**Is ISIS Winning?**

**Kurt Volker:** Uh, good evening. Uh, my name is Kurt Volker. I have the honor of serving as the Executive Director of The McCain Institute, and thank you all for coming this evening.

We are delighted to be, uh, kicking off our Debate and Decision Series again this fall, uh, with the topic of, "Is ISIS Winning?" And I think you'll find that, uh, to be an interesting and entertaining and informative debate that we have for you, uh, this evening. You've heard a lot about The McCain Institute in this, uh, video that you just saw.

Uh, one of the things that I know you just heard was an introduction of our Next Generation Leaders Program. And to give it a little bit more detail, this is iden-, helping to identify, train, network, and empower a group of already accomplished emerging leaders from around the world and the US, and helping work with them on individual action plans to bring about positive change in the future.

And our new class of Next Generation Leaders happens to be with us this evening. So if you would just wave or say hello, uh here from, uh...

[applause]

**Kurt:** ...from a number of different countries, five continents. The fourth class that we've had here. So thank you very much. I also see our Policy Design Studio, uh, students here as well. We're delighted to have you and lots of other friends and supporters of The McCain Institute from all over, so, uh, we're delighted that you're here.

Uh, the terms of this debate, uh, this is meant to be a timed and structured, uh, debate. It is not a, uh, uh, partisan debate, we hope, but really one that gets to the substance of the issues. Uh, each side gets a fair opportunity to present a case, to rebut a case, and then, in response to questions and answers, they'll have, uh, fixed amount of time.

It's about four minutes opening statements, two to rebut, and then, in response to a question, each side can have about two minutes to respond to that. But we do want it to be interactive and dynamic.

Uh, there will be an opportunity for the audience to ask questions. When that opportunity comes, please, uh, do be brief. Please do make it a question. I know it's, it's tempting sometimes to comment on some of the provocative things you may have heard, but please do make it a question and we'll feed that back into and hear from our presenters that are here.

Uh, also, we do encourage you to tweet, to take pictures, to live stream, whatever you wanna do. Uh, there is WiFi here and the network and the password are on the back of the program. And the hashtag, uh, is #MIDebate. So feel free to use that. Log into the WiFi. Tweet along the way.
To get our debate going this evening, uh, we have a very, uh, good and dear friend of mine. We served at the National Security Council together. He had previously been at the US Department of the Treasury. Uh, he's the author of a book, "Treasury's War." He's a former Deputy National Security Advisor for Counterterrorism.

Uh, you may have seen him as a commentator on CBS, and he's now also, uh, managed to develop a very successful business, uh, uh, working in the areas of, uh, counterterrorism and compliance with, uh, US, uh, counterterrorism requirements of the financial area. So let me introduce Juan Zarate. Thank you.

[applause]

**Juan Zarate**: Good evening, everybody. For those of you who have managed to come to the Navy Memorial, welcome and thank you for taking time with us. For those watching online and perhaps will watch later, welcome to this debate.

Uh first thing I want to say is we're among friends here, even though is going to become a heated debate. I count Ambassador Volker as a very close friend and colleague. I'm honored to be here, and I want to thank you and the McCain Institute for inviting me to moderate among such distinguished experts.

I also want to thank Liz, uh, Fontaine and Arizona State University for all the work that's happening, uh, all the work that we just heard about. Go Sun Devils.

[laughter]

**Juan**: I also want to give a shout-out to our Navy brethren who are here. Uh, we are in the Navy Memorial. It's good to remember and recognize the sacrifice of those who served in the Navy. My father served as a naval surgeon. I'm always proud of that. So, welcome.

We have a provocative question. Is ISIS winning? In some ways, it seems like a very simple question, but if you unwrap it, it is filled with some fundamental questions and issues. After 15 years, post 9/11, is the United States any safer? Is terrorism growing more dangerous? And as it's most violent and obvious manifestation in ISIS that has established a so-called caliphate in the heart of the Middle East, is it winning and expanding?

Are the efforts to constrain it effective? Are we constraining its ability to not only reach beyond the Middle East but also into the homeland? We've got three graphics for you. And in this debate, I'd ask you to keep an open mind, because data and facts can be read in different ways.

But I'm going to start you off with three graphics to set the table for the debate. The first is a graphic from IHS Conflict Monitor which shows the loss of territory for ISIS in the red and the crimson from January 2015 to July 2016. This in the heart of the caliphate.

It clearly lost territory. They've lost leadership, personnel. The number of foreign fighters has trickled according to the "Washington Post" from a height of 2,000 fighters per month.
to now just 50. Their popularity appears to be waning in most parts of the world.

If you go to the second graphic, you see that ISIS finances, uh, which has fueled the most, uh, wealthy and, and, uh, and prosperous terrorist organization in modern history, their finances has been decreased. And, th-, the estimates, uh, vary, but according to some estimates, their monthly budget has been decreased by at least 30 percent.

But if you go to a third graphic, which is a little less clear. This comes from "The New York Times." You see that not only is the group established itself well beyond the so-called caliphate, but it has established so-called provinces or [indecipherable 06:19] in places like Libya, Egypt, and even Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

And groups like Boko Haram that once flew the banner of Al-Qaeda have now shifted to fly the banner of ISIS. And you see, of course, the quickening of the pace and the severity of some of their attacks well beyond their provinces and territorial reach into the heart of Europe, even inspiring attacks in the United States.

So the question is, is ISIS winning? It's not a simple question. Now let me ask the audience, because this is participatory. Let me ask you not whether or not you think ISIS is winning, but whether or not you think you know the answer. Starting this debate.

[laughter]

Juan: So raise your hand if you think you have an answer. It's OK if you do. OK, not many. Oh good, we've got an open audience and some open minds. I'm gonna ask a different question at the end of the debate, so be prepared. Put your listening ears on, and let's get ready to go.

There are no better experts than the four, uh, experts with us today to discuss this issue. Debating on the side of no, the argument that ISIS is not winning are Peter Bergen and Doug Ollivant.

Peter Bergen, well-known to you all. Award winning author. Uh, Peter's often in the media, CNN, the vice president of the New America foundation. Author of many books, including the latest, "The United States of Jihad. Investigating America's Homegrown Terrorism." A, a well-recorded expert and someone who, uh, is always provocative.

Next in is Doug Ollivant, uh, a military veteran. Someone, uh, with whom I served and who served in the White House, who's a part of the future of War Project at New America. He's also associated with Arizona State University. He's a managing partner and senior VP at Mantid International.

On the yes side, ISIS is winning, we have two formidable experts. Dr. Sebastian Gorka, famous for his bestselling books, including his latest -- and he's a good author. He brings a copy -- "Defeating Jihad: The Winnable War." It's good news.

[laughter]

Juan: He's a vice president professor of strategy in irregular warfare at the Institute of
World Politics. Uh, you see him frequently on Fox News, CNN, debating with the best and the brightest. We're lucky to have him as well.

Finally, last but surely not least, is the honorable Mary Beth Long, Madame Secretary. Uh, currently the CEO of Metis Solutions, an entrepreneur in her own right, but a policy expert recognized on both sides of the isle.

Having served, uh, in her last stint in the government as the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Affairs where I got the honor and had the privilege of working with her, in particular on counterterrorism issues in the Middle East.

That is our debate line-up and this is our question. Is ISIS winning? We're going to start with the no answer. We're going to turn to Doug to start the debate. You have four minutes. Then we're going to turn to the yes side for four minutes. Doug, the panel's yours.

Douglas Ollivant: Thanks much, Juan. Thank you all for coming. Let's be clear what we're debating tonight. The question is, is ISIS winning? Not are Islamic Jihad's groups on the decline? Or is the threat of Islamic terrorism declining? Let alone, does the United States have a coherent strategy for the Middle East?

We're debating a narrow topic. The fortunes of a group that few of, tus-, a few of us had heard of before 2014. The descendants of Al-Qaeda in Iraq that was defeated during the 2007 Iraq surge. So let's take a hard look at some stubborn facts about this particular group.

In the past couple of months in Iraq, only greater Mosul remains under ISIS control with more and more of the surrounding villages falling to the Iraqi Army and Kurdish Peshmerga forces every week. General David Petraeus is on the record, scoring the liberation of Mosul before the end of the Obama administration as probable, an opinion shared by General Votel, the CENTCOM commander.

In Syria, the city of Manbij, important because it was the hub for foreign fighters joining ISIS, fell to coal-, a coalition-backed Kurdish and Arab forces, and Turkish forces responded by crossing the border to liberate Jarabulus.

