

Attendee Materials

Gates Forum I

Gates Forum I:
Strategic Communications

Conferee Biographies



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Chancellor Robert Gates

Chancellor of William & Mary
Former Secretary of Defense

Robert M. Gates served as the 22nd secretary of defense (2006-2011). He is the only secretary of defense in U.S. history to be asked to remain in office by a newly elected president. Dr. Gates served eight U.S. presidents across both parties. On Gates's last day in office, President Barack Obama awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America's highest civilian honor. Before becoming secretary of defense in 2006, Gates was the president of Texas A&M University, one of the nation's largest universities.

Gates served in the CIA for nearly 27 years, culminating his service as director of Central Intelligence from 1991 to 1993. He is the only career officer in CIA's history to rise from entry-level employee to director. He spent nearly nine years on the National Security Council at the White House, serving four administrations across both parties.

Gates has been awarded the National Security Medal, the Presidential Citizens Medal, has three times received the National Intelligence Distinguished Service Medal, and has three times received CIA's highest award, the Distinguished Intelligence Medal.

Gates currently is a principal at the consulting firm, Rice, Hadley, Gates & Manuel, LLC, with former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley.

Additionally, he is Chancellor of William & Mary, his alma mater. He has served on various public boards, to include Starbucks, the NCAA, the American Council on Education, and the Boy Scouts of America. Gates has authored four books, covering his experiences at CIA and at the Pentagon, leadership, and US nonmilitary instruments of power.



Elizabeth Allen

Senior Official

Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs

On April 4, 2022, Secretary of State Antony Blinken delegated the functions and authorities of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs to Elizabeth M. Allen. She has served as the Assistant Secretary of Global Public Affairs since September 13, 2021.

With over 15 years of strategic communications and public affairs experience, Liz specializes in message strategy, project and crisis management, and leadership communications. She was previously a Partner at Finsbury Glover Hering (FGH), leading integrated communications campaigns and providing strategic counsel to a range of global philanthropic, corporate, non-profit and entertainment clients. In 2020, Liz served as Vice President Kamala Harris's communications director on the Biden-Harris Presidential campaign.

Prior to FGH, Liz spent seven years in the Obama-Biden White House, serving as Deputy Communications Director and Deputy Assistant to President Barack Obama, White House Director of Message Planning, and Deputy Director of Communications to then-Vice President Joe Biden.

During her White House tenure, Liz drove communications planning around the President's priorities, domestic and foreign policies, and legislative and outreach strategy. She managed complex message events, groundbreaking interviews and documentaries, and press coverage for President Obama and Vice President Biden across the United States and in more than 30 foreign countries on five continents.

Elizabeth Allen (continued)

Senior Official

Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs

Liz's former public service extends to the U.S. Department of State, where she served as Director of Public Affairs for Educational and Cultural Affairs, focusing on public diplomacy and the impact of people-to-people exchange programs and international education. She previously worked at the State Department on human trafficking and international women's issues.

Liz is a proud Buffalo, New York, native and graduated Magna Cum Laude and Phi Beta Kappa with a degree in Political Science and minor in Sociology from the State University of New York (SUNY) College at Geneseo.

Brandt Anderson

National Security Advisor for Senator Todd Young

Mr. Brandt Anderson serves as the National Security Advisor for Senator Todd Young (R-IN). He advises the Senator on policy matters pertaining to foreign policy, defense, and handles the Senator's portfolio on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and as the co-chair of the Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism.

Before joining the staff of Senator Young, Mr. Anderson served as the Military Legislative Assistant for Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) where he advised the Senator on issues related to the defense budget, the National Defense Authorization Act, and handled the Senator's portfolio on the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Previously, Mr. Anderson served as a Legislative Director and Military Legislative Assistant for members of the House Armed Services Committee.

Before working in the U.S. Congress, Mr. Anderson served eight years in the U.S. Army as a Captain and CH-47F helicopter pilot. He commanded Bravo Company, 3rd Battalion, 10th Combat Aviation Brigade, 10th Mountain Division. Mr. Anderson is a veteran of multiple tours in Afghanistan and awards include the Bronze Star Medal, the Meritorious Service Medal, multiple Air Medals, the Army Commendation Medal, the Air Force Commendation Medal, and the Humanitarian Service Medal. He was commissioned in 2006 through the Army ROTC Program at Florida Southern College in Lakeland, Florida.

Mr. Anderson resides in northern Virginia with his wife, young son and daughter.



