

America and the Middle East: Meeting the Challenge (full transcript)

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In-Depth Reports

Thank you all for your warm welcome. I'm grateful for the invitation to be here and that introduction. And I wanted to be here tonight. I flew from New Hampshire a little bit earlier. I have a personal appreciation for the work that you've done and for the work that this Institute has done. And you and Larry are wonderful friends and I wanted to join your friends and family in honoring you.

When we first met you only had one grandchild; now you have twelve. And I didn't have any, and now I have one. (Laughter.) Thank you very much. My grandson was born on the Fourth of July. He's a Democrat. (Laughter.) How many other grandparents are here, just for the record? Could I see a -- thank you. If you have advice afterwards, I'm open to suggestions. What I've learned so far is that evidently the preferred technique is just to give that grandchild whatever he wants, and if that causes any problems, give him back to his parents. (Laughter.)

Barbi, your work at The Washington Institute truly has been an inspiration, and I want to say just a few words about that in a moment, but first I want to also acknowledge another great alumnus of the Washington Institute, Assistant Secretary of State Martin Indyk, who will be returning to Israel as United States ambassador, and I congratulate you on that, Martin.

(Applause.)

I want to acknowledge former Congressman Mel Levine. There are a lot of dignitaries here, and I haven't had a chance to look around to see everybody who is here. (Applause.) Ambassador and Mrs. Shoval, thank you very much for joining us. I know that there are other members of the diplomatic corps here as well.

I'm delighted to have a chance to speak to you this evening, not only to honor Barbi, but to speak briefly at a critical juncture for the Middle East and for U.S. foreign policy, and to talk about the importance of vigorous American engagement in the world. Our engagement in the world has a huge impact on the peace and prosperity of the Middle East, and a huge impact on every part of the world. And, of course, in honoring the work of Barbi Weinberg, we honor the work of so many of you who have joined together to try to focus on the Middle East in a constructive way.

On behalf of all who have benefited from this work, I do thank you, Barbi. You believed that by creating a center that would draw scholarship and analysis and good research to Washington, you could make a positive impact on U.S. Policy, and improve chances for true peace and security in the Middle East.

And if I remember correctly, the attitude of the establishment back then was, shall we say, politely skeptical, and some of those in the film recapitulated the sentiments of that time.

But fifteen years later, Barbi, we are here to honor you for your role in the birth and growth of Washington's most-respected center for studies on the Middle East. You have helped to articulate a compelling vision for the U.S.-Israel strategic partnership. You have informed the thinking of experts. You have created a training ground for top policymakers.

And so I do honor you for the achievement of a lifetime. And on a personal basis, I just want to say you have done what you've set out to do, my friend. Congratulations. It's a wonderful achievement.

(Applause.)

It's the right time to gather and honor the work of the Washington Institute, in part because America desperately needs to be reminded that our national security depends on America's wise and well-informed action in the world.

And I've got a few words to say here tonight that may not be welcome by everybody in the audience, but I want to say them. There is now a deeply worrisome isolationism that seems to be creeping beyond its natural habitat among right-wing partisans. And they say, "Leave us alone." At least, that's what they seem to say. They seem to believe that what happens "over there" really doesn't matter, and we can't do anything about it anyway.

That is the isolationists' creed. It was folly in the 1920s. It was a deep tragedy as Hitler rose in the '30s. Indeed, we all recall that even after Hitler had begun his march, the draft was renewed by a single vote margin in the House of Representatives. So the sentiments have a deep course in American culture and history.

But we have the capacity to rise above our limitations and shortcomings and see clearly the challenges that we face today. And today isolationism runs counter to our national interests, contradicts our core values, and poses great dangers to our friends and allies around the world. It is the wrong direction for America. Deeply wrong.

It reminds me a little bit of the gentleman who -- elderly gentleman who had a specific health problem that made his wife worry that he ought to quit driving. Maybe you know somebody like this. I do. But she tried to get him to quit driving, but he wouldn't. And one day he took the keys and took the car out toward the interstate, and she was so worried she just sat there by the radio. And after a while she called him on his car phone and she said, "Honey, please be careful; I just heard a bulletin that there's somebody driving the wrong way on the interstate." And he said, "There's not just one; there's hundreds of them out here." (Laughter.)