In Libya, ISIS forces have had to flee the city of Sirte as a combination of opposing militia forces unite to eject them. Of course, this is just the recent past. Again, back to Iraq, a series of major cities, Tikrit, or the University of Tikrit reopened in December of 2015.

Baiji, Ramadi, Fallujah have all been recaptured by Iraqi forces. When I was last in Baghdad in the spring, the talk was definitely about when, not if, all of Iraq could be liberated.

In Syria, Palmyra has fallen into the Syrian government while fighting still rages in Deir ez-Zor. ISIS has not gained any new territory in Iraq and Syria since it seized Palmyra and Ramadi in the summer of 2015, both cities which they have since lost.
Meanwhile, CNN reports that it's getting harder for ISIS to finance its war machine due to its shrinking territory and its crippled oil business, and it's cutting its fighter salaries in half. It appears there's response to this physical tightening.

The FBI director, James Comey, is testifying that ISIS has lost the ability to attract people of the caliphate from the United States. The flow of other fighters is also steeply declining with the Pentagon estimating as high as a 90 percent reduction in foreign fighter flow, joining ISIS just isn't what it used to be.

And General Votel has noted in the reading fight, in the recent fighting in Manbij, "Isis fighters refused to hold their ground but instead retreated under relatively light pressure." The only aspect in which ISIS has gained traction has been its suicide bombers and inspired attacks. But this is a tactic of weakness, not strength.

An organization that once aspired to be, in fact named itself the one and only true Islamic State, is now a pale shadow of its foreign self and can only run relatively small networks in the slums of various world cities.

Now, a terrorist bombing campaign is obviously a problem, but it's hardly the situation in 2014 when the fall of Baghdad and [inaudible 12:43] at least seemed to be live issues. So, no, ISIS is not winning, not even close. It's likely to lose all its territory in Iraq by the end of this calendar year.

And while Syria is more complicated, various forces continue to eat away of ISIS' territory there as well. Its forces in Libya are being pushed from the coastlines back into the desert. The once wealthy group is now largely broke. If this is winning, I'd hate to see what losing looks like.

Peter Bergen: And just to add to, uh, uh, Doug's, uh, presentation, just this afternoon, I'm sure we all will be pleased to hear that the crucial, uh, crucially strategic town of Tell Abyad in Syria just fell which was held by ISIS. And American flag now flies over this town.

Uh, this is very important because as Doug mentioned, Manbij has already fallen to the west of Raqqa, the de facto capital of, of ISIS in Syria. Now to the north, uh, there, this other town has also fallen. It's always a real sign of winning when your own de facto capital is being circled. You will hear from our friends on the other side that a string of recent terrorist attacks show that ISIS is, is winning.

But in fact, these attacks are contributing precisely to why ISIS isn't winning, and also our friends are falling into the trap of believing ISIS' own propaganda that they're winning. ISIS is the Islamic State. They are a geographic entity. That is their most important, uh, sort of matter of being and also why they attracted so many, uh, foreign fighters.

Now, they attracted powers in November 2015. The French immediately amped up their airstrikes against, against ISIS. In June 2016, uh, the, uh, the, the ISIS attacked Istanbul airport. Now, the Turkish army has now invaded Syria.
Now, the Turkish army is not some ragtag Kurdish militia. These are tanks. They, they have close air support. They, they have Special Forces. They slice through ISIS' lines almost overnight.

So, ISIS terrorist attacks around the world are undermining its overall strategy to hold on to territory and rule like a state, which is to con-, which is to confuse tactical success with, strategy, strategic victory, which is precisely what you're going to hear, uh, from our friends on this other, other side of the debate are gonna confuse you further with this issue.

[laughter]

Juan: OK. So, allow us to hear Peter Bergen. I gave them an extra minute. I'm gonna give you an extra minute.

Sebastian Gorka: Thank you.

Juan: Now, we're going to hear from the yes side, ISIS is winning, Dr. Gorka.

Sebastian: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. If I were you, I wouldn't buy any stocks or shares that, uh, Mr. Bergen predicted for you would be increasing in value, because he doesn't infactly predict what I'm going to tell you. I'm going to tell you a different story. What is ISIS? Let's look at the facts. ISIS is the world's first caliphate in the modern age that actually holds territory in multiple countries of multiple regions.

It's not just Syria and Iraq, or even Libya. Boko Haram was accepted into the caliphate of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, which means Nigerian territory under Boko control is de facto apart of his caliphate. We have never ever seen any insurgency, be it Marxist, be it jihadi, or any other type of insurgency hold territory in multiple theaters at the same time.

Yes, we have squeezed them financially. But even the "Financial Times" says, "ISIS has a GDP of $500 million." If you look at the 9/11 commission report which states the attack of September the 11th 15 years ago cost barely $500,000.

ISIS makes that in six hours. Do you feel safe? We shouldn't. Not only that. Let's look at what your government has recorded just three weeks ago. The president went to the Pentagon for a big ISIS meeting. The National Counterterrorism Center briefed him on ISIS. This is the agency for counterterrorism analysis within the office of the director of National Intelligence.

The map they used to brief the president made it out into the press. And what did that map say? And I quote directly, "ISIS today has 18 fully operational affiliates in 18 nations." Not people who just think ISIS is cool and swore Bay'at, swore loyalty. But according to the United States Intelligence Community, fully operational.

Now, if 18 out of 200, is that scary? Yes, it is, because the State Department drew a similar estimate just two years ago. And then, the number was seven. ISIS has more than doubled its fully operational affiliates in less than 25 months.
Whether or not you believe ISIS is winning will boil down to two questions. Are you old-fashioned? Do you think about strategy in an 18th century way? Do you measure winning just by towns captured or towns lost? Or is it more than that? Is it perhaps ideological as my colleague will discuss?

And the second question is a much more important one. It is a moral question. Can you answer this question of whether ISIS is winning or not based on solely upon the lives of Americans? Syria is inextricably linked to ISIS. That conflict has caused the lives of between 400,000 and 500,000 people in five years. Do we write them off as foreigners, as Muslims, as Shia, as Sunni? Or is that death toll also something we should care about.

I hand over my last minute to my tag team colleague, Mary Beth.

[laughter]

Juan: WWF.

Mary Beth Long: Peter was right about one thing. Um, the caliphate certainly early on announced that it would hold territory and it would represent itself as the ideological underpinning of what true Islam is.

The geography is important, but the more important aspect of that is the ideological, the religious ties, the fact that for the recruits, the individuals associated with this movement are attracted to its ideology. The ideology that makes them act in certain ways, the influence.

You only need to ask yourself the following questions to figure out whether ISIS is winning. If you've been in Monte Carlo last week like I was, you walked the streets, you went to the shops, and you went to the hotels, and you went to the restaurants, and they were empty, and you asked the holders, "Why?"

And they said, "Because of what happened in Khan. We're terrified." The people and their governments have lost the faith that our ability in our security services and our police can identify these ISIS lone wolves.

And it doesn't matter whether they've pledged themselves to the caliphate 10 minutes beforehand or have been working with it for 10 years. The fact is the fear that they thought, the distraction, not only the immediate distraction, but the real damage they're doing to our economy happens every day.

If you went to Nice, those streets are nearly empty. If you walk down the streets right now of Germany, you see people crossing the street because the person that looks like he or she may be Islamic, may be an immigrant, represents a danger.

ISIS is winning 'cause it's polluted our minds. It's polluted what we do with our money. It's polluted what we do every day with our cars, with our vacations, and everything else. Did you know that there had been a 110 Americans tapped? And, and that the FBI has said that 60 percent of those are 15 to 25 years old who were inspired online by the
The caliphate may not be sitting in that village, and may have left that village for tactical support. But where they are is on the Internet. Where they are is twittering and tweeting. And they've got an amazing magazine that is inspiring people all over the globe.

They have a caliphate cubs where children are born into the caliphate will know nothing other than the violence and the purity of Islam, and will grow up to be what? People that we can't even communicate with.

We don't even have a strategy to confront that. How can you say that we're even on the battlefield of the ideological fight against ISIS? At the end of the day, that's the fight that matters. And we're not even on the battlefield. ISIS is winning the important fight. And that's the fight of legitimacy.

Juan: Thank you very much. I gave you both some leeway. I'm gonna be less, uh, gentle in the next, uh, round. Now, we're going to go to the segment of two-minute questions. I'm gonna pose questions to each side.

Let me go to, uh, Peter and Doug first. How do you address this issue of the, the real problem being ISIS is reached whether it be on the Internet, with new territories geographically, or even ideologically? Isn't that part of the battlefield that we need to consider?

