



## **DIRECTOR RASMUSSEN OPENING REMARKS**

UNITED STATES SENATE YOUTH PROGRAM WASHINGTON WEEK  
MARCH 9, 2017 8:00-9:00 A.M.

Good morning. It is an honor to be with you today at the United States Senate Youth Program's 55<sup>th</sup> Annual Washington Week.

Isha [Dalal, Connecticut Delegate], thank you for the introduction. I know you may have heard it more than once this week, but you should all be very proud of the achievements that have brought you here today.

From my perspective, it is exciting to see this group of talented young people who are working toward a future in public service. Someday, I hope to see many of you serving in Congress, working at the White House or the State Department.

Or maybe just maybe taking my seat as the future Director of the National Counterterrorism Center.

Thank you to the Hearst Foundations for funding and administering this program, and to the Hearst family—it is an honor to be here with you, the grandchildren of William Randolph Hearst, one of the great legends of American journalism.

Senator Wicker and Senator Heitkamp—thank you for your leadership and commitment to this program.

Rayne Guilford [USSYP Director] and Steve Cox [USSYP Director of Student Activities and moderator]—thank you for your efforts to create a truly life-changing experience for these students here in Washington.

I know you have a very full day and a lot of exciting things ahead of you, but to get your day started, I wanted briefly to cover 3 quick topics:

first, my particular path to public service;

second, some of the national security challenges I see that are facing our nation and the world;

and third, a few quick words about my role as the Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, known as NCTC.





As I prepared to speak with you today and as I learned more about the Senate Youth Program, I was struck by how life-changing this experience can be.

Alumni of this program hold prominent positions in all branches of government and in all sectors of society.

It is clear that the week you spend here is a remarkable opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of how our government works.

But, perhaps more importantly, it is an opportunity to embark on a life in public service.

I am often asked about my own path to public service, and sometimes I wish I had a more exciting tale to tell.

But in my case the truth is actually quite simple, and yet it had a profound influence on my future.

I grew up very close by in northern Virginia and attended Fairfax High School right down the road from here. Growing up, I lived exactly 17.5 miles from the Capitol building.

My parents were both public servants. My dad had a forty-year long career in the government; when he retired, he was as the most senior career official at the United States Department of Education,

My mom worked as a public school teacher and was deeply involved in our community in northern Virginia.

My parents enjoyed highly successful and satisfying careers, and combined with just being around Washington and growing up here, I developed a natural interest in public service.

And I was not alone among my siblings in my instinct for public service following the example of our parents.

One of my brothers has served for almost 28 years in the US Army, including multiple tours in Afghanistan. And my other brother works in local government in our hometown of Fairfax Virginia.

When I went away to college, I was focused mostly on studying political science and history and economics.





I attended Wesleyan University in Connecticut, where I was a College of Social Studies major.

The College of Social Studies at Wesleyan is founded on the tutorial concept—meaning small, intensive classes with no letter grades...except for one big comprehensive exam at the end of the semester, and a heavy focus on reading, writing, and analytic skills.

Through that coursework, I developed the ability to synthesize large amounts of information, to build arguments, and to express myself persuasively. To write quickly and clearly.

I have drawn on these skills every day in my 26 years in the government.

If I can offer my first piece of advice about how to prepare for a career in public service, it would be this—make sure you develop the ability to write well and to think analytically.

These are invaluable skills, regardless of what part of government you want to work in.

Whatever's happening in the global economy, There is always a job for someone who can think, speak and write with clarity and precision.

As college students, whether that's next year or the year after, you will have the opportunity to strengthen and expand these skills, and you should know that they will serve you well, whatever career path you decide to follow.

While I was still an undergraduate at Wesleyan, I joined the Defense Department as an unpaid intern at the Pentagon.

Later, after finishing graduate school and getting a Masters degree at Princeton University, I joined the State Department as a Presidential Management Intern (now known as a Presidential Management Fellow).

This was an entry way for me into a career of government service.

