In 1953, President Eisenhower summoned a diverse group of leading minds to participate in a unique strategy planning exercise focused on the complex and poorly understood threat of communism. Because the group met in the White House Solarium, the secret exercise was dubbed Project Solarium. Over fifty years later, the Department of Social Sciences, on behalf of the Superintendent, will tap into the spirit that animated Eisenhower’s groundbreaking effort to grapple with the equally complex problem of terrorism.

Since 9/11, the United States has prevented terrorists from conducting another strategic attack on U.S. territory, an often underappreciated accomplishment. Our counterterrorism (CT) efforts have made America safer, but not yet safe. In many ways the CT challenges facing policymakers today are more daunting than they were immediately after 9/11, and some question whether U.S. strategy has kept pace.

Today’s policymakers must contend with a fiscally austere environment, a war-weary American public recovering from thirteen years of persistent conflict, and a jihadist threat that is more amorphous, geographically diffuse, and ideologically fractured than ever before. While the United States is undeniably more capable in conducting tactical CT operations than it was before 9/11, its long-term strategy requires critical study. Policy documents show that U.S. strategic ends have fluctuated – from defeating terrorism and violent extremism writ large to defeating al Qaeda, its affiliates, and its adherents – and critics contend that some of the most popular ways and means are not only ineffective but counterproductive. Crafting a coherent and sustainable long-term strategy will also require the help of foreign partners to succeed.

This conference will encourage participants to examine rigorously (and in some cases question) the ends, ways, and means associated with U.S. CT strategy. Sessions will include featured speakers from disciplines that at first blush may appear to be completely unrelated to CT, but after closer examination, actually share several important yet counterintuitive commonalities. CT experts will then engage in a spirited roundtable dialogue about the merits of applying key concepts and solutions to the terrorism problem set. Key questions include:

1. How do other communities of practice craft strategic ends for ambiguous, volatile, and poorly understood problem sets?
2. What can other fields teach strategists about crafting metrics that are useful for gauging progress?
3. What are best practices in balancing politics and operational effectiveness when combating threats that require multilateral approaches and public-private partnerships to be successful? How can these approaches improve building partner capacity and security force assistance in CT?
4. In the ideological domain, how do we best combat the ideas of violent extremists? How do practitioners in other fields alter thinking and change behaviors that are harmful yet ultimately attractive to certain segments of the population?
5. What can we learn from disciplines that focus on chronic problems with both external and internal causes? How do other communities of stakeholders act to mitigate enduring problems?
6. What can the United States do now to avoid the further spread and appeal of the group that called itself the Islamic State and other like-minded jihadist groups active elsewhere?

This conference will provide a perfect forum—a sequestered and informal setting at West Point—for candid discussions among all participants. Comments are “not for attribution,” further facilitating a free exchange of ideas. Senior Conference 2015 is made possible by the generous support of the West Point Association of Graduates and the Combating Terrorism Center’s donors.