

# RONALD REAGAN INSTITUTE

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## **A President at Pointe du Hoc**

*By Secretary Leon Panetta*

Let us consider the remarkable words of President Reagan on June 6, 1984, at the 40th Anniversary of the Normandy Invasion. Standing on a lonely, windswept point--Pointe du Hoc, a historic site of the D-Day landing on the northern shore of France--he gave us a treatise on the strength of American foreign policy.

President Reagan made clear that “democracy is worth dying for, because it’s the most deeply honorable form of government ever devised by man.” He spoke to the “unity of the Allies” who summoned “strength from the faith, belief, loyalty and love of those who fell here.” He remembered the leadership of the United States in “creating the Marshall plan to help rebuild our allies and our former enemies. The Marshall plan led to the Atlantic Alliance - - a great alliance that serves to this day as our shield for freedom, for prosperity, and for peace.”

He reminded the world of the bitter lessons America learned from two World Wars: “It is better to be here ready to protect the peace, then to take blind shelter across the sea, rushing to respond only after freedom is lost. We’ve learned that isolationism never was and never will be an acceptable response. . .”

He spoke to the pursuit of peace through being prepared to “deter aggression; prepared to negotiate the reduction of arms; and yes, prepared to reach out again in the spirit of reconciliation.” And he spoke of the bonds of alliance: “the same loyalties, traditions, and beliefs” that all allies shared. He made clear that the strength of America’s alliances are vital to the United States and that the “American security guarantee is essential to the continued freedom of Europe’s democracies,” and concluded: “We were with you then; we are with you now. Your hopes are our hopes and your destiny is our destiny.”

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Today, some 35 years after that speech, as we contemplate the words of President Reagan—who truly defined American leadership in the world--we cannot help but ask whether America is at the end of that old world order, or whether the inspiration of his words can help us again embrace a new dedication to the principles of American leadership in the 21st century.

There are clear signs of deterioration in the old world order. Authoritarianism is on the rise, from China and Russia to the Philippines, Turkey and Eastern Europe. New technological and

political impacts have had destabilizing effects on globalization. The world is challenged by the consequences of climate change and the spread of social media to groups and people intent on disrupting order. Nationalism and populism have surged as a result of greater inequality within countries. Increased flows of migrants and refugees have destabilized nations, and the power of the information revolution has been used to spread hate.

Institutions like the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the European Union have failed to adapt to the pressures of a changing world, creating a powerful backlash to their authority. And the leadership of the United States, which was always expected to rise to the occasion and confront crisis anywhere in the world, has decided that it is better for the U.S. to withdraw and hide in an America First bunker so that we can better focus on our own problems.

That process began with President Obama and has continued with the Trump administration, in an effort to escape the wars of 9/11 and not repeat the mistakes of the past. As a consequence, both political parties, trapped in the gridlock of partisanship in Washington, have little room to devote to the problems of the world. And while President Trump and both parties have supported increased funding for defense, the inability to arrive at any consensus on the broader budget has left serious gaps in both the important diplomatic tools of international leadership and the foreign aid we have provided to support stability.

This dangerous combination of failing leadership at home combined with economic, technological and political changes in the world, has left the United States vulnerable to a series of dangerous flashpoints in the world: the continuing threat from terrorism and non-state actors; the turmoil of failed states in the Middle East; the threat to stability from rogue nations like North Korea and Iran; the expanding aggression of Russia in the Ukraine, Syria and in the U.S. election process; the rise of China and its spreading economic and military influence; the ongoing wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Yemen; and the growing threat of cyber-warfare. Add to all of this the concerns from climate change, the expanding trade wars, the crisis in Venezuela, and our southern border, and one is left with the sense that we are experiencing the same confluence of events that ultimately led us to a World War in 1914.

The harsh truth is that we have forgotten the bitter lessons from two World Wars that President Reagan reminded us about at Pointe du Hoc. We are seeking blind shelter across the sea while the forces of nationalism and militarism are eroding freedom and threatening our security. But as President Reagan made clear: “our armies are here for only one purpose-- to protect and defend democracy.”

The President’s words should not be remembered as a requiem for the old order. They should be an inspiration to create a new order for the future.

It must begin with the United States getting its own house in order. America cannot provide needed leadership abroad if it is divided at home, distracted by domestic problems and lacking in resources. The responsibility of a President is to unify, not divide; to govern, not blame others for failure; to take risks in order to do the business of the nation, not resort to chaos or crisis as an excuse for lack of policy. The leadership of the President and both parties is critical if we are to deal with a record \$22 trillion debt, rebuild infrastructure, adopt comprehensive immigration

reform, promote health care, educate our children for skills and jobs of the 21st century, reform and improve the social safety net, and work together to govern the nation.

The United States must strengthen its alliances in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and Africa because we cannot solve the problems of globalization on our own. We need to work with allies on climate change, trade, cyber operations, arms control and non-proliferation issues. And we must assert our values and freedoms to counter authoritarian powers' interference in the democratic process.

In taking on these challenges, America must remain the strongest military power on the face of the earth and rebuild the strongest diplomatic capability essential to engaging with the world. From this position of strength, the U.S. will have the credibility to deal with Russia and China through a mix of compromise, incentives and tough pushback. In his speech at Normandy, President Reagan spoke of reaching out in the spirit of reconciliation to the Soviet Union to "lessen the risks of war, now and forever." He did just that and, as a consequence, the Berlin Wall came down and the Cold War ended.

None of this will be easy. But giving up on the fundamental principles that have guided United States leadership for over 70 years is not an option. In his final words of that historic speech, President Reagan said "Let us make a vow to our dead. Let us show them by our actions that we understand what they died for." It would be a betrayal of all they fought and died for if we decide that providing the essential leadership in a dangerous world is simply not worth the effort.

We the living, 35 years after President Reagan's Normandy address, must listen to and act upon his final words: "Strengthened by their courage, heartened by their valor, and borne by their memory, let us continue to stand for the ideals for which they lived and died." Those words must be our inspiration to continue strong American leadership in the world of the 21st century.