Brent Colburn

Senior Vice President of External Relations & Communications
UC Office of the President

With over twenty years of experience navigating the changing landscape of communications and public engagement, Brent Colburn currently serves as the senior vice president for external relations and communications at the University of California (UC). Working with the UC's ten campuses, five medical centers, and three national labs, his broad portfolio includes all university-wide internal and external communications, state and federal government relations, and stakeholder engagement in support of UC's tripartite mission of education, research, and public service.

Mr. Colburn brings more than two decades of high-level communications and leadership perspective to his work, having served in senior roles in higher education, the nonprofit sector, the federal government, and national politics. Prior to UC, Colburn served as the vice president for communications and public affairs at Princeton University, overseeing communications, government relations, and community affairs. Before joining Princeton, he was the vice president of communications at the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, Priscilla Chan's and Mark Zuckerberg's philanthropic effort dedicated to driving innovation in education, social justice, and science.

Brent Colburn (continued)

Senior Vice President of External Relations & Communications
UC Office of the President

Colburn's extensive experience in public service includes senior roles in the Obama administration, where he served as the assistant to the secretary of defense for public affairs, chief of staff at the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), assistant secretary of public affairs at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and director of external affairs at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Colburn began his career working on political campaigns, eventually serving as the National Communications Director for President Obama's successful 2012 re-elect.

Mr. Colburn graduated from William & Mary with a bachelor's degree in political science and a master's degree in public policy. He has written and lectured on political and national security communications, including a stint as a resident fellow at Harvard's Institute of Politics. Brent is married to Nichole Mayer, a professional chef, and lives with her and their dog, Dusty Baker, in Oakland, Calif.



Senator Chris Coons

United States Senator

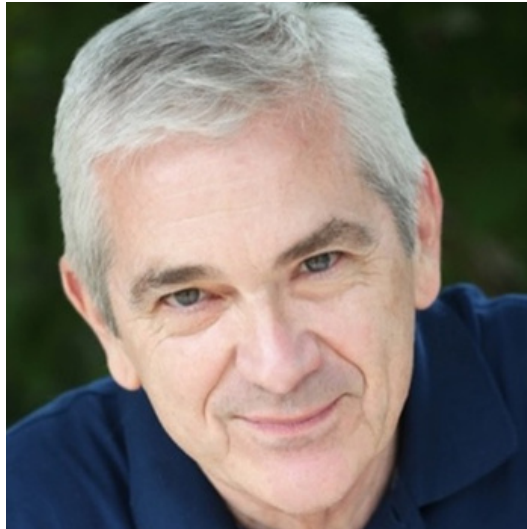
In his twelve years as a United States Senator, Chris Coons has worked hard to find bipartisan solutions to the issues confronting Delaware, the nation, and the world.

As a member of the Foreign Relations, Judiciary, Appropriations, and Small Business and Entrepreneurship Committees, and as Chair of the Senate Select Committee on Ethics, Senator Coons is uniquely positioned to nurture American innovation and make the United States more competitive in the global market.

Senator Coons is the Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs (SFOPS), where he focuses on strengthening U.S. alliances, supporting displaced and vulnerable people, and bolstering public health infrastructure around the world. He is also the co-chair of the Senate Human Rights Caucus.

In these roles, Senator Coons is working for the interests of Delaware and the United States abroad while shaping a more stable and secure world. This includes advocating for peace and stability in regions plagued by conflict, supporting American partners and allies, and championing democracy.

Senator Coons lives in Wilmington, Delaware with his wife, Annie, and their three children, Michael, Jack, and Maggie.



Tom Gjelten

Former NPR News Correspondant
Member of the Council on Foreign Relations

For nearly four decades, Tom Gjelten was a correspondent for NPR News, reporting on national and international news from posts in Washington and around the world. As one of NPR's pioneer foreign correspondents, he covered war and political strife in Central and South America, the first Gulf War, the wars in the former Yugoslavia, and the transitions to democracy in the former Soviet bloc. After returning from his overseas assignments, Gjelten covered U.S. diplomacy and national security affairs. In his final assignment, Gjelten was NPR's religion correspondent.

His reporting from Sarajevo from 1992 to 1994 was the basis for his book "Sarajevo Daily: A City and Its Newspaper Under Siege" (HarperCollins). He is also the author of "Bacardi and the Long Fight for Cuba: The Biography of a Cause" (Viking), and "A Nation of Nations: A Great American Immigration Story" (Simon & Schuster).

