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SOCOM: POLICING THE WORLD

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SOCOM POLICING THE WORLD

(1:15 p.m.)

MR. SWAN: Okay. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, hope you've had a great lunch and some time to meet and greet one another. My name is Guy Swan, I'm the vice president at the Association of the United States Army, former commanding general of U.S. Army North, the Army's component of U.S. Northern Command, but I'm most proud to be a member of the Clark Ervin Aspen Institute Homeland Security Group. So thank you, Clark.

It's my privilege this afternoon to introduce the next session SOCOM: Policing the World. It will come no surprise to this group that the Trump administration's approach to foreign crises and the use of military power is clearly different than that of its predecessor. Having said that, there is one significant capability that has been and continues to be leveraged by both administrations, Special Operations Forces. To discuss the role of this important element of the U.S. Military in responding to flashpoints around the world and building partner nation capacity to provide for their own defense, it is my good friend, commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, General Tony Thomas. Moderating this session is Catherine Herridge, and this audience knows Catherine very well as the award-winning chief intelligence correspondent for the Fox News channel.

Catherine was the first major television network correspondent assigned to the Homeland Security beat back in 2001. Now she covers intelligence, the Justice Department, as well as the Department of Homeland Security. So at this point, I'd like to turn it over to Catherine, but let's give them both a warm Aspen welcome.

(Applause)

MS. HERRIDGE: I'd like to thank the Aspen Institute, Clark Kent Ervin, Walter Isaacson, John Hogan and his team. So General Thomas, what do you say we unpack the title of our panel first? Is that how you see it?

GEN. THOMAS: I'd love to unpack the title. Truthfully, it gives us an opportunity to debunk some mysticism about Special Operations Command. Clearly we are not the world's cop, we are not a panacea. We don't do anything by ourselves, and we aren't doing things that aren't, you know, highly supervised, so there's no off-the-reservation, wild Indian activity. So if it implies that, I'd like to dispel that right from the beginning. What I do think it does impart is that we are very, very relevant to most, if not all the national security challenges that have been discussed over the -- through this forum and they're certainly discussed in other forums. I think we're a great return on investment. I hope you'll think that when you consider for all our varied activities, right now 8,000 people in 80 different countries around the world.

We're doing that on 2 percent of the DOD budget, and 2 percent of the DOD manpower. The concern is, and I think that what the title gets is are we over-employed? Are we over-used? Are we over-extended, or used inappropriately, and truthfully that's something we look at all the time. We are actively trying to work ourselves out of a job everywhere where we are, whether that's concluding in a peaceful environment for some of the early discussions we had for Afghanistan and I've been there every year since 2001 except for the year 2008. I spent that lovely year in Mosul, Iraq, so I know that fight intimately. We're anxious to, you know, to finish there, to win, but as we try and work ourselves out of a job, that's one way we can reduce the operations tempo for our command, and we're also trying to leverage others. I mean, again we don't do anything by ourselves. We're probably guilty of trying to do too much for ourselves from time to time, but whether it's trying to leverage our other partners in DOD, our allies, the -- our interagency partners, we're actively trying to do that to reduce the tempo while we prepare for other things because there hasn't exactly been a peace dividend or a respite in our portfolio now or lately and we need to stay ready for that. So that's the balance.

MS. HERRIDGE: You've been working the

counterterrorism problems now for 37 years?

GEN. THOMAS: I've been in the military for 37 years. Certainly very focused on the CT problems since 9/11. I was ranger battalion commander and deployed to Afghanistan about 2-3 months after that as a lieutenant colonel. So I laugh now when I read the articles that the generals are all at fault. I kind of take that personally, and then I think, wait a minute, I was lieutenant colonel when this all started. You know, I shouldn't take it too personally, but reality is we've all been at this for a while and we've made huge gains in some regards and in other places we've allowed a phenomenon to metastasize and we've got a lot of work left to be done.

MS. HERRIDGE: Some people here may not realize that General Thomas really played a central role in the take-down of Osama bin Laden in 2011. Take us through that moment when you knew that we had him.

GEN. THOMAS: You've got to go there. I did not shoot Bin Laden.

(Laughter)

GEN. THOMAS: Just for the record and there will not be any books or movies that describe --

MS. HERRIDGE: You have to be a SEAL to write a book, right?

GEN. THOMAS: Oh, there, you see, don't be challenged.

MS. HERRIDGE: Oh, I'm sorry. We're going to move on from that.

GEN. THOMAS: I'm sorry for my SEAL friends in the crowd. I do not approve of that statement.

MS. HERRIDGE: Okay. You throw me under the bus already.

GEN. THOMAS: Yeah, yeah.

MS. HERRIDGE: Okay. Thank you.

GEN. THOMAS: This is going to be adversarial. Very quickly.

MS. HERRIDGE: Yeah, I can see that.

GEN. THOMAS: I was blessed and honored to be Admiral Craven's 2 IC (phonetic). I was his deputy commander for that time-period. So I was forward-deployed for that event. Truthfully at the time it seemed incredibly cathartic, and in fact when I think of hearing, you know, the codeword Geronimo which is too many books and movies, I was actually flushed thinking, man, it's been a long 10 years. A lot of hard work went into this. You know, it seemed like a seminal moment and truthfully it's actually brought home I think the lesson that that was one guy, albeit a pretty powerful and symbolic guy, he's one guy on top of a network and if you don't dismantle the whole network, if you don't address the ideology, you've killed one guy. So again to me it was -- it had -- you know, it was needful, it had happened, I think was good for the country to know that we would relentlessly pursue somebody who had attacked us, but reality is it was just another stepping stone in this kind of epic fight that we've been at.

MS. HERRIDGE: While we're on the subject of terrorist leaders, you know, it's been since November of last year that we've heard from the ISIS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi --

GEN. THOMAS: He doesn't write to me anymore. I'm disappointed with that. Yeah.

(Laughter)

MS. HERRIDGE: Is he still relevant? I mean, does he matter?

