

Potomac Officers Club - 2014 Federal Intelligence Summit

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak to you all today. And thank you, Juan, for that generous introduction.

Juan is an expert in following the money so watch your wallets when he is around!

In all seriousness Juan, thank you for your outstanding work over the years in helping to disrupt terrorist plots around the globe. We have seen how incredibly effective disrupting terrorist and proliferator financing is and Juan you were a big part of the U.S. getting that right.

It is always great to be in front of a crowd of business leaders whose companies help the defense and intelligence community accomplish their vital mission. Now, after years of continuing resolutions, minibuses, omnibuses and bus crashes with the shutdown, I am surprised you didn't revoke my invitation to speak to you this morning!

Well, here I am. Actually, with Congress' approval rating back up sharply to near double digits, I thought over the holidays my family might actually like me again. When I overheard my dad telling someone how proud he was of his family, I thought alright, finally. But then he went on to say: "I have five boys. Four turned out really good and I got one in Congress." So much for that.

Thanks for being here and thanks for your work and your interest in these critically important national security issues. If you take a look around the world it's pretty staggering how much instability there is, how many failed states there are now, and how much potential trouble there is for the United States of America and our interests.

Libya and Somalia do not control their own borders, Egypt is in crisis, and Syria essentially no longer exists as the nation we knew. And the spillover due to lack of action in Syria has been everything we feared. Lebanon teeters on the edge of open sectarian warfare, al Qaida controls physical territory in Iraq's Anbar province, and Jordan and Turkey are struggling with staggering refugee populations. Sectarian strife is spreading throughout the Middle East fueled by Iran on one hand and Sunni Islamic extremists on the other. The U.S. withdrawal out of Afghanistan at the end of this year seems to be more focused on ending the war than winning it.

All of this gives al Qaida and other terrorist groups what they need to be most effective: ungoverned space from which to conduct terrorist operations.

Iran is emboldened. It continues its nuclear program while engaging in diplomacy to buy time. Their centrifuges continue to spin and they continue to enrich uranium, marching toward a nuclear weapon that would devastate a delicate balance of power in the world's most volatile region. According to President Rouhani at least, the West has "surrendered" to Iran's demands.

And that is not the only threat. China is asserting dangerous claims in the East and South China Sea, threatening not only its neighbors but international commerce. In Russia, Putin is attempting to leverage oil wealth and U.S. dithering to vault Russia back to superpower status.

I know you all track these issues closely as do I, which is what makes this growing call for isolationism we see from some in this town so concerning. Given this environment and these growing threats, I think it is exactly the wrong time to disengage from the world and to start dismantling our capabilities to counter the threats we face.

Currently, because of the actions of a criminal, much of the intelligence community is under intense scrutiny and the leadership of these agencies at times spends more time addressing these leaks than they do focused on their mission.

Now, some who oppose these NSA programs have even gone so far as to call Edward Snowden a hero.

Snowden is a criminal and a fugitive from justice who has harmed America's ability to defend our nation and our people. He sure made the job of the tens of thousands of Russian and Chinese intelligence agents who wake up every day trying to steal our secrets a heck of a lot easier.

He stole 1.7 million of our most sensitive documents, got on a plane and flew to China and then Russia while parsing them out to be published online where all of America's enemies can learn about how we track them. Now he is even trying to barter the classified information he stole in an effort to gain asylum in South America for himself.

My committee received an important classified report last week from a DIA task force that is working to assess the damage to DoD resulting from the Snowden disclosures. While the work of the task force is on-going, this report reveals that significant damage from the leaks is already evident, and the report makes several disturbing conclusions.

The report revealed that while most of the press reporting to date has centered on NSA's acquisition of foreign intelligence to protect the lives of our citizens and allies, the files

Snowden compromised cover sensitive topics well beyond the NSA collection. Disclosure of this information in the press and to adversaries has the potential to put DoD personnel in harm's way in places like Afghanistan and jeopardize the success of U.S. military operations.

I am astounded by assertions of Snowden's "bravery" and "integrity." I would be inclined to believe his story if he had raised his concerns within the system and if he had used any of the five avenues available to him as a whistleblower. He used none of those avenues available to him though, not one.

As Chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, I take legitimate whistleblowers very seriously. We run every whistleblower allegation we receive to ground while protecting the whistleblower and the classified information that helps keep our nation safe.

Senator Diane Feinstein, the NSA's Inspector General or I never once heard from Edward Snowden until he started his international media blitz from China. He chose a different and illegal path, perhaps one he thought would be more glamorous. He chose the path of a coward and a traitor.

Tomorrow, the President is expected to announce changes to the operations and oversight of some of our most important intelligence collection programs. This speech comes on the heels of last month's report from the President's Review Group, which was populated more with law professors than people familiar with conducting counterterrorism.

The Review Group's report is definitely a mixed bag of good and bad ideas, but it is important to note that it confirms what we on the intelligence committees already knew: NSA programs operate within the law and under tremendous oversight from all three branches of government.

There has not been a single case of intentional violations of the NSA's telephone metadata program. If an NSA employee were ever to misuse one of these programs, he would be detected and face a range of punishments.

Now, after the President announces his recommendations, it is my hope that Congress will enact reforms that improve confidence in the NSA and its collection programs. Clearly we should work to build more transparency and trust in our intelligence collection programs, but NSA's work to track terrorists and adversaries must go on for the security of the U.S. and our allies. Further, we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that NSA employees are patriots who work hard to defend our country. They deserve our respect and appreciation.

NSA programs were authorized by two Presidents of different parties, by the Congress and by 17 federal Judges 37 times.

The problem we face is fighting myths about what these programs really do. Nonetheless, I don't dismiss for a minute that these are very powerful tools, like our military or a big city police department, that in the wrong hands could be used against the very citizens they are designed to protect. That is why, just like our military and police departments, we have so many layers of oversight to make sure that these tools are never abused.

We all would love to live in a world where we don't need an NSA, or a military or a police department. Unfortunately, we don't, so we must maintain these important tools to preserve our security. At the same time, we must also maintain vigorous and multi-layered oversight on those vital tools to ensure that they are not abused.

So I hope we all commit today to stand up for America's intelligence and national security programs that we know keep our fellow citizens and our allies safe. I hope we'll all stand against isolationism. America has tried it before and it did not work.

Thanks so much for having me again here today. Thanks for staying engaged on these important issues and thank you for your and your company's work to help provide for the defense of the best country on earth. I know we all agree that this is a special place still worth fighting for.

Thank you. I'd be happy to answer any questions you might have.