MH: We seem to have, as a society, moved into a post-truth world – which your Oxford dictionary declares is a world in which decision making is based less on fact and evidence and more on feeling, emotion, preference, tribe, loyalty or grievance. And then on top of that societal move we've had a President who actually quite cleverly recognised that during the campaign, exploited it, and now as President, by a fair amount of what he does, but especially by what he says, I think worsens that drift into post-truthism.

EB: Haven't you just described a President who’s in tune with his people? Perhaps that intuition explains why he’s made much more progress with some of those entrenched political problems than leaders before him. You describe North Korea in your book as an ‘unsolvable problem,’ that has confounded previous US administrations. Aren’t you impressed by Donald Trump’s ability to bring King Jong-un to the table?

MH: Well, frankly Emma the answer is not yet. I mean, where we are now we have been before with North Korea. I wish the President well, and I wish him success, but my issue is the President seems to be making decisions based on something other than objective truth. Let me give you one specific example that I use in the book. It illustrates why I’m uncomfortable. He was being asked by an American newsman about the so-called Obama wire tapping of Trump Tower, and the newsman was pursuing him, almost stalking him. ‘What evidence do you have, what proof do you have?’ And finally the President, out of exasperation, simply says, ‘Look, a lot of people agree with me. People are saying – a lot of people are saying.’ To me that is a microcosm, a little morality play, for what’s happening in my country.
EB: But aren’t you generalising? Why would the President of South Korea say that Donald Trump should win the Nobel Peace Prize?
MH: Because the President of South Korea wants to avoid a war on the Korean Peninsula, and he’s fearful that American actions would kill both North and South Korea.

EB: A lot of people could say that President Trump is making progress where others haven’t.
MH: Well, again I’ve already said, not yet. Where we are now, alright, we have been before in two previous administrations and they’ve not led us to a happy ending. I wish the President well. I think it’s a tactical mistake to begin the negotiations at the head of state level, but we probably are going to do that and I hope it succeeds. And I hope I’m wrong but it doesn’t – that particular case – doesn’t undercut the broad approach to policy making which seems to be detached from an objective view of reality. We can talk about, for example, immigrants. We can talk about the Iranian nuclear deal. And in each case the President seemed to be making decisions other than on what his intelligence community and other fact-based institutions have been telling him.

EB: You called President Obama’s nuclear deal with Iran imperfect.
MH: I did.
EB: So why don’t you praise Donald Trump rather than criticising him for pulling out of it?
MH: Fair question. I had all my complaints about the deal – I felt we should have been tougher – but we do have a deal and now, let me tell you, not my view but the view of the current American intelligence community, President Trump’s intelligence community. Number one, the Iranians aren’t cheating on the deal. There have been no material breaches. Number two, with this imperfect deal the Iranians are further away from a weapon than
they would be without it. And number three, we know more about the Iranian programme with this deal than we would without this deal. We have parked the nuclear question at least temporarily, seven, eight, ten years. And so I don’t think particularly with everything else going on we need to rip that up.

EB: What about the development of ballistic missiles? It’s all very well saying we now know more, but what’s to stop Donald Trump getting a far greater and more encompassing deal?
MH: Well, number one, the objections of the Chancellor of Germany, the President of France, the Prime Minister of Great Britain. But beyond that those three heads of state – in the British case it was the Foreign Minister – came to the United States, suggested that they were moving in the direction of trying to get unified action against that particular problem, the ballistic missile testing on the part of the Iranians. Almost all of the American government advising the President, what I call the fact-based guys, were advising the President to give this more time so that we can work in unity with the Europeans, perhaps John Bolton disagreed with that, but everyone else it seems did agree. And the President, based on, you tell me – Instinct? Intuition? Campaign language? – ripped up the deal and here we are.

EB: But General Hayden, didn’t you pre-judge the commander-in-chief before he was even elected? In fact, you signed a letter alongside other senior security figures from past administrations saying he lacked the temperament to be President. You prejudged the man who’s now making progress, you could argue.
MH: I don’t think it’s prejudging. I watched what the candidates said during the campaign, and I was actually quite careful. What I said during the campaign is if the President governs in any way similar to the language the uses as a candidate, I think we all have a great deal to be concerned about. For example, he said as a candidate, a serious candidate to be the President of the United States, that it would be his intention to not just kill terrorists but
to kill terrorists’ families, but he would do far worse than waterboarding against captives because they deserve it. That NATO was a burden on the United States. That our alliance structure was a series of bad deals. This is not prejudgement, I listened to the man.

EB: And you say he’s doing harm. Could that be repaired by a future President?

MH: Well, I mean, look, all advantage in life is temporary, all disadvantage is transient, and so I do think there’s room for recovery. Let me give a specific example, Emma, because I think it brings together a bunch of threads that I’ve tossed out here. Shortly after becoming President, I think eight days into the administration, the President issued what looked to the world, and frankly to a lot of Americans, a Muslim ban. Limiting entry into this country from seven Muslim majority nations. Number one, it upset folks like me because it was not based on reality. It was based on rhetoric and fear. Number two, it was very harsh on the least fortunate people in the world. And number three, and this is the more important part, Emma – number three, by doing that the President actually made the United States less safe, because he lived the narrative of our enemies in the Islamic world, the ISIS and Al Qaeda supporters, that there is undying enmity between Islam and the west. That’s the kind of damage, Emma, that I’m suggesting that will be long lived. It will be subtle in its effect, but its effect will be real and we’ll be feeling those effects for a long time. And that’s the kind of thing that will be more difficult to undo.

EB: General Hayden, thank you very much for talking to me.

MH: Thank you.

(ends)