GEN. THOMAS: He's absolutely relevant in the sense that he's the iconic head of ISIS, right, so he got up and proclaimed the caliphate. To your point, we

haven't heard from him lately. He's been an utterly ineffective leader by our assessment, if at all, as opposed to Zawahiri who's still trying to hold on in the Al Qaeda time frame work. Baghdadi literally had not heard peeps from him. Ordinarily I monitor the same reports that everybody else does that he's dead, no, he's not quite dead yet. He might be south of Raqqa. The bottom-line is we will get him eventually. It's not safe for him on this earth for what he's done and what his organization has done, but in the meantime we have absolutely dismantled his network.

I mean, everyone who worked for him initially is dead or gone. Everybody who stepped to the plate the next time, dead or gone. Down through a network where we have killed in conservative estimates 60,000 to 70,000 of his followers, his army. They declared an army, they put it on the battlefield, and we went to war with it. We're right now inside the capital of his caliphate at Raqqa. We'll have that back soon with our proxies, a surrogate force of 50,000 people that are working for us and doing our bidding. We have Mosul back, it's still a little bit testy. There's still some ISIS pockets out in Western (inaudible) and other places, but we're pursuing these people as aggressively as we can to effect the physical aspects of the caliphate while we really deal with the harder parts, the kind of the ideological basis for it which we still have to deal with.

MS. HERRIDGE: Have we been close to Baghdadi and why did we lose him?

GEN. THOMAS: We have been close on several -- in fact sometimes we've been closer than we know. It's just the vagaries of combat I think, and counterterrorism targeting. There were points in time when we were particularly close to him. Unfortunately, there were some leaks about what we were up to at that time, you know, when we went after Abu Sayyaf, the oil minister who was very close to him, one of his personal confidants, he didn't live, but his wife did and she gave us a treasure trove of information about where she had just been with Baghdadi in Raqqa, you know, days, if not -- you know,

within days prior and so that was a very good lead. Unfortunately, it was leaked in a prominent national newspaper about a week later and that lead went dead. So I mean that's the challenge we have in terms of where and how our tactics and procedures were discussed openly, it was a great need to inform the American public about what we're up to. There's also a great need to recognize things that will absolutely undercut our ability to do our job.

MS. HERRIDGE: And sort of the third piece of this terrorist leadership, so Ayman al-Zawahiri, where do we think he is and is he at this point completely cut off from further managerial role in that network?

GEN. THOMAS: I think the conventional wisdom is and there's enough of intelligence professionals in the crowd that can correct me if I'm wrong, we still think he's somewhere approximately Afghanistan, Pakistan border. I think he's under extraordinary pressure. He has been for quite a while. Why do I say that? Several years ago, he already put out the -- kind of the advance notice to team Al Qaeda it's not good here, let's, you know, let's regroup and repack. Luckily he picked Syria as a place to do it where we were already actively engaged and had the access, so we were able to turn our focus on the Khorasan Group, an element that they were related to, and we've been monitoring any other developments of Al Qaeda where they try and compete with ISIS because they're absolutely trying to compete with ISIS going forward to be the Sunni extremist, you know, guidon bearer if you will. He's still -- he's more than symbolic. He's still messaging, from time to time he'll put out videos and broadcasts, so he's still trying to stay relevant, but less effectively.

I think again Al Qaeda is not a good space right now, but this is not the time to let the pedal up on them there. I mean they're probably most dangerous now that they're, you know, this low. It's worth reminding everybody that ISIS in 2011 was AQI in Iraq when we left. AQI was under unbelievable pressure then, really -- you know, we had taken out every level of leadership. They weren't done, but they were seeking -- they were seeking refuge, you know, wherever they could, whether it was in

Eastern Syria, or Western Iraq, they were going to ground. Less than 2 years later, they were ISIS who ran the deck in Eastern Syria, Anbar, (inaudible), and we're on the verge of moving into Rabil (phonetic) in the Kurdish Republic before we finally did anything about him, less than 2 years later. So these guys know how to go down -- you know, how to take a whoop and then come back up. And so I think we just need to remember that that despite some pretty devastating damage to them, we can't take our eye off them.

MS. HERRIDGE: Has AQ core now been eclipsed by the affiliates?

GEN. THOMAS: Yeah, they'd say no. I think practically -- and actually I would check that. In the competitive scheme of things, Al Qaeda affiliates like AQAP in Yemen, still very, very viable and very dangerous; Nusra in Syria, viable and dangerous; other Al Qaeda affiliates less so, but aspiring. So they still want to -- and it's almost lucky for us that they are still bent on spectacular attacks, so that has some trappings to it that helps us in some cases see it ahead of time and preempt it, not making it easier, but it helps us kind of see a developmental threat. ISIS is swinging large and almost indiscriminately. If you've read their publications, Ramian (phonetic) now, Dabiq before, they literally are just asking anybody -- anybody with the inclination with a knife or a pickup truck or whatever you can do, go down -- you know, mow down westerners, you know, for the good of the cause and truthfully that's the most dangerous aspect because if you light a match under that hardest to see, you know, inspired people, hardest to see, certainly hard to -- hardest to disrupt and eradicate from a law enforcement standpoint back home, and doesn't play at our portfolio of the away game if all they're doing is producing magazines and ideology whether it's coming through cyber channels or whatever, we've heard in some of the previous discussions we have a hard time challenging that space right now, and they're very vibrant there.

MS. HERRIDGE: So in your job as SOCOM commander, you're really like the synchronizer-in-chief, is that one way to look at it?

GEN. THOMAS: We have an official role, so we about a year-and-a-half ago, 2 years ago, we were designated the DOD coordinating authority for trans-regional terrorism and really -- I mean it was a role that didn't exist, it was a process that didn't exist that tried to tie together our disparate DOD efforts. So think of what Joe Votel is doing in the Central Command. Think of what General Waldhauser is doing in AFRICOM. Think of what Perry Harris, Admiral Harris is doing in PACOM now, and in Morau (phonetic) in the Philippines and places like that. They were good, focused activities, but without any sort of global synchronization at the DOD level. So we were thrust in that role.

It didn't empower us, I'm not moving pawns on the battlefield or telling people to go left or right, but what it does enable us to do and it's a very profound, professional discussion that we're able to agitate or drive at the senior DOD level is an assessment, you know, an active aggressive assessment of what are we trying to do, how well are we doing it, and what do we need to change in terms of strategy and resourcing. We didn't have that process before. That -- I mean that didn't exist below the secretary of defense, so you had, you know, geographic combat commanders doing their level best to deal with the problem, but arguably restricted when it got to the limits of their domain, their borders, their geographic area or areas.

