TRANSCRIPT
The Truth of the Matter

“Bad Ideas in National Security”

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Bob Schieffer: I'm Bob Schieffer.

Andrew Schwartz: I'm Andrew Schwartz of the Center for Strategic and International Studies and this is The Truth of the Matter.

Bob Schieffer: This is the podcast where we break down the policy issues of the day since the politicians are having their say, we will excuse them with respect and bring in the experts, many of them from the CSIS, people who have been working these issues for years.

Andrew Schwartz: No spin, no bombast, no finger pointing, just informed discussion.

Andrew Schwartz: In today's episode of The Truth of the Matter, I'm flying solo as Bob Schieffer is out of town. Each year around this time, CSIS defense policy experts publish their bad ideas in national security series. The series features short articles on recently considered and not too obvious bad ideas in the defense and foreign policy space by CSIS experts and their colleagues from other think tanks.

Andrew Schwartz: Today I'm joined by three authors of this year's edition, Dr. Kathleen Hicks, senior vice president, Henry A. Kissinger chair and director of the international security program at CSIS. Andrew Hunter, who's director of the defense industrial initiatives group at CSIS and a senior fellow in the international security program. And by Todd Harrison, director of the defense budget analysis and aerospace security project at CSIS and the leading voice and editor behind the Bad Idea Series. Welcome everybody. Let's talk bad ideas.

Andrew Schwartz: We've got the dream team of CSIS' international security program here. And I have to ask you guys, every year we come up with bad ideas in national security. That's our signature series. Why don't we do good ideas in national security? Why are we doing bad ideas in national security?

Todd Harrison: It's kind of like my kids complain that there's a Mother's Day in the Father's Day, why isn't there a kid's day? My response is every day is kids' day. That's kind of what it is at a think tank. What we normally do is we research, we analyze, and we look at good policy solutions. What are the good ideas? And that's what we normally write about. What we decided to do in this series is we're going to take one month with this limited series of articles and focus on what are the bad ideas that are out there? Because there are a lot of different bad ideas out there and sometimes you just need to call them out?

Andrew Schwartz: All right Todd. Let's start with you. This is the third year of the Bad Idea series. What was the thing that actually inspired you to launch it back in 2017?

Todd Harrison: It was in part, let's call out some of these bad ideas that are out there that keep lingering, but also, it's kind of getting into the spirit of Festivus from Seinfeld. Talking about how I got a lot of problems with these people and now you're going to hear about it, to quote Frank Costanza.
Kathleen Hicks: We have a lot of grievances.

Todd Harrison: A lot of grievances.

Andrew Schwartz: I'm going to, now I'm going to be like, hello Dr. Hicks.

Todd Harrison: Think of it as therapy in a way.

Andrew Schwartz: We can do a whole Seinfeld themed podcast here.

Andrew Hunter: Oh, just wait. It's coming.

Andrew Schwartz: Andrew Hunter is coming. Okay, here we go. All right, so Todd, back to you. I'm sorry I digress.

Todd Harrison: It's kind of a therapeutic thing to kind of release what are the things that have been bugging us all year long? And we decided to do it in December, in the month of December as a series of short articles so each person could air something that's been bugging them that year. And since then, this is our third year of doing it, we've expanded, we've actually started asking scholars from other think tanks to write for us as well to air their grievances. It's kind of turned into an annual tradition that's fun.

Andrew Schwartz: I love how we've opened it up and have other experts from other think tanks to bring their ideas into it too. Have they really dove into it as well do you think? Do they get into the spirit of it?

Kathleen Hicks: Oh absolutely. Todd from the first year, reached out. This is Todd's brainchild and he reached out beginning in the first year. This is now our third year and every year we have great participation from left, right and center and all in between. And we thought that was really important in terms of getting, that's part of our mission here at CSIS. Bad ideas come from all quarters and people.

Andrew Schwartz: And bringing the community together.

Kathleen Hicks: It's great. Yeah.

Andrew Schwartz: Dr. Hicks, let me ask you, in your piece, you argue that strategy, the quote explicitly says, "What we will not do is a bad idea." Tell us about that.

