I thank Dean Montgomery for his introduction and the Georgetown Public Policy Institute for this invitation to deliver the Whittington lecture. Having recently been named a Visiting Distinguished Professor at GPPI, I am extremely honored to be part of this community. I look forward to many productive endeavors in association with Georgetown and to developing relationships with students and faculty.

Today, we remember Dr. Leslie Whittington, her loving husband Charles Falkenberg, and their two beautiful children, Zoe and Dana. Most Americans still feel a sense of loss when they contemplate the events of September 11, 2001, even if they knew no one who was personally affected. But for the Georgetown Public Policy Institute and others in the Georgetown community who knew Dr. Whittington, the tragedy is still a very personal one. She was an exemplary member of the faculty who performed ground-breaking research and inspired students and colleagues alike. She was devoted to achieving better public policy outcomes and training the next generation of leaders. Our own attention, today, to important public policy questions pays tribute to her values and her work.

When we reflect upon the loss of such talented Americans, I hope that we are inspired to live life to the fullest, to commit ourselves to service, and to see each other more generously. I also hope that these positive impulses will prevail in our public discourse and the operation of our government. Indeed, after September 11, a strong sense of bipartisanship and cooperation did exist for a while in our government. Unfortunately, most commentators see our current era as one of the most partisan in American history.

As someone who frequently has had to contend with the implications of being labeled bipartisan, I have given some thought during my career to what this should mean. Very often, bipartisanship is mistakenly used as a synonym for moderation or centrism. But one does not have to be a centrist to act in a bipartisan fashion. I have known a great many legislators of both parties who held strong ideological views, who nonetheless led bipartisan efforts when the country was in need.
Bipartisanship also has been equated with the inclination to cut deals. But, in my experience, bipartisanship is not the act of deal making, or even compromise. Almost every day at the U.S. Capitol deals are cut as part of the machinery of legislating. Most of these deals are tactical and are frequently motivated by political calculation.

I would define true bipartisanship as the suspension of the pursuit of political advantage in the interest of doing something necessary for our country. Implicitly, it assumes that there are times when politics have to be subordinated to policy objectives. True bipartisan leaders take electoral risks in the interests of good governance.

The Founders of our country were realists who understood the power of factionalism, parochialism, regionalism, and personal ambition. They understood that good intentions would not always prevail. Accordingly, they designed a system to check abuse and prevent power from accumulating in a few hands. But they knew that the efficient operation of such a Republic would require cooperation. They knew that it would require most elected officials to have a dedication to governance, and they trusted that leaders would arise in every era to make their vision work. They understood, in short, that achieving effective governance in a Republic requires bipartisanship.

Unfortunately, bipartisan acts have been scarce in recent years. As a result, our national political culture has produced mostly temporizing results or no results at all. The few major initiatives that have been enacted either were the product of partisan steamrolling, like the 2010 Affordable Care Act, or they were reactions to obvious failures that had already manifested themselves, such as the 2010 Dodd-Frank Wall Street reform bill.

Our system is producing fewer leaders who are placing legislative accomplishment above ideological purity. We have seen innumerable examples of both parties failing the most basic tests of governance. Congress could not avoid sequestration, despite broad agreement that it was a problematic outcome. Nor has it been able to pass a joint House-Senate Budget Resolution during the last four years. Even more concerning, partisan sensibilities are dominating Congress’ examination of foreign policy, which traditionally has been characterized by a higher degree of bipartisan cooperation.

It is important to ask whether today’s partisanship is merely the cyclical intensification of a common condition of American democracy that echoes back to the beginnings of the Republic. Or whether it is the source of fundamental dysfunction within our government that requires not just awareness and patience, but a solution. My own view is that our current partisan atmosphere is unique in character, if not intensity. More troubling, it is unlikely to recede without a concerted effort to change our political culture and institutions.

Under perfect conditions, we would not only govern, we would execute a coherent strategy that responds to fundamental changes in the global order that demand our attention if the United States is to remain competitive and secure.
The list of such changes is long, but it starts in Asia with the rise of China and India as economic, political, and military powers. The Obama Administration has conspicuously announced a “pivot” to Asia. At the center of this pivot is China, which exists as both an adversary to certain U.S. interests, and a fellow traveler sharing mutual goals and vulnerabilities on others. The ongoing challenge will be for the United States to discern, sometimes issue by issue, whether China is an adversary or a partner. This calibration will impact America’s relations with the rest of Asia and may ultimately determine prospects for war or peace.

More broadly, we face the specter of global resource constraints, especially deficiencies of energy and food that could stimulate conflict and deepen poverty. We have made startling gains in domestic energy production, but we remain highly vulnerable to our dependency on oil. Perhaps equally important, even if we are able to produce more energy at home, we cannot insulate ourselves from energy-driven shocks to the global economy. In other words, we have to cooperate with other nations in improving the global system of manufacturing and moving energy supplies. Currently, a key to this is helping to ensure the completion of the southern energy corridor serving Central and Southeastern Europe and unleashing our own liquified natural gas exports to address the energy vulnerabilities of our closest allies.

The potential global crisis over food production is less well understood. Whereas research is opening many new frontiers in the energy sphere, the productivity of global agriculture will not keep up with projected food demand unless many countries change their policies. This starts with a much wider embrace of agriculture technology, including genetically modified techniques. The risks of climate change intensify this imperative.

Even as we deal with potential resource constraints, our country remains vulnerable to terrorism and asymmetric warfare. Access to the internet and social media has deeply altered international politics, in most cases for the better. But it also has contributed to instability through sudden upheavals like the Arab Spring; it has allowed destructive terrorist movements like al Qaida to publicize themselves; it makes information related to the development of weapons of mass destruction more accessible; and it has intensified the risks of cyber-attacks and espionage. The potential for a major terrorist attack on American soil employing weapons of mass destruction is very real. In addition to the horrific loss of life, such an attack could set back economic growth by a decade or more.