So we're in that role. It's been empowering to a degree, I'd like to do more, I'd like to provide, you know, better product to the Department of Defense so that we are more agile than the enemy. Right now we're everywhere Al Qaeda and ISIS is. Other than former Soviet locations and that's their problem, but everywhere that they've described in Rumiya that they think they have a province or thought they had a province, we are there, you know, actively trying to combat them either directly or through proxies.

MS. HERRIDGE: Thanks for that explanation for those who aren't really that familiar because I have some questions that relate to the specific combatant commands.

I have a couple of questions about Syria. When you look at Syria, do you feel that you have a clearly defined objective for what the end-stage should look like?

GEN. THOMAS: Not for Syria per se. For a DOD charter, for my -- for the -- my forces that support General Votel in his area, the description of our missions is pretty clear from Secretary Mattis. It was defeat ISIS, it's now annihilate ISIS. I think he put a non-doctoral term out there just to amp up the volume a little bit. We all got the message and in fact we're pressing as hard as we can, and I think you see the results in Raqqa, in other places like that. But he does not intend -- much like in 2011, he does not intend to let these rascals have a break on the backside of our operations and so we understand that. The hard part is a lift-up is what -- how is this feeding in strategy relative to Syria, relative to Iraq, relative to Russia, relative to Turkey, relative to Iran, that are all in that morass.

So we go down the rat-hole of the tactical environment, yet we are playing a level of brinksmanship in this space that's indescribable. I mean, our -- right now our pilots out there are getting painted radar-wise by Syrian aircraft, Russian aircraft, ground control intercept capabilities. You can imagine how dicey it is for a pilot who is on top of us to give us the necessary protection, and wondering, you know, is this -- it's very top-gunnish, is this bogey inbound on me, do I have to pull the trigger, do I have to do something preemptively, pretty dicey situation in a very tight space there.

MS. HERRIDGE: Does Assad fit into this?

GEN. THOMAS: He fits into it in that every senior leader I talked to in that area, so whether it's the Turks, the Jordanians, the Israelis and others, not hyper-critically, but they will typically say you're fighting the symptom, he's the problem. So as long as Assad is there he's -- we talked earlier in one of the forums, he's a disruptive influence, we know that, he's not the solution to putting Syria back together again or solving the problem. But he's also -- he also, he and his regime inspire this aspect of extreme activity that spins

in, you know, in various directions because of, you know, the source there. So he's something and the regime is something that ultimately has to be addressed. And more problematic now that the Russians have bolstered it, and he's riding high now as opposed to even just as recently as 2 years ago when we were worried about catastrophic success of the regime imploding.

MS. HERRIDGE: It's now out in the public reporting that these anti-Assad rebels are very unhappy that this covert program to arm them has been rolled up. Is it your assessment that this was done to create favor with Russia, or that it was not an effective program?

GEN. THOMAS: Absolutely -- absolutely not in my -- at least from what I know about that program and the decision to end it. Absolutely not a SOP to the Russians. It was I think based on assessment of the nature of the program, what we're trying to accomplish, the viability of it going forward, and a tough, tough decision. I mean we're all reading the editorials now of are we leaving people at the altar, you know, people have we manned and equipped, but they're -- it is so much more complex than even I can describe, and again that's not necessarily an organization that I've been affiliated with, but a sister -- a parallel activity that was -- that had a tough, you know, some would argue impossible mission based on the approach we took. It might have been scoped too narrowly or not empowered sufficiently. I don't know enough about it to criticize it in that direction, but it had a tough road to hope.

MS. HERRIDGE: How do we lock in our gains in Iraq, and which partnerships had been the most effective?

GEN. THOMAS: Interestingly the partnerships, at least from a military standpoint where with the guys that we invested the most in. So the counterterrorism service that we had spent a lot of time in our many years in Iraq, they were our go-to force when we came back out there. We've been able to cultivate others. I was personally disappointed with (inaudible). Again I spent a whole year, I spent 15 months in Mosul, so I knew the Kurds very well, they talked a good game. It was a pretty army. It

didn't fight very well when push came to shove, so we've had -- you know, bring them up to a level of competency that you would have hoped was better for him, but they are now contributing pretty actively. It's also an indescribably complex environment when we are coffee-breath close to Shia popular mobilization forces riding around us, riding in M1 tanks that we provided the Iraqi army back in the day.

So how Iraq evolves here post-Mosul, post-Tal Afar and Anbar, I'd keep a very, very close watch right now on Kirkuk, I think most of you know that the Kurds have picked a very awkward time to have a referendum on whether or not they should be independent. Kirkuk is absolutely part of their vision of greater Kurdistan, always has been, you pick up the Kurdish tourist map and you'll see it there, and it's absolutely a point -- a departure with the government of Iraq, whether it was Maliki before, or with the current administration I don't think they're going to say, sure, take the Khurmala oilfields and Kirkuk and go your way, it's not going to go peacefully.

So again you think Iraq of all places, we took the hardest part Mosul, no, not so much -- you know, a difficult task, a city the size of my hometown of Philadelphia, but it's -- you know, it is still lots of work to do. And to your point, the hardest part of how you finish, arguably we haven't finished anything very effectively over the last couple of decades, you know, from a military standpoint. We have a big -- and it's not just the military. It's a whole government approach, but how are we going to finish in Iraq. Lots of hope on Abadi as the responsible leadership who might be able to affect, you know, a continued future relationship together, but he's one man, and he's going to have some heavy poll from Iran next door on whether or not we are interlopers or occupiers or good for Iraq going forward.

MS. HERRIDGE: One of Iran's objectives in the region has been to establish what's called the Shia Crescent extending from Iran through Iraq, Syria, and then into Hezbollah in Lebanon. What evidence is there that they've made progress to achieving that goal and what does

it mean for us and the regional partners?