Kathleen Hicks: Yeah, sure.

Andrew Schwartz: I love this. This is my favorite.

Kathleen Hicks: Oh, yeah. You have to say. I'll pay you later.
Andrew Schwartz: Well, I'm going to pick favorites. And this is my favorite of the Bad Idea series, so I'm just going to lay it out there.

Kathleen Hicks: Yeah. Sometimes you'll hear around Washington or elsewhere, the military in particular, and the Defense Department needs to just say what it's not going to do. It just needs to get it out there and say it's not going to do. And it's a very simple, it resonates with people. Yeah, we'll just say what we're not going to do. The problem is twofold that we point to in our piece. And I did my piece with Joe Federici who works in the International Security Program as well.

Andrew Schwartz: Big shout out to Joe.

Kathleen Hicks: Big shout out to Joe as always. What Joe and I argue is that that may feel very satisfying, but it puts you into two traps. The first and biggest trap is when, because we are inside a democracy that's driven by political officials elected by the people, choices around use of force in particular are driven by that dynamic. And DOD gets a say, but it doesn't get the final say. And so sometimes when DOD tries to go out, or even when you have officials at higher levels go try to go out and say, "We're not going to do this," then you don't prepare for it. And in point of fact, what happens is sometimes you do it.

Kathleen Hicks: The classic example is the statement by Dean Acheson that we would not get involved in Korea. That Korea was outside our perimeter of interest. This is in fact on the verge of the Korean War. Some have argued, it's historically debatable whether or not that was seen as a green light by the Chinese to help along the Korean War. And then the United States reversed positions immediately and decided that Korea was in fact inside its strategic interest.

Kathleen Hicks: A much more recent set of cases is around example Syria where you had...

Andrew Schwartz: Obama's red line.

Kathleen Hicks: You had Obama's red line, and then you had in 2017 even more recently a statement by Nikki Haley when she was the UN ambassador saying that, we're not sure that we're so worried about the Assad regime. And the Assad regime turned around and used chemical weapons in that context in 2017 and then the US actually did respond.

Kathleen Hicks: It can be very strategically confusing. And it can also, as I said, really the bigger challenge is not just the confusion but that it can lead you to be unprepared for the things that ultimately the people who elect senior officials actually expect you to be ready for.

Kathleen Hicks: And then the second area we point to is the mission set piece. And this is really popular. One of the ones I like to point to is counter-narcotics. There's almost no constituency inside DOD that really wants to do counter-narcotics.
Andrew Schwartz: Why is that?

Kathleen Hicks: It's just on a mission that they see inside the strategic culture or mission set of the department.

Andrew Schwartz: It's more Homeland Security.

Kathleen Hicks: More Homeland Security oriented. And at the time, particularly in the late seventies through the eighties into the early nineties, there was a very strong push during the war on drugs associated mostly with the Reagan and then first Bush administrations for DOD to take a bigger role in interdiction, particularly at the borders over air and sea. And DOD really resisted that because they didn't see it in their mission space. But again, the politicians elected by the people get a vote. Congress cares a lot about the war on terror, particularly from border states, and they've been very insistent on DOD having a role. There are the other examples like this, but areas where DOD and people who think about defense issues, invest huge amounts of energy and time and pen writing about how DOD shouldn't be involved in these areas when the political realities frankly are very clear. That they're going to be involved.

Kathleen Hicks: What we argue instead is not don't have any priorities. This is the false narrative. It's not the alternative is don't have priorities, don't do strategy. It's no, no, no. Think carefully about how you articulate what you do think your priorities are. Be very clear about those priorities and focus on agility of the force to deal with the uncertainty that exists in living in an uncertain world that a democracy predicts will happen for our military. We argue it's really the best focus of strategy is being clear about what you think the priorities are and making sure that you're aligning and being clear to that political leadership and the public about what it takes. Be realistic about what it takes in terms of ways and means to execute those objectives and then be ready to flex. Semper gumby as the Marines like to say.

Andrew Schwartz: Got it. Okay, so this is especially important now in the strategic environment we're in, I would assume.