Now, last week in a vote marred by political spite, the Senate Republicans ignored bipartisan appeals to national security and made the United States of America the only nation in the world to vote down the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. They started a fire of political partisanship that they found they could not put out, and thus left the fate of a crucial international treaty in the hands of those who would play politics with nuclear weapons.

Perhaps there can be honest disagreements over the merits of the treaty -- I happen to think it was a pretty strong case -- but whatever your opinion on the merits, I don't believe there can be any nonpartisan approval of the way it was voted down, because it was done without any sense of the weight or consequence that attaches to America's actions in the world. There were no serious hearings. There were no serious explorations of what was at stake. It was really contrary to the finest traditions of our country.

I say this looking out here at friends like Max Kampelman and Bud McFarlane and remembering days during the Reagan administration, when as a Democratic member of the House of Representatives, and then a Democratic member of the United States Senate, I worked hard to cultivate Democratic support for a bipartisan approach to nuclear arms control. I went to Geneva countless times. And many of us in both parties held up the American standard that Vandenberg and Truman -- and President Truman had exemplified after World War II, and tried to follow in their mold in building a bipartisan commitment to doing the right thing for our country.

There's never been a treaty handled the way this one was handled, and I think that it is worthy of very serious sustained thought, because we've got to do something about it. Especially when during that same week, the Congress sent to the president a Foreign Operations Bill that cut \$2.2 billion from his budget request, slashing funds for counterterrorism, for nonproliferation, for peacekeeping, for debt relief, for development banks, for international assistance, and for advancing peace in the Middle East.

We're about to lose our vote in the United Nations because they won't fund the payment of our arrears or our dues to the United Nations.

Hello? There's a world out there.

You know, when I came back from Vietnam as a young man, I was disillusioned. I had watched my father, a Democratic senator, be defeated after standing on principle. He was for civil rights, and he was against the Vietnam War. I had seen the pressures the Vietnam War had placed on our country, tearing it apart. I had watched Watergate unfold. I thought politics would be the last thing I ever did with my entire life. I wanted nothing to do with it. I was a journalist for seven years. I asked my editors not to assign me to any stories that had anything to do with politics.

Slowly, when I got some promotions and worked as a city editor, I began to see firsthand the connection between the way people got involved and engaged in the work of the community and made tough decisions that made all the difference in whether or not pregnant women had prenatal care, whether poor families had housing, whether women could walk down the street without fear. And I felt myself drawn back toward public service. And that's why I eventually ran for Congress.

I think that that disillusionment that I felt as a young person, borne of the bitter experiences that I had in coming into contact with political decision making, is similar in some ways to this new isolationist feeling. I think that there is a tendency to just instinctively pull back from the world, go it alone, don't get engaged, pretend that we don't have to live in the world. But it is a dangerous illusion, and it must be rejected.

To entangle this issue in politics after refusing to finance counterterrorism and nonproliferation and these other things, the chair of the House Foreign Operations Subcommittee fabricated a fictitious competition for the funding when he said, and I quote, "We will not raid social security, nor will we agree to raise taxes to pay for increased foreign aid spending." End quote. That's a false choice, squared.

Where does that kind of analysis lead? Where does that kind of politics lead for our country?

Moreover, they seem to have no grasp of the benefits bought with these investments. The sum of their comments, criticisms, and funding cuts do not cohere into anything that could be called an approach or much less a policy. They ridicule U.S. involvement in peacekeeping efforts, but they cut funding to build other nation's peacekeeping efforts.

They decry the dangers of proliferation, but slash funding to fight nuclear smuggling.

They're concerned about the threat of nuclear missiles, but they cut funds to dismantle the nuclear weapons in Russia.

They claim we overuse the military and then they underfund our diplomacy.

They say they want peace in the Middle East but will not fund our commitment to support the Wye agreements.

They would renege on a longstanding promise made by America to stand by the Israelis and Palestinians as they take steps toward peace.

I will do what I can to lead the attack against this go-it-alone, isolationist nonsense. I will take the argument to the American people that diplomacy is the first and best defense of our national security. I will work to renew the American mandate for active engagement in foreign affairs, a clear commitment to peace in the Middle East and full funding for the Wye agreement.

Every American president since the founding of Israel has seen the security of Israel as a key national security interest of the United States. And, since the 1970s, America's been an active and committed sponsor of the peace process, and this must continue.

