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# Leadership in a Time of Rapidly Changing National Security Challenges

A CONVERSATION WITH MIKE MULLEN  
*Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*

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**FLETCHER FORUM:** *This edition of The Forum aims to take a local approach in its study of international affairs. With this in mind, we are interested in learning more about your earliest years in Los Angeles. What role did those years and your experiences play in setting you on your career path?*

**MIKE MULLEN:** I was raised in the entertainment industry in a little town

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**Mike Mullen** is considered one of the most influential Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in history. He took a fresh approach to the most important issues of the twenty-first century, including America's global positioning and how business trends and the economic health of the United States directly impact our national security. He is widely recognized as an "honest broker" in his key leadership roles as the top military advisor to two presidents—Barack Obama and George W. Bush—as well as to the Secretary of Defense and the National Security Council. He continues to maintain strong relationships with leaders around the globe. He led the military during a critical period of transition, overseeing the end of the combat mission in Iraq and the development of a new military strategy for Afghanistan. He advocated for the rapid development and fielding of innovative technologies, championed emerging and enduring international partnerships, and advanced new methods for combating terrorism—all of which directly culminated in the elimination of Osama bin Laden. As the first Chairman of the Joint Chiefs to have attended Harvard Business School's executive program, Mullen sought the advice of economists, entrepreneurs, and non-profit practitioners and embraced social media both to inform himself and strengthen ties between the U.S. military and the nation. In an unprecedented in-depth feature article, *Fast Company* called Mullen "not just a new model for military officers—and a new kind of business titan—but also a case study in twenty-first-century leadership." Today he shares with audiences his deep experience in leading change in complex organizations, executive development and succession planning, diversity implementation, crisis management, strategic planning, budget policy, congressional relations, risk management, technical innovation, and cybersecurity.

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near Hollywood called Studio City, CA. My parents instilled in me a great set of values which guide me to this day. My father, who was a publicist, and my mother were both in the entertainment industry. That's how they met. Both could write and message. As a kid, I don't think I paid a lot of attention to that, but as I reflect and look back, the impact they had on me—the importance of the free press, the ability to message and communicate through a lot of mediums—was pretty extraordinary. That became more obvious to me as I became a more senior officer. That business is a pretty rough business, as tantalizing and glamorous as it is, and as a teenager, I started to see the less glamorous side in terms of personalities and egos. I don't remember consciously deciding this, but I was not overly attracted to it. Also, I was a basketball player and I had a hankering to go to school on the East Coast somewhere. I went to a small Catholic high school and I was recruited to play basketball at Navy. I made the decision to get on a plane and fly to Baltimore to go to Annapolis in 1964 and never looked back. I was the oldest of five and we didn't have a lot of money, so the scholarship aspect of it was attractive. I really enjoyed the interaction with my classmates from all over the country. Over the course of forty-seven years, that aspect of it—being with extraordinary people, meeting people from all over—had a huge influence on me. It all started in a small town in Southern California.

**FORUM:** *You served as Commander of the Allied Joint Force Command in Naples, Italy beginning in October 2004. What did that experience teach you about the nature of the NATO alliance? What are its strengths and its shortcomings, and what do you make of the present tensions within the alliance today?*

**MULLEN:** The Commander of the Allied Joint Forces Command is a Navy Four-Star job and a NATO job, filled by a U.S. Navy Admiral. In 2004, there were a number of significant issues with respect to the relationship between the United States and NATO. There were European countries who were opposed to the United States being involved in the Iraq War. It's one thing to read about it, but a whole other thing to live it, dealing with diplomats and military leaders from these other countries who opposed the war. One country that stood out in that regard was France. Second, just before I arrived in September, NATO had agreed to lead a training mission in Iraq, and I was the Operational Commander of that NATO mission. That was my first entrée to Iraq and the Iraq War. It would not be my last.