GEN. THOMAS: I think the evidence is literal. We bump into them everywhere, so humorously I parked my plane one day right next to Sulaimani's plane in Rabil. We were kind of salivating about what we could -- should do at that moment in time, but we did nothing. I consider him to be my peer competitor and he's everywhere. So he's -- he'll be in Manbij in Syria in one day, he'll be, you know, cavorting around, you know, Iraq and further afield. So they have laid the seed corn down from Iran through the -- obviously the southern oilfields through Baghdad looking for, you know, access whether it's Anbar up through (inaudible), they join hands with Lebanese Hezbollah in Syria, and that transcends into Lebanon. So they've got a de facto presence as it is now.

And I -- whether or not we did that discovery learning again every Sunni leader that I deal with out there, and you know the prominent Sunni leaders, I will point out that that's the result of your 16 years out here. Do we think that's what we wanted to have, and it's a rhetorical question clearly from a Sunni standpoint that, no, we've got -- that's imbalanced and we may have to do something about it. And so you wonder in the big scheme of things is -- is this not an overreach by the Iranians that's going to cause some backlash from the Sunni, you know, the Sunni leadership to Sunni major countries. And what potentially easier on the mix because there's the existential threat that is real for every fields from Iran, and if it's closer to them, it only get them more excited.

MS. HERRIDGE: Want to move over to Libya. Back in 2015 we had some information that about a half-dozen senior ISIS operatives had really put down their stake in Libya. Can you compare and contrast what ISIS looked like in Libya back in 2015 versus what you've been able to accomplish today?

GEN. THOMAS: Again, I don't -- I never fall into the trap of admiring the enemy, I do give them props for aggressive export of the product. So they are trying to export this ideology wherever there are either failed

states or sanctuaries available. They seized on Libya as a failed state, as a good place to put up a, you know, property sign. They declared it a province. Our estimates were at one point in time the high-water mark that they had anywhere from 1,500 to 2,000 folks primarily located in a seaside town named Sirte. They don't exist anymore, period. So we were able to affect some -- and through proxies, through surrogates again pretty effectively, didn't make a lot of noise back home, but they did a lot of the heavy lifting for us in a very -- again very complex environment.

You know, who's in charge in Libya right now? Technically Sarraj, Haftar, obviously the potentate in the east, and a lot of players in between. We were very CT-focused, but with the paramount goal from a U.S. standpoint of how does Libya come back together again with this current, you know, terrorists, this current extremist cancer inside it. We excised the cancer, it's not done, we did the heavy lifting, we'll have to go back in and kind of see if -- you know, what's left. They've gone mostly to the deserts of the south, they're still out there hopefully come back up, again these guys are -- they're resilient, but 1,500 of them are no longer ISIS card-carrying members.

MS. HERRIDGE: Is this a good example of how SOCOM identifies the enablers on the ground? And talk us through that process, how you select who you think you can really support and work with.

GEN. THOMAS: As you know, sometimes it's of necessity, who's available. The one that I think is most discussed and most misunderstood is the evolution with our counterpart in Syria, the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces. Now, interestingly they came about that name because at one point in time and I dealt with them directly, I was in on the formal stage of the relationship with these guys. They formerly called themselves the YPG, who the Turks would say equated to the PKK who are dealing with the terrorist enemy mind, you know, how can you do that ally. So we literally played back to them that you've got to change your brand, you know, what do you want to call yourself besides the YPG, and with about a

day's notice they declared that they were the Syrian Democratic Forces. I thought it was a stroke of brains to put democracy in there somewhere.

(Laughter)

GEN. THOMAS: But it gave them a little bit of credibility, and the interesting part and I was lucky to have a great partner in Brett McGurk out there with me about the same time because they were asking for things that I couldn't give them. And literally was an acknowledgment that they were the demographic dominant force in Northern Syria. They wanted a seat at the table, whether it's at Geneva, or Astana or wherever talks are happening about the future of Syria and because they had been branded as PKK, they could never get to the table, so while we paired with them militarily, Brett McGurk was able to keep them in the conversation and allow them to, you know, the necessary legitimacy to be good partners for us. So it was literally something, I need you militarily, you know, Hill, the diplomat here will deliver an entrée if nothing else for you to be legitimate from a state standpoint --

MS. HERRIDGE: Right.

GEN. THOMAS: -- or from at least a government standpoint thereon. We didn't -- we tripped to that one, so to your point how do you find these guys, we tripped to them when some of you may remember there was a town called Kobani, I had to find it on the map, I had no idea where Kobani was, but it was identified to us as just about to be expunged by ISIS. They had amassed thousands of troops on it, they wanted it symbolically, it was up on the Turkish border, and other Kurds introduced us to this problem and said could you help them, and all we did early on was provide kinetic capabilities to them and kept them from being wiped out. They were up against the backdrop of the Turkish border, they had no escape valve there. And then I was able to walk the dirt in Kobani about 7 months later. It was utter devastation. They lost 2,000 -- so our Kurdish allies lost 2,000 there. They estimate ISIS impaled themselves to the tune of about 6,000 to 10,000 there, complete devastation in the town, but they

were just happy that they had survived the experience.

And out of that seed corn, that's when they started saying, by the way we have Kurdish cantons and other -- and right away we said it's got to be more representative than that, other Arabs who are interested in joining your coalition here and then they would identify folks of, yes, we've been gone on to this canton, this town, and this thing rolled from just a couple thousand that we knew early on to now a 50,000-person force that, you know, when folks want to test, you know, are those ghost numbers, my comeback is that's the ghost force that has just taken, you know, is halfway through Raqqa and has taken every March objective we've had so far. And the real kind of unstated aspect of the magic here is luckily -- luckily we've only lost two U.S. service members throughout this whole thing. So 2-1/2 years of fighting this fight with our surrogates, they've lost thousands, we've only lost two service members. Two is too many, but it's, you know, a relief that we haven't had the kind of losses that we've had elsewhere. It's their fight, they've got to embrace it more than we do.

MS. HERRIDGE: If I can, you go to Walter Reed a lot now that we're on that topic, you do that pretty much every time you go to Washington, right?