I was privileged to meet several times in July with Prime Minister Barak. I had the privilege of speaking with him

about what he called "an historic opportunity for peace." For my part I assured him that, of course, we will continue to stand by Israel as it takes risks for peace. I assured him we will continue to help ensure that Israel maintains the qualitative military edge that is essential to its security.

The goal of a permanent status agreement by September 13, 2000, seven years to the day since the historic signing on the White House lawn, is, of course, an ambitious one. Having met with the prime minister and with Chairman Arafat, I believe their commitment makes it a realistic one. This is an agreement that will not and cannot be made in America. But rest assured, the United States will be there every step of the way to support this goal, to facilitate progress by the parties, and to assist the Syria and Lebanon tracks as well, so all parties can achieve a comprehensive peace in the new millennium.

Should the coming year bring peace agreements among the parties, it will be a tribute to their remarkable courage and determination.

But we should all lift up our eyes and recognize that, as triumphant as this would be, peace will take hold only after all of us, Arabs, Israelis, Americans, and others who are willing to join us, prove together that peace is not just a noble sentiment of saints and songwriters, but a way of life that is better and safer and fuller for all of the families of the Middle East.

So we can't stop once agreements are signed. We must be ready to move on with the rest of the agenda for making the Middle East a more stable, secure and prosperous region.

The Middle East faces four sets of core challenges that go beyond the issues in the Arab-Israeli peace process and will shape this region as we look beyond the year 2000. Since this is the focus of your conference, before I close I want to briefly share a vision of my vision of the region's longer-term agenda.

First are security concerns. The United States must continue to maintain a strong military presence in the region to help deter aggression and defend our friends and allies. We must keep our word. We must stand by our commitments. This is not charity; it is national security.

One of the region's premier threats comes from Saddam Husayn's Iraq. The United States is committed to getting rid of Saddam Husayn and, in the interim, blocking his efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction. Here again I was honored to help build a bipartisan base of support during the Bush administration for the policy that I felt was wise against Iraq. We are determined to continue sanctions against Baghdad until it meets its commitments to the international community, and at the same time we will continue to support UN-supervised humanitarian aid for the Iraqi people, even as Saddam continues to hinder the program and cynically deprive his people of its full benefits. That's just one more reason why we support the Iraqi opposition, and will work with them toward the day where Iraq has a government that is worthy of its people and trusted by its neighbors.

We also, of course, remain deeply concerned with Iran's policies in the region. The pressures for liberalization within Iran have been growing stronger, and yet we still see the repressive arm of fundamentalist rule as used against Iranian students last summer, and in the case of the thirteen Iranian Jews falsely arrested on trumped-up charges. In the area of weapons of mass destruction and terrorism and opposition to the peace process, we have seen no real change. And if Iran wants to build the international ties that can help expand its economy and improve its security, it must be a force for peace and not a source of terror. And it still is.

Meanwhile I have repeatedly pressed the issue of Russian weapons of mass destruction transfers to Iran with every prime minister from Chernomyrdin to Putin, and there have been a bunch of them. And with the latest one I've already addressed this matter. We will continue to make this urgent issue one of the key priorities of our bilateral relations.

We also have the opportunity and obligation to foster greater regional antiterrorist activities. There have been some important steps, including the regional antiterrorism summit in Sharm al-Shaykh. But we need to do more together to isolate any nation or group that does not renounce and reject terror.

Realism not only demands vigilance against such threats, it also demands that we recognize and seize new opportunities for security cooperation. This is the reason behind the multilateral arms control and regional security track of the peace process. This represents a regionwide opportunity for confidence-building measures, arms control, and other areas of shared interests. While official talks have been inactive for the past few years, significant progress was made earlier on, and I think the time is right to reenergize such efforts.

Security is an essential first step, but peace will not last without an improvement in prosperity. And that's why the second priority of the Middle East agenda is economic growth and opportunity. We seek to help the Middle East become more fully integrated into the global economy. We seek a Middle East where every child will have enough to eat, where the new generation of Arab youth will have more and better job opportunities, where more and more families at all levels of society can share in the global prosperity.

Clearly, we need to work harder to invigorate economic growth. We can all remember the great enthusiasm surrounding the first economic summit in Casablanca in 1994. Our then-ambassador to Morocco, Marc Ginsberg, who played such a key role in the success of that summit, is here tonight. The high hopes that came from the success of that summit have unfortunately not been fulfilled. We need to resume these efforts, expanding the private sector involvement and relying on the economