

Distinguished guests,

1. intro (waarom hier & waardering sprekers)

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you here today, on behalf of the municipality of Eijsden-Margraten.

I am pleased that we are gathered here - as civil and military leaders, professionals and citizens - for the purpose of sharing our knowledge and perspectives on the subject of peace and security.

It is the second time we're hosting this lecture, after the first was initiated by the *America Europe Friendship Association*, of which I am a proud ambassador, back in 2024.

And where better to host this lecture than here: in a region known for its strong sense of community, warm hospitality and a history that has witnessed many of Europe's defining moments.

A place where bonds that were formed in the past continue to inspire how we act today.

I am deeply grateful to our distinguished speakers for joining us: General Gerhartz, Professor Habibovic and consul-general Rothenberg.

In the midst of demanding schedules, filled with matters of great importance, you have made time to share your insights and experiences.

A special welcome to Mark LaPointe, who has crossed an ocean for this occasion. Thank you all for being here today.

2. Noodzaak van maatschappij weerbaarder maken

Ladies and gentlemen,

As we look around us, we see a world that is changing rapidly. A world in which peace and security are no longer a given.

For 4 years now, Russia is waging a brutal and illegal war against Ukraine, a peaceful and sovereign nation. Tensions in the Middle East are rising by each day. China increases it's hostile rhetoric and actions.

The United States has recently declared it's foreign policy objectives, focusing more on the western hemisphere. We also see examples of international law being challenged. In our country, with it's strong legal tradition and host nation to some many international institutions, this of course causes great debate.

For decades now, NATO has been our safeguard for peace and security. Our region is proud to host Allied Joint Force Command Brunssum. But the balance within the alliance is unmistakably shifting.

As a result, The Netherlands and other European countries are – finally – increasing their defence expenditures and military capabilities. This will have a big impact on society.

The threats we now confront – not only military but also threats like hybrid warfare, disinformation and the undermining of our institutions, or uncontrolled migration - are not distant or abstract.

They are here, and they demand our immediate attention. A growing number of people take an active interest in these matters. It's not a coincidence that the daily foreign policy podcast Boekestijn & De Wijk, of which I am a great fan myself, is one of the best listened podcasts of the moment. Still, too many people remain unaware of how fragile our peace and security have become.

The American Cemetery in Margraten, just down the road, is a silent witness to the price of freedom. We must never forget the sacrifices of those who fought for our freedom, nor the lessons their courage still teaches us.

And as the first liberated municipality in The Netherlands, I believe we in Eijsden-Margraten carry a moral responsibility: to continue to honour the liberators' sacrifice and to keep our 'forever promise', a pledge of gratitude and remembrance, ensuring no soldier is forgotten.

And from this, we have a duty: to contribute to a deeper understanding of our current challenges, and to ensure that the horrors of the past are never repeated.

So, as mayor of this unique and beautiful community, I see it as my responsibility to act, to raise awareness, and to inspire each of you to do the same.

It is also a reflection of the personal promise I made, and deeply feel, to the American veterans that still visit us each year, regardless of their old age, which I am privileged to meet and whom we all love so dearly. A promise that the sacrifices of the greatest generation shall not have been in vain.

3. Hoe maken we de maatschappij weerbaarder?

The question is: *how* do we protect our peace and security, our democracy and the rule of law, our welfare and way of life?

The purpose of our actions must be to become more *resilient*. It means that we can anticipate a crisis before it hits – and when it does, that we can cope with it as a society.

It is vital that we, representatives from all levels of society, stand together in prioritising our security. To prepare for crisis situations, to join forces, and to learn and share knowledge.

Not in order to cause panic, but to provide guidance and to lead by example.

In that respect, we can take inspiration from Queen Maxima and the Princess of Orange, both of whom have recently joined the Dutch armed forces.

As local governments, we are preparing more intensively for various scenarios, with plans, simulations and emergency provisions. Including clear and effective communication, so that people know which practical steps to take. And, crucially, so that they are able to understand and accept the hard choices that are necessary to keep all of us safe and secure.

If we succeed in that, we are effectively building trust and making our society stronger. In my opinion, mayors carry a special responsibility and can help narrow the gap between our military and civil society.

As we all know, building resilience does not happen automatically. It requires effort and resources.

This won't be comfortable, and the right path won't always be clear. I know from experience how many *other* challenges demand our attention. Every week, our municipal agenda is full: housing, infrastructure, social care. Security is *one* responsibility, among many.

But if we fail in this responsibility, it will cost us far more. Without freedom, everything else becomes irrelevant.

I sometimes ask myself whether we are moving fast enough. When are we prepared? Will we be safe? From the conversations I have, I know that many people share this uncertainty.

But I do know this: we cannot afford to wait. Our reality is shifting beneath our feet, and we need to stand firm. That is why we are here: to learn, to reflect, and to act.

4. Slot

In conclusion, let's make this lecture not just informative, but inspirational. Or even better: a call to action.

We will certainly not solve everything today. But if we leave here with clear priorities and stronger connections, that will already matter. Thank you.

Afsluiting

Dear guests,

Before we conclude and I invite you for a drink and further conversation to share our thoughts, to strengthen our bonds and to prepare for the challenges ahead, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to all our speakers.

General Gerhartz, professor Habibovic and consul-general Rothenberg: your words have given us much to reflect upon, and your presence here today shows the importance of continuing this conversation.

Special thanks to Mark LaPointe for being here with us. Your performance is truly moving.

In this country, in western Europe, we have lived in peace for eighty years. It's easy to take that for granted, almost as easy as turning on a tap and expecting water to flow. But freedom, like our water, depends on care and commitment. The world around us is changing, and we must stay ready to protect what matters most.

Most of us here are not heroes. I certainly am not. We simply do our best, in our offices and in our communities, to make a difference where we can. The true heroes are those who fought for our freedom in the Second World War, and those who serve on the front lines today.

Their example reminds us of the price of freedom, and of our duty to safeguard it. It is to them that I dedicate this second Margraten lecture on peace and security. Thank you.