



October 8, 2012

Transcript: Mitt Romney Remarks at Virginia Military Institute

The following is the full text of Mitt Romney's speech on foreign policy as delivered on Monday at the Virginia Military Institute in Lexington, Va. (Transcript courtesy of Federal News Service)

MITT ROMNEY: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so very much for that warm welcome. And I particularly appreciate the introduction by my good friend and tireless campaign companion, Governor Bob McDonnell. We have traveled the state together time and time again, and he goes all over the country helping me. He is also showing here in Virginia what conservative leadership can do to build a stronger economy.

And thank you also to Congressman Goodlatte for joining us today. I appreciate his service and leadership. And particular thanks to General Peay. I appreciate his invitation to be with you today at the Virginia Military Institute. It's a -- a privilege to be here at an institution like this that has done so much for our nation, both in times of war and in times of peace.

For more than 170 years VMI has done more than educate students. It has guided their transformation into citizens, warriors and leaders. VMI graduates have served with honor in our nation's defense, just as many are doing today in Afghanistan and in other lands. And since the September 11th attacks, many of VMI's sons and daughters have defended America, and I mourn with you the 15 brave souls who have been lost. I join you in praying for the many VMI graduates who are right now serving in harm's way. May God bless all who serve and all who have served.

Of all the VMI graduates, none is more distinguished, perhaps, than General George Marshall, the chief of staff of the Army who became secretary of state and secretary of defense, who helped to vanquish fascism and then planned Europe's rescue from despair. His commitment to peace was born of his direct knowledge of the awful costs and consequences of war. General Marshall once said, quote, "the only way human beings can win a war is to prevent it."

Those words were true in his time, and they are true in our time.

Last month our nation was attacked again. A U.S. Ambassador and three of our fellow Americans are dead, murdered in Benghazi, Libya. Among the dead were three veterans. All of them were fine men on a mission of peace and friendship to a nation that clearly longs for both. President Obama has said that Ambassador Chris Stevens and his colleagues represented the best of America, and

he's right. We all mourn their loss.

The attacks against us in Libya were not an isolated incident. They were accompanied by anti-American riots in nearly two dozen other countries, mostly in the Middle East, but also in Africa and Asia. Our embassies have been attacked. Our flag has been burned. Many of our citizens have been threatened and driven from their overseas homes by vicious mobs shouting "Death to America." These mobs hoisted the black banner of Islamic extremism over American embassies on the anniversary of 9/11.

As the dust settles, as the murdered are buried, Americans are asking how this happened, how the threats we face have grown worse and what this calls on America to do. These are the right questions, and I've come here today to offer a larger perspective on these tragic recent events and to share with you and to share with all Americans my vision for a freer, more prosperous and more peaceful world.

The attacks on America last month should not be seen as random acts. They're expressions of a larger struggle that is playing out across the broader Middle East, a region that's now in the midst of the most profound upheaval in a century. And the fault lines of this struggle can be seen clearly in Benghazi itself.

The attack on our consulate there on September 11th, 2012, was likely the work of forces affiliated with those that attacked our homeland on September 11th, 2001.

This latest assault can't be blamed on a reprehensible video insulting Islam, despite the administration's attempts to convince us of that for so long. No, as the administration has finally conceded, these attacks were the deliberate work of terrorists who use violence to impose their dark ideology on others, especially on women and girls; who are fighting to control much of the Middle East today; and who seek to wage perpetual war on the West.

We saw all of this in Benghazi last month, but we also saw something else, something hopeful. After the attack on our consulate, tens of thousands of Libyans, most of them young people, held a massive protest in Benghazi against the very extremists who had murdered our people. They waved signs that read, "The ambassador was Libya's friend" and "Libya is sorry." They chanted "No to militias, no to militias." They marched, unarmed, to the terrorist compound and then they burned it to the ground. As one Libyan woman said, "We are not going to go from darkness to darkness."