Kathleen Hicks: Yeah, the world's a little uncertain. I don't know if you've covered that yet in your podcast.

Andrew Schwartz: A little. That's sort of the theme of the podcast, so yeah. Andrew, you've written a piece that might be a little bit controversial in the defense budget space by arguing that eliminating the overseas contingency operations funding, which is also known as OCO or war funding is a bad idea. Can you explain that?

Andrew Hunter: Yeah. Well, and this is where get, I think back into this true spirit of Seinfeld in this debate because there's a variety.

Andrew Schwartz: Do tell.
Andrew Hunter: I'm going to believe me, I'm going to get to the payoff here. George Costanza at his fullest.

Andrew Schwartz: Oh good.

Andrew Hunter: Because I think there's two George Costanza articulated arguments against OCO that I think perfectly encapsulate why it's a bad idea to eliminate OCO. Let me just say first, there are lots of critics of OCO and critics and OCO has been abused in prior years. There are legitimate critics of OCO. I'm sitting next to one of them here at the table, but there are those who take that critique to this step of saying we'd be better off without OCO. If we just abolished it entirely. And I think that's where you step over the line into insanity. The argument against OCO or the critique of OCO is that there have been things included in OCO that don't belong there. Things that are enduring requirements that belong in the base budget and or things that should simply not be done at all, whether they're enduring or transitory. And from time to time that's happened. But my argument is it's not the fault of OCO, it's us.

Andrew Hunter: The first Costanza argument that I think you have to grasp is it's not you, it's me. This is his famous line. It's not you, it's me. And the problem is.

Andrew Schwartz: Okay, this is good.

Andrew Hunter: The problem with OCO is the abuse of OCO is not the fault of OCO, it's the people who set the policy. It's Congress. It's the people in the department who set the budget and the Comptroller's office and the leadership who have put things in OCO that probably legitimately don't belong there. But we need the OCO mechanism. We do need funding that is not fully preplanned, that can be responsive and reactive to emerging requirements. We saw this with the operations in Iraq and Afghanistan where we had to rapidly spin up funding for a variety of activities, countering the IED threat where we needed the funding that hadn't been fully planned out because we couldn't just go cancel three aircraft carriers to fund the war. That would not have been smart. We needed that flexible funding.

Andrew Hunter: And this is evidenced by the fact that we've had some form of OCO, whether it's called OCO or an emergency supplemental for over 25 years. It's going to happen. We're going to need this money, we're going to do it in some way. And the reality is the OCO mechanism is a pretty good way, I think of doing it. You've got this, it's not you, it's me argument.

Andrew Hunter: The second argument you get is, I've got hand. You have people who want to use OCO as a weapon in the budget debate that's entirely exterior to national security. And they feel that either eliminating OCO or putting OCO under threat will strengthen their hand in the broader budget fights in Washington, over the budget control act and what follows it. And ultimately their critique of OCO isn't really even a critique of OCO. It's just a weapon that they can use to bring
people to their point of view. And that ultimately, okay, may be fine if you only
care about the budget, but if you care about national security, that's wrong.

Andrew Schwartz: We will now forever associate George Costanza, not only with the New York
Yankees, but with the Overseas Contingency Operations budget.

Andrew Hunter: He can be proud.

Andrew Schwartz: Yeah. Oh, this is big time. You've really added a new dimension to Seinfeld and
to George. This is great. All right, Todd, in addition to being the chief editor of
Bad Ideas, you're also an author. What did you write about this time?

Todd Harrison: What I wrote about my bad idea this year stemmed from a report I released
earlier on the future of the Air Force. My bad idea is continuing to keep small
fleets of aircraft. The problem with this is that the Air Force over time has made
cutbacks in its air force inventory and so that they have a lot of different types
of aircraft, but many of them are in very small numbers. There's a huge cost to
this that if you look at the data, what the data shows is that your cost per
aircraft to operate and sustain it scales inversely with the number of aircraft you
have in that fleet. When you have small fleets, each aircraft costs a lot more to
operate and maintain. You'd be better off consolidating onto a fewer number of
types of aircraft, but larger numbers of each type. To put it in perspective, in the
past 20 years, the Air Force's budget has grown by 60% above inflation. The
number of aircraft in the inventory has gone down by 13% over the same
period.

