

# Keynote Address: Samuel W. Lewis Memorial Symposium

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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William J. Burns has served as deputy secretary of state since July 2011.



Brief Analysis

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## The deputy secretary of state speaks about Sam Lewis's diplomatic legacy and the lessons it holds for today's most pressing regional issues.

**T**he following is an excerpt from the deputy secretary's opening remarks. To read an edited transcript of his full remarks and the subsequent Q&A session with Ambassador Dennis Ross, download the PDF. Video of the rest of the symposium is also available, featuring *remarks by Elyakim Rubinstein, William Andreas Brown, Jessica Tuchman Matthews, and Paul Wolfowitz (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/2014-samuel-w.-lewis-memorial-symposium>)*.

"It's always an honor to be here at The Washington Institute but it's a special honor to be introduced by Dennis Ross, someone for whom I've had great respect over many years. I've learned an enormous amount from you about what it is to be a diplomat and what it is to pursue our country's interests and our country's values, and how to do it with integrity and decency. So thank you very, very much.

I'm also deeply honored to join all of you in celebrating the wonderful life and career of Sam Lewis, one of our country's most admired diplomats and peacemakers. From post-war Naples to the 1973 Afghanistan coup and from Camp David to Oslo, Sam lived a life of significance and adventure that most diplomats could only dream of. And with Sallie, he lived a life of friendship and romance that would make Woody Allen weep. His Texan charm, candor, courage, and common sense earned him the respect of countless leaders -- both abroad and here at home. He was as comfortable going jaw to jaw with counterparts in the negotiation room as he was going cheek to cheek with sharks on his many scuba dives off the coast of the Sinai. He was a man who didn't just know where he -- and the country he loved -- needed to go. He knew how to get there, how to lead, and how to get things done.

Sam once called the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel -- an historic achievement in which he played an indispensable part -- "a mountain peak in a sea of sand." The same could be said about Sam's own extraordinary career. Generations of American diplomats have tried to learn from his example, follow in his footsteps, and scale the diplomatic peaks he conquered so skillfully over the years. None of us have been terribly successful. But all of us

learned a great deal along the way -- about our profession, about the Middle East, and about the promise of American leadership.

Through Sam's remarkable journey and my own checkered thirty-three year career in the Foreign Service, I have learned that the Middle East is a place where pessimists seldom lack for either company or validation, where skeptics hardly ever seem wrong. It is a place where American policymakers often learn humility the hard way...a place where you can most easily see the wisdom in Winston Churchill's famous comment that what he liked most about Americans was that they usually did the right thing in the end; they just liked to exhaust all the alternatives first.

I've learned that stability is not a static phenomenon, and that regimes which do not offer their citizens a sense of political dignity and economic possibility ultimately become brittle and break. I've learned that change in the Middle East is rarely neat or linear, but often messy and cruel, and deeply unpredictable in its second and third order consequences. I've learned not to underestimate the depth of mistrust of American motives that animates so many people in the region, and I've learned that we often get far more credit than we deserve for complicated conspiracies. I've learned that, with all its stubborn dysfunction, the Middle East is a place where people and leaders are capable of great things...and that American diplomacy, with all of its own occasional dysfunction, can make a real and enduring difference.

During this incredible moment of testing in the region, we miss Sam's judgment and good counsel more than ever. If Sam were with us, I suspect he would be the first to say that we cannot afford to neglect what's at stake. And he would urge us not to neglect our responsibility to help shape, within the limits of our influence, the great generational struggle between moderation and extremism that is unfolding across the Middle East today..."

*The Samuel W. Lewis Memorial Symposium was supported by the Irwin Levy Family Program on the U.S.-Israel Strategic Relationship.* ❖

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