At the State Department, I had the chance to work on some of the most interesting and difficult national security issues our country faces...stopping North Korea from developing nuclear weapons; making peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors; working with our allies in the Middle East to bring stability and security to a difficult part of the world.

Then in the summer of 2001, almost 16 years ago, I accepted a position to work on the National Security Council at the White House on counterterrorism issues, working for President George W. Bush.





My first day on the job was Monday, September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2001, six days after the 9/11 attacks.

For most of you, September 11<sup>th</sup> occurred fairly early in your life—you were maybe a year or two old.

For those of us who lived through it as adults, I believe it is our solemn obligation to share those memories with you and with future generations.

It is a day that fundamentally changed our nation, and for me, it also proved transformational in my career.

After 9/11, Counterterrorism became the most pressing national security issue of our time—and it has become the singular focus of my work in government since then.

It's no exaggeration to say that literally every day of my life since September 2001 has been spent in some way working or thinking about terrorism and counterterrorism. Even on holidays and weekends.

And all of this work is focused on trying to do a better job of keeping your family and my family safe from potential terrorist attack.

My job right now is to serve as the Director of the National Counterterrorism Center.

The Center that I lead was established in 2004 in response to the lessons learned after 9/11.

The fact is that we in the government failed to detect and prevent the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York, on the Pentagon here in Washington, and on the airplane that crashed in Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

And it was that failure that convinced us that we needed to reform the way we did our jobs and change how we worked.

That was the only way to make sure that we wouldn't see another 9/11 attack.

And so NCTC, the Center I lead, today has over a thousand public servants working every single day to analyze and understand every available bit of information related to terrorism.

NCTC is not a place where we fly drones or drop bombs or arrest terrorists. There are others in the US government who do that.

But the unique thing about NCTC is that we have access to information from every other government organization about terrorism, so that we can see the full picture.





We also have on our staff officers from all across the government—from the military, from the CIA, from the FBI, from Homeland Security, pretty much from every government agency you've ever heard of.

The workforce that I lead is made up of experts from every part of government—all focused on doing whatever we can to defeat terrorist groups who are trying to attack us.

In the 15+ years since the September 11 attacks, our government has made a lot of progress in improving our defenses against terrorism.

We are better at collecting intelligence, we are better at working together and sharing information with all of the people who need it, and we are better at responding to terrorist attacks when they happen.

We are in a much better place than we were 15 years ago. I really believe that.

But even though that is true, I still must tell you that the current threat environment does give me reason for concern.

I spend a lot of my time talking to members of Congress, in meetings with our foreign partners, and in meetings with senior leaders of our government.

And we are all focused on a threat environment that is in some ways more challenging than it has ever been.

In this current environment, terrorist threats to the US typically take one of two forms.

On one end of the spectrum, we face complex plots driven by known terrorist groups—groups like ISIS and al-Qa'ida—that can take months or even years to materialize.

In my view, we are in a very good position to defend against these kinds of attacks because of the capability, skill, and dedication of our nation's counterterrorism professionals.

On the other end of the spectrum, we face a growing threat from what we call homegrown violent extremists. Sometimes you hear the term "lone wolf" used to describe these kind of individuals.

They frequently act alone—without any direct connection to terrorist groups.





These lone wolf actors can be inspired by ISIS or some other terrorist group as well as by other motivating factors that are often deeply personal, or which may involve mental illness.

And the most frustrating part is that these lone actors are harder to detect and identify because—by definition—they are acting alone and hiding what they are doing, even from the people closest to them.

Ultimately, our greatest hope for countering this kind of terrorism rests in a preventative approach that seeks to counter the appeal of terrorist ideologies.

And that's what we are trying to do.

My team at NCTC is actively involved with communities all across the United States.

Our goal in these efforts is to give communities the information and tools they need to recognize the signs and symptoms of violent extremism in their midst and do something about it before something tragic happens.

We have found that when one of these lone wolf actors does something terrible or carries out an attack, there is usually somebody we can look back to and say “wow, that person could have known what they were up to.”