Peter: Um, Sebastian Gorka mentioned the 18 affiliates. So, a lot of these affiliates are people just slapping the patrons, saying that ISIS is just trying to be the big bad, uh, because it's the brand of the moment.

Sebastian: Wrong.

[laughter]

Peter: Let me finish up. Um, the only affiliate that ISIS really kind of operates in a kind of command and control sense in any real sense is the ISIS affiliate in Libya. Uh, that, uh, that, uh, affiliate just lost Sirte, which is a major city that they held. It's Gaddafi's birthplace.

Uh, they, in fact, by the way, it's the Libyans themselves have liberated with some American help. Uh, so, I think the, uh, affiliates is a bit of a sort of smoke screen that is being put up. Um, and ISIS overall has a math problem. You know, we have killed 45,000 foot soldiers in ISIS according to Sean, Sean MacFarland who runs the anti-ISIS coalition.

Foreign fighters now, it's just not a very attractive thing to go to Syria and be killed by Latin American drone. Uh, 1,700, uh, foreign fighters a month, now down to 200. And, um, Mary Beth Long correctly pointed that out about the Americans who've been attracted. But, you know, the numbers have gone from six a month through we're trying to go to one a month.
And we haven't had a single ISIS-trained militant come back here to try and do anything. We've had about eight people who've come back, seven of them are in jail and one is dead.

So, you know, you have to look at the numbers if you're talking about winning or losing. At the end of the day, after all, wars are about attrition. And we have put an enormous amount of pressure on this group.

**Douglas:** That's right. Look, Boko Haram is a problem. But is Boko Haram really any different today ISIS-affiliated than it was three years ago, Al-Qaeda-affiliated?

Now, there's still a bunch of nasty of people who dare to do nasty things on their territory. But the fact that you changed the brand under which you're operating doesn't make you any different. Likewise, the affiliate in Afghanistan, a bunch of nasty people, very, very strongly, Islam has put on a new patch, but they're really not doing anything terribly different than they were four years ago.

**Juan:** Thank you. One minute rebuttal.

**Sebastian:** Uh, thank you for walking straight into my trap.

[laughter]

**Sebastian:** Um, let's talk about Boko Haram. You said, they just changed brands. They're not deadly at all, it's totally irrelevant. They changed the labels on the doors.

But according to CFR, the Council on Foreign Relations, before Boko Haram became the West Africa province of the Islamic State, the caliphate region of Nigeria in 2013, it killed a total of 1,008 human beings. The next year, it was accepted into the caliphate. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, it killed in that year 3,425 people. Three times as many but it gets worse a year later after having been a fully paid out member of ISIS for 12 months. In 2015, Boko Haram, one of the deadliest jihadi groups today, which is part of the Islamic State, killed more than 11,000 people according to the Council on Foreign Relations. Every year, a three-fold increase. You judge.

**Juan:** Thank you. Now, a question on this side. What about the very important point that we made, this is a group that hasn't demonstrated the ability to reach into the homeland or westward in a significant way?

Uh, it's been able perhaps to inspire, but not to launch a 9/11 style attack or a significant series of strategic attacks that would impact the United States directly. How do you address that?

**Mary Beth:** I'll start on that one. Um, I'm offended by the idea that apparently we're going to judge whether a trans-national, uh, terrorist group really only accounts if it's killed a lot of Americans, I think a point that you made adequately, um, number one.

Number two, with all due respect to my colleagues, we're still talking about physical geography, and that's what this movement isn't about. Mr. Bergen and, uh, our dear
friends still talk about why people aren't going to Syria anymore. Of course, they're not.

Because a year ago, the caliphate came right out and said, "Don't come to Syria anymore. Stay where you are. Affect your terror right there and do terror at home," and it can be little acts because it's the little acts that inspire the fear in everybody, the grassroots. And that's exactly what's been done.

And you can't argue that ISIS hasn't been effective in the West when you look at what happened in Germany, in Turkey, in France, in Orlando, in San Bernardino. That counts. The slap on the back counts. These are individuals who inspired, who were inspired by ISIS.

If you went to San Bernardino, ISIS was delighted and featured in their magazine the fact that the couple in San Bernardino, the cri-, did that horrific act, had a picture of their crib with their now orphan daughter. And that was front and center on Dabiq magazines.

Why? Because they were proud of it, because they were inspired by ISIS. And ISIS used this as propaganda to see," Look, what this couple did in United States. You, too, should sacrifice everything for this cause." How can you say that we're winning against that?

Juan: 10 seconds.

Sebastian: What if you're prosaic? What if you're pedestrian? What if you're an isolationist? What if you only care about Americans? Well, how about this?

Of the 110 people we have arrested who killed in America since the caliphate was declared two years ago, those individuals, if you prorate the arrests by month, we are intercepting 300 percent more ISIS terrorists in America than the highest Al-Qaeda average for monthly arrests, 300 percent more. It's just data. You decide.

Peter: That's because the FBI is doing a fabulous job, you know. They're arresting a lot of people and a lot of these...

Sebastian: Or they're recruiting more of them, Peter. You decide.

Peter: Well, there's also the issue of sting operation. But point is the FBI is all over this like a wet blanket. And, and that's the reason, you know, the 63 deaths...

Sebastian: Are we following protocol, Mr. Chairman?

Juan: Yes. It, it is the one minute rebuttal.

[laughter]

Peter: But please keep on interrupting, Sebastian, because it's seems to be more interesting.

[crosstalk]

Sebastian: ...in the kitchen, Peter. You know what I, they say.
**Peter:** OK.

**Juan:** Go ahead, Peter.

**Peter:** San Bernardino and Orlando, obviously great tragedy. 63 Americans were killed by ISIS-inspired terrorists. Um, but these are not national catastrophes on the scale of 9/11 or even of Paris.

Uh, and of course, Mary Beth mentioned that, uh, Dabiq is celebrating this in their propaganda. Well, I don't think everybody in the audience will fall into the trap of believing ISIS' propaganda on this point that somehow this means they're winning.

Yes, they're getting some small tactical victories, but we, uh, going, going back to the, um, Sebastian mentioned how many people Boko Haram has killed. We have killed far more people inside ISIS, 45,000 than Bo-, Boko Haram has ever done in Nigeria.

We've inflicted a great deal of damage on this group. We basically destroyed their finances as we saw earlier. There's, they've halved the salaries of their fighters. Uh, you know, ISIS is just, if we had this debate in 2014, in, in summer of 2014, uh, I mean it would have been absurd to have this debate.

But, of course, ISIS was winning then. But now, it's equally absurd to pretend they're winning today. They're losing.

**Juan:** Let me ask then a follow-up question. How do you address the effect of the perception of ISIS' reach in terror to a point made earlier? Isn't the reach and the psychology of terrorism having an impact? And isn't ISIS driving that as we speak?

**Douglas:** They are driving it because we're letting them shift the goal post. Look, the whole point of Islamic State was to be a state. We're not claiming that their territory is important because we're old-fashioned.

We're claiming their territory is important because they said it was important. This was the primary difference between the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda. They said, "No, no, no. That's, that's piddly stuff. You don't do little itsy-bitsy attacks and hope that the caliphate comes about someday. You declare it here, and you make it, and you have territory."

What's ISIS doing now? Doing little piddly attacks and hoping that the caliphate comes someday because their core territory is disappearing. Now, is the Al-Qaeda strategy working? That's a totally different question. That's not what we're debating.

Is the ISIS strategy of holding terrain in the caliphate working? No, they're being squeezed all the time and losing territory every day.

**Juan:** You actually have more time if you'd like, Peter.

**Peter:** No, I think the point was well made.

**Juan:** Rebuttal.
Sebastian: Little piddling attacks? Tell that to the French of Nice. Tell that to the family of the police commander who was beheaded at home with his wife. Tell that to the people of San Bernardino and Orlando.

These are not piddling. This is a different form of warfare. ISIS has learnt from the mistakes of Al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda was too successful, too successful on September 11th. It painted itself into the corner because it killed 3,000 people in a 102 minutes therefore it had to go spectacular again and again and again and failed because spectacular death is hard to do without weapons of mass destruction.

ISIS has proven the first rule of insurgency. Be flexible, be adaptive. They are doing classic guerrilla warfare on the streets of Florida, on the streets of California, in Paris, in Brussels, in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

It's not about spectacle of gargantuan proportion. It is, as Peter said, about attrition. It's about the fact that the restaurant owner is absolutely bankrupt because the tourists aren't going to Cannes. That will kill you as a thousand cuts will kill you.

Juan: Let me allow a quick rebuttal.