During his years at NPR, Gjelten was honored with two Overseas Press Club Awards, a George Polk Award, a Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award, and a National Headliner Award. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.



Dr. Mara Karlin

Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy, Plans, and Capabilities

Dr. Mara E. Karlin is the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy, Plans, and Capabilities. She is responsible for advising the Secretary of Defense and other senior defense leaders on national security and defense strategy; the forces, contingency plans, and associated posture necessary to implement the defense strategy; emerging capabilities; and security cooperation plans and policies, to include strategy and policy for the Defense Security Cooperation Agency. Dr. Karlin ensures that the Department of Defense (DoD)'s program and budget decisions support and advance senior DoD leaders' strategic direction, especially as articulated in defense planning guidance.

Prior to assuming her current role, Dr. Mara Karlin was Performing the Duties of Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy from August 2021 to February 2022. Dr. Karlin was sworn in as the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategies, Plans, and Capabilities on August 17, 2021.

Preceding this role, Dr. Karlin served as the Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, where she led the Department's relations with Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Russia, Eurasia, and the Western Hemisphere. She served on the policy team for the Biden-Harris Transition, was Director of Strategic Studies and an Associate Professor at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), and a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. Previously, she served in national security roles for five U.S. secretaries of defense, advising on policies spanning strategic planning, defense policy and budgeting, future conflicts, and regional security affairs.

Dr. Karlin started her government career as a civil servant in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and has received the Secretary of Defense Meritorious Civilian Service Award. She is the author of two books on defense policy and military history.



Admiral John Kirby

Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs

John F. Kirby was sworn in as Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs on January 20, 2021. In this role, he advised Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III and Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks on public communications and community engagement. He also served as the Department's chief spokesperson. Most recently, Kirby was an adjunct lecturer at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and a military and diplomatic analyst at CNN. Kirby previously served at the Department of State, as the Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Public Affairs from December 2015 to January 2017 and as the State Department's spokesperson from May 2015 to January 2017. Prior to the State Department, Kirby served as the Pentagon Press Secretary under Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, the first uniformed officer to hold the position of chief spokesman for the Department of Defense.

Kirby commissioned in the U.S. Navy in September 1986 after completing Officer Candidate School at Newport, RI. He served in uniform for more than 28 years, before retiring in 2015 at the rank of Rear Admiral. His naval career included duty at sea and ashore, including deployments to the Middle East and Mediterranean. His last Navy posting was as Chief of Navy Information, where he served as the principal spokesman for the Department of the Navy.

He is a 1985 graduate of the University of South Florida in Tampa, Florida, where he received a Bachelor's degree in History. He holds a Master of Science degree in International Relations from Troy State University and a Master of Arts in National Security and Strategic Studies from the Naval War College.



Sophia Lafargue

Chief of Staff to Congressman Gregory Meeks

Sophia Lafargue is the Democratic Staff Director of the United States House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee. Ms. Lafargue sets and advances the Committee's legislative and oversight agenda and leads a team of professional staff. She is the top Committee liaison with the leadership of the House of Representatives, and is the primary advisor to Democratic members of the Committee on national security matters in the Executive Branch.

With nearly two decades of experience in the House of Representatives, having held several staff positions, Ms. Lafargue has played a key role facilitating multi-track diplomacy efforts on some of the most intractable global conflicts, and promoting trade capacity building for economic development. She has led legislative efforts to bolster diplomacy as a pillar of U.S. global strength, and has a sharp focus on increasing diversity in foreign policy and national security in government and the private sector. Ms. Lafargue has actively supported the advancement of all major trade legislation signed into law during her tenure.

Ms. Lafargue is known for her bipartisan approach to legislating, developing high performance teams, and her understanding of the real world implications of policy making. Ms. Lafargue is a graduate of Harvard University and Queens College, City University of New York. She is married to Dr. Ferentz Lafargue and is a mother of four children. Her hobbies include hiking, beekeeping, and related agricultural and environmental advocacy.



Dale Lawton

Special Assistant

Office of the Under Secretary of the Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs

Dale Lawton is a U.S. Foreign Service Officer currently serving as Special Assistant in the Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. He most recently served as the Public Affairs Officer at the U.S. Consulate in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Since joining the State Department in 2004, he has completed tours in Ghana, Mongolia, Cuba, South Africa, Iraq, Washington DC, Venezuela, and Muscat.

