[Intro]
Thank you, Admiral Cole, for that kind introduction.

To the Surface Navy Association, Midway and WWII veterans, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, it is an honor to be with you tonight.

In January, I had the privilege of speaking to many of you at the Surface Navy Association’s National Symposium about the importance of developing commanding officers of competence and character to lead their teams over the horizon, ready to face any challenge that may come their way.
So it is indeed an honor to be back with you to pick up on some of those themes, analyzed through the lens of the Battle of Midway, described by British historian John Keegan as “the most stunning and decisive blow in the history of naval warfare.”

Greater than Trafalgar or Tsushima Strait or Jutland or Leyte Gulf.

Why do we come together like this? Well, Midway was a great battle, filled with stories of valor...the US Navy’s finest hour. That victory alone is worth celebrating.

But commemorations like this allow us to study this fight over and over again -- always uncovering new details or exposing fresh revelations.
When we look back at the Battle of Midway, we could mine the lessons of just that single case study and never find the bottom. This depth and repetition contributes to new perspectives.

And so, it’s appropriate that we’ve come together again this year. My intent tonight is not to recount the events of the battle -- the planes sortied, torpedoes shot, damage controlled, or ships sunk...these are well chronicled.

Instead, as I study “the most stunning and decisive” battle at sea in our nation’s history, I want to highlight one theme that really emerges at Midway: the value Trust and Confidence -- among commanders, and between commanding officers and their crews.
Last Monday, on Memorial Day, I visited Golden Gate National Cemetery, 161 sprawling acres outside of San Francisco where 143,000 men and women -- heroes all -- are laid to rest.

Among the white marble headstones are two in section C-1 -- indistinguishable from the others at a distance -- that belong to two Sailors who are perhaps more responsible than any others for winning at Midway and triumphing in the Pacific campaign:

- Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz, Commander in Chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet; and
- Admiral Raymond Spruance, Task Force 16 commander and, after Midway, ADM Nimitz’s chief of staff.

The trust and confidence these men shared with each other -- and the trust and confidence others had in them -- offer prime examples of how such leadership traits contribute directly to victory in great power war at sea.
So through this lens of trust and confidence, three lessons from Midway illustrate how this connection among commanders -- built on the foundation of competence and character -- form the basis on which the authority, responsibility, and accountability of command rests.

The first lesson of Midway is that trust and confidence are a prerequisite for decentralized operations at sea -- the key to our effectiveness as a force.

Consider the theater for which Admiral Nimitz was responsible -- the Pacific -- which spans nearly half the world’s surface.

How do you command a force like that...thousands of miles away in Hawaii with limited or time-late information?...

How do you send your commanders into harm’s way, knowing what must be done but unsure if they will return?...
For Nimitz, it was all a matter of treasuring the very essence of command and empowering those under his charge. Pragmatically, this meant inculcating the “right way” to do business. Early in his time as CINCPAC, he told his staff,

“I would like to see, as Navy Regulations specify, the commanding officer of any ship that joins the command.”

Commanding officers of all vessels -- from Lieutenant (junior grades) commanding LSTs to senior captains on new battleships -- arrived in Pearl Harbor and reported to the headquarters building at 11 o’clock for 15 minutes with their commander.

“Some of the best help and advice I’ve had,” Nimitz observed, “comes from junior officers and enlisted men.”
Admiral Nimitz needed to be able to look his commanders in the eye -- believing that they were both technically brilliant and that they shared his values -- before he felt confident sending them over the horizon with America’s most precious resources aboard.

Nimitz’s biographer wrote that

“the story of the commander in chief’s morning receptions spread through the fleet...giving assurance that the big boss was interested in everyone and was their active partner.”

However, this personal connection is, by itself, insufficient to fight over such large swaths of ocean. Commanders must allow their units the time to train, the room to learn, and the space to operate to effectively exercise command at a distance.
That means providing clear boundaries and the latitude to maneuver inside those boundaries.

These concepts aren’t new -- they’re inherent in the principles of delegated authority and command by negation; they’re central to any military operation and particularly naval operations -- and Admiral Nimitz mastered them.

In his oral history after the war, Nimitz’s intelligence officer, LCDR Edwin Layton, recounted that Nimitz “retained operational command throughout the Battle of Midway and he didn’t intend at any time to interfere with Spruance.”
Nimitz undoubtedly recognized the importance of offering clear guidance to his subordinates. He provided VADM Frank Jack Fletcher and RADM Raymond Spruance his clear intent prior to Midway.

In OP-PLAN 29-42, Nimitz directed them to “inflict maximum damage on the enemy by employing strong attrition tactics, and to be governed by the principle of calculated risk.”

Their orders were clear. His guidance was unambiguous.

Nimitz got out of their way and left them to conduct operations as they saw fit, telling his staff, “Leave them alone. Looking over their shoulders will only inhibit them...COs must retain the initiative.”
At one point during the battle, word reached PACFLT headquarters that Spruance turned his force away from Midway, departing to the east while the Japanese striking force opened to the west.

Huddled over the plot table in Pearl Harbor, Nimitz’s staff was nervous -- unsure why Spruance was not pursuing the crippled Japanese ships to send Admiral Yamamoto’s force to the bottom.

Nimitz reminded them coolly,

“I’m sure that Spruance has a better sense of what’s going on there than we have here. I’m sure he has a very good reason for this. We’ll all learn about this in the course of time. From here, we can’t second-guess a commander in the field of action.”

There it is -- trust and confidence in his team, and they didn’t let him down.
The second lesson of Midway is that trust and confidence is essential to every single phase of combat -- from planning through execution -- and no place was this more evident than at Midway.

