combined Arms Maneuver
- Sustain the Total Force
- Assure our allies, partners, and friends through theater security cooperation
- ...all with fiscal uncertainty

"We have gotten into the fashion of talking of cavalry tactics, artillery tactics, and infantry tactics. This distinction is nothing but mere abstraction. There is but one art, and that is the tactics of the combined arms."
-Major Gerald Gilbert, British Army, 1907

FORSKOM Unclassified 5

Figure 4

Let me tell you what we're doing in the United States Army. You know what we have predominantly been doing for the last fifteen years. We have conducted a major campaign in the Middle East, in Iraq, and then into Afghanistan and after the initial campaign we transitioned in many cases into counter-insurgency operations.

Then it evolved over time. We still conducted counter-insurgency operations and we also invested a significant amount of time and energy to train, advise, and assist host nation security forces, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan, so they can provide a viable military to secure their own people and their own country. That is what we have been about for the last fifteen years. We were not very good at it at the beginning. Some of you might say we are still not very good at it and I would be happy to have that discussion with you if you want.

But I am proud of our army. We were not very good at it at the beginning; we did not understand culture, language. We really did not understand the significance of history, of the other campaigns that had been fought and conducted by other countries, with the British Army being one in both of those countries. We under-appreciated it and as a result we paid the price early on but we pride ourselves, in our army at least, on being a learning organisation and sharing lessons learned. We went to school on other people's experiences.

This is actually my third trip to the UK. My first was January of 2004 on the eve of my division's deployment to Iraq. My Commanding General at the time, Major General Pete Chiarelli, was trying to really expand our knowledge and understanding of counter-insurgency; this was really peaking over the edge of our transition to stability operations and we did not really understand counter-insurgency and we knew there was one in Iraq.

So we thought let's reach out and he had some people that he had served with in the British Army. He reached out and called his old friend and said 'hey, you guys have been dealing with an insurgency of your own for thirty years. Can you help us out?' And he said 'no problem' so we came here in the middle of the night, landing in Heathrow. We spent two days with the Operational Training and Advisory Group (OPTAG) and

learned everything we could. We got back on the plane in the middle of the night and flew back to America and we have been learning ever since, so today we are actually really good at it.

I have been in our army for the last thirty-four years and this is the best version of our army that I have been in. The best trained, most combat experienced, most operational experienced. Kids are bright, young, energetic, committed, and focussed. When soldiers came into the United States Army pre-9/11, in 2000 and 2001, yes they knew they were signing up to be soldiers. They knew they were taking an oath to defend our country and our ideals. They knew that combat was a possibility but it was a distant possibility. So they came in for a variety of reasons.

Soldiers in our army today know exactly what they are getting into. They know they will be deployed. They know the uncertain world that we live in. They know our country will use its military instrument of national power to achieve desired outcomes in a variety of circumstances and they know there is a high chance that they will enter into ground combat at some point in their career. They are eyes wide open, clear eyed, and they do not hesitate.

Those of you who may have heard that we have a challenge recruiting; not really, we are doing pretty good and the kids we have today, yes they have different pastimes and hobbies and they do not spend as much time outdoors while growing up as we would like and come in a little soft around the middle and a little chewy, but they are no less committed than those who entered into our service in 1940, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990. They are just a different version of an American soldier. I am very proud of them, as you can tell.

We have got to sustain this capacity. If I was asked today 'we need you to send an infantry platoon, pick them up and send them to an African nation, 45 days, I want you to fall in on a county-like area and I want you to improve the professionalism of a local police force. Train them self-defence, how to be professional, how to follow rule of law' I would have no hesitation.

I would remind you a US infantry platoon is led by a Lieutenant somewhere between one to two years of service. He is ably supported by a Sergeant First Class with nine years' service. He has got two or three Staff Sergeants who have been in the army five or six years with three combat deployments. Everybody else in that platoon is a young soldier who has probably never deployed, but is eager to. So we tell them:

'Go to this African nation and be there next week. There is no time for you to learn the culture or the language. We are going to throw at you some international monitors from the UN and they will assist you as a law enforcement professional and give you some expertise. There will be nine governmental organisations operating in your area, so help them out by providing some logistics and if they come to you for help take appropriate action. Here is an interpreter that you have never met before but meet on the ground and be professional. Oh and media; show up and deal with the media. You are free to engage with the media when they show up.'

