



WORLDVIEWS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

A Monograph Series

U.S. Security in a World of Discontent

A Conversation with
Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Stephen Cheney



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The views expressed in this monograph are entirely those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the staff, officers or advisors of the Global Connections Foundation, the University of Central Florida's Global Perspectives Office or UCF's Political Science Department.

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Q: What are the United States' most-pressing security concerns?

Stephen Cheney: The American Security Project (ASP), a non-partisan organization, was founded to help people understand the evolving nature of national security in this century. Some of our biggest challenges, both short-term and long-term, are climate change, energy security and nuclear security. These issues are interrelated, and we can also draw a line from them to various international matters that create worries for the United States.

Q: Could you provide a specific example?

A: Consider that from 2007 to 2011, Syria had the worst drought in its history. That catastrophe drove a significant part of the country's population into the cities, which happened to occur in the period leading up to the Arab Spring. Many people revolted against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad after he ordered attacks on population centers, especially in Aleppo, the country's largest city. The connection is that climate change was an accelerant of tensions, and helped foster the Arab Spring because of rising wheat prices and other disruptions.

Q: Upheaval in Syria has also contributed to the strengthening of terrorist groups such as ISIS, with repercussions recently in Paris, San Bernadino and elsewhere. What can be done?

A: Terrorism was one of our original focal issues at ASP, and still is. Most importantly, we need to take a lesson from our experience in Iraq, and recognize that the U.S. military isn't the answer to dealing with terrorism. For much of our history, it was common to turn to the U.S. military to uphold our security. It's a different world today.

Let's look at what happened in Iraq after the United States intervened there in 2003. Despite our early military victory and the ousting of Saddam Hussein, the situation quickly deteriorated, exacerbated by the fact that the U.S.-led administrators decided to disband the Iraqi army. That left a large number of armed Sunnis with nothing to do. Many of them joined the insurgency, which came to be dominated by Al-Qaeda in Iraq. If you look back at various insurrections, it becomes clear that if you lack the support of the local population, you're not going to win. However, in Al Anbar province, a large, Sunni-dominated part of Iraq, many of the Sunnis began to realize that al-Qaeda was much worse than us. They flipped, supported us, and helped defeat al-Qaeda in Iraq and push the remnants of it into Syria.

Q: Which meant the story didn't end there.

A: Unfortunately, no. One result was result was the formation of ISIS, which has since seized control of parts of Syria and Iraq. It's had a measure of success, especially because of ongoing resentment and high youth unemployment, and its reach has extended via the Internet to other countries. To combat ISIS, you could throw in a division or two, and perhaps create a safe zone. But for how long and toward what end? As I said earlier, the military isn't the answer. Instead, we need to combine all of our capabilities – diplomatic, economic, ideological, technological and, yes, military – to deal with the threat.

Q: You mentioned climate change above. Why is it such a pressing concern?

A: Climate change has been a plank issue since ASP's inception. The point that we try to drive home consistently is that there are long-term, huge threats posed by climate change, both tactical and strategic. Tactically, our physical military bases and stations are threatened by climate change because they're going to go under water. Norfolk, Diego Garcia and dozens of others over the next 30 to 60 years will be flooded. They'll have to adapt or disappear. But we also have to deal with the strategic question, the cause of climate change, with CO2 pollution being the main problem. The bottom line is that we have to persuade all countries to curb CO2 pollution.

Q: Give us a sense of what the worst-case scenario for climate change might produce.

A: The polar ice caps melt at a dramatically higher rate. There's a sea-level rise of two to three feet. Major U.S. cities – including Baltimore, Miami and New York – on the east coast experience severe flooding. People here and in other parts of the world, potentially in the hundreds of millions, have to move. Terrorist organizations take advantage of the situation, especially among the unemployed youth, and engineer attacks. The entire northern sea route opens up in the Arctic. Countries decide to ship through Russian waters, and Moscow decides to tax, fortify and militarize the Arctic. Catastrophic weather events intensify times 10.

Now, that's a pretty dire picture, but it's within the realm of possibility. The sad part is we know what's happening and causing it, but people are sticking their heads in the sand, and essentially leaving the problem to their kids and grandkids. There's no reason for that to happen.

Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Stephen Cheney is the Chief Executive Officer of the American Security Project (ASP) and a member of the Department of State's Foreign Affairs Policy Board. He is a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and has over 30 years' experience as a Marine. His career included a wide variety of command and staff positions with the operating forces and the supporting establishment. His primary specialty was artillery, but he focused extensively on entry-level training, commanding at every echelon at both Marine Corps Recruit Depots, to include being the Commanding General at Parris Island. He served several years in Japan and has traveled extensively throughout the Middle East and Asia. Other selected highlights of his military career include tours as Deputy Executive Secretary to Defense Secretaries Cheney and Aspin; ground plans officer for Drug Enforcement Policy in the Pentagon; liaison to the Congressional Commission on Roles and Missions of the Armed Forces; and Inspector General of the Marine Corps. Following retirement from the Marines, he became the Chief Operating Officer for Business Executives for National Security (BENS), in Washington, D.C., and most recently was President/CEO of the Marine Military Academy in Harlingen, Texas. He is a graduate of the Marine Corps Command and Staff College, the National War College, and the University of Southern California. He was a military fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York City, and is presently a member. He is also a member of the Secretary of State's International Security Advisory Board. He has been on the Board of Directors for ASP since 2006. This interview was conducted by Worldviews Editor John C. Bersia on December 8, 2015.