This is the struggle that's now shaken the entire Middle East. It's the struggle of millions and millions of people -- men and women, young and old, Muslims, Christians and nonbelievers -- all of whom have had enough of the darkness. It's a struggle for the dignity that comes with freedom and opportunity and the right to live under laws of our own making. It's a struggle that's been unfolded under green banners in the streets of Iran, in the public squares of Tunisia and Egypt and Yemen, and in the fights for liberty in Iraq and Afghanistan and Libya, and now in Syria.

In short, it's a struggle between liberty and tyranny, justice and oppression, hope and despair.

We've seen this struggle before. It would be familiar to General George Marshall. In his time, the ashes of world war, another critical part of the world was torn between democracy and despotism. Fortunately, we had leaders of courage and vision, both Republicans and Democrats, who knew that America had to support friends who shared our values and prevent today's crises from becoming tomorrow's conflicts.

Statesmen like Marshall rallied our nation to rise to its responsibilities as the leader of the free world. We helped our friends to build and sustain free societies and free markets. We defended our friends and ourselves from our common enemies. We led. We led. And though the path was long and uncertain, the thought of war in Europe is as inconceivable today as it seemed inevitable in the last century.

This is what makes America exceptional: It is not only the character of our country; it is also the record of our accomplishments. America has a proud history of strong, confident, principled global leadership -- a history that's been written by patriots of both parties. That is America at its best and is the standard by which we measure every president as well as anyone who wishes to be president.

Unfortunately, this president's policies have not been equal to our best examples of world leadership. And nowhere is this more evident than in the Middle East.

I want to be very clear: The blame for the murder of our people in Libya, and the attacks on our embassies in so many other countries, lies solely with those who carried them out -- no one else. But it is our responsibility and the responsibility of the President to use America's great power to shape history, not to lead from behind, leaving our destiny at the mercy of events.

Unfortunately, that's exactly where we find ourselves in the Middle East under President Obama.

The relationship between the president of the United States and the prime minister of Israel, for example, our closest ally in the region, has suffered great strains. The president explicitly stated that his goal was to put daylight between the United States and Israel, and he's succeeded. This is a dangerous situation that has set back the hope of peace in the Middle East and emboldened our mutual adversaries, especially Iran.

Iran today has never been closer to a nuclear weapons capability. It has never posed a greater danger to our friends, our allies and to us. And it has never acted less deterred by America, as was made clear last year, when Iranian agents plotted to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in our nation's capital. And yet when millions of Iranians took to the streets in June of 2009; when they demanded freedom from a cruel regime that threatens the world; when they cried out, are you with us or are you with them, the American president was silent.

Across the greater Middle East, as the joy born from the downfall of dictators has given way to the painstaking work of building capable security forces and growing economies and developing effective democratic institutions, the president has failed to offer the tangible support that our partners want and need.

In Iraq the costly gains made by our troops are being eroded by rising violence, a resurgent al-Qaida, the weakening of democracy in Baghdad and the rising influence of Iran. And yet America's ability to influence events for the better in Iraq has been undermined by the abrupt withdrawal of our entire troop presence.

The president's tried, he tried, but he also failed to secure a responsible and gradual drawdown that would have better secured our gains.

The president has also failed to lead in Syria, where more than -- more than 30,000 men, women, and children have been massacred by the Assad regime over the past 20 months. Violent extremists are flowing into the fight. Our ally Turkey has been attacked. And the conflict threatens stability in the region.

America can take pride in the blows that our military and intelligence professionals have inflicted on al-Qaida in Pakistan and Afghanistan, including the killing of Osama bin Laden. These are real achievements won at a high cost. Al-Qaida remains a strong force, however, in Yemen and Somalia, in Libya and other parts of North Africa, in Iraq and now in Syria. And other extremists have gained ground across the region. Drones and the modern instruments of war are important tools in our fight, but they are no substitute for a national security strategy for the Middle East.