That person might have been a teacher, or a friend, or a coach, or a cousin, or a neighbor, or really anyone at all.

And we also know that the more informed and the more resilient a community is, the less likely that community's members are to join a terrorist group or carry out an attack.

This leads me to my second piece of advice for you, which is about resilience.

I'm not sure if the word “resilience” shows up in your SAT Review sessions but I looked up the definition yesterday when I was preparing for this event today.

The word resilience means “the ability to bounce back or recover quickly from difficulties. Or a simple synonym, it means “toughness”.





From Paris to Brussels to Berlin—our European partners have demonstrated tremendous resilience and resolve in the face of terror attacks.

They have shown that terrorists can carry out attacks, but they cannot succeed in changing our society and our way of life unless we let them do it.

I believe for the US to triumph over the threat of terrorism, we must be more resilient as a society. We can show greater toughness and the ability to bounce back.

Building strength and resilience in communities across the US—showing that we can and will recover and bounce back—that is what will give us the decisive advantage over our terrorist adversaries,

That is actually what denies success and victory to terrorist groups, even if they do manage to attack us.

And you—as future leaders—can help model this resilience in your schools, neighborhoods, and communities.

Before I wrap things up, I would like to turn to the third topic I mentioned—my role as NCTC Director.

As both a presidential appointee and lifelong civil servant, I have had the honor of serving under multiple administrations—both Democrat and Republican.

I served at the White House under President George W. Bush. I served at the White House under President Obama, and then President Obama appointed me to be the Director of NCTC.

And earlier this year, President Trump's Administration asked me to stay on into the new Administration.

And speaking very personally, I am truly grateful for the opportunity to continue leading NCTC.

It's very humbling to be in a position to lead men and women who come to work every single day with the sole purpose of trying to prevent terrorists from succeeding.





As the Director of NCTC, my job is to give the President and other senior leaders in our government the most complete and clear picture possible about the threat of terrorism we face.

I often spend my days consuming and reading analysis prepared by trained intelligence officers; briefing and attending meetings with members of Congress and at the White House; and interacting with our foreign partners and other colleagues in the Intelligence Community and law enforcement.

Coming back to where I started this morning, you can see how my first piece of advice about developing the ability to absorb large amounts of information, think critically about it, and communicate it succinctly is very relevant to my job today.

As we look to the future, recruiting and training the next generation of public servants will be the key to keeping pace with the fast paced world we live in and the changing terrorist threat.

Every single day, I'm thinking about what kind of skills and talent do we need at NCTC to do our jobs.

We need individuals many different skills and backgrounds—political science, history, computer science, engineering, language skills, psychology, and many more skill sets—in order to win this fight.

So, please, pursue higher education in college and maybe beyond, develop those skills and someday I hope I can serve alongside you inside the government, working to keep our fellow Americans safe.

One other point I would make about skills and education.

Your generation has grown up with personal electronic devices in your hands essentially from birth, and you know how to use them to create new things, to communicate, and to share ideas.

I bet that some of you were able to function on an iPhone or a tablet before you could even talk.

That gives you a huge advantage over people of my generation and I hope you recognize that.

It should come as no surprise that today's terrorists use technology just like you do. To communicate with each other, to share information, and yes, unfortunately, to hide from their parents or the police.

So, we need our counterterrorism professionals to be just as agile and digitally savvy as the bad guys that are trying to do us harm, and we need young people like you who are dedicated to public service to help make that happen.





This leads me to my final piece of advice—digital skills are in high demand and short supply.

I encourage you to embrace your natural affinity for all things digital, keep pace with technology, and be creative in interpreting data to solve complex problems.

In closing, I want to congratulate this year's delegates, and I look forward to seeing your futures unfold.

Stay focused on building those core skills of critical thinking and writing, be part of the work to build strength and resiliency in your communities, and lean forward on developing your digital literacy, and I have no doubt you will serve your community and your country with great distinction.

Thank you. I will stop there and I'm happy to take some questions.

[Steve Cox USSYP Director of Student Activities will moderate 15 minutes of Q&A]