Within the Alliance, the war was an extremely controversial issue. Heads of state had agreed to this mission, but what was immediately obvious

to me was that inside some of the countries that had voted in favor of this mission, significant players like finance ministers and foreign ministers had started to undermine the intent of their own country. All of this was playing out because of the Iraq War. Third, I commanded 17,000 ground troops in Kosovo and Bosnia; this was coming out of the Balkans conflicts in the 1990s and the early 2000s. This was my first time commanding ground forces, which was an opportunity to learn and grow. I spent a fair amount of time on the ground with units from various countries. One of the things that really jumped off the page at me were the ties between the unit commanders—some of them as junior as an Army Captain—and their capitals, because what they did on the ground had immense influence and potential political impact, particularly downsides, for political leaders, including heads of state. The ties of the political leadership to the company commander who had 100 to 150 peacekeeping troops on the ground in Kosovo were very enlightening.

Those were lessons that I would carry forward with me as we figured out coalition operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and in jobs that I was subsequently in. This was not my first NATO job. I had operated with NATO over the course of my career. That time also validated the importance of the relationships and the critical nature of those relationships. While NATO is a military alliance, it also exists inside politics, so it plays a joint role in these countries. Those were four major lessons I learned during my short seven months in Naples.

The NATO alliance is even more important now than it was then. In the 2004 to 2005 time frame, we were working our way through trying to develop a constructive relationship with Russia. Putin was there at the time. We didn't understand the danger of Russia back then, but I think we can see that danger very clearly now. Undermining or breaking up NATO would be a huge mistake. In fact, we need to be strengthening NATO and strengthening relationships, not moving in the other direction.

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**FORUM:** *During your time in Europe, did you see any indications of the populist threat to European unity and liberal democratic systems of government? What implications does the rise of populism have for shared transatlantic security interests?*

**MULLEN:** I was stationed in Europe in 2004 and 2005, after which I came back to be the head of the Navy. When I was Chairman from 2007 to 2011, I spent a lot of time in Europe. From 2001 to 2011, I saw no indications of the rise of populism in Europe. For me, the fact that we did not engage in Syria opened up a significant group of challenges, not least of which was the refugee crisis, which facilitated—not caused, but uncorked—populism. This was already existent just beneath the surface in countries like Hungary and France. I would even argue that's what Brexit is about in the United Kingdom. So, in retrospect, the lack of control over events in Syria in a way that helped the country and its people was what exploded into the death of half a million Syrian citizens. The subsequent refugee crisis facilitated a wave of political unrest and populism across the continent. This is fundamentally changing Europe.

**FORUM:** *In 2005, you became the twenty-eighth Chief of Naval Operations (CNO). What were your priorities for the Navy, and how did you seek to integrate U.S. naval power into the full arsenal of U.S. military capabilities? What do you think are the greatest challenges and opportunities facing the Navy today?*

**MULLEN:** My top priority for the Navy was to build the Navy out. We were in a position in 2005 that if we kept doing what we were doing, just from a ship-building standpoint, the fleet size would continue to shrink dramatically. I wanted to turn that around and stabilize it. I directed an extensive analysis of how many ships were needed and for what. That study generated a fleet size of 313 ships. That number has generally stood the test of time. My successors have raised that number based on the current needs up to around 355.

The challenge facing the Navy right now, as well as all the military services, is to figure out how they're going to conduct warfare in the

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..... future. It's not going to be with aircraft carriers and submarines or tanks and airplanes exclusively. The whole issue of gray zone conflicts, like what Russia did in Crimea, and what is going on in Ukraine, as well as issues of space, electromagnetic warfare, and cybersecurity, are going to be huge in the future. It is

..... very difficult for all the services, the Navy included, to convert themselves into a fighting force for the future. The age-old adage is that we are always fighting the last war. As simple as it sounds, why is that always out there?

That is what we are fighting against. There is a lot of entrenched history and technology and tactics and operations that you need to move away from as you look to the future. So, back to 2005, my number one goal was to build a navy that could actually grow instead of getting smaller. We were on a path to be a navy with about 200 to 210 ships, which was not going to be a global force. You would not have had enough ships to do the kind of work we needed to do.

My second priority was really focused on people, particularly a diverse workforce including women and minorities. I believe that if we are a force that is just made up of white men, we are going to detach ourselves from the demographics of the United States. And with that detachment, we will go on to lose credibility, visibility, and we will eventually become irrelevant. I put a tremendous amount of emphasis here.

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The third priority was creating readiness to fight and making sure we created readiness in depth. Those readiness accounts—making sure our people account was robust, our technology investment was significant, and that our maintenance and monitoring systems were up to date—were critical. Those were my top three priorities that I would routinely focus on wherever I went.