Peter: Because we had a little bit of extra time, again I think Sebastian's making our point by himself, which is that these attacks, yes, they're successful on a tactical level. 130 people died in Paris. It was a terrific tragedy for Paris. It was the French 9/11. But the French were already involved in the coalition and amped up their airstrikes very, very strongly.

Again, when there was an attack in Istanbul the Turkish army invaded Syria. These tactical successes you can't confuse them with a strategic victory. The strategic victory was controlling the territory the size of the United Kingdom in Syria and Iraq. They just lost 50 percent of that in the last year. If this is winning I'd hate to see what losing looks like.

Juan: Mary Beth, before I give you the floor, let me add a new question, because I think the question of, "Is ISIS winning?" can also be a question of trajectory of where we are in the conflict at any point in time, and we're asking it in 2016.

How do you deal with the fact that the trajectory for ISIS given all of the markers seem to be in decline, numbers of foreign fighters, uh, approaching the caliphate, amount of territory held, funding, uh, that they hold, even Twitter accounts that are active?

How can you deal with the, the question of the trajectory, which does not look good in comparative terms for ISIS?

Peter: Great question.

Mary Beth: And that's because you're measuring the wrong thing.

[laughter]
**Sebastian:** Mm-hmm.

**Mary Beth:** You're measuring the wrong things. Does anybody in this room think that we're going to, with the French increasing the airstrikes, or if we take over 99 of the 100 villages in Iraq or Syria, that that's going to make ISIS go away? Does anybody in this room think that other than the people sitting over here?

[laughter]

**Mary Beth:** That's just not the way war is conducted anymore, and it's not the way they're conducting their war. And yes, they've been tactical. They've changed their strategy. They've changed their name. They've change their emphasis.

It's not recent that they told people, "Stop coming to Syria. Go home. Do your attacks at home," and it's been effective. Where is this going? Yes, we can, we can say they're not getting as much money from oil. Guess what? They're now owning car dealerships. By the way, in, in Iraq, uh, fishing farms, so-, some estimates of which they're getting millions of dollars a month from fishing farms alone.

They will replace the money. And, oh, by the way, the people weren't going there because they were looking to make big bucks anyway. There's not, little evidence that the cut in salaries has made people leave.

Well, they're not going hold territory. When this administration made its decision to depart Iraq no one had even heard of ISIS. No one cared. They knew there were these guys out there that were still sort of dangerous, that were former Baathists, but they didn't represent anything approaching conceivably like this threat, and look at where we are two years later. Just two.

Oh, yes, uh, they're not getting a lot of foreign fighters into the area. Well they shu-, practically shut them off themselves a year ago. Of course they're not. But look at the spectacular transmission, their inspiration of what they're doing that has gone global in a year. In a year.

And now we're willing to take this moment in time and say, "Well, look, there's these indicators that we're used to. These are the traditional indicators of war, and it looks like they're losing." They're not losing. They've got some 30,000 women held hostage in their caliphate who are pregnant with what? Cubs of the caliphate. They are teaching. They have classroom books that count one, two, three, four five and the alphabet that tie those to the number of bullets and mines.

They're the first real Islamic terrorism group, that from the very beginner are gonna grow fighters that will leashed upon the world from the beginning who will know nothing but their distorted brutal unbaseable religious interpretation of what it is they want, this violence.

These piddly little acts...
Juan: Mary Beth.

Mary Beth: ...they are horribly violent. Excuse me.

Juan: No, it's all right.

Mary Beth: So are they winning? Yes. No, if you want to count the things that don't matter. But if you do want to count the things that matter, it's obvious.

Juan: Rebuttal.

Douglas: Our opponents are once again making our case for it, uh for us. 30,000 women carrying cubs of the caliphate is a real problem that you can only do if you hold territory. You can't hold 30,000 women hostage if you're just running terrorist cells out of the sub-, uh out of the suburbs of Paris and Brussels.

This is why this is important. You can't do this. Yes, you know, piddly attacks may be a, you know, an unkind way to characterize 500 deaths, but ISIS is able to kill scores of people in Mosul and Raqqa on a relatively daily basis if you read what they're doing.

They are killing people on the scale of these European attacks on a daily basis in these cities. If we take their cities away from them, if we take their territory away, then they are once again a garden variety terrorist group that is a problem.

Mary Beth: Do you think they're just going to quit?

Sebastian: [laughs] Well, clearly.

Douglas: We're going to kill them.

Sebastian: They're just going to be found and they're never going to escape.

Douglas: But it, we are we going to get...So the group formally known as the Islamic State, or the once was Islamic State, or the, the once and future Islamic State, it's just not going to have the same ring as the Islamic State.

Sebastian: Because we defeated Al-Qaeda and then we won the war, correct?

Juan: Let, let me pose another question and it, it dovetails neatly. How do you deal with the reality that if territory is so important this is a group that not only has established territory but been able, has been able to hold real urban environments, the second largest city in Iraq, for over two years with access to citizens, to banks and money service businesses, to labs and scientists, even to prove that it can govern?

The, the vast majority of the videos from the Islamic State are about its ability to govern...

Mary Beth: Govern.

Juan: ...as opposed to beheadings and other violent acts. So how do you deal with that part of the argument? This is a group that has held significant territory and continues to in
the face of a coalition onslaught from the world's superpower.

**Peter**: For us?

**Juan**: Please.

**Peter**: Yeah, I mean this a very important point. It's the Islamic State. Er, much of their propaganda is about what a great society they've created. Well in fact, if you go online you can see the opposition groups, uh, there's no electricity, there's bread lines. They are not governing like a state, and, er, it's been a huge fiasco.

Um, but just to set the terms of the argument again the Islamic State, that's what they call themselves, they weren't called the Islamic State before. They were called Al-Qaeda in Iraq and various other names. They are the cal-, they, Abu Baghdadi said he was the caliph. Now the last time a caliphate existed it was the Turkish Empire, a rather large geographical entity that took...was much of the Middle East. This is what they want to be.

Our, our opponents are falling into the trap of believing ISIS's own propaganda. The reason they're encouraging these attacks in the West is not because they're doing well, but because they've got nothing left in their quiver. What they're trying to do, trying to achieve in the Middle East has gone disastrously badly, and there's a way of measuring this rather well.

If you look at ISIS propaganda today it's full of child soldiers. It's full of child suicide attackers. Now this is not a sign of strength, this is a sign of weakness. This is reminiscent of child soldiers used by Hitler at the end of World War II. They're going out of business, and they know it.

And, um, one, and that as they die they're trying to perform on the world stage and say, "Hey, we're still powerful and important." It's a charade, and if you believe, uh, the, our opponents you're literally falling into the ISIS's own propaganda trap.

**Juan**: One minute rebuttal.

**Sebastian**: Well if we're falling into the propaganda trap of ISIS then you know what? So is the American intelligence community. I can but repeat the National Counterterrorism Center said there are now 18 fully operational, not one of these, fully operational. There are another 23 affiliates that aren't under operational control.

So if your accusation is that the best intelligence community in the world is falling, prop-, for propaganda that's another thing we can debate. Uh, on the issue of, of territory again, our colleagues are falling into such an 18th century mindset. This isn't the Somme. This isn't, uh the Battle of the Bulge.

This is a new kind of warfare, and to judge it by the metrics of the 19th, even 20th century, will lead us to continue see a growth in this global jihadi movement which, yet again, all I can say are the facts, is recruiting three times as many jihadis on US territory than Al-Qaeda ever did.
That's a data point that is not propaganda out of ISIS. It's federal and state arrest records.

**Mary Beth:** The other thing is we as westerners interpret the use of children, um, and from our point of view which is, which relates very much to our cultural heritage. The fact of the matter children have been used in war by the British, by the Americans, by the Mamelukes for centuries.

Um, and it's, it's not a point of weakness. It's a point of strategy, and in their case the strategy is I will have the better foreign fighter, or I will have the better indigenous fighter by bringing this person up in pure Islam. Pure Islam being the Islam that I am advocating as this violent extremist Islam.

It's not a weakness. It's actually a very different approach to what is the basic design from top to bottom of the soldier that they believe, um, justifies and, and is a representative of their existence. It's a huge danger. It's not a weakness, it's not because they're running out of adults, believe us.

**Juan:** Mary Beth and Sebastian, let me ask you this, though. Isn't part of the calculus, in terms of not just the perception of who's winning or losing, but also reaction to terrorism a question of our own response and perhaps even overreaction?

The question of whether or not this is as important a threat to the United States as, uh, the, the question would suggest, whether or not ISIS is actually an existential threat as the President has said himself. So isn't this really an issue...

