

Vice President Cheney:

Address to The Washington Institute's Weinberg Founders Conference

Oct 21, 2007



In-Depth Reports

On October 21, 2007, Vice President Richard Cheney delivered a special address to The Washington Institute's 2007 Weinberg Founders Conference. The following is a transcript of his remarks. The vice president was introduced by Institute Executive Committee member Roger Hertog.

Thank you very much, Roger. Thanks for the kind words, and thank all of you for the welcome this morning. I've been looking forward to have the opportunity to join the conference.

It's been my privilege, as Roger mentioned, over the years to address The Washington Institute a number of times. In fact, most of you knew me long before anyone called me, Darth Vader. I've been asked if that nickname bothers me, and the answer is, no. After all, Darth Vader is one of the nicer things I've been called recently.

All of us do know each other rather well, and I see some good friends in the audience. And I, in particular, want to thank your president, Howard Berkowitz, Chairman Fred Lafer, and Chairman Emeritus Mike Stein, and Vice President Wally Stern. I also want to thank Barbi Weinberg, who is not here but whose work has been invaluable. She has the respect of all of us.

I've gained much from the wisdom of many in the room today; people like Dennis Ross and, of course, Rob Satloff, as well as from the many other analysts who've been affiliated with The Washington Institute. I'm proud to say your former deputy director, John Hannah, is now my assistant for national security affairs. And you can't have him back yet. John and his staff are on duty night and day, and with his leadership, they're doing a tremendous job.

I'm pleased to be among the many participants in the conference, a group that includes your key noter, Walid Jumblatt, from Lebanon. I've met with Mr. Jumblatt on a number of occasions, and I admire the courageous stand he's taking for freedom and democracy in his home country.

This is a period of great consequence for the Middle East, and, as always, The Washington Institute, under Rob Satloff's leadership, is providing a forum for calm, nonpartisan, rigorous discussion. For twenty-two years, you've brought clear and careful thinking to bear on some of the most complex and vital issues of the age. You've provided a venue for many fine scholars, and you've hosted countless forums for the sharing of ideas and discussions. It's an enormously productive enterprise, and your work is more relevant and useful today than ever before. All of us respect The Washington Institute for its high standards of research, study and insight. And so, for both myself and for the president, I want to congratulate the men and women of the Institute on the exceptional work that you do each and every day.

You're focused on many of the same matters that make up a good deal of our time in the White House, starting with the intelligence briefing that I have with the president every morning. In nearly every category of national interest, what happens in the Middle East is of direct concern to the people of the United States. The region is home to important allies, valued friends and trading partners. Its resources and commercial routes are at the very heart of the global economy. Its history and its holy sites have deep meaning to hundreds of millions of people in many, many

countries. And, of course, across the broader Middle East -- from the Sinai Peninsula to the Arabian Sea, to the Iraqi desert, to the mountains of Afghanistan -- many thousands of our fellow Americans are on military deployments.

As a nation of influence and ideals, the United States has been engaged in the Middle East for generations. Our goal is peace among its many nations, and a lasting stability that benefits all the world. And the stability we seek is not the kind that simply keeps a lid on things. Real stability, long-term stability, depends on giving men and women the freedom to conduct their own affairs and to choose their own leaders. This, we believe, offers the only real chance of resolving the underlying problems of the region, and of lifting the hopes of all who live there. As President Bush has said, so long as the Middle East "remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment and violence ready for export."

The ideological struggle that's playing out in the Middle East today -- the struggle against radical extremists -- is going to concern America certainly for the remainder of our administration, and well into the future. On September 11, 2001, we suffered a heavy blow, right here at home, at the hands of extremists who plotted the attacks from an outpost thousands of miles from our shores. Since that terrible morning, Americans have properly called this a war. For their part, the terrorists agree. The difference is they began calling it a war a good many years prior to 9/11. And they've been waging that war with clear objectives, aggressive tactics, and a strategy they want to carry out at any cost.

They've stated their objectives. The terrorists want to end all American and Western influence in the Middle East. Their goal in that region is to seize control of a country so they have a base from which they can launch attacks and wage war against governments that do not meet their demands. Ultimately they seek to establish a totalitarian empire through the Middle East, and outward from there. They want to arm themselves with chemical, biological or nuclear weapons; they want to destroy Israel; they intimidate all Western countries; and to cause mass death here in the United States.

