

Remarks as Prepared for Delivery by U.S. Senator Joni Ernst
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Thank you, Roger, for that kind introduction.

What an honor it is to be here this evening – in this beautiful place.

I’ve had the great privilege of being part of the annual Reagan National Defense Forum a number of times – an event hosted right here at the Reagan Library.

But I must say, tonight is uniquely special – and I’m grateful to have been chosen to speak as part of this important series on the future of our party, our country, and ways we can, together, continue striving towards becoming a more perfect union.

I’m fortunate to have grown up in the 1980s when Ronald Reagan was president.

He was one of those once-in-a-generation leaders who made us proud as a nation. He helped us understand our purpose in the world and our role in history.

President Reagan inspired so many young Americans...even Iowa Hawkeye football fans.

Yes, a little-known fact about our 40th president, he was the [chief sports announcer](#) at WHO-radio in Des Moines, Iowa and the voice of Iowa Hawkeye football in 1933!

Ronald Regan inspired us all to believe in our country and ourselves, and to go into public service to make the world a better place.

For the thirty years prior to his presidency, an iron curtain held back much of the world from experiencing freedom.

Reagan’s faith in America, his fellow citizens, and the desire of all men to live free, set the stage for our country’s triumph over communism in the late 20th century, and inspired a global revolution whereby dozens of nations chose, and continue to choose, freedom over tyranny.

Growing up on a farm in rural Southwest Iowa, I thought of service in the context of my community.

George Washington once said, “I would rather be on my farm than be emperor of the world,” and I couldn’t agree more – Montgomery County, Iowa is still my home.

We certainly didn’t have much, but what we didn’t have in money, mom made up for in love, and dad taught my brother, sister, and me the value of hard work, sacrifice, and service.

Never in a million years did I think I would end up serving in the United States Senate.

I was going to be a nurse, or a farmer’s wife – and in my wildest dreams – Ms. America.

But God had other plans.

He used an agricultural exchange program to expand my horizons, and remind me of how blessed I am to have been born in America – and truly inspired me to serve.

While I was in college, I had the opportunity to take part in an agricultural exchange program to Ukraine, when it was still part of the Soviet Union.

As a student, who'd never been out of the country before, I was eager to leave home and have new experiences...but I was not quite prepared to see a communist country up close.

The first night on that collective farm in Ukraine, I so clearly remember what our conversations centered around...freedom.

The Ukrainians asked me: what's it like to be free? ... what's it like to be an American?

Seeing how they lived, deepened my love of America, and it compelled me to recognize the strength, freedom, and leadership we far too often take for granted.

And upon my return home, I joined the Army ROTC.

It was the best decision I ever made – I served for 23 years in uniform, including my time as a company commander leading 150 soldiers during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Executing a mission to secure our homeland from terror, and doing so alongside millions of my fellow military servicemembers willing to pay the costs of freedom firsthand made me proud.

My deployment to the Middle East sealed my intent to pursue lifelong service to our great country.

We're imperfect, but American freedom, our concept of liberty and inalienable rights, and the lengths we're willing to go to protect them, comprise the most exceptional form of government on Earth.

It's so easy to take for granted the freedoms afforded to us just by being born in America.

And when this attitude of ungratefulness goes unchecked, it can quickly lead to pure disdain...even hatred.

Our military is facing the [lowest](#) recruitment numbers since the Vietnam War. And our police departments across the country are [understaffed](#).

One reason why? The American apology tour being conducted by the Left – and amplified by their friends in the media.

From foreign policy to domestic concerns, the Democratic Party is pushing America to blend in...and to forget the very exceptionalism that makes us the greatest nation on the face of the planet.

As Republicans, we may not be able to change their dark perspective, but we have an obligation to our children and future generations to inspire the rest of the world to keep proving the American experiment is a success and one worth fighting for.

Our Founding Fathers prescribed a federal government with limited responsibilities – a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

And, over time, we have made great strides to better fulfill that purpose.

Our Founders wanted to keep the republic from becoming a nation ruled by a liberal, elitist class in a far-away capitol not to be bothered by the plight of the working American.

Instead, they envisioned a citizen legislature – made up of individuals from all backgrounds and walks of life...including mine.

While a new academic and political class focuses on the sins of our past to condemn our nation today, can anyone genuinely argue that our country—or the world—would be better off without the system established by our Founding Fathers nearly 250 years ago?

The Reagan revolution was not born from the “battle for the soul of the nation” or a redefinition of the government’s relationship with its people.

It most certainly was not a new entitlement program or a wealth redistribution plan.

On the contrary, Ronald Reagan recognized life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness, and our other inalienable rights as Americans are the core commitments of a government to its people...commitments that must be protected above all else.

The tendency of government over the ages has always been to acquire more and more power at the expense of the people.

Washington has taken over functions that don’t truly belong to it, and as Reagan said, in almost every case, it has been a failure.

The bureaucracy is as bloated as ever with less transparency and accountability. Even the smallest change is a challenge.

Many of you may remember, Iowans elected me with the commitment to make Washington squeal – but after 8 years, I often feel I am the one doing most of the squealing.

Skepticism of what happens in Washington is not a new phenomenon, but for too long in Republican politics we failed to realize the strong undertones in our own electorate.

President Trump’s “Drain the Swamp” slogan was simple – people congregated toward it because it resonated with them. They truly believe Washington has either left them behind, or is out to get them.

He tapped into the forgotten man and woman – like my brother and sister who for so long felt snubbed by coastal, out-of-touch elites.

Republicans, we must learn from this, and we must continue to celebrate everyday working families by getting Washington off their backs, out of their businesses, and away from their families.

In Iowa, Chuck Grassley and I do what’s known as the Full Grassley – or the 99 County Tour.

We visit every county, every year—holding public town halls and walking up and down our main streets.

We do this for multiple reasons, but of top importance: hearing directly from the constituents we are so fortunate to represent.

We are accessible and accountable to the people who have offered us the great opportunity to serve them – as our Founders’ intended.

And in order to uphold the Founders’ intent, there were select powers prescribed to the federal government, and arguably the most important of these powers is to protect our people and our way of life.

Protection, starts with the basics, right here at home.

We have to secure our borders.

You hear that phrase a lot, I know. But the reality is, an enforceable, clear boundary and preserved border is statecraft and deterrence 101.

Without it, there’s a clear incentive to take advantage of America’s compassion and our rich history of immigration.

Just last month, Border Patrol told me 30% of the young girls and women who are being trafficked across the border by the cartels are being sexual assaulted...and the heartbreaking reality is, some never even make it as far as our border...

The cartels take pride in these actions – hear me; and I know this is difficult...these ruthless monsters take pride in raping innocent women and children. They take pride in flowing drugs over the border, so lethal they can kill you with just the smallest dose.

And friends, those drugs don't just stay in Texas and Arizona. No, they travel up I-35 to Des Moines and Mason City – and they're wreaking havoc on the lives of my fellow Iowans.

Without a strong, secure border, the lawlessness we're witnessing will continue.

And sadly, it's already bleeding into our streets...

At thirty-two years old, and seven months pregnant, [Jessica Covington](#) of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, was murdered in cold blood while unloading gifts from her very own baby shower.

Ms. Covington's story, though extremely tragic, is sadly, not unique.

Her death is just a snapshot of the crime running rampant in our communities – rural and urban.

Republicans have long been the party of law and order. But it can't just be mere words we speak, or a catchphrase for a bumper sticker.

We actually have to be willing to do what it takes to ensure safety.

Yes, that's funding and wholeheartedly supporting the police, but it's also ensuring mental health access for students and families.

It's ensuring our prosecutors are holding everyone who breaks the law accountable for their actions.

It's once again restoring hope in our federal law enforcement agencies through greater transparency and accountability.

And, most pressing, it's restoring the value of LIFE, and the family.

Maybe more than ever in our nation's history, we must stand up for the rule of law, but I would contend it begins with defending and valuing human life.

Ronald Reagan once said: "An America that is militarily and economically strong is not enough. The world must see an America that is morally strong with a creed and a vision ... For us, values count."

Values do count in America – and they must be consistently applied across all sectors of our economy and government.

The Democratic Party claims human rights as a central component of their policy platform, never mind their stunning hypocrisy on energy policy.