GEN. THOMAS: Selfishly it's -- it is so inspirational that I'd like to think I'm going to buoy their spirits, but every time I go and you accompanied me on one occasion. I mean I'd encourage any of you guys, they'd love to see you, but go in there and you'll walk out with one of the best buzzes you've ever had in terms of resiliency of human beings, of American service members, who are not the least bit self-pitying. They want to think that they've helped accomplish something, so if they have a concern, if they have a dilemma, it's has this been worth it, have I suffered this injury, have I lost friends and teammates for something that really matters, are we going to stay and accomplish or are we going to get to the one-yard line and fumble or walk away. And so that's -- they give us a pass in fact, you know, most their parents give me a pass when I'm at Arlington and I've had this conversation with General Dunford who

will be here tomorrow, that they have every right to ask this, you know, is this worth the squeeze, are we -- do we have a strategy, or is this just activity in search of a strategy.

MS. HERRIDGE: Just to shift gears you're always looking for new partnerships, right?

GEN. THOMAS: Always.

MS. HERRIDGE: Always. Okay. So you met recently with the singer Bano or his team, right?

GEN. THOMAS: Right.

MS. HERRIDGE: Are you going to work with him?

GEN. THOMAS: I hope so.

MS. HERRIDGE: Not on stage or --

GEN. THOMAS: I hope so. This was strange and actually a member of his team is here today and we met with him to try and put some meat on these bones, but the interesting thing, Bano came to tamper with YouTube fans, so this -- it was pretty easy when he said, hey, can I meet with you and General Votel, you're rock on, let's do this.

(Laughter)

GEN. THOMAS: So before one of the best concerts I could ever imagine, he spent about 40 minutes describing all his efforts to the one foundation that he's trying to do around the world, and the fascinating part was he acknowledges -- early on he said the last group of people I ever expected to be hanging around with was a bunch of military people, and I thought about that for a second, I thought, yeah, because you have the perception that a lot others do that we're just a bunch of knuckle-dragging pipe swingers who, you know, call on them when you need to do something desperate, but otherwise how could they be helpful. His late life epiphany, he's 54 years old, is that you know what, all the humanitarian assistance that

I'm trying to push around the world doesn't happen without security.

You seem to provide security and you seem to want to stabilize places either at a time before a conflict or as we're wrapping up post hostilities might we do things together, and I'm thinking absolutely, you have an 8 million organization that runs the gamut of positive humanitarian activities that need the trappings of security or need that kind of synergy and symbiotic relationship, sign us up, so we're trying to actively -- and we're global like he's global, so it's kind of a match made in heaven in terms of the opportunity. Now, again ask me 6 months from now have you done anything more than admire YouTube music more than you did before, I hope I can tell you, hey, here's where we're actually moving out, and it's a great, you know, kind of match of buried --

MS. HERRIDGE: Right.

GEN. THOMAS: -- capabilities that they're doing, you know, that are improving a lot of humanity.

MS. HERRIDGE: Your plans said try and make something work, right? Yeah.

GEN. THOMAS: And I think it's free money, so why not.

(Laughter)

GEN. THOMAS: He literally is offering the entree for -- you know, to marry up with his activities, so -- and there's others out there like him that I think we have not taken advantage of in the past. They're also turning their focus on which absolutely plays to our, you know, our strong suit or our priority effort, they're about countering violent extremism, they want to get at the aspects, the ideology, the root causes and all, so again you think while you go -- mosey down that lane, you might -- might we have some things we can do together. I think it's a powerful opportunity if nothing else.

MS. HERRIDGE: One thing I've heard consistently

from people who work in your space is that you've been at such a high operational tempo now for 15-16 years, how does that impact your ability to plan and prepare for other contingencies especially now that North Korea is getting so hot.

GEN. THOMAS: I won't pooh-pooh the challenge. It -- we are -- business is very, very good, that doesn't say good things for national security necessarily. We are trying to minimize or to work ourselves out of current missions where we can to recap and have capability. We are able to juggle more than one ball at the same time, so even while we're leaning into Korea contingencies, things that, you know, I don't know that this public is aware of, we've had persistent presence in every country -- every NATO country and others on the border with Russia doing phenomenal things with our allies, helping them prepare for their threats, but that's persistent presence in all the Baltic countries, Romania, Poland, Ukraine, so non-NATO countries, Georgia, it's a great environment for us where we're able to, you know, produce --

MS. HERRIDGE: You just had a trip there, didn't you?

GEN. THOMAS: I was just out in Lithuania, Estonia, Finland, Ukraine and Poland. They love us. I mean they are desperately hopeful that the U.S. continues to ride a leadership role there. They are very concerned about their adversary next door. They make no bones about it. That's an adversary next door and they are very concerned that they don't lose their hard-won freedom. A guy my age in Lithuania and Estonia lived for 30 years under the yoke of the Soviet Union. They are happily liberated right now and they hope to stay that way going forward.

MS. HERRIDGE: So what's the message that this capacity building is sending to Russia?

GEN. THOMAS: What's the --

MS. HERRIDGE: What message is being sent by this capacity building on its border?

GEN. THOMAS: That's a fascinating question because I am -- I try to appreciate the adversary's optic to -- I realize that a way to gauge a metric if you will for how well we're doing, I am curious what Putin and his leadership are thinking. I think it was a little unnerving and -- but kind of predictable, he called us, you know, kind of called us out with the move on Ukraine. You know, obviously we made a small commitment early on. You've had a conventional force commitment over the last 9 months were a brigade combat team landed there and moved out, linked up with all their conventional partners. So there's an interesting level of, you know, build going on here that you do wonder what -- how he considers this situation going forward. The point of concern for most of these eastern Europeans right now is they're about to do an exercise in Belarus, Russia that's going to entail up to 100,000 Russian troops moving into that country. The great concern is they're not going to leave, and that's -- that's not paranoia, that's active concern among the countries that is that just to play to get closer and get better staging, or is he just flexing a little bit and then they'll go back to, you know, where they're staged from around Moscow and whatnot.

MS. HERRIDGE: When you talked to the leadership of these countries on the border with Russia, what are they saying to you about American leadership and whether they've perceived any kind of change?