**Mary Beth:** Is this after he said the JV team thing?

[laughter]

**Sebastian:** Three days before San Bernardino.

**Juan:** So the, the question is isn't this largely a question of how we react to what they're doing, and whether or not we overreact, and isn't that a part of the calculus?

**Sebastian:** In, in irregular warfare, which is what, uh, ISIS is following, it is one of the best approaches. You wished the enemy government to be provoked into overreaction. We saw this with IRA, with FARC. You wish them to overreact because then what happens is you fulfill their narrative and then they get more recruits so we have to be cautious here.

But, again, um, I don't see, looking at the world as in a grand strategic perspective, there are no other existential threats of the ilk of the ISIS threat allied with the other version of the caliphate, which is Iran. Russia is a problem, Iran is a problem, er, but, but mostly these are spoilers. These are people, China is not going to go to war with America. They have one aircraft carrier. We have 12. Wouldn't be very smart.

But if you have an enemy who is determined, who recruits children from the, from the moment they are born they have a game plan that isn't about the next quarter, the next PowerPoint brief I have to give. It's not even about next year.
It's a millennial plan. If I defeat you in a 100 years that's excellent. If you, if you squeeze me out of Iraq and I move into Africa or Asia or the Caucuses that's fine. If I defeat you in 500 years that's just dandy.

So we shouldn't overreact, but we should understand the enemy has a very different sense of time.

**Peter:** As we talk about military strategy I thought it'd be helpful to note Doug's background as lieutenant colonel who wrote the Baghdad Security Plan in 2007 for General Petraeus during the Surge and also served as a senior counter-insurgency advisor in eastern Afghanistan.

So I'll let Doug chime in on the military, uh, kind of debate we're having here, uh, and just give his assessment of how ISIS is doing.

**Douglas:** Look, again, irregular warfare is important but if you don't think terrain isn't important in irregular warfare you've never done it. Terrain still matters. It's important because people live there.

And yes, enemies can do various things with it, and they can react asymmetrically, and sometimes being in control can be a vulnerability, but irregular warfare is a tactic of weakness. You only use it when you're weak. Um, that's the real problem.

Very quickly with child soldiers, this is not particularly with ISIS. This is done by everyone who's running out of people. We see this everywhere in Syria. Nusra is using child soldiers. Sham is using child soldiers. The Free Syrian Army is using child soldiers.

Hezbollah is starting to drive down the age, not quite child soldiers, but certainly early teen soldiers. Everyone in Syria is running out of people. They're all using child soldiers. This is not something unique to ISIS. It's what you do when you start running out of adult males.

**Juan:** I'll give you a quick rebuttal, Sebastian.

**Sebastian:** Irregular warfare is the weapon of the weak. Does that mean it never works? I remember a guy called Mao for whom it worked rather well.

I remember a bunch of rowdy, rowdy colonials in the 1770s for whom it worked exceptionally well, and though I don't sound like it I'm now a proud American and proud to be somebody grateful for how irregular war can actually defeat such greater powers.

**Juan:** Let me, uh, ask a final question of the, uh, of the old Avant of [inaudible 48:03] .

[laughter]

**Juan:** Um, what about this point that ISIS's plan is not about the immediate, uh, and they are adaptive, um, and they are thinking in millennial terms, generational terms? Isn't then the question of whether ISIS's is winning less about the temporal and more about their long-term trajectory? And hasn't their very ability to create a physical caliphate and to
survive for at least a few years, hasn't that already been a success, and doesn't that mean they're already winning?

**Peter:** One way to answer that there was something going to be called the Thousand Year Reich, and it turned out to be rather short-lived. I mean, th-, this is again to fall into ISIS's propaganda trap. Hey, we're not winning now, but you know, check with us in a century, you know.

[laughter]

**Peter:** That, that is not a very persuasive argument. I mean, yes, I mean, uh, history is long things change, but we're talking about is ISIS winning, and we're not talking about is ISIS winning in the 22nd century. We're talking about is ISIS winning today. And the answer obviously is no.

**Juan:** Rebuttal? You have, you've got time for it.

[laughter]

**Mary Beth:** Of course it's about temporal. Um, this is an organization that, uh, how many of you thought, by the way, for this election that we would be voting between the president, uh, and presidential candidates we would be voting about Obamacare...

[laughter]

**Mary Beth:** ...or about whether or not we should have bailed out the major car manufacturers, or whether we should be, uh, looking at our particularly southern border immigration policy? I think everyone maybe even a short time ago as two years ago thought those would be the centerpieces of our elections. And that's not what we're talking about are we?

A major component of what we are talking about in this campaign is about ISIS and the threat of terrorists to the union and a threat from inside the union of people who are inspired by this movement. What a huge, huge change in 24 months. Phenomenal change.

It is exactly about the temporal change, and it is exactly about the perception of who's winning. And it's exactly about what are we talking about, what are we fearing? And how many gay guys and, and, and individuals who are not heterosexual in Orlando walk into that club and hesitate every time thinking, "Is this the next target?" And how unfair is that? And how has that changed their very lives? That's winning.

**Juan:** Peter?

**Peter:** If that's winning every year in this country 10,000 people are murdered with you know, guns or, or 3,000 more likely to be killed by a fellow American with a gun than by a terrorist inspired by ISIS.

**Sebastian:** But are they building a caliphate, Peter?
Peter: I don't even know what that means. I mean...

[laughter]

Sebastian: Go, go to Raqqa and Aleppo and find out.

Peter: Ah well, thank you.

[laughter]

Juan: That's actually a nice way to end this portion of it.

[crosstalk]

[laughter]

Peter: ...but that's OK.

Sebastian: That's what they're trying.

Peter: But not winning it.

Juan: I've got a couple more questions, but we now want to open this up to the audience. We said we wanted to make this participatory, and we will. We have the next half hour for questions. I would ask out of respect for everybody who has a question that you keep it very short and precise with a question, and we will manage then the answers.

Uh, let's start with this young lady in the middle there.

Jocelyn Westray: Hi, my name's Jocelyn. I'm with the Foundation for the Defense of Democracy. My question is...

Juan: Do we have a microphone? Let's wait for the microphone. Sorry about that. That's our fault. Some community action there. There we go. Thank you.

Mary Beth: You can all now run for president.

Jocelyn: Hi, my name is Jocelyn Westray. I'm with the Foundation for Defense of Democracy. My question is for the yes side. If they are winning, what can we do to stop that? What's our forward looking strategy?

Sebastian: That's meant to be our roundup question, isn't it?

Juan: Yeah, why don't we save that for the end? We're gonna, we are gonna ask, I'm going to ask one final question and it's gonna to relate to just that. Since we have the mike already there why don't we go to this gentleman right there? Just to make it efficient.

CO Johnson: Hello, my name's CO Johnson. I'm Master of Science in Homeland Security from San Diego State University. And, uh, my question for you each is in your own opinion, and I'm hoping I get four different answers here, what quantitative metrics
would you use to evaluate whether or not we're winning against ISIS?

Sebastian: Great question.

Juan: Two minutes per side if you'd like. You don't have to take it all, but go ahead.

Sebastian: Uh, I'd start with a very simple one, and, and it leverages off what my colleague said. The, the, the challenge is not just territory. Territory isn't irrelevant, but it's not the metric. The metric is the brand of Jihad.

Mary Beth: Mm-hmm.

Sebastian: That's the metric. When somebody who is a successful pupil in a British private school, an IT engineer with a graduate degree, becomes the front man for ISIS, we are losing. When a man who is integrated, ostensibly, into American culture decides to slaughter 49 fellow Americans, we are losing.

So, for me, the, the real metric is when, when the brand of Jihad is no longer sexy. There's a shocking video by an American, uh, uh, Jewish, um, uh, s-, um, activist of a, um, Ivy League campus in America, where he stands for three hours in the middle of the quadrangle waving the black jihadi flag of ISIS.

Do you know what happens to this man as the students walk past him? Nothing would be good. It's much worse than nothing. The students who stop say, "Wow, are you a religious revolutionary? Do you hate Israel? Rock on."

Now, I went to Harvard. I hated it.

[laughter]

Sebastian: I would never say the Ivy League represents America, but these are American kids in an American college who think the flag of our enemy that is draped behind the executions of Foley, of the Coptic Christians of Egypt, is cool.

We're losing if American kids think it's cool.

Peter: Well, the brand of Jihadism is in really bad shape. I mean, the metric for that is the Americans that were interested are suddenly no longer interested. It's just, it's not that cool anymore. The numbers have gone down from six to one a month are even attempting to join, one a month.