The president is fond of saying that "the tide of war is receding." And I want to believe him as much as anyone else. But when we look at the Middle East today, with Iran closer than ever to nuclear weapons capability, with the conflict in Syria threatening to destabilize the region and with violent extremists on the march, and with an American ambassador and three others dead -- likely at the hands of al-Qaida affiliates -- it's clear that the risk of conflict in the region is higher now than when the president took office.

I know the president hopes for a safer, freer and more prosperous Middle East allied with us. I share this hope. But hope is not a strategy. We can't support our friends and defeat our enemies in the Middle East when our words are not backed up by deeds, when our defense spending is being arbitrarily and deeply cut, when we have no trade agenda to speak of and the perception of our strategy is not one of partnership, but of passivity.

The greater tragedy of it all is that we are missing an historic opportunity to win new friends who share our values in the Middle East -- friends who are fighting for their own futures against the very same violent extremists and evil tyrants and angry mobs who seek to harm us. Unfortunately, so many of these people who could be our friends feel that our president is indifferent to their

quest for freedom and dignity. As one Syrian woman put it, “We will not forget that you forgot about us.”

It is time to change course in the Middle East. That course should be organized around these bedrock principles: America must have confidence in our cause, clarity in our purpose and resolve in our might. No friend of America will question our commitment to support them. No enemy that attacks America will question our resolve to defeat them. And no one anywhere, friend or foe, will doubt America’s capability to back up our words.

I will put the leaders of Iran on notice that the United States and our friends and allies will prevent them from acquiring nuclear weapons capability. I will not hesitate to impose new sanctions on Iran and will -- and will tighten the sanctions we currently have. I will restore the permanent presence of aircraft carrier task forces in both the Eastern Mediterranean and the Gulf. And I’ll work with Israel to increase our military assistance and coordination. For the sake of peace, we must make clear to Iran through actions, not just words, that their nuclear pursuit will not be tolerated.

I’ll reaffirm our historic ties to Israel and our abiding commitment to its security. The world must never see any daylight between our two nations.

I’ll deepen our critical cooperation with our partners in the Gulf, and I’ll roll back President Obama’s deep and arbitrary cuts to our national defense that would devastate our military. I’ll make the critical defense investments that we need to remain secure.

The decisions we make today will determine our ability to protect America tomorrow. The first purpose of a strong military is to prevent war.

The size of our Navy is at levels not seen since 1916. I’ll restore our Navy to the size needed to fulfill our missions by building 15 ships per year, including three submarines. I’ll implement effective missile defenses to protect against threats. And on this, there will be no flexibility with Vladimir Putin. And I will call on our NATO allies to keep the greatest military alliance in history strong by honoring their commitment to each devote 2 percent of their GDP to security spending. Today only three of the 28 NATO nations meet this benchmark.

I’ll make further reforms to our foreign assistance to create incentives for good governance, for free enterprise and for greater trade in the Middle East and beyond. I’ll organize all assistance efforts in the greater Middle East under one official with responsibility and accountability to prioritize efforts and to produce results.

I’ll rally our friends and our allies to match our generosity with theirs. And I’ll make it clear to the recipients of our aid that in return for our material support, they must meet the responsibilities of every decent, modern government: to respect the rights of all of their citizens, including women

and minorities; to ensure space for civil society, a free media, political parties and an independent judiciary; and to abide by their international commitments to protect our diplomats and our property.

I'll champion free trade and restore it as a critical element of our strategy, both in the Middle East and across the world. The president has not signed one new free trade agreement in the past four years. I'll reverse that failure. I'll work with nations around the world that are committed to the principles of free enterprise, expanding existing relationships and establishing new ones.

I'll support friends across the Middle East who share our values but need help defending them and their sovereignty against our common enemies.