GEN. THOMAS: Not so much change, it's been consistent. So I was there the previous administration as well. They are desperately hopeful that the U.S. stays in the lead, and while they are part of NATO and join NATO for a reason, they realize that NATO might be slower in terms of decision-making or at -- they're very hopeful that persistent U.S. presence there now conveys, you know, a quicker turn in terms of U.S. leadership in the event of a contingency or at least lasting commitment for the U.S. for building up their capacity. Every one of these countries in the last 5 to 10 years stepped away from a conscript army because they thought it was peace in their time. They're all scrambling to get an -- you know, their own self-defense forces back up because they realize that

we can't do it for them, but in this interim period they are looking at arming irregulars and being prepared for the potential that Russia decides to bite off a piece of their country much like they did Eastern Ukraine and Crimea.

MS. HERRIDGE: I want to bring the conversation back to North Korea. So how broad are the options that you're considering?

GEN. THOMAS: To quote one of our senior administration officials, everything's on the table. I mean we're the military, so we prepare for all the contingencies. I heard a comment today that was provocative in -- but the right way that the general comment, the military option, there is no military option. There is always a military option. That's why you pay \$600 billion a year to have a military option. It is an ugly, ugly option, but you cannot play elements of power and then discount that there is no military option. So what -- you know, I'm very interested to talk about Putin's perspective, I'm very interested what is KJU thinking right now. You know, he has seen nuclear submarines come at him, he's seen aircraft carriers come at him. While I was out there last time they -- the timing was extraordinary, but there were South Korean news articles that Delta and SEAL Team Six were on the peninsula being -- preparing to topple, to decapitate the KJU regime. I was coming back the States, got with DOD and others to decide should we counter that message, should we let it have its 15 seconds of fame.

Humorously I was talking at an academic institution; I said I just read the same disturbing things you did this morning that these units are supposed to be on the peninsula. That is absolutely not happening. I had to call back to SOCOM to make sure it's not happening, but it's absolutely not happening.

(Laughter)

GEN. THOMAS: What I thought --

MS. HERRIDGE: But it could happen.

GEN. THOMAS: What I thought -- interestingly what does KJU think right about now because he's seen a nuclear sub come at him, an aircraft carrier come at him, he may or may not have special operations poised to do things. So as we play this, and it's not play, as we throttle, you know, the level of deterrence, you know, deterrence theory in action, you know, obviously he needs to appreciate we have both the capability and the will, part of the pillars there, but I'm very hopeful that Secretary Tillerson's conversations are going to have some needful gains vis-à-vis the Chinese, and however we get to talk to the North Koreans eventually. But in the meantime, you know, if I took a poll here in this audience of would you expect your military to be prepared, you know, for the contingencies that might come if somebody blinks, I think your answer is yes, that's why you're there brother, otherwise, you know, get off the stage. So we're preparing like the rest of the military is.

MS. HERRIDGE: So you're not ruling out having your guys on the peninsula?

GEN. THOMAS: Again, that's somebody else's decision. We've been told to be prepared, you know, that if -- that -- and truthfully the discussion earlier and I'm not saying one that he doesn't have the capability to reach out further than Seattle right now, I'm not saying that he can't put, you know, a device the size of -- people take solace in the fact that we think he can only put something the size of a Hiroshima bomb onto a missile right about now. That's not comforting to me.

(Laughter)

GEN. THOMAS: So as he -- and the aspect -- I mean I've heard it debated over a couple -- then he's here, everything I'm hearing, I'm not an intelligence expert, but everything I'm hearing is he and the regime are inextricably tied to their nuclear program. Good luck trying to split it apart. So good luck, you know, diplomats good luck; sanctions good luck, the things that precede, you know, potential military actions, but if it fails, you know, again I don't think that's the time you

want us to be, you weren't thinking about this, you know, you weren't prepared for this. So I mean we're doing prudent military planning and preparation for whatever the situation may entail.

MS. HERRIDGE: You recently took on the WMD portfolio. Where is that?

GEN. THOMAS: Because we weren't busy.

MS. HERRIDGE: You weren't busy enough, right?

GEN. THOMAS: Yeah.

MS. HERRIDGE: So what's the status? How far along are you in that mission?

GEN. THOMAS: We just picked it up in January, again much like the CT, The counterterrorism portfolio, we were asked to be the DOD lead to take a global look at what we're trying to do. A fantastic mission set that absolutely exceeds special operations. Picked it up in January, I'm hopeful in August or so to be able to sit down with Secretary Madison (phonetic), give him an assessment of what our policies and objectives are which are varied and different; what we are doing from a DOD standpoint; some reflection on what interagency partners are doing, what international partners are doing; and then really to play the role of if we're -- you know, as we are serious about WMD portfolio and we're very serious, here's where we may ought to change the strategy, here's where we may ought to resource more extensively. I think, you know, I think intuitively it's going to -- it's going to bring out the fact that we are not sufficiently resourced from an intelligence capability left of bang left of crisis to see everything from dual-use technology to other nefarious activities out there.

So I think we're going to point that out and more importantly come up with ways to make sure our country is better defended, you know, from this threat that runs across a bunch of different actors, so it's state actors, it's terrorist actors, it's others who would love to get their hands on a weapon of mass destruction.

MS. HERRIDGE: Is this White House listening to your counsel?

GEN. THOMAS: I've had two opportunities to, you know, to interact with the commander-in-chief. So I mean I think they are -- I think they have a lot of challenges on their plate right now, you know, Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, by an extremism, trying to cobble together coherent strategies long game if you will for the activities that they've inherited right now. I absolutely know they listen to Secretary Mattis. The chain of command is alive and kicking through him. We're lucky to have him as a great boss and he -- I mean he's got -- he's (inaudible) counsel on the planet, you know, for best military advice coming from the Department of Defense, and he certainly listens to us and I know he's providing it to the President.

MS. HERRIDGE: Before we open it up to questions, I mean what does the future look like for SOCOM? Are you going to remain at the tip of the spear? Do you see this evolving?

GEN. THOMAS: We're -- I think we are attractive in terms -- we give different options, unconventional options to decision-makers, sometimes a smaller footprint, smaller resources, maybe more discreet application if you will. My biggest concern, and again great to be in venues like this and other venues, is the need for us to transform, so I won't name the senior executive, very, very senior executive of one of the biggest companies on the planet came to visit us recently to talk about innovation, and he felt compelled to give me a report card after sitting with us for about 24 hours with my good mentor Admiral McRaven, and he said you guys clearly hire the right people, you know, to the question of Director Pompeo got last night, we're still blessed with getting the best talent in America, I mean unbelievable talent that comes into our ranks every day from all walks of life, so you definitely hire the right people is his assessment.