I would have no hesitation choosing a rifle platoon today from our army and sending them on that mission. Why? Because the operational experience of our non-commissioned officers gives me great comfort to know we can handle anything. Our non-commissioned officers today and our junior officers are perfectly comfortable in that very uncertain environment. They would not hesitate or blink an eyelid; they would be excited about it.

If you had thrown that challenge to me when I was a young Lieutenant in West Germany, on our mission along the border, I would have thought about throwing up in the corner. A bit frightening, you want me to do what? We have come a long, long way and we have got phenomenal expertise. We recognise this is a core mission for our army of the future and we have to sustain it. In our doctrine we call this Wide Area Security (Figure 4), so you see why we have to sustain this proficiency.

The next line there (Figure 4), we are focussed like a laser beam on this particular aspect: Combined Arms Manoeuvre. This is the integration of manoeuvre, fires, joint fires, rotary wing aviation, fixed wing aviation, and all of our other combat enablers: sappers, electronic warfare, military intelligence, and unmanned aerial systems. It is the bringing together of all this capability, like a symphony orchestra leader to make it really sound and to achieve the results that we want in conducting ground operations in near-peer competition. We do have near-peer competitors in the world and we have to be able to deal with them should it come to that.

So this is something we have been working on for a couple of years because in all candour when we were focussed for fourteen or fifteen years on counter-insurgency, our combined arms manoeuvre war-fighting skills had gotten a little rusty, a lot rusty, because we had been focussed on other things. So a couple of years ago we changed our focus, as our commitments 'down-range' decreased significantly and gave us time and space to get back and really sustain our expertise in Combined Arms Manoeuvre. Happy to talk about that in Q&A if you want.

We have got to sustain our Total Force (Figure 4). As I mentioned earlier, I have responsibility not only for nine active duty divisions but I also have responsibility for 340,000 US Army National Guardsmen, something you do not have here in the UK, and 195,000 men and women US Army reservists; we call that the Total Force. Many of you who have studied us recently know there has been a bit of a dip with relationships inside our army. We are not very proud of it, but 'it is what it is', to use the vernacular of today. It does not matter how we got here, what matters is that as an army we are reducing in size.

For us, reducing the size of our army to 980,000 is a significant emotional event based on all the commitments that we know to be in accordance with our defence strategic guidance and we will need all 980,000 to fulfil our commitments. All of them, including defending our homeland, and ensuring they are trained and ready. So one of my prime responsibilities from the Secretary of the Army and our Chief is to sustain our Total Army and that is something I work on every single day.

We have to assure our allies and partners, our friends. We do that through theatre Security Cooperation (Figure 4). That could be exercises, it could be that platoon I described in some West African nation. Oh, by the way, as of last week we have about five of those platoons sprinkled on the African continent doing exactly what I just described and they are doing magnificently. We have got to continue to do that. It is important for us to continue to do that; important for our partners and friends and allies.

We do this all in a country with fiscal uncertainty. That probably falls on deaf ears with this audience, but again it is a challenge for us when we plan a budget of our size to deliver the capability that we need to meet our national security strategy and we do it one year at a time. If we were running a business we would have been bankrupt many, many years ago. If we have businessmen in our audience, I know that you do not do it that way and it causes us challenges. It is an internal political debate in United States. If you want to ask me about it you can. I probably will not answer it but I am happy to entertain your question. Suffice to say it does impact on our force.

It impacts on our ability to meet our responsibilities. It impacts on our ability to have the readiness that is required, total readiness, where we are able to man and compensate our force appropriately. It impacts our ability to provide adequate funding for trained ready-equipped units and a modernized force that is capable of delivering on the requirements that are laid out in our defence and strategic guidance.

So we have made some strategic choices; it is not a secret. We have sort of mortgaged a lot of our modernisation plans, at least for the army, so that we can provide a trained and ready force to meet the requirements of the uncertain world that we live in. This is our challenge. This is a calculated risk on our part, but it is too important for our nation and frankly we think it is too important for the world.

So I am going to end there. I really appreciate the opportunity to engage with this audience. It has been a real treat for me and my wife to be in the United Kingdom and it has been a whirlwind tour. But in the spirit of Kermit Roosevelt, I can look all of you not in uniform in the eye and tell you that there *is* a special relationship between these two armies and we are all committed, from my generation down to the youngest generation.

We are committed to sustaining that special relationship between our two armies. We are the ones giving the blood and treasure. We have done it, time and time again, in dirt across the world. We know we will have to do it again. We are committed to sustaining that special relationship.

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