By the way, we're arresting everybody, pretty much who, at the airport. Um, so if, if, if the brand of Jihad is the measure, which I think is not a bad one, including losing geography, losing money, losing foreign fighters, you know, the sheen, the sheen is off this brand.

Um, if this was a, you know, a sort of marketing campaign, you know, ISIS has really, you know, scored a, uh, uh, the marketing campaign hasn't gone very well. The, the, it did well when they were winning. Right? There were suddenly a lot of people who wanted to
join this.

There's a halo effect against Iran winning teams or winning universities. The halo is very much off this particular brand right now.

**Douglas:** And again, we have to, the question here on the table is about ISIS. And we have to judge them on their own terms. And they set the metric as, "We have a caliphate now." They are now shifting, and saying, "Well, we're going to have a caliphate later."

When you move to that argument, now you're back to Al-Qaeda. And if you're going to say, "Let's have the caliphate later," then why not go with Al-Qaeda that had that position all along and never engaged in this foolishness of, "Let's build a caliphate now," and got 45,000 Jihadists killed for eventually nothing.

[crosstalk]

**Douglas:** We're shifting the metric. This is not about do we have a problem with Islamic Jihadism. The answer to that's clearly yes. The answer, the question on the table is do, is, "Is ISIS winning?" And that answer is no.

**Mary Beth:** The United State government and our coalition have been talking about taking back Mosul how long? How many years? So if you wanna talk about shifting claims to territory, we're just as bad as they are, and they still have Mosul. And the reason they have Mosul is their two-year planning, which was just on the inch of happening, have failed because we couldn't do it.

So does that make, does that make the case that we're losing? No, but it doesn't make the case that they're winning. And the fact of the matter is our own State Department has said that IS -- the, the so-called Islamic State -- is now executing third-country suicide bombings and executions at a rate higher than ever before.

Now, you can say not a lot of U.S. people may be going to Syria and Iraq as have, as they have before, but there's no statistic that I'm aware of that can accurately tell you how many of that 110 FBI intercepted terrorist acts in our country, 60 percent of which were 15 to 25-year-olds. They're kids.

If there's some metric that can tell me, look into the minds of America's children and say statistically that they're not hanging out or exploring or thinking these sites are cool, and that somehow that doesn't count, then shame on all of us, because we are still, as my colleague says, judging this movement by antiquated standards that aren't going to matter.

And when the next person, shop, plane, automobile is attacked by someone in this country or someone in France or in Belgium or in Turkey or a knife-wielding crazy person on a train, the next time that happens, we say, "Well, that doesn't count," then shame on us again, because it does count and it's exactly what this movement is about.

It's that kind of terror. It's reaching into your individual homes, your lives, your politics, your grocery shopping. It's a new kind of war, and our lack of being able to recognize it --
two very smart guys -- shows that they're winning.

Juan: Next question. Let's go right here, and then we'll come here next.

[background conversations]

Alexander Kravitz: Thank you very much. Uh, fasci-, fascinating debate. I hope coming debates in the fall, uh, rise to the, to this level.

Um, it, I'm going to ask my question very respectfully. It seems to me like one side has been debating the question of whether ISIS is winning and the other side has been debating the question, er, whether ISIS has been defeated, but to try to, fra-, uh, frame the, the question on, on, on, let's say, on your terms, I would like to ask, let's, let's assume that, uh, Mosul is taken in six months, three months. Uh, how would that affect, in your view on the, on the north side? How would that affect the ISIS brand?

Juan: Can you identify yourself, sir, please?


Juan: Two minutes each.

Mary Beth: Go ahead.

Sebastian: Wonderful question, wonderful question. Er, it completely depends upon the scenario. If it is us, if the face of that victory is a white or brown-skinned American victory.

If it's the 82nd Airborne or one myth that pulls in and takes Mosul, it will be a victory for ISIS, because they will just go to the eschatological texts that they use in their 55,000 daily social media posts and say, "Look, we told you. This is the final Jihad. Al-Sham is being attacked by the infidel, the new crusaders."

And instead of 36,000 foreign fighters recruited in three years, it will be 36,000 fighters recruited in three weeks, because they will exploit that mercilessly. If, as opposed to that -- as I described in my book -- we really think about this as to how victory should look.

If it is a true Sunni alliance, that we helped facilitate the Jordanian, and Iraqi, and Egyptian, and Emirati with the Hashemite king riding on that Humvee into Mosul, and followed by the Iraqis, followed by the people who are the greatest victims of this war, the moderate Sunnis, ISIS will be crushed.

Because then they will impose their version of moderate Islam to destroy the eschatological version of Islam that is ISIS's propaganda magnet. So, we have to be very careful here not to fulfill their wish list of, "The crusaders are coming."

Er, because if we do, ISIS today will look like an amateur thea-, theatrics, er, troupe, as opposed to what they will become.
Juan: Doug, Peter.

Peter: Well, um, I think Sebastian quite effectively made our argument because that's exactly what we're going to do.

Sebastian: [laughs] I wish.

Peter: I mean, it's not gonna be the 82nd Airborne sort of going into Mosul. I mean not, if you look at basically all the military activity, uh, the American face on it is very minor. It's the Iraq army in the lead, and it's the Kurds and, and other groups.

And by the way, a ne-, a new point. It's never an effective strategy to make a world of enemies, and this is precisely what ISIS has done. There's not a country in the world that hasn't said that they're a part of this coalition, and, uh, there are more than a dozen countries that are actively bombing as we speak.

Not only that, but they've made a world of enemies within Iraq. There's not a category of insin-, or ethnic group or person they haven't attacked. The Yazidis, the Christians, the, uh, Sunnis who don't agree with them, the Shia.

Everybody is united against them. I mean, how do you win against a coalition that includes the entire world and everybody in your country? The answer is you can't.

And then just one other sort of new idea in here. The Paris attacks, they succeeded. They killed 130 people. Why? Because these people had actually trained in Syria. They weren't some people who just sort of read stuff on the Internet. They studied close unit tactics in Syria, uh, and they killed 130 people.

The reason we went into Afghanistan was to get rid of Al-Qaeda's sanctuary in Afghanistan as a counter-sanctuary strategy. The reason that it's important for us to get rid of that sanctuary in Syria and Iraq is then they can't train people for massive, at-, attacks that are really, uh, trained, directed, operated.

Yes, we're gonna have lone-wolf attacks by people inspired by ISIS or whatever follows ISIS. There's not a hell of a lot we can do with that, because by the law of averages, some of them are going to get free.

But that said, the FBI is doing a very good job of staying on top of these cases.

Juan: Let's go...

Mary Beth: To...sorry.

[crosstalk]

Juan: ...Mary Beth, let me hold off, let's get another question. This young lady in front, please. Microphone.

Hosana: I am Hosana from Brazil...
Sebastian: Please wait. Microphone.

Hosana: Good evening. I am Hosana from Brazil. At first, um, my country got a read that some days ago from a terrorist group called [inaudible 63:05] . They started at, as a, as a polite way to show liberty and new ideas. As now, we are living in a liquid generation that we can spread ideas through Internet with idealism.

Do you really think they are losing? Because, um, I can show you after this, uh, how much my country lose, uh, have lost in these years -- 13 years -- because they are terrorists. And I say to, I can say to you, terrorists can be organized to be in the power in a polite way.

How can you say about it?

Peter: Well, I don't, I'm not aware of ISIS attacks or ISIS-inspired attacks in Brazil. We're talking about ISIS here. I don't think we're talking about the general issue of, of course ideas spread on the Internet, Internet. And, but I mean, uh, I don't think there's any argument about that. And ISIS has done a pretty effective job of spreading its ideas. But, but the shine is off because they're losing essentially. And no one wants to be on a losing team.

Mary Beth: May I?

Peter: Particularly, um, particularly not Doug Ollivant and Peter Bergen.

[laughter]

Juan: They're doing a good job. Mary Beth?

Mary Beth: I think your point is well taken. Um, it's only been this summer, it's only been in the last couple of months that Turkey, Paris, all these horrific, horrific, it's also a new kind of violence, but we haven't talked much about that. But it's a violence beyond what many of us would have conceived was even acceptable.

It's, it's almost to the point where we're not, we're, we're a little rest shocked if it's just a beheading. It, how horrible is that? That an entity could honored on, I mean beheading's something happening for a long time.

But this medium, I think by all counts, these terrorists have taken the medium of propaganda, the medium of this ideology tool to a whole new level of horrifying. And it's slowly, uh, becoming less and less horrific. Is that not winning?