You prototype pretty well, and then he said but

you suck at deep learning. You are -- you haven't even taken a dip in the pool here and he went further, he couldn't help himself because he's one of these companies that represents the way in a life for deep learning, he said, General, I know you live in a very complex world, but if I rode along with you for one day, I'll bet I could solve every one of your problems with algorithms and software that you just can't even imagine, just an up-down switch for every decision you have to make. And luckily I took a deep breath, Admiral McRaven handled the question.

(Laughter)

GEN. THOMAS: Because truthfully I was ready to hit him.

(Laughter)

GEN. THOMAS: But I thought about for a second, I thought God he's so right because what we're doing with a lot of folks in the IC is a lot of individual human analytic hustle trying to bring in, you know, pieces and parts of apical software and whatnot to automate, but we're still, you know, choking on terabytes of data which they laugh at, you're dealing with terabytes of data, we're so far removed from that. And when I thought about how companies like this one might sound like Google, might sound like, you know, Twitter, Facebook et cetera, how they are already doing it from a business standpoint if and how we can leverage that the future, we are SOCOM on steroids in terms of seeing threats, seeing opportunities and applying our, you know, our special capabilities now where it's more than just a throw at the dartboard, but it can be greatly enhanced. So from a machine learning cognitive computing standpoint the world is wide open for us.

Our platforms are all very good for right now. They're not necessarily very good for peer competitors. So how we transform over the next decade which requires resourcing obviously we have to get at that in my tenure, I mean in the next 2 years we have got to figure that out to project this is in the future. And then how we continue to transform this force in terms of unbelievable

talent and great people, but the kind of formal structure for SOCOM for the future in a global dynamic world that we learn more about every day, but we learn mostly how we need to be more and more agile.

MS. HERRIDGE: I'd like to open it up for questions. I'm afraid I promised the first question to Charlie Allen. So Charlie --

GEN. THOMAS: Great mentor.

MS. HERRIDGE: -- stand and be accounted for.

MR. ALLEN: Thank you, General Thomas. Great, absolutely brilliant presentation. I am concerned about the long-term capabilities of Al Qaeda and the franchises, whether it's in Yemen or whether it's in North Africa. It is something that with all your commitments and all your abilities and we have something called Boko Haram which, you know, also is around. I really believe that your ability to do -- to use technology is probably only excelled in this by anybody, by any of the commands because you have -- you're agile, you're quick, you do contracting a lot better, I just wish we could translate that to the federal government, but thank you for this and I'd like your views on the future of AQ.

GEN. THOMAS: Thanks for the question, Charlie. Obviously we have not taken our eye off them and specifically we're focused on AQAP, on Nusra in Syria, on AQIM, on Al-Shabaab, on Boko Haram, all the affiliates that have declared byath (phonetic) or some fidelity to Al Qaeda, in some cases they aspire to swing bigger sticks, in some cases they are localized and when Nick talked earlier, there is, you know, an effort to try and make this a local problem where local governance, local police activities, things like that that can take care of it short of, you know, these open conflicts that we're currently encountering. But we are absolutely not taking our eye off them. It's a competitive market. They -- I have watched with interest analysis on whether they would ever consider merging with ISIS. Reality is in some places on the planet there are AQ affiliates who are absolutely -- they have symbiotic relationships with ISIS.

So it's not like they can't merge, you know, in the bigger scheme I don't put a lot of money on that, but right now they're competitive -- and competitive to be most nefarious, worse, you know, worst people on the planet kind of thing from our aspect, so how we keep an eye on them going forward is I think, you know, kind of the, you know, the critical balance that we have to have.

They've not given up the ship, and as you know, they're at it much like we've heard in Afghanistan for years is you've got the watches, we've got the time. You know, we can outlast you. And so how we in the wake of our military and our interagency efforts get governance and law enforcement in place in these very locations. I mean right now we are lead dog, you know, at least supporting or lead outright in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, Philippines and everywhere else they're cropping up. So -- and that's a mixed bag of ISIS and Al Qaeda that are competing with each other.

MS. HERRIDGE: Okay, right down here in the front.

MS. WRIGHT: Robin Wright. I want to ask you a question -- the variation of a question I asked Nick Rasmussen this morning. Given your battlefield experience in facing down various extremist movements, given the planning you obviously are doing for the future, can you kind of project what you think the evolution of various extremist movements might be, both in terms of their tactics and in terms of their goals? And secondly on Charlie's question, Hamza bin Laden, the son of Osama bin Laden, has been visibly emerging over the last 2 years in audio messages and so forth, and Ali Soufan's new book writes extensively about him emerging as a younger generation leader who might revive or reenergize Al Qaeda. Could you talk to also about his role and how important you think he might be?

GEN. THOMAS: No, I'm glad you mentioned --

MS. HERRIDGE: Yeah.

GEN. THOMAS: -- because it's part and parcel to

Charlie's question. We've had this interesting phenomenon of senior Al Qaeda in quasi house arrest in Iran of all places. I've never kind of been able to figure why, you know, what allowed that to happen and why is it continued to go, but last seen somewhere between Iran and Syria trying to come back out and at least leverage the family name lost going forward, but he's absolutely trying to get the band back together and galvanize, you know, life after, whether it's life after Zawahiri or just life after, you know, the current phase. So we're watching him and them closely as well, (inaudible) and others. To the evolution of the threat, again, worst mistake we can make is to not give them credit for leveraging everything that's available, and so I missed Secretary Kelly's discussion the other day. We are working very tightly with him in terms of homeland defense and make sure there's not gaps, but think of every technology that's on the planet right now and all the open source materials available; think of the evolution. We're lucky to an extent that we just experienced the scourge of off-the-shelf drones in Iraq and Syria because that could have first shown up at the Meadowlands or someplace like that as the first experience of, oh my goodness, you can buy this stuff, you can weaponize it, you can put it in play.