Proponents of a radical climate agenda portray themselves as heroes in a fairy tale riding to the rescue—on an electric vehicle, of course—to defeat the greedy corporations polluting the planet for profit so we can all live happily ever after.

The postscript to this fantasy reveals the electric vehicle supply chain is powered primarily by Communist China's state-supported corporations, often using slave and child labor.

But it's not just EV batteries.

When the Biden administration rapidly and haphazardly pulled us out of Afghanistan, they left behind a treasure trove – to the tune of one trillion dollars – of rare earth and critical minerals that make up the utilities and technologies we use every single day.

The key materials used to power your phone...the TV you binge watch your favorite Netflix series on... or even, the MRI machine that helped diagnose your son's cancer...

God has gifted America with an abundance of resources, and instead of a sharp left turn to renewables before we can even sustain our needs, we should once again allow U.S. energy producers to flourish – and when we do, we remove the risk of relying on authoritarians who don't adhere to American ideals to power and fuel our lives.

The U.S. must return to energy independence.

Friends, it is abundantly clear the world is more interconnected than ever before.

And this world, well, it's not inert. It's quite the opposite...trending toward chaos.

The Commander in Chief's policy choices regarding the operations of our diplomats and military members must be in service of American security and prosperity above all else.

It's not up for debate: our nation's security and prosperity have declined, and done so quickly, under President Biden.

His choices demonstrate a cruel mix of appeasement in the name of international consensus, and a feeble inability to assume risk to defend the homeland.

Safety from the wrath and intent of those who seek to do America and our freedom-loving partners harm, is not a guarantee. Without a change in vision, chaos will continue to reign.

One year ago – over the advice of his experts and top military advisors—President Biden forced a rushed and haphazard exit from Afghanistan – leaving behind at least 800 of our own citizens and abandoning many allies.

Today, the murderous Taliban regime is back in power; violent extremist organizations have reconvened to plot their next move against America; and, Afghan women and girls are once again under the restrictive, barbaric policies of terrorists.

Beyond the on-ground disaster and terrorist activity in Afghanistan, America's retreat greatly damaged our credibility.

Our adversaries learned that the president was not willing to bear the cost of achieving our goals. But rather, he was willing to lie for domestic political cover.

These realities, and a lack of deterrence, emboldened Vladimir Putin— greenlighting a new war in Europe and a heart-wrenching global food crisis.

Ukraine, like Iowa, is a heavy, ag-based economy – and considered to be the breadbasket of Europe.

Approximately [400 million people](#) are dependent on Ukraine for food. And at least [14 African countries](#) import half of their wheat from Russia and Ukraine, including Egypt, the world's largest wheat importer.

Because of Putin's war, people are literally starving. Famine is on the rise. And so often with famine we see unrest – even terrorist activity.

So not only is this food crisis of immediate concern to many of our European partners, it's of clear importance to our security and stability here in the homeland.

Earlier, I mentioned my time in Ukraine on a collective farm...

While there, I became very close to the daughter of my host family, who I call my Ukrainian sister, Svetlana.

When Putin made his unjust provocation, I quickly reconnected with Svetlana.

She and her family are near Mykolaiv – a city of commerce, but one with constant Russian shelling.

If more than 4 days go by without word from her, my heart skips a beat... after all, she's living in a war zone, unsure of what each day brings.

Imagine living like that...waking up in the morning; praying, hoping, a Russian missile doesn't hit your home, kill your loved ones...

When left to their own devices, and allowed to flourish, autocratic thugs, like Putin, will try and crush the innocent to maintain power.

One adversary has been intently watching our president's doctrine of appeasement play out: China.

The Chinese Communist Party has ambitions to expand its sphere of influence not just in the East, but globally.

Through their so-called “belt and road” initiative, China is providing loans to countries around the world that they see as opportunities to leverage, while continuing to build up their military capabilities and technologies. Countries like Panama.

Think with me briefly about the economic impacts of China controlling the Panama Canal...

The U.S. is the top [user](#) of the canal. If this key shipping lane was handed over to our number one adversary, I hate to even imagine the long term economic and security impacts that would have for our American farmers, businesses, and families...

Now, most immediately, China is looking toward their close-by island neighbor, and America’s partner, Taiwan.

Why does this matter to the average Iowan, or American?

This goes back to my earlier point on critical minerals.

The minerals we are too often sourcing from forced labor in China or from Chinese-owned operations, are then used to make chips and semiconductors in Taiwan.

So, if China were to invade, and take Taiwan, then again, you can say goodbye to the new iPhone 25...or the basic household appliances and electronics you use every single day.

The CCP is our greatest near-peer adversary – no question. They require constant attention.

But how can the U.S. ever be expected to face down the world’s largest army if we are unwilling to impose maximum pressure on the world’s largest state sponsor of terrorism?

The Biden administration continues to believe a fanciful idea that American diplomats can sit down with their Iranian “counterparts” and make peace, while denying the billions upon billions of dollars the regime is using to fund terrorist activities against the U.S., our servicemembers, and our ally, Israel.

The myth of a non-nuclear Iran in exchange for sanctions relief is ludicrous.

Iran hates America. They have active bounties on U.S. national security officials.

Any further appeasement of this terrorist state is malpractice – and could lead to grave, long-lasting consequences to the homeland.

Ruthless dictators, like Xi and Putin, and violent extremist organizations like the Taliban and terrorists in Iran, only respond to strength.

Friends, I don't want America to be the world's policeman.

And I'm not advocating for global democracy building – and a return to former versions of Republican foreign policy.

I believe in American leadership – Ronald Reagan's peace through strength.

His understanding of American engagement was neither hawkish nor was it sentimental.

Rather, Reagan understood the necessity of deterring our adversaries, standing by our allies, and ensuring the unmatched strength of the greatest lethal fighting force known to man: the American military.

I believe in America First, always, but never America alone.

Forging strong partnerships and allied networks are essential to America's security and prosperity.

When I was deployed to Iraq and Kuwait, who was standing next to me? Ukrainians. Our partners in the fight against terrorism.

NATO, the world's leading multinational alliance, needs America to lead – and to force our partners to bear their share of the resource burden.

In the Middle East, we must work with our friend Israel, and our Gulf State partners, to counter Iranian aggression.

In Africa, we must be willing to make a moderate investment in return for stability.

Recently, I was having a conversation with the former commander of U.S. Special Forces in Africa.

He was telling me how, for years, terrorism has been growing in the region. As he and other military leaders were assessing the instability, they advocated for a very small team – I'm talking 12 servicemembers– to advise and stabilize, and to ultimately keep the terror threat from the American homeland.

America led, and six of our allied nations followed.

This is my view of American leadership and global engagement. We're not here simply for the good of the world, but to provide security and stability in order to PROTECT our country, our people, our freedoms, and our way of life.

When given the freedom to choose, people around the world will embrace the American idea that our rights are not granted to us by government...but rather an all-powerful God, and that government derives its authority from the people for the purpose of protecting their freedoms.

My Ukrainian friends, they hungered for freedom...to live a life such as mine in America.

It wasn't until August 24, 1991 – 31 years from yesterday – that their dreams became a reality.

It took the strength and courage of freedom-loving fighters, like Ronald Reagan, to help lead the way.

In our U.S. Army—which strengthened and developed me— leadership is not defined by your title or your rank. It's about inspiring a group of individuals toward a common goal or objective for the good of the unit or the organization.

Sometimes leadership means stepping aside, but most often it means stepping up.

As Republicans, we have a choice: we can either sit on the sidelines, complain about the direction America is headed; or, we can step up and fill the gap, and inspire the next generation of leaders...the next generation of freedom-loving fighters.

Now, is not the time for America to shrink back.

It's not the time to abandon our allies and partners.

It's not the time to promote progressive fantasies at the expense of the security, stability, and prosperity of our own nation and people.

Now is the time for an unwavering commitment to restoring our federal government to its founding and limiting role of protection – including protection from intrusion by the government itself. Anything further is an assumption beyond our solemn obligation to the United States.

We must be willing to do whatever it takes to ensure all Americans, regardless of race, religion, or socio-economic status, are afforded the opportunity and the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

As Republican leaders, we can evaluate our success on the Reagan model: Did we leave the country and the world safer and freer for our children and grandchildren?

That is our challenge and our sacred mission if we hope to live up to Ronald Reagan's expectations for our "rendezvous with destiny..."

Thank you.

May God bless you all, and may God bless these great United States of America.