In Libya I'll support the Libyan people's efforts to forge a lasting government that represents all of them, and I'll vigorously pursue the terrorists who attacked our consulate in Benghazi and killed our fellow Americans.

In Egypt I'll use our influence, including clear conditions on our aid, to urge the new government to represent all Egyptians, to build democratic institutions and to maintain its peace treaty with Israel. And we must persuade our friends and allies to place similar stipulations on their aid.

In Syria I'll work with our partners to identify and organize those members of the opposition who share our values and then ensure they obtain the arms they need to defeat Assad's tanks helicopters and fighter jets. Iran is sending arms to Assad because they know his downfall would be a strategic defeat for them. We should be working no less vigorously through our international partners to support the many Syrians who would deliver that defeat to Iran, rather than sitting on the sidelines. It's essential that we develop influence with those forces in Syria that will one day lead a country that sits at the heart of the Middle East.

In Afghanistan I'll pursue a real and successful transition to Afghan security forces by the end of 2014.

President Obama would have you believe that anyone who disagrees with his decisions in Afghanistan is arguing for endless war. But the route to war and to potential attacks here at home is a politically timed retreat that abandons the Afghan people to the same extremists who ravaged their country and used it to launch the attacks of 9/11. I'll evaluate conditions on the ground and weigh the best advice of our military commanders. And I will affirm that my duty is not to protect my political prospects but to protect the security of the nation.

Finally, I'll recommit America to the goal of a democratic, prosperous Palestinian state living side by side in peace and security with the Jewish state of Israel. On this vital issue, the president has failed, and what should be a negotiation process has devolved into a series of heated disputes at the United Nations. In this old conflict, as in every challenge we face in the Middle East, only a new

president will bring the chance to begin anew.

There's a longing for American leadership in the Middle East -- and it's not unique to that region. It's broadly felt by America's friends and allies in other parts of the world as well: in Europe, where Putin's Russia casts a long shadow over young democracies and where our oldest allies have been told we are "pivoting" away from them; in Asia and across the Pacific, where China's recent assertiveness is sending chills throughout that region; and here in our own hemisphere, where our neighbors in Latin America want to resist the failed ideology of Hugo Chavez and the Castro brothers and deepen ties with the United States on trade and energy and security. But in all of these places, just as in the Middle East, the question is asked: Where does America stand?

I know many Americans are asking a different question: Why us? I know many Americans are asking whether our country today, with our ailing economy and our massive debt and after 11 years at war, is still capable of leading.

I believe that if America doesn't lead, others will -- others who don't share our interests and our values -- and the world would grow darker, for our friends and for us. America's security and the cause of freedom cannot afford four more years like the last four years. I'm running for president because I believe the leader of the free world has a duty, to our citizens and to our friends everywhere, to use America's great influence, wisely, with solemnity and without false pride, but also firmly and actively, to shape events in ways that secure our interests, further our values, prevent conflict and make the world better -- not perfect but better.

Our friends and allies across the globe don't want less American leadership. They want more -- more of our moral support, more of our security cooperation, more of our trade, more of our assistance in building free societies and thriving economies. So many people across the world still look to America as the best hope of humankind. So many people still have faith in America. We must show them that we still have faith in ourselves; that we have the will and the wisdom to revive our stagnant economy, to roll back our unsustainable debt, to reform our government, to reverse the catastrophic cuts now threatening our national defense, to renew the sources of our great power and to lead the course of human events.

Sir Winston Churchill once said of George Marshall: "He always fought victoriously against defeatism, discouragement and disillusion."

That's the role our friends want America to play again, and it's the role we must play.

The 21st century can and must be an American century. It began with terror and war and economic calamity. It's our duty to steer it onto the path of freedom and peace and prosperity. The torch America carries is one of decency and hope. It's not America's torch alone, but it is America's duty and honor to hold it high enough that all the world can see its light.

Thank you so much for your participation in this great charge. God bless you, and God bless the United States of America. Thank you very much. (Applause.)