Luckily, you know, we've had this battlefield experience to say not good. In fact where we had air superiority, they had a level of superiority underneath us, you know, dropping little 40-millimeter rounds on our heads until we came up with new and exotic ways to defeat them, not just from small arms, but with RF impulses, cyber effects et cetera, but give them credit, they saw that, wow, they have everything in the air, you know, they have air superiority, they're completely on air space, we're coming in underneath that for \$500 a copy of a quadcopter or whatever it is, so give them credit for everything that's available, they'll continue to try and you know, to work at going forward in terms of their evolution and we've got to stay ahead of that. I don't know if -- I hope that answered your question.

MS. HERRIDGE: Can I take a question from over here just in the back, the gentleman.

MR. IGNATIUS: David Ignatius from *The Washington Post*. General, I want to ask you to look ahead in Syria. Michael Gordon of *The New York Times* and I were lucky enough a few weeks ago to go into Syria with your special operations forces and see what they were doing. A powerful experience, I hope you take more journalists on trips like that. But want to ask you about something that I heard from Kurdish commanders who are leading that fight, and they said we really hope that after ISIS is gone from Raqqa and the other areas on the Euphrates that our American advisors will stay, that they'll be bases east of the Euphrates, where they'll be a persistent American force. Obviously that's a policy question that in some ways you wouldn't want to address, but maybe you could just speak militarily to the advantages of having a platform like that, the potential costs of leaving these allies we've worked so closely with in recent years.

GEN. THOMAS: David, I won't surprise you. I'm going to spin this in three different directions. So first part would be to your question advantages to us to stay there with them as long as there's a CT threat that we have to deal with. So they have been our surrogate force maneuver-wise while we have been bringing every other aspect, all the tools of the trade that we can to great effect. So still much -- until and unless we stick a fork in ISIS and they're done, very, very advantageous and a stabilizing capability for a part of Syria, not -- sort of not covering all. Here's the conundrum, we are operating in the sovereign country of Syria. The Russians, they're stalling, their back-stoppers have already uninvited the Turks from Syria. We're a bad day away from the Russians saying why are you still in Syria, U.S., and it has come up in the form of some close calls there, but it will be hard, I'd defer to the lawyers in the crowd and others in terms of international law on the basis for us staying there other than our CT writ.

We went there for all the righteous reasons, but if the Russians play that card we may want to stay and have no, you know, ability to do it. They could play it out. The other part that -- and you saw it, the Kurds can help themselves here. They are still -- they've still got a product -- a branding challenge going forward, and the

Turks remind us that every day. The first time Brett McGurk and I went out to this very old cold guildhall in Kobani right on the Turk border, we went in there a bunch of somber, you know, technocrats and military people and you know, who's beaming faces looking down at us from the front of the guildhall but Öcalan. And we said, hey, that's got to go. You can't -- you cannot hold on to Öcalan and have any chance of legitimacy in this -- in the construct we're in. So you're either something different, something -- you know, something that has legitimacy and you saw a part of it, so that the interesting part and we're too close to the problem, so I was glad you got out there to give a different perspective, they're doing something unique to every other circuit we've worked with in the last decade-and-a-half and that's -- they're governing in their wake.

They are providing representative governance. You got to see it. It's not perfect. It tends towards socialism, but socialists where their women is empowered as their men by the way, you know, actively fighting and actively leading in, you know, throughout their leadership there. But they're governing in their wake, so there's something -- McGurk and I discussed it at length, there's something special about this that whether or not we can embrace it going forward, whether it can be part of the future fabric of Syria, let's see, but again luckily they're at the table now and at least having -- have an opportunity to represent themselves, but they've got to work on their own branding. If they continue to keep linkage to, you know, past product or your PKK linkage specifically, this -- the relationship is fraught with challenges.

MS. HERRIDGE: Okay. So one more question. The gentleman over here please.

MR. KORN: My name is David Korn with the Department of Defense. Sir, you mentioned addressing the ideology that is driving this Islamic extremism. What are we doing to do that and who should be doing that?

GEN. THOMAS: That's the forever question, isn't it? I mean we -- if we were given ourselves grades for

our U.S. effort to, you know, to combat this ideology, I think if it's not failing, it's just short of failing. It's going to -- just puttering along. Partly I think we had the huge dilemma describing the nature of the adversary and you know, we played our own sensitivities, good, you know, good -- a good fault that we didn't want to brand an entire religion necessarily dangerous, but I think we did it to an extreme where we did in the same breath and that's where to me it struck me as illogical from 2001 all the way to now we would say it's not, you know, it is not related directly to the religion, yet, you know, a source of leverage are the muftis, the imams, the clerics. How do you say that in the same breath? I mean -- and not to mention the fact that truthfully those folks have no legitimacy with these fringe guys, they're on -- they're spinning on a different, you know, to its different tune.

So I think we stumbled in terms of what's the nature of this idea. It's an ideology, so you've got to -- if you're going to kind of fence it where you're not even to get at the root cause, I daresay you'll never get there. I think we've gotten over that with time that, you know, here's the aspect of what they're proselytizing. We have to counter message, but then it's to your point who's the we. It's not a bunch of Anglo-Saxon Christians messaging out on, you know, across the, you know, down in Maraovi (phonetic), not just in the Arab street, not just in the North African Littoral. How do you get the right legitimate counter-messaging out there?

Again I'd go back to these -- there's a fascinating opportunity here. Who's into this already right now? Google, Twitter, Facebook they are already designing -- they have algorithms to find out who is on the wrong websites right now. I'd love to know that from a targeting standpoint, that'd be very handy. They then go one step further to say, hey, don't hang out there, come into the way in the light, go this way, you know, there's an alternate course. And they're doing it as much from a, you know, indemnity, you know, concern that we don't want you hanging out on Facebook on that website where I might have a, you know, legal problem down the road, but it's free money, it's effective to a degree and

it's massive. I mean, it's these companies that are doing that out there, so there are mechanisms and then culturally across, you know, who actually informs that better, we better be -- find new partners all the time because there's a lot of the people that know this problem, and can identify the root and the fix is much better than we can. And we're still not where we need to be.

MS. HERRIDGE: General Thomas, our time has run out. I want to thank you and your wife Barb and your kids for all of their service and for putting the nation first. This has been a personal highlight for me. Thank you for being so generous with your time, and thank you for coming this afternoon.

GEN. THOMAS: Thank you.

(Applause)

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