Andrew Schwartz: What's all the money for?

Todd Harrison: Well, good question. A lot of it's going to higher personnel cost and higher
operation and sustainment cost.

Andrew Schwartz: Is this why they're starting to call it chair force?

Todd Harrison: Well they've always called it the chair force, but that's the army that calls it that.
No, but you look at the Air Force's budget today, it's the second highest in the
history of the Air Force. Second highest budget ever, and it's gotten nearly the
smallest inventory of aircraft that it's ever had. This is a trend that cannot
continue indefinitely. Ultimately, we're going to price ourselves out of the ability
to field a force of sufficient size to execute the strategy. And so what the Air
Force needs to be focusing on doing is eliminating some of these small fleets of
aircraft. Aircraft that they maintain in very small numbers, five or 10 or 15 of a
particular type of aircraft.

Todd Harrison: There are some exceptional cases where you're not going to be able to do that.
I'll give you a good example. The B2 stealth bomber, we only have 20 of those
planes. But you know what? It's our only long range stealthy aircraft. It's the
only one we have in the inventory. It would not make sense to eliminate it. It is expensive to operate though because we have it in such small numbers.

Andrew Schwartz: But that gives us a major strategic advantage in some cases.

Todd Harrison: Exactly. You have to do it selectively. But look across the fleet, the E8 is the JSTAR’s aircraft that we use for ground surveillance. We only have 16 of those planes. We could do that mission with other aircraft and the Air Force is planning to transition it to other platforms in the future. But the sooner we can eliminate these small fleets, the better from a cost perspective because ultimately this is limiting the Air Force’s ability to sustain the aircraft it has today and to potentially grow in the future.

Andrew Schwartz: You have a list of all the recommendations for planes that can be eliminated.

Todd Harrison: I think the Air Force has got to sit down and do a hard look at where our aircraft, where they can offload the mission to other aircraft. Where can they do it through other systems entirely through space? And where are their aircraft that may be just they have to accept some risk because what those aircraft are designed to do is not a priority anymore. I don't get to specific aircraft recommendations. I leave that to the planners in the Air Force, but I think this should be an overarching factor in their planning is that they’ve got to be looking at these small fleets and trying to eliminate them, combine them as much as possible.

Andrew Schwartz: Okay. Now the final articles in the series of Bad Ideas in national security are coming out in just a few days and then as our annual custom, you all vote on what the absolute worst idea in national security. Are there any front runners out there right now for each one of you? Does each one of you want to give a little preview of your worst idea? Kath, you want to go first?

Kathleen Hicks: Yeah, sticking with the strategy theme, there are quite a few really excellent entries beyond mine and Joe's of course.

Andrew Schwartz: Excellent worst ideas.

Kathleen Hicks: Excellent worst ideas, and the one that I think is just really well articulated is by two non CSIS scholars, Alexandra Evans and Alexandra Stark, the Alexandra’s, we'll refer to them as.

Andrew Schwartz: Alexandra Evans is from Rand and Alexandra Stark is from. New America.

Kathleen Hicks: Alexandra Stark is from New America.

Andrew Schwartz: Great.
Kathleen Hicks: And their bad idea is assuming the small wars era is over. And I love when people point to the nuance and complexity of strategy because I think there is such a yearning for clarity, analogies to the Cold War, great power competition, China. None of that is untrue if you will on some level. But it's so lacking in nuance and what the Alexandra's do so well in their piece is point to the potential to lose a lot of knowledge and to forget that countries like China and Russia to the extent that they are challenges in the future, are going to still use and rely on the skills and knowledge of small wars. The US ought to have that in its kitbag alongside a larger conventional and strategic tool in the toolkit. I thought it was a great piece.

Andrew Schwartz: Great. Look forward to that one. Andrew, what's your worst bad idea in national security?

Andrew Hunter: I don't think it's going to be the overall winner because it's too arcane. But the arcane ones really appeal to me. And it was a piece, Justin Joffrion.