Prior to joining the Foreign Service, Dale worked in the non-profit world, managing grant-funded projects aimed at improving candidate behavior during political campaigns. He completed his BA in Near Eastern Studies at Brigham Young University and his MA and PhD in Politics from the University of Virginia.

He is married to Michele Lawton; they have three adult children and a golden retriever.



Elizabeth O'Bagy

Senior Foreign Policy Advisor to Senator Chris Coons

Elizabeth O'Bagy is the Senior Foreign Policy Advisor to Senator Chris Coons (D-DE). Before joining the Senator's office, she was an External Relations Officer with the UN Refugee Agency where she managed UNHCR's outreach with the U.S. Congress and U.S. Department of State and served on emergency humanitarian deployments to Ukraine and Pakistan.

Previously, Elizabeth worked for the International Republican Institute in Tunisia and served as Foreign Policy Advisor to the late Senator John McCain (R-AZ), advising him on foreign affairs, national security policy, foreign assistance, and trade.

Elizabeth holds a MA in Arab Studies from Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service and received her undergraduate degree in Arabic Language from Georgetown University. She has lived in Tunisia, Morocco, Syria, and Egypt and conducted field research in Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey.

Dr. William Prillaman

Chief of Analytic Strategy
DA Front Office

William C. Prillaman currently serves as Chief of Analytic Strategy for the DA Front Office. Previously he was Chief of the President's Analytic Support Staff, the unit responsible for managing the President's Daily Brief (PDB). Prior to that he was a senior reviewer for the PDB during the Obama and Trump administrations; he also served as a PDB briefer during the Clinton administration, where he provided daily intelligence support to the Secretary of Defense, Deputy Secretary of Defense, and Vice President.

Mr. Prillaman began his career as an analyst on Latin America, where he authored hundreds of assessments and briefed three US Presidents and more than 50 cabinet officials and members of Congress. He also covered global strategic analysis, drafting assessments on topics ranging from terrorism and Wikileaks to the global financial crisis. He was Program Manager for the DA's Senior Analytic Service, a cadre of the Directorate's 200 senior-most analysts, and Tradecraft Chair at the Sherman Kent School, where he drafted a study examining lessons learned from two dozen of the Agency's most noteworthy intelligence successes. Mr. Prillaman also has been a Visiting Fellow at the Brookings Institution. He was selected for the Senior Analytic Service in 2000 and the Senior Executive Service/Senior Intelligence Service in 2005.

Mr. Prillaman received his Ph.D. and B.A. from the University of Virginia and his M.A. from Tulane University. He is the author of multiple books and articles, including "The Judiciary and Democratic Decay in Latin America and Crime," "Democracy, and Development in Latin America," and a contributing editor to "Legal Systems of the World." His articles have appeared in The Christian Science Monitor, Washington Times, National Review, Intelligence and National Security, US Naval Institute Proceedings, and Orbis.

He and his wife Kristin, a production officer in the Office of the Inspector General, have five children.



Brigadier General Patrick Ryder

Press Secretary
Department of Defense

Brigadier General Patrick S. Ryder is the Department of Defense Press Secretary at the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia. In this role, he serves as the Department's chief spokesperson, providing timely and accurate information to the public, Congress, and news media. He also advises Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III and Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks on public communications.

Brig. Gen. Ryder was commissioned in 1992 through the Air Force ROTC program at the University of Florida in Gainesville. Most recently, he served as the Director of Public Affairs for the Office of the Secretary of the Air Force. His staff assignments include serving as the Special Assistant for Public Affairs to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Director of Public Affairs for U.S. Central Command, and Director of Public Affairs for the Office of Defense Representative-Pakistan.

During his career, Brig. Gen. Ryder has led public affairs operations in numerous overseas contingency operations. He served as the PAO for the Air Force's initial cadre at Taszar Air Base, Hungary, during the 1995 peace-keeping mission, Operation Joint Endeavor, and led 48th Fighter Wing public affairs operations in support of NATO during the 1999 Kosovo Air Campaign. In support for Operation Iraqi Freedom, he served as a strategic communications planner for the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad from March-July 2004 and led the DoD Public Affairs response to highlight U.S. military humanitarian support to Pakistan during floods in 2010. While at U.S. Central Command, Brig. Gen. Ryder oversaw the command-wide public affairs operations in support of the counter-ISIS campaign Operation Inherent Resolve from 2014-2016.



Thom Shanker

Director

Project for Media and National Security

Thom Shanker was named director of the Project for Media and National Security in June 2021, after a nearly quarter-century career with The New York Times, including 13 years as Pentagon correspondent.