Back to Mosul. I think there's one thing that we're all sort of sliding by here. And that is the real, very real possibility that a success by the coalition even with the US behind the scene, appropriately hidden behind, uh, people who don't look like us will include a significant portion of Shia militia, an IRGC either backed or inspired who will, having defeated ISIS, do, do what we fear they will do most, which is continue to slaughter to the Turkmen, the Kurds, and the Sunni, and Mosul, uh, in retaliation which will end up being a huge victory for ISIS.
Because we will once again be faced with the predicament of Sunni and those who are not Shia, and are not aligned with Iran, and are not part of the Iraqi Shuans-, Shia-inspired militia will turn, will, will be forced to, to align themselves with the most effective player on the ground.

One of which is certainly ISIS, and we'll end up with even a worst-case scenario having taken all the statistics and all the criteria that we've been talking about over here, and one Mosul-backed. Excuse me.

**Sebastian**: One, one fact on the coalition...

**Juan**: Quickly, Sebastian.

**Sebastian**: One fact. Uh, we have been accused of drinking propaganda kool-aid. Well, Mr. Bergen has drunk our kool-aid, the administration's kool-aid. There is no 63-country coalition. It does not exist. I've gone there. I've breathed [inaudible 66:50] in theater.

Out of 62 nations, there were two Muslim nations in the room. And one of them was Turkey which isn't even Arab. It's smoke and mirrors. I only wish this is what we're going to do. It isn't happening.

And on the data point of what was just mentioned, The Long War Journal and the SITE Intelligence Group has estimated this is fresh since June 2nd of this year, with the rise of ISIS. There has been a jihadi attack outside of Iraq and Syria every eight to three...

**Mary Beth**: Every eight hours.

**Sebastian**: ...hours. Does that sound like you as if they're losing?

**Juan**: Let me not be biased to my right of the way I'm facing here, it's nothing I'm ever accused of, by the way.

[laughter]

**Juan**: This young lady here, please.

**Mary Beth**: That's awesome.

**Anna Smith Lacey**: Anna Smith Lacey. By, um, the accounts of Sun Tzu, "The greatest victory is that which requires no battle." According to the pretty pre-modern principle, would you consider ISIS winning or losing?

**Sebastian**: [laughs]

**Juan**: Both.

[laughter]

**Peter**: Doug?

**Douglas**: Uh, look. ISIS is not winning. And I think that's, you, we, we've heard Dr.
Gorka a lie here. You just said it at the end. You know, they're not losing. Well, that's not what we're talking about here. The question is, are they winning?

And I'm like, "What is their theory of victory?" How do a couple attacks, even if they do manage to breach a horrific level of 150 here and there and, you know, 30 here and terrible bombings in Iraq. What's your theory of victory? How does that get you winning particularly when you're losing your base at the same time?

That's, these are two different questions. The one we're debating here is, are they winning?

Sebastian: Uh, I'll tell you how they're winning. They're winning exactly in the mode of Sun Tzu. Sun Tzu is the master of the indirect, non-kinetic victory. It's already been said. When we go to the polls in November, and for many Americans, probably most, I would hazard, the burning issue is, "Will I and my children be safe with this person as the commander-in-chief or that person the commander-in-chief?" They are winning.

Mary Beth: Well, and, and more importantly, and, and, and with all due respect, if the, if the, let's assume that ISIS doesn't have a strategic plan. If lack of a strategic plan is an indication of whether you're winning or losing, I don't wanna put words in the mouth of anybody in the audience, but that means we would have lost this thing a long time ago. Because I don't think there's a person on this planet that thinks that we have had, even with our own government, a coherent strategy that's been executed at least on ISIS.

And forget the fact that we don't have one, there's no one that can say that this so-called coalition of the willing, or the unwilling, or the paper has a plan that's, that's being executed as a plan that is trans-national, trans-border, and that is de facto of not only in Sirte, in Iraq, and in Syria, and in Libya, but where the majority of this threat actually, uh, certainly by activities lies, and that is in these other caliphates and these other targets.

If there's a plan there, I would love for someone to refer to it, but there isn't. So, I'm, I'm not saying that that's a, uh, to say that we're losing, but I'm saying that that's the criteria, Doug, then we lost a while ago.

Juan: Time for more questions. This young lady in the middle, please.

[pause]

Ashley Bowers: Hi. Ashley Bowers. I actually attend the McCain Institute with the Policy Design Studio. Um, but my question is, at the beginning of this war, it was very quickly stated that this war would be brief. Um, and here we are 15 years later, um, with such a rise of ISIL. Um, and my question for you all, is this war even potentially winnable?

Peter: Well, this is not what we're debating today. I mean, it's a very good question. It's a very good question. I mean, I think we are on a start-, state of quasi-permanent war that will likely be a feature, at least everybody on the stage's professional life and maybe
people who are younger as well.

But the question is, is ISIS winning? Now, we're about to defeat ISIS almost, I would say, completely within the next year or so. They, their claim to have run this state is basically gonna be over.

We are not saying that global Jihadism is a problem, is not a problem. Of course, it is. We are saying that particular iteration that we are seeing this group, ISIS, has over, overstepped and it's, and is losing.

And there might be a, a glo-, there will certainly another successor to ISIS that may act, uh, may have a better, slightly better strategy because they, you know, may not make a world of enemies, may not make a world of internal enemies in the Middle East.

Uh, and in fact, that group may well be Al-Qaeda who, which is not making the same mistakes that ISIS is doing, which is holding territory in Syria, and maybe the next iteration of this threat that we need to be concerned about.

Uh, so, we're not saying global Jihadism is not a problem. Uh, I, I think everybody on this stage agrees that it's a, a kind of a feature of our lives which unfortunately will carry on for a long time. We aren't saying this particular kind of expression of it is in deep trouble.

Juan: This side.


Peter: 24.95 on Amazon.

Sebastian: Absolutely.

[laughter]

Sebastian: For you, 50.

[laughter]

Sebastian: Um, it is winnable. Why? Because ISIS is the embodiment of a global jihadi movement. What is that movement predicated around? Totalitarianism. It has a connective tissue to fascists, to the Nazis of World War II. It has a connective tissue to Stalin and the Soviet Union.

It is religiously informed, but it is totalitarian because either you agree with them or they will kill you and enslave you. That's the definition of a totalitarian ideology. And guess what? Which nation was in dispensable in the last century to the defeat of both fascism and communism? This one.

And guess what? It's going to be us again who are indispensable to this victory. We've done it before. We can do it again, but only, as my colleague said, if we get on to the
battlefield of ideas.

These gentlemen are obsessed with the physical, with what can be mapped. We're not fighting Tojo's imperial Japan. This isn't the Pacific. OK? This is about the mind of that Afghan descendant in Orlando. It's about the mind of those children being bred into jihadi schools as we speak. If we don't begin to understand how the ideology is the center of gravity, then we will continue to lose this war.

Mary Beth: Just a, I'm sorry.

Juan: 20 seconds. Go ahead.

Mary Beth: 20 seconds.

Juan: 20 seconds.

Mary Beth: We don't, we don't get it. Everybody in this room, don't you feel like you've heard this, you've seen this video before?

"OK, we got Al-Qaeda over in Afghanistan. We defeated them. They're into the caves. We're winning. They're losing. Some of them had escaped in Al-Qaeda, oh my gosh. All we need to do is get this guy Bin Laden and they'll go away. Now, we gotta get other guy, gotta get, gotta get other guy."

And, and they're not, they're not winning. They're not losing. And, and then, and then, it, it's this constant beat of extremists who are violent who we don't understand. Because we constantly beat them, beat them, they're losing in ways that we are used to looking at things.

Territory, numbers of bullets, number to people, how many did I kill? Airstrikes, suicide bombers. And yet, 15 years later, we're just, oh, they're morphing. So, that means they're weak. Step back. Look at this strategically. They win by the mere fact that we're talking about this 15 years later.

Juan: Peter, I'm gonna give you a quick rebuttal, and then we're gonna go to the top to this young lady up there.

Peter: You have great small point. No foreign terrorist organization has attacked the United States since 9/11. I mean, we're much, much safer than we were on 9/11.

Um, and, you know, at the end of days, ideologies tend to attach themselves to territory in some way. I mean the Soviet Union collapsed was an ideology. Uh, one, once they, you know, in the absence of the Soviet Union, the ideology kinda collapsed with it.

Uh, so, there is a relationship between ideology and states. I mean, this is a group that calls itself a state. If it's not a state, the ideological claims it makes are much less strong.

Juan: Doug?