Todd Harrison: Full disclosure, he's a longtime friend of mine from middle school.

Andrew Schwartz: And Justin's also with the Air Force, correct?

Todd Harrison: He is. He is. He's a PhD economist in the Air Force now.

Andrew Hunter: Well this is why it appealed to me because I also have training as an economist, sort of a non-practicing economist now, but so he makes what I think is a deceptively simple but very insightful argument, which he says that we should be careful about paying military service members more to do the same amount of work. And so he's not arguing against pay raises per se, but he's making the point that ultimately increases in pay should be tied to increases in productivity. And we see this usually, not always, but usually in the private sector that workers earn more when they are more productive. And so yes, we talk about cost of living increases, but the idea is you're actually going to get more out of your workers otherwise you get into this loop, as Todd was talking about earlier on the aircraft side, we're going out with one employee because you don't have enough money to pay them all if you're not increasing your productivity and earning more revenue.

Andrew Hunter: But of course the government doesn't earn revenue, so you don't have that same market signal to measure productivity about. And so his argument is if the military isn't also getting more productive over time, then these pay increases ultimately will price us out of being able to do critical national security missions. And so what I think he's getting at is there's a tendency in the military to measure capability in terms of force structure and ultimately that takes you down a path to obsolescence. Tied up in his argument about pay is really an argument about how do we measure military capability? And understand that it's because we lack some of the typical market signals for doing this, we're
going to have to come up with other means to ensure that we are increasing productivity over time.

Andrew Schwartz: Fascinating. Todd.

Todd Harrison: What I really like, one of the bad ideas I really like this year is one by Chris Preble and Patrick Eddington at the Cato Institute and they wrote a piece about how over classification is a bad idea. This comes up repeatedly in different working groups around here and around town. What it basically boils down to is we have a tendency in the national security community, particularly on the intel side to just over classify, classify at the highest possible level and what that ends up doing is restricting information from getting to the people who really need it and also from getting to the public when it needs to get to the public. Now of course, and Chris and Patrick agree with this, that there are things that need to be kept secret of course. But too often we default to this super high level of secrecy and it basically cuts the public out of the loop and in the process cuts a lot of policymakers out of the loop as well.

Todd Harrison: And this is something that actually it came up, the Reagan national defense forum on the panel that Kath spoke on in regard to space systems. And for too long we classified virtually everything to do with space. The threats we were seeing in space, our space capabilities, our own operations in space, the operations of others in space, to the point that in the public catalog of objects that are in space, there are a lot of things that are classified and therefore aren't reported in this public catalog. But you can see them, you can literally take a telescope out at night and point it in the sky and see these objects that we are refusing to report that exist there. And so it creates all kinds of problems because number one, it exposes the fact that we're hiding stuff in space. It makes us look bad.

Andrew Schwartz: And you have no language to talk about.

Todd Harrison: No, and we can't talk about it. And then also when there is a potential conjunction, where two objects in space are about to hit each other, if one of them is a classified object that we haven't reported, how do we then tell the other object, watch out. We’re coming through, let's negotiate on how we're going to maneuver to avoid a collision that's in everyone's best interest? If that object is secret, then we can't have that back and forth communication to avoid a problem. There's a lot of examples of where we over classify, but I thought this was a really good one given that this is something that has persisted through multiple administrations and that at some point Congress I think is going to have to step in and tackle the whole classification system and how things get reviewed.

Andrew Schwartz: I think we can all agree what we learn from these bad ideas is there's a lot of things we can do policy wise for the good.
Todd Harrison: I think so, yeah. That is the point of pointing out the bad, is to then point out what we could do better.

Andrew Schwartz: Great. Well, I thank you all for coming on today and for all of our listeners who want to read all the bad ideas in national security and find out what the absolute worst idea was, go to the Defense 360 site. You can find it from our website, csis.org or you can just go to Defense 360 and you'll see it there. Thanks for everybody for coming on today and more to come.

Kathleen Hicks: Thanks Andrew.

Andrew Hunter: Thanks.

Bob Schieffer: You. Thanks.

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