The tactics, of course, are familiar to all the world: suicide attacks, car bombs, beheadings, messages of violence and hatred on the Internet, and the hijackings of 9/11. And the strategy is clear, as well: Through acts of stealth and murder and spectacular violence, they intend to frighten us and to break our will; to hit us again and again until we run away. It's not easy for a civilized society to comprehend evil like that of Osama bin Laden or Zawahiri. It shocks us to hear such men exhorting other people's sons to "join a caravan" of so-called martyrs, proclaiming that heaven favors the merciless and murder is the path to paradise.

They've chosen this method because they believe it works, and they believe the history of the late twentieth century proves the point. During the 1980s and '90s, as terror networks began to wage attacks against Americans, we usually responded, if at all, with subpoenas, indictments, and the occasional cruise missile. As time passed, the terrorists believed they'd exposed a certain weakness and lack of confidence in the West, particularly in America.

Dr. Bernard Lewis explained the terrorists' reasoning this way: "During the Cold War," Dr. Lewis wrote, "two things came to be known and generally recognized in the Middle East concerning the two rival superpowers. If you did anything to annoy the Russians, punishment would be swift and dire. If you said or did anything against the Americans, not only would there be no punishment; there might even be some possibility of reward, as the usual anxious procession of diplomats and politicians, journalists and scholars and miscellaneous others came with their usual pleading inquiries: 'What have we done to offend you? What can we do to put it right?'" End quote.

Not surprisingly, the terrorists became more ambitious in their strikes against American interests, choosing ever bigger targets, racking up a higher body count. In Beirut in 1983, terrorists killed 241 of our servicemen. Thereafter, the U.S. withdrew from Beirut. In Mogadishu in 1993, terrorists killed 19 Americans, and thereafter, the U.S. withdrew its forces from Somalia. This emboldened them still further, confirming their belief that they could strike

America without paying a price, and more than that, they concluded that by violence they could even change American policy.

We had the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York in 1993; the attack on U.S. facilities in Riyadh in 1995; the murder of servicemen at Khobar Towers in 1996; the attack on our embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998; and, of course, the attack on the USS Cole in Yemen in 2000; ultimately, September 11 and the loss of nearly 3,000 lives inside the United States in the space of a few hours.

In a violent world, the safety of distance was suddenly gone. And with grave new dangers directly in view, the strategic situation changed fundamentally. From the morning of 9/11, we have assumed correctly that more strikes would be attempted against us. So we have made enormous changes to harden the target and to better prepare the nation to face this kind of emergency. We've reorganized the government to protect the homeland, and put good people in charge of big responsibilities. One of them is Judge Michael Mukasey, who presided over the trial of the blind sheikh and has a profound grasp on the work at hand. Judge Mukasey had his confirmation hearing this past week. He did a superb job. I believe he'll make an outstanding attorney general.

But we cannot protect the nation, much less win a war, by simply bracing for another attack or by seeking the guilty afterwards. The president made a decision to marshal all the elements of strategic power to confront the extremists, to deny them safe haven, and above all, to deny them the means to wage catastrophic attacks. We've also made clear that in the post-9/11 era, regimes that harbor terror and defy the demands of the civilized world should be held to account before it's too late.

One of the best weapons against terrorism is good intelligence, information that helps us figure out the movements of the enemy: the extent of the network, the location of their cells, the plans they're making, and the methods they use to hit the targets they want to hit. Information of this kind is the hardest to obtain, but it's worth the effort in terms of the plots averted and the lives that are saved. So our government has taken careful but urgent steps to monitor the communications of our enemies and to get information from the ones that are apprehended.

In the days following 9/11, the president authorized the National Security Agency to intercept terrorist-linked international communications that have one end in the United States and the other end overseas. This is the very kind of communication that was going on prior to the attack on America, and the 9/11 Commission was rightly critical of the government's inability to uncover links between terrorists at home and terrorists abroad. It's called connecting the dots, and in times like these, it's critical to protecting the American people.

The program has been falsely referred to as domestic surveillance. It is not domestic surveillance; it is international surveillance. It is limited in scope to surveillance associated with terrorists. It is carefully conducted. The information obtained is used strictly for national security purposes. It's been carried out with the utmost regard for the civil liberties of American citizens. Appropriate members of Congress have been briefed into the program from the very beginning. Indeed, I have personally conducted many of those briefings. This program has, without question, helped to detect and prevent possible terrorist attacks against the United States.