Having devoted considerable time to this problem, my experience is that there are no silver bullets. Protecting the United States from weapons of mass destruction is a painstaking process that every day must employ our best technological, diplomatic, and military tools.

Responding to these strategic concerns requires, first and foremost, a stable, growing, and competitive U.S. economy. Currently, partisan failures of governance have prevented the construction of a rational economic program that reduces the deficit in the short run, maintains economic growth, and enacts substantial reductions in long-term entitlement commitments. During the next few months,
our government will undergo a difficult test that will determine if there are enough bipartisan voices to pass a budget deal that will achieve these objectives.

Clearly, enacting a long-term budget is important for our domestic welfare. Failing to construct a credible deficit reduction plan carries extreme risks, as markets and managers look for assurances that the United States is prepared to arrest the long-term fiscal spiral. Given the recent upheaval over Europe’s debt crises, further signs that the United States is incapable of addressing its fiscal situation could have dire consequences for the U.S. economy.

But we also should see budget deliberations as a national security priority, because our current economic posture leaves us highly vulnerable to both economic and national security disasters. The President should regard the conclusion of a comprehensive budget deal as central to his commander-in-chief duties. The budget plans put forward contain no provisions for economic and national security shocks in the coming years. That is not a criticism, because one never builds disasters into long-term budgets. But the odds of us traversing the next decade without an unexpected shock are extremely small. A glance at recent history shows that such shocks as wars, catastrophic terrorist acts, financial meltdowns, natural disasters, and pandemics are part of the modern experience. Consider that in just the last twelve years we have experienced three unexpected economic shocks in the United States that almost any observer would classify as severe. These were the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes, and the 2008-2009 financial crisis. The necessary response to each of these catastrophes included large public expenditures that deepened our budget problems. These do not even include the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which were undertaken with deliberation.

One might take the view that this string of events was merely bad luck that is unlikely to be repeated. But that is belied by the fact that we also experienced many near misses, including terrorist plots that were thwarted and natural disasters that could have been worse. Two natural disasters in Asia -- the 2004 Tsunami and the 2011 Japanese earthquake -- both impacted the global economy even if the severity for the United States was not debilitating.

Moreover, the list of potential catastrophes that could hit us in the near term is especially sobering. These include the possibility of a war with Iran over its nuclear program, a nuclear confrontation with North Korea, regional upheaval in the Middle East emanating from chaos in Syria, the terrorist acquisition and use of some of Syria’s chemical weapons, a virulent flu epidemic emanating from Asia, massive food shortages that endanger political stability in key countries, or a rapid descent of the European financial crisis.

The bottom line is that we are living in a volatile world where we can expect events to occur that will require a decisive response from our government to prevent massive loss of life, long-term economic damage, or grinding insecurity. If our budget is so constrained or our political system is so partisan, that we cannot respond adequately, we are setting ourselves up for some very hard times.
I have not come to offer a gloomy scenario. We do have the capacity to prevent and respond to all of this. The fundamentals of American society still offer the best hand to play. No other country has the same quality and variety of post-secondary education. We have the broadest scientific and technological base, the most advanced agricultural system, and the most influential culture in the contemporary world. Our population is younger and more mobile than in most other industrialized nations. We still can flourish in this global marketplace if we nurture the competitive genius of the American people that has allowed us time and again to reinvent our economy.

We should see education, energy efficiency, access to global markets, the attraction of immigrant entrepreneurs, the production of increasing food supplies, and other factors as national security issues. Most of these elements – especially free trade, energy efficiency, and immigration reform – need not have a negative effect on the U.S. budget, and may, in fact, generate revenue for the government and savings for businesses. I would underscore that no attempt to gain the maximum strategic advantage from our human resource potential should fail to enact comprehensive immigration reform that resolves the status of undocumented immigrants and encourages the most talented immigrants to contribute to America’s future.

But our hard won advantages will be severely undercut if we fail to put our fiscal house in order. That will require a transcendent act of bipartisanship by President Obama and the Congress. If both sides reflexively attack the budgets of the other, positions will harden. In that event, we are likely, at best, to get another temporary budget fix that leaves most major economic issues unresolved.

After the President’s State of the Union Address, I noted that although the entirety of the speech was partisan, he had included a few lines regarding entitlement reform that Republicans should seize upon as an opening to productive budget discussions. Over the weekend, Senator Lindsay Graham had a similar reaction to the broad outlines of the President’s budget in advance of the formal release of that budget tomorrow. Senator Graham cited the President’s apparent willingness to slow down cost of living increases for entitlement programs as a potentially significant development that could be a starting point for progress. Similarly, House Budget Chairman Paul Ryan commended the President “for challenging his party on entitlements.” Such statements may not seem that significant, but in the context of the unrelenting partisanship that has dominated recently, they are conspicuous openings that should be embraced by the White House.

President Obama must attempt to reestablish a closer working relationship with Congress that gives those members who are inclined toward bipartisanship some assurance that their sacrifices can lead to productive outcomes. Such cooperation is necessary not only to achieve important national goals, but also to undergird national unity in the event of severe crises.

This cooperation depends both on Congressional leaders who will to set aside partisan advantage and on Administration officials who understand that the benefits of having the support of Congress is worth the effort and political capital it takes to secure that support.
I hope and pray that that this spirit will prevail in the coming months. I believe that our system of government, our traditions, and individual leaders can produce extraordinary outcomes for the betterment of our country. I thank all of you for the contributions you have made and will make to this effort, and I look forward to our discussion.