Early in the war in Afghanistan, Mr. Shanker embedded with Army Special Forces at Kandahar. He subsequently conducted dozens of reporting trips to Afghanistan and Iraq, and embedded in the field with units from the squad and company level through battalion, brigade, division and corps.

Most recently, he had served as Deputy Washington Editor for The Times, managing coverage of the military, diplomacy and veterans' affairs.

Mr. Shanker is co-author of "Counterstrike: The Untold Story of America's Secret Campaign Against Al Qaeda," published in August 2011 by Henry Holt & Co. The book became a New York Times best seller.

Before joining The Times, he was foreign editor of The Chicago Tribune. Mr. Shanker also served as The Tribune's senior European correspondent, based in Berlin. Most of that time was spent covering the wars in former Yugoslavia, where Mr. Shanker was the first reporter to uncover and write about the Serb campaign of systematic mass rape of Muslim women.

He spent five years as The Tribune's Moscow correspondent, covering the start of the Gorbachev era to the death of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the communist empire in Eastern Europe.



Vivek Varma

Chief Executive Officer
Emes Project LLC

Vivek Varma is chief executive officer of the Emes Project LLC and vice chairman of the Schultz Family Foundation (SFF). In this role, he works directly with Sheri and Howard Schultz to steward the family's investments and strategic focus on increasing opportunity and reducing inequality for all Americans. The Emes Project aspires to bring an entrepreneurial lens to political and policy reform through multi-sector partnerships, advocacy, and policy transformation. As SFF vice chairman, Vivek works closely with SFF president Tyra Mariani to steer philanthropic investments to programs and prototypes designed to lift the human spirit and create possibilities for young people facing economic and social hardship.

Prior to joining the Emes Project and SFF, Vivek served 12 years on the executive leadership team at Starbucks Coffee Company. As executive vice president of public affairs and social impact and president of the Starbucks Foundation, Vivek built a world class team while serving as strategic counsel to Howard Schultz during the company's transformation and the years of record-setting growth that followed. Upon Schultz's departure from Starbucks in 2018, Vivek helped lead the company's transition to its next CEO, Kevin Johnson, and took on a new role as chief transformation officer.

Prior to Starbucks, Vivek held a variety of public affairs and communications roles at Microsoft, most notably defending Microsoft in the Department of Justice antitrust case as a member of the legal and communications team. At Microsoft, he co-led the company's corporate communications function and was immersed in the technology competition, partnerships and acquisitions of that era.

Vivek Varma (continued)

Chief Executive Officer
Emes Project LLC

Vivek started on Capitol Hill in 1988 as congressional staff serving Oklahoma constituents and working on legislative issues, eventually progressing to lead the Washington DC office of the late Congressman Mike Synar of Oklahoma.

In 1995, Vivek became Executive Director of the Campaign for America Project, a project focused on campaign finance reform that was founded by Rep. Synar with backing from Wall Street financier Jerome Kohlberg.

He holds a B.A. in Political Science from Swarthmore College and a law degree from the American University Washington College of Law.

An avid tennis player, Vivek is a two-time Oklahoma singles state champion, a two-time collegiate All American and a three-time national champion of the U.S. Tennis Association's Men's 50 and Over Doubles Division.

He grew up in Chickasha, Okla., and currently resides in Mercer Island, Washington, with his family.



Senator Todd Young

United States Senator

Senator Todd Young represents Hoosiers in the United States Senate. He currently serves on the Senate Committees on Finance; Foreign Relations; Commerce, Science & Transportation; and Small Business and Entrepreneurship. A fifth-generation Hoosier, Todd grew up watching his parents work hard in order to support the family.

His first jobs were delivering newspapers, mowing lawns, and providing janitorial services at the family business. Todd is a graduate of the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. He graduated with honors in 1995 and accepted a commission in the U.S. Marine Corps.

In 2000, Todd was honorably discharged from the Marine Corps as a Captain. While serving in the Marines and working as a business consultant, Todd earned an MBA and his law degree. In 2010, he ran for Congress and served three terms representing Indiana's 9th District. He was elected to the U.S. Senate in 2016. Todd married his wife Jenny in 2005 and worked together at a small law firm in Paoli, Indiana started by Jenny's great-grandfather.

Today, they reside in Greenwood, Indiana with their four young children: a son, Tucker, and three daughters, Annalise, Abigail, and Ava.