We're also asking Congress to update the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, or FISA. The law was written nearly thirty years ago, before the age of the Internet and disposable cell phones. Some read the law to require that legal protections meant only for people in the United States should now apply to terrorists overseas. That left a huge gap in the kinds of intelligence we could gather. We were missing a lot, so we asked Congress to fix the problem. Congress did the right thing, but they also wrote some fine print into that law. The FISA revisions they approved are set to expire on the first of February, some 103 days from now. We're asking Congress to renew the FISA revisions as soon as possible.

Members of Congress are also well aware that some companies are now facing multi-billion dollar lawsuits merely

because they are believed to have assisted in the effort to defend the United States after 9/11. We're asking Congress to grant liability protection to those companies. Without that protection, the lawsuits carry the risk of laying state secrets in front of our enemy. And that's not a risk we ought to be taking in the middle of a war.

It's worth remembering a few things that the president told Congress and the country in his speech on September 20th, 2001. He said, "The thousands of FBI agents now at work in this investigation may need your cooperation, and I ask you to give it." He asked Americans for patience in a long struggle. And he said the fight against terror would involve not one battle, but a lengthy campaign, including perhaps "dramatic strikes, visible on TV, and covert operations, secret because they're successful -- and secret even in success."

Most everyone understood this when the memory of 9/11 was still fresh. Most everyone understood that it would be a luxury and a fantasy to suppose that we could answer terrorism without going on the offensive against the terrorists themselves. Because we've been focused, because we've refused to let down our guard, we've gone now more than six years without another 9/11. No one can promise that there won't be another attack; the terrorists hit us first and they are hell-bent on doing it again.

We know this because of their public declarations and because of the intelligence we've gathered through monitoring and, yes, through interrogations. There's been a good deal of misinformation about the CIA detainee program, and unfair comments have been made about America's intentions and the conduct of America's intelligence officers. Many of the details are understandably classified. Yet the basic facts are these. A small number of high-value detainees have gone through the program run by the CIA. This is different from Guantanamo Bay, where select captured terrorists are sent and interrogated by the Department of Defense according to the Army Field Manual. The CIA program involves tougher customers and tougher interrogations.

The procedures are designed to be safe, legal, in full compliance with the nation's laws and our treaty obligations. They've been carefully reviewed by the Department of Justice. The program is run by highly trained professionals who understand their obligations under the law. And the program has uncovered a wealth of information that has foiled specific attacks, information that has on numerous occasions made the difference between life and death.

The United States is a country that takes human rights seriously. We do not torture. We're proud of our country and what it stands for. We expect all who serve America to conduct themselves with honor. And we enforce the rules. Several years ago, when abuses were committed at Abu Ghraib -- a facility having nothing to do with the high-value detainee program -- when those abuses came to light, Americans were mortified and rightly outraged. The wrongdoers were arrested, prosecuted and punished, as justice demanded. America is a fair and decent country, and President Bush has made it clear, both publicly and privately, that our duty to uphold the laws and standards of this nation admits no exceptions in wartime. As he put it, "We are in a fight for our principles, and our first responsibility is to live by them."

The war on terror is, after all, more than a contest of arms and more than a test of will. It is also a battle of ideas. To prevail in the long run, we have to remove the conditions that inspire such blind, prideful hatred that drove 19 men to get onto airliners to come kill us. Many have noted that we're in a struggle for the "hearts and minds" of people in a troubled region of the world. That is true and it should give us confidence. Outside a small and cruel circle, it's hard to imagine anybody being won over, intellectually or emotionally, by random violence, the beheading of bound men, children's television programs that exalt suicide bombing, and the desecration of mosques. The extremists in the Middle East are not really trying to win hearts and minds, but to paralyze them, to seize power by force, to keep power by intimidation, and to build an empire of fear.

We offer a nobler alternative. We know from history that when people live in freedom, have their rights respected and have real hope for the future, they will not be drawn in by ideologies that stir up hatreds and incite violence. We

know, as well, that when men and women are given the chance, most by far will choose to live in freedom. That's the cause we serve today in Afghanistan and Iraq -- helping the peoples of those two nations to achieve security, peace, and the right to chart their own destiny. Both peoples face attack from violent extremists who want to end democratic progress and pull them back toward tyranny. We are helping them fight back because it's the right thing to do, and because the outcome is important to our own long-term security.

When historians look back on the especially difficult struggle in Iraq, I think they'll regard recent events in Anbar province to have been deeply significant to the broader effort. Local residents and tribal leaders, Sunni Muslims, are rising up against al-Qaeda, sick of the violence and repulsed by the mindless brutality of al-Qaeda. Proud of their local traditions and culture, and serious about their Islamic faith, the people of Anbar now see al-Qaeda as the enemy, and they've worked with Iraq and American forces to drive the terrorists from their cities. It's still dangerous in the province. The terrorists recently killed one of the sheikhs who had been a leader in the fight against al-Qaeda. But that fight goes on, and America's support will not waver.

Our new offensive strategy in Iraq -- led by General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker and backed up by a surge in forces -- is producing good results. Even though we have more troops carrying out perilous missions, our casualty rates are down. Many al-Qaeda sanctuaries have been wiped out. Our military has seized the initiative, and conditions in the country are getting better.

President Bush has made clear that America's word is good, and our nation will do its part to keep Iraq on the road of freedom, security and progress. And we expect Iraq's national government to press much harder in the work of national reconciliation to match the kind of cooperation now taking place at local and provincial levels. We'll continue, as well, our intensive effort to train Iraqi security forces so that over time Iraqis can take the lead in protecting their own people. Progress has been uneven at times and the National Police especially need improvement. But Iraq's army is becoming more capable. And because there's now a greater degree of cooperation from local populations, Iraqi forces are better able to keep the peace in areas that have been cleared of extremists.

We have no illusions about the road ahead. As Fouad Ajami said recently, Iraq is not yet "a country at peace, and all its furies have not burned out, but a measure of order has begun to stick on the ground." Iraq won't become a perfect democracy overnight, but success will have an enormous positive impact on the future of the Middle East, and will have a direct effect on our own security, as well. The only illusion to guard against is the notion that we don't have to care about what happens in that part of the world, or to think that when we took down Saddam Hussein our job was done.

America has no intention of abandoning our friends, of permitting the overthrow of a democracy, and allowing a country of 170,000 square miles to become a staging area for further attacks against us. Tyranny in Iraq was worth defeating, and democracy in Iraq is worth defending. We're going to complete the mission so that another generation of Americans doesn't have to go back and do it again.

Success in Iraq will confirm our good intentions in the Middle East more than words alone ever could. Especially in a region of such great strategic importance and so many dashed hopes, commitments are credible only if they're backed up by deeds. The United States, and certainly this administration, has shown a willingness not just to proclaim great objectives, but to work and sacrifice to achieve them.

George W. Bush is the first president to call for a two-state solution, with Israel and Palestine living side by side in peace and security. He has announced a meeting to be held in Annapolis later this year to review the progress towards building Palestinian institutions, to seek innovative ways to support further reform, to provide diplomatic support to the parties, so that we can move forward on the path to a Palestinian state. Secretary Rice just made her most recent journey to the Middle East to lay the groundwork to support movement toward the establishment of such

a state.

We are, of course, hopeful and greatly concerned about the future of Lebanon, which will elect a president in coming weeks. The United States supports the democratic aspirations of the Lebanese people, and we have done so through difficult years of the Cedar Revolution. Lebanon has shaken off years of Syrian occupation, and many courageous democracy advocates have stepped forward at great personal risk. Through bribery and intimidation, Syria and its agents are attempting to prevent the democratic majority in Lebanon from electing a truly independent president.

Lebanon has the right to conduct the upcoming elections free of any foreign interference. The United States will work with free Lebanon's other friends and allies to preserve Lebanon's hard-won independence, and to defeat the forces of extremism and terror that threaten not only that region, but U.S. countries [sic] across the wider region.

Across the Middle East, further progress will depend on responsible conduct by regional governments; respect for the sovereignty of neighbors; compliance with international agreements; peaceful words, and peaceful actions. And if you apply all these measures, it becomes immediately clear that the government of Iran falls far short, and is a growing obstacle to peace in the Middle East.

Given the recent appearance by the Iranian president in New York City, no one can fail to understand the nature of the regime this man represents. He has called repeatedly for the destruction of Israel; has spoken of his yearning for a world without the United States. Under their current rulers, the people of Iran live in a climate of fear and intimidation, with secret police, arbitrary detentions, and a hint of violence in the air. In the space of a generation, the regime has solidified its grip on the country and grown ever more arrogant and brutal toward the Iranian people. Journalists are intimidated. Religious minorities are persecuted. A good many dissidents and freedom advocates have been murdered, or have simply disappeared. Visiting scholars who've done nothing wrong have been seized and jailed.

