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International
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Environmental Change and Security Program

Energy, Climate Change, and the Military: Implications for National Security

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Edited Transcript—Admiral Dennis McGinn, USN (Ret.)

Thank you all for coming and for your interest in this vital topic that has so many key consequences to our national security.

I want to address the question, “What does all this mean, not just to DoD and government agencies and departments, but what does it mean to the American people?” Let’s think about the context of this report and the enormous stakes. Global climate change will pose serious threats to water supplies and agricultural production, leading to mass migration in some cases. At the same time, we’ll see an increasing demand for a dwindling supply of fossil fuels. These factors mean an intense competition for key and vital resources around the globe, and that leads to conflict. The United States and the United States Military cannot assume that we will be untouched by these conflicts. We have to understand how they will play out, and we need to prepare for them where we cannot mitigate their effects or prevent them.

I’d also like to refer back to an earlier conflict. And this highlights something very different about this report, different from the first report in 2007, and I believe from many other reports involving military leaders. That is because, in it, we make a direct appeal to the American people. We talk in this report of the amazing sacrifices the American people made during World War II, planting victory gardens, cutting down on fuel use, saving scrap metal and old rubber, sacrifices -- which is, I guess, a word we tend to avoid these days of good times or relatively good times -- they could be called sacrifices, or maybe they were just examples of common sense, frugality, and prudent lifestyle changes. Whatever you call them, the steps taken by the American people then shortened the war and saved lives.

And I believe the same can be said today about these challenges of energy security and climate security. There are individual steps that every American can take: using less energy, being more efficient with the energy that we do use, supporting new policies to help our



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country take a new energy path. These are the steps that can help us avoid or shorten wars in the future, those wars over competition for vital resources. These are steps that can save lives. They may cost money, yes, but if we don't spend the money now, primarily thinking of that as an investment, we'll still pay, and we'll pay much more later. In fact, very likely, we'll pay in American lives lost.

American civilians played an important role during World War Two because they understood the stakes and because they were asked to do so. General Wald made the stakes clear, and our report makes the stakes clear. Our current energy posture poses a significant and urgent threat to our national security, militarily, economically, and diplomatically. Hopefully, more Americans will understand these things, that these consequences will affect them. Hopefully, more Americans will hear the very direct request from our Commander in Chief and from this small group of a dozen retired admirals and generals. The American people, all of us, through our energy choices, can contribute directly to the security of our nation.

In reflecting on General Wald's remarks, to achieve the end state, a transformation, a true transformation in the way we generate and use electricity and other forms of energy in America, requires a national effort and leadership from the highest levels of government. In all of this, there's a tremendous benefit and a great opportunity. It is a triple win. It reduces our dependence on oil, it reduces the impact on the environment, and it makes our nation very, very much secure. And despite the pleas by General Wald and Sherri Goodman for me to continue to talk for a couple of hours so that they wouldn't have to answer any tough questions, I'm going to conclude my remarks, turn it back over to Geoff so that we can hear what's on your mind and give you our best judgment. Thank you.