As far as integrating the Navy into the Joint Force, because we were at war in Iraq and Afghanistan, I directed the Navy to provide thousands of sailors on the ground to support our Army and Marine Corps troops on the ground. There were, at one point, up to 11,000 sailors on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan.

**FORUM:** *As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, you oversaw the end of the combat mission in Iraq and the development of a new military strategy for Afghanistan. In each of these cases, how did your understanding of the local contexts influence strategic planning? How did you balance reacting to developments on the ground and planning for long-term U.S. strategic interests?*

**MULLEN:** The importance of understanding what is happening on the ground in any job, in any profession, is essential. The more senior you are,

the more difficult that is. I spent a lot of time on the ground when I took over as Chairman. I am a sailor, and I had two ground wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and a third one, which was the fight against terrorists. So I spent a lot of time on the ground. It was absolutely critical, and I really worked hard to integrate my knowledge, what I personally both observed and studied on the ground, into the strategic decisions that I was making at the Chairman's level. That model is a great one for any leader in any profession.

The best metric I can give you is when I was CNO, my goal was to be out of town about 25 percent of the time. When I was Chairman, because of the wars, I increased my time out of D.C. to 40 percent. I was taking a significant risk because you need to be present in the meetings in D.C. You need to be close to the players. That was how important it was to me, and thus I took the risk of being gone a lot.

**FORUM:** *During the Obama administration, you traveled regularly to Pakistan to meet and negotiate with Pakistani leaders. What are the key takeaways from your time working on U.S.-Pakistan relations? What path forward do you see for the relationship, particularly with regard to the future of Afghanistan?*

**MULLEN:** The driver for me was the Vietnam War. It is very clear that we did not win that war in great part because there were enemy safe-havens in the countries next door, in Laos and Cambodia. Given the threat of the Taliban and other terrorists, such as al-Qaeda, and the safe haven they had in Pakistan, we were not going to be able to win in Afghanistan without Pakistan's assistance. The most influential and powerful person in Pakistan was the Army Chief. I met with him frequently. Strategically, that was critical; it remains relevant today, even in the midst of the Afghanistan peace talks. At some point we're going to have to include Pakistan in the current peace talks, either visibly or invisibly. If we don't get them aboard, they will continue to disrupt what goes on between those two countries. India is also a big part of this. I came to believe, as a result of my time in Pakistan and India, that until we unlock Kashmir and fix that problem, India and Pakistan don't have any chance of getting along.

The other country that has a very strong relationship with Pakistan is China. Since I retired in 2011, Pakistan has not been prioritized by the United States. I've watched Pakistan drift under the umbrella of China. I think that is where Pakistan could end up, with Pakistan and China on one side and the United States and India on the other. I do not think that is good for China, and I do not think that is good for the United States, and

I certainly do not think it's good for India and Pakistan. The people, more than anything else, the Indian people and the Pakistani people, will suffer the most.

**FORUM:** *In 2010, you expressed strong support for President Obama's repeal of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy and took a lead role in dismantling the policy. How do you remember this moment? How does the repeal fit into the broader evolution of the U.S. military and its culture?*

**MULLEN:** With respect to integrating and accepting gay individuals, the military was lagging behind the rest of the country. Historically, at least with African Americans, we were leaders with the integration of minorities; in this area, we were a follower. When I listened to then-candidate Obama in 2008 say that this was a priority for him, I put together a small group to go study the issue. Inside Washington, not just inside the Pentagon, there had been very little study since 1993, which was the time the policy of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" had been put into place.

As I did my own research, and had others do it for me—over the course of almost two years from 2008 to 2010—what I came to believe is that the military had to be a leader on this, and as the senior-most military officer in the country, that obviously would involve me. I became convinced of the downsides of the current policy, the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy. The military is a values-based institution, and the most important value is integrity. I testified in Congress that I could not reconcile how an institution founded on integrity could ask people to come to work every day and lie about who they are. That was intensified by the fact that gay and lesbian troops were dying for our country in Iraq and Afghanistan at that point, while being forced by a policy to lie about who they were.