As planning for the operation got underway, Admiral Halsey fell ill with severe dermatitis, which ultimately sidelined him for Midway.

He called it “the most grievous disappointment of my career.”

Despite the cultural tribalism that existed in the U.S. Navy at the time -- brown shoe aviators vs. black shoes Sailors...and despite the fact that he was a non-aviator and former cruiser captain...Halsey recommended Spruance replace him as the Task Force 16 commander.
Halsey wrote to Nimitz saying, “**RADM Spruance has consistently displayed outstanding ability combined with excellent judgment and quiet courage.**

*I have found his counsel and advice invaluable. From my direct close observation, I have learned to place complete confidence in him in operations in war time.*

*I consider him fully and superbly qualified to take command.”*
Though Spruance could have sailed with his own team, he deliberately chose to retain Halsey’s staff.

As they dined in the Flag Mess his first night aboard the USS Enterprise, the staff sat silently...staring at their plates...unsure of their fate.

“Gentlemen,” Spruance said, “I want you to know that I do not have the slightest concern about any of you. If you weren’t good, Bill Halsey would not have you.”

The mood lightened and a bond among a leader and his new team was formed -- and just in time.
This atmosphere -- open to criticism -- was NOT the case on the Kido Butai...records show that they were looking for a repeat of the Russo-Japanese war and 1905 Battle of Tsushima -- a single “Kantai Kessen” or great battle.

They did not question their assumptions, even when they lost the battle in wargames...inputs from juniors were not welcome.

As planning gave way to preparation, Nimitz trusted his chief cryptologist CDR Joe Rochefort’s enigma decryption, believing his assessment that the Japanese code-name for a forthcoming operation -- “ALFA-FOXTROT” -- in fact stood for Midway.

This confidence ultimately allowed Nimitz to issue the Operational Planning guidance to his subordinate commanders.
Trust and confidence between commanders proved critical during execution, too.

Though Admiral Fletcher was numerically senior to Admiral Spruance, he shifted tactical control to his junior commander when his flagship, USS Yorktown, was struck and forced out of the fight.

It was a tacit recognition of the fact that Spruance’s was better positioned to lead the force and an unequivocal endorsement of Spruance’s competence.

In Spruance’s fitness report submitted months after the battle, Fletcher wrote,

“His action at the Battle of Midway leaves no doubt as to his character and ability.”
The third and final lesson of Midway is that trust and confidence even at the tactical level can have strategic implications.

Indeed, one could argue that the relationship between ADM Nimitz and ADM Spruance -- strengthened in the crucible of combat -- paved the way for American victory in the Pacific campaign.

Based largely on his reputation as a leader of unparalleled competence and character, Nimitz chose Spruance as his chief of staff following Midway -- a position that, while far from the waterfront, was vitally important.
Spruance became a critical source of ideas and a sounding board for Nimitz. The two men dined together, took long walks together, traveled together, and even lived together.

After a year as Nimitz’s chief of staff, Spruance returned to sea as commander of what would become the Fifth Fleet.

When the announcement was made, one of the officers commented that “Nimitz was ready to let Spruance go since now they walked and talked and thought alike.”

Nimitz trusted his judgment, had confidence in his abilities, and knew Spruance could fight and win at a time and place of his choosing.
Anyone who has served -- including those of you in this room -- recognizes that this bond between shipmates can, under fire and fury, become bonds of love and devotion.

These men lived and served together, and they were equally as devoted to each other as they were to their own families.

So it’s no coincidence that when asked who he wanted in his burial plot in Golden Gate’s section C-1, Nimitz told his wife, Catherine, simply, “I’d like to have Spruance with me.”
[Closing]

Times, technology, and tactics have changed. But one principle endures -- equally applicable today as it was in the waters surrounding Midway 76 years ago -- that the highest measure of effectiveness in command is trust and confidence.

Top commanders inspire their teams to perform at or near their limits and by making their team stronger, they relentlessly chase best-ever performance.

They study every text, they try every method, seize every moment, and expend every effort to out-fox their competition.
They ceaselessly communicate, train, test, and challenge their teams. They are toughest on themselves.

They routinely seek out feedback and are ready to be shown their errors in the interest of learning and getting better.

When they win, they are grateful...they are humble...and they are spent from their efforts.

And by doing all these things, great leaders bring their teams to a deeply shared commitment to each other in the pursuit of victory.
Such was the case with ADM Nimitz and ADM Spruance -- quiet warriors whose legacy lives on.

If you asked them, they would say they were just doing their job -- no more or less important than any Sailor or soldier who devoted their life to the defense of our country.

Their simple gravestones, which blend in with those of their men, belie their importance to our Navy and our nation.

Trust to the point of no return...you have no choice...
Fast-forward to today when these principles of authority, responsibility, accountability, and expertise -- codified in the recently released *Charge of Command* -- are more relevant than ever.

Nimitz and Spruance embodied them. Their standard is our standard.

How can we best honor the men who fought and died at Midway and in WWII?

Well, in two ways:

First, we can apply the lessons we learned at Midway about the importance of trust and confidence to make us stronger as an organization and as a fighting force.
Second, before you lay your heads down tonight...before your head touches the pillow...we can pray for those who fought at the Island of Midway and for those who sailed in the great waters of the Pacific so that we may live in peace.

Pray also for those Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen deployed around the globe.

They are bound by the same oath as the veterans who join us here today and those who gave their lives for the cause of liberty...serving in very dangerous places, guarding our peace and that very fragile thing we call freedom.

Remember and honor them -- every day, but especially today.

Thank you and God bless.