Douglas: A couple of things. I mean, I'm glad I wrote at this down. I mean, I said at the
beginning, the question is, "Is ISIS winning?" Not "Are Islam's jihadis groups on decline? Is the thread of Islamic kill or terrorism declining? Or does the United States have a coherent strategy for the Middle East?" which Mary Beth just jumped on to.

Peter and I would not argue against those three, you know, those three statements. That's not we're talking about. Yes, ideology is a huge problem. It's much, much larger. The ideology is above ISIS. And then ISIS is a subcategory thereof.

And then you have other sub-, subcategories. And some of them don't like each other. We have Al-Qaeda fighting ISIS inside Syria on occasion. They don't always get along. The question is about this specific brand of ISIS.

Mary Beth: But just, just to be clear, but you made the point that ISIS, what was at ISIS' strategy for winning, wasn't talking about our strategy for the Middle East. And I turned it right back on you and say, "So, what's our plan for defeating ISIS?" And the fact...

Douglas: I don't think you're getting the picture, I just said we have a plan for that. That's not the question we're debating here.

Mary Beth: But you made the point that ISIS was losing because they didn't have a plan, and I turned it right back at you.

[crosstalk]

Douglas: They have to beat us. They have to beat us. We don't...

Mary Beth: No, they don't have to beat...

Douglas: They have to win. Are they winning? That's our question, Mary Beth. Are they winning?

Mary Beth: No, they don't have to beat us in the way that you're saying. They have beaten us in the wa-, war of ideology which is why we're sitting here talking about them. That's the whole problem.

Douglas: The ideology is out there, Mary Beth. But that's not ISIS.

Mary Beth: That is ISIS. They are, they are ideology...

[crosstalk]

Juan: Let me, let me hold here. Let me hold here.

Mary Beth: Sorry.

Juan: Let's, let's go to this young lady up here who been very patient and has the mic.

Mary Beth: You said you wanted us to interject, we're interjecting.

Juan: I love it. Go ahead.
**Claudia:** OK. Hi. My name is Claudia. I'm from Brazil, too.

**Juan:** Oh, a lot of Brazilians, welcome. Obrigado.

**Mary Beth:** Nice job on the Olympics, by the way.

[laughter]

**Claudia:** And, uh, my question is, uh, I agree with the, with the yes side when they say that this is a war that is much more, um, psychological and like about fear than it is about territories in a way. I would, I would agree with that.

However, uh, it seems to me that, especially because of that, since you used as a unity of measure the amount of fear that it brings up in people, uh, don't you think, and it's so my question is for you, uh, that saying that they're winning is buying into their own product?

And also, um, if, I mean, the, the next question I think it will be more of, um, how, uh, the best strat-, strategy to beat them would be but in, in a reasonable way. And then I, I would ask you to consider and to talk about a little bit more about the, um, the relevancy of territorial, um, combat. So, not like person to person, but with droids and what's been going on, so.

**Mary Beth:** You wrote on this, so.

**Sebastian:** Yeah.

**Juan:** If we could answer the first question, that would be good.

**Mary Beth:** OK, sorry.

**Sebastian:** OK. So, uh, fascinating question. Um, Whether or not people are afraid is a fact. Denying it because you don't want to admit it's there isn't a solution. I mean, how many people are afraid, it was just pointed out, going into a gay bar or a gay club now in America after Orlando?

That fear is what the terrorist wishes to achieve. And if they've achieved it, they are winning. It is an objective fact. Where-, if we, the fact that we don't like it doesn't change anything, and us whistling past the graveyard trying to deny it doesn't get us to a point where we're winning.

We get to a point where we're winning where the brand is eventually, the ISIS brand, the ISIS brand, is delegitimized with our Muslim allies as the front of that delegitimizing effort, to the point at which Americans are no longer afraid. That's the correct metric.

When people step out of their house in the morning, and they don't think that America is potentially where they will be killed by a jihadi. That's the metric.

**Mary Beth:** And, and I would argue even it, its contextual is all of it. But what isn't is everything but the, the psychological part.
It's, it's everything that everyone ha-, saw up on those boards, but you didn't see anything about the fact that people aren't shopping in Khan or Monte Carlo, or that parents of, of, of friends of mine who live in Orlando, who wanna go out in the evening with their friends and dance are calling their kids and saying, "Please don't go." It's all of it.

And by, but by denying the fact that you can lose the battle in Sirte and it won't make a darn bit of difference to that 15-year-old in Ohio who bought a gun and was looking for ways to kill an entire school only because he thought he could.

If you deny that, does it really matter what happens in Sirte? When the next, when the next bomb goes off in a club, is it really gonna matter how many Libyans lost their lives in a transaction that killed all the jihadis and name the town that we'll never even be able to find on the map?

Juan: Mary Beth, I may have to ask you to stop.

Mary Beth: It's contextual.

Juan: Peter?

Peter: You know, if the test is, uh, is ISIS succeeding ideologically, which is part of the argument of our friends on the other side. I'm not a mathematician, somebody maybe can help me with this.

But, let's say the maximum people that are being attracted by this ideology is 50,000. And then let's look at the universe of Muslims in the world which is 1.5 billion plus. I mean, the number is 0.00001 percent.

They have succeed-, if the, if this is about the war of ideas, you know, communism which doc-, Dr. Gorka mentioned earlier, I mean, hundreds of millions of people thought that was a good idea. Nazism, tens of millions of people in Germany thought that was a good idea.

This is not the case with this ideology. This ideology has attracted very few people. And as we've, I think, very well outlined, the number of people who are signing up is going down precipitously precisely because they're not creating the Islamist utopia in that state, they're creating hell on earth, and that's now widely recognized.

Juan: Uh, front here, this gentleman.

Gregory Gowen: [inaudible 82:22] .

[crosstalk]

Mary Beth: You have to project your voice.

[pause]

Gregory: Good evening. Midshipman Gregory Gowen, um, from the Naval Academy. Um, my question is, in its current of ISIS where it's losing territory, can it survive without
any support from external nation states? And how much support does it exactly get from, uh, Saudi Arabia?

Sebastian: [laughs]

Peter: I mean, I think that's hard to judge. And I mean, I think there's no debate on this stage that this is a, you know, well-off, uh, uh, terrorist group. But, uh, a very important point here. As they lose territory, they're losing money very quickly because there's a lot of discussion about ransoms and oil. The real way they make the money is taxation and extortion.

If you control eight million people, that's a lot of people to tax and extort. If you suddenly only can control three million people, that's a lot less. The reason that those figures are going down is not just that we'd taken all the, you know, many or their old tribes. We also, by the way, bombed, you know, the bank where they kept all their currency. And the "New York Post" had a wonderful headline, "US makes big deposit."

[laughter]

Peter: Uh, and so, you know, it, their money just went up in smoke. And that's why they've had to half their salaries. And, you know, if you're a terrorist group, you have volunteers. If you're running an insurgent army, you're often paying people. And they have, uh, you know.

So, running out of money is a problem for them. Uh, you know, they have a, they try to fill the very large army. It is getting smaller, and smaller, and smaller. So, I think the Saudi issue about whether they're financing ISIS is, I mean, it's a very complicated question that this, it would be hard to answer in, in this format.

Juan: Rebuttal.

Sebastian: Whether we win and take more territory or not is, is really irrelevant because they're following a game plan. And I'm gonna plug a book, not my book, OK? There's a book everybody in this room should check out, which is the game plan for ISIS. It's called, "The Management of Savagery," written by Abu Bakr Naji, N-A-J-I. You can find it online, translated by Will McCants.

Abu Bakr Naji wrote an incredibly pragmatic, irregular warfare approach to how to build a caliphate. And this is absolutely what ISIS is following. It's based upon three phases -- the vexation phase, the expansion phase and the consolidation, and the enlargement phase.

Peter: The expansion phase is really going well.

[laughter]

Mary Beth: It is there in 86 countries.
Sebastian: ...interrupting you, Peter.

Peter: Just that I, I felt compelled.

[laughter]

Sebastian: So, and the point, the point of the plan is it's not like our plans, like our joint pubs, like our military doctrine where a phase is very clean. It's discrete. It begins, it ends in the next one.

Their plan is based upon the creation of a hybrid caliphate. What I like to call a giant FOB, a giant forward operating base, which is a lily pad, which is a launch platform, which whether it shrinks or enlarges, it's irrelevant because it is used to launch more terrorist attacks into new theaters.

So, whether this village falls Syria or Iraq is irrelevant because next, they would move into Jordan. They will into Saudi. They will move into other areas. It's, it's a non-western conceptualization of warfare. And again, when we apply our metrics, it looks like we're winning, but it's the wrong metrics.