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With something as politically contentious as this, you never know if it's going to work. I was on a trip overseas with a United Service Organizations show in December 2010, having testified the previous February on this policy, fully expecting this legislation to die. It had been passed in the House the previous year. In a very short couple of days there were a handful of Senators who came out in favor of the bill, and it went

from what I thought was completely dead to passed legislation seemingly overnight. I had also spoken with several of my counterparts from other countries who had already made this shift, and they had seen the same kind of debate where it sounded like the world was going to end. In the end, one said to me, it was a “nothing sandwich.” That’s exactly what it turned out to be in the United States. Implementing the change, even in a time of war, has gone smoothly.

**FORUM:** *You have made the argument that the top national security threat facing the United States is the national debt. How does the level of the national debt threaten the U.S. military and the American people? How do you see this threat, and possible solutions, developing in the future?*

**MULLEN:** I don’t know what the solutions are. Medical costs are the elephant in the room. We have an unsustainable tab to pay for our Medicare and Medicaid programs. The other program that I would include is Social Security. If we wait long enough to address this, Social Security will become a crisis as well. There are adjustments that could be made right now in Social Security, like raising the starting age, that could actually contain the downside of the social security cost and figure out how to pay for it.

When I was asked that question about the greatest threat by a reporter—I think it was in 2010—I actually did not make it up. I had thought about it a fair amount. I am somebody that believes that when economies go really well, countries and regions are much more stable, and the workload for our military and militaries around the world decreases significantly. The opposite is also true. Back then, the debt was around \$10 trillion. I do not have to say much except that here we are in 2019, nine years later, and it is \$22 trillion, with the expectation for increasing growth in the next decade. Nobody is doing anything about it. I think it is border-

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line criminal that leaders won’t take this issue on, because all future generations are going to live with this. I still think it is the most significant threat we have to our country.

According to simple math from a national security perspective, as defense takes up about half the discretionary funding available to the nation, you are going to see that part of the pie shrink. One of the reasons that I felt the way I did then and do now is we are not going to have resources for

national security. In the next few years, the size of interest on our debt is going to be the same as the annual budget for the Pentagon. It is a much more complex issue than what I just laid out, but at the high level, it is still at the top of my list for the top-level threat facing our country.

**FORUM:** *You served two commanders-in-chief as the top officer in the U.S. military. How would you describe their different leadership styles and approaches to foreign policy? What qualities do you think are most important for U.S. leaders addressing today's major global challenges?*

**MULLEN:** I have never commented on the differences between Presidents Bush and Obama, so I will not do that now. They are two men who care deeply about our country. Obviously, they have different worldviews. I think that's been pretty well articulated over time. I think their foreign policy speaks volumes about that.

Separately, I am concerned about the lack of leaders globally who can move us forward in what is an increasingly challenging environment. You've mentioned the debt. I would add the re-emergence of Russia, the emergence of China, while the threat from terrorists is also still out there. I think the cyber threat is existential to our way of life. In a way, the overall environment is tougher now than it was during the Cold War.

Also, whether you like politics or not, it takes bold leadership in the political arena to make the decisions that solve really tough problems. Individuals that expose themselves in the current environment and in the

current news cycle—they get stripped to the bone and torn apart. We are lacking leaders because people just will not come out and put up with that. We need great leaders in the future. I don't know who they will be or what they'll come from. I worry that the United States is in a steady decline and it will take some catastrophic event to occur out of which a consensus leader will emerge to heal our divisions and take America to a future which restores the American Dream.

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**FORUM:** *Based on your experience, what advice do you have for young people interested in embarking on a career in the military or in public service more broadly?*

**MULLEN:** Public service is hugely important and it is an incredibly rewarding part of one's life. This is tied to what I said about the lack of  
 ..... leaders—if we've got lousy people  
*Public service is hugely* in public service, you cannot expect  
*important and it is an* anything but lousy results. So we need  
*incredibly rewarding part of* people to raise their hands and fill  
*one's life.* these critical jobs that really can make  
 ..... a difference in the world, or for our  
 country, state, or city. I think we are  
 going to need more and more of that. I  
 have spent almost eight years in the private sector. In terms of satisfaction  
 and gratification and making a difference and impact on people globally, I  
 could not have been in a better place and feel really fortunate to have had  
 the opportunity to serve our nation for over forty-three years. I encourage  
 young people to do it as often as they possibly can. *f*