This same regime that approved of hostage-taking in 1979, that attacked Saudi and Kuwaiti shipping in the 1980s, that incited suicide bombings and jihadism in the 1990s and beyond, is now the world's most active state sponsor of terror. As to its next-door neighbor, Iraq, the Iranian government claims to be a friend that supports regional stability. In fact, it is a force for the opposite. As General Petraeus has noted, Iran's Quds Force is trying to set up a "Hezbollah-like force to serve its interests and to fight a proxy war against the Iraqi state and coalition forces in Iraq." At the same time, Iran is "responsible for providing the weapons, the training, the funding and, in some cases, the direction for operations that have indeed killed U.S. soldiers."

Operating largely in the shadows, Iran attempts to hide its hands through the use of militants who target and kill coalition and Iraqi security forces. Iran's real agenda appears to include promoting violence against the coalition. Fearful of a strong, independent, Arab Shia community emerging in Iraq, one that seeks religious guidance not in Qom, Iran, but from traditional sources of Shia authority in Najaf and Karbala, the Iranian regime also aims to keep Iraq in a state of weakness that prevents Baghdad from presenting a threat to Tehran.

Perhaps the greatest strategic threat that Iraq's Shiites face today in -- is -- in consolidating their rightful role in Iraq's new democracy is the subversive activities of the Iranian regime. The Quds Force, a branch of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, is the defender of the theocracy. The regime has used the Quds Force to provide weapons, money, and training to terrorists and Islamic militant groups abroad, including Hamas; Palestinian Islamic Jihad; militants in the Balkans; the Taliban and other anti-Afghanistan militants; and Hezbollah terrorists trying to destabilize Lebanon's democratic government.

The Iranian regime's efforts to destabilize the Middle East and to gain hegemonic power is a matter of record. And now, of course, we have the inescapable reality of Iran's nuclear program; a program they claim is strictly for energy purposes, but which they have worked hard to conceal; a program carried out in complete defiance of the

international community and resolutions of the U.N. Security Council. Iran is pursuing technology that could be used to develop nuclear weapons. The world knows this. The Security Council has twice imposed sanctions on Iran and called on the regime to cease enriching uranium. Yet the regime continues to do so, and continues to practice delay and deception in an obvious attempt to buy time.

Given the nature of Iran's rulers, the declarations of the Iranian president, and the trouble the regime is causing throughout the region -- including direct involvement in the killing of Americans -- our country and the entire international community cannot stand by as a terror-supporting state fulfills its most aggressive ambitions.

The Iranian regime needs to know that if it stays on its present course, the international community is prepared to impose serious consequences. The United States joins other nations in sending a clear message: We will not allow Iran to have a nuclear weapon.

The irresponsible conduct of the ruling elite in Tehran is a tragedy for all Iranians. The regime has passed up numerous opportunities to be a positive force in the Middle East. For more than a generation, it had only isolated a great nation, suppressed a great people, and subjected them to economic hardship that gets worse every year. The citizens of Iran deserve none of this. They are the proud heirs of a culture of learning, humanity and beauty that reaches back many centuries. Iranian civilization has produced shining achievements, from the Persian Book of Kings, to the poetry of Rumi and Khayyam, to celebrated achievements in astronomy and mathematics, to art and music admired on every continent. The Iran of today -- a nation of 70 million, a majority of them under the age of 30 -- is a place of unlimited potential. And the Iranian people have every right to be free from oppression, from economic deprivation, and tyranny in their own country.

The spirit of freedom is stirring in Iran. The voices of change and peaceful dissent will not be silent. We can expect to hear more from the courageous reformers, the bloggers, and the advocates of rights for women and ethnic and religious minorities, because these men and women are more loyal to their country than to the regime. Despite the regime's anti-American propaganda, the Iranian people can know that America respects them, cares about their troubles, and stands firmly on the side of liberty, human dignity and individual rights. America looks forward to the day when Iranians reclaim their destiny; the day that our two countries, as free and democratic nations, can be the closest of friends.

It's been given to us, ladies and gentlemen, to live in an era crowded with decisive events, and we've had to face challenges that no generation would choose for itself. All of you know those challenges better than most, and you've devoted time, energy and intellect to the great issues confronting the Middle East today. In all your discussions, and in all that lies ahead, you can be certain that our country will stay engaged in the Middle East, making the hard choices and providing the kind of leadership that makes this world a better place. We accept that responsibility for the sake of our own security and in service to our founding ideals. And as long as America continues to lead -- steady in the face of the adversaries and firm in the defense of freedom -- this young century will be a time of rising hopes, and of advancing peace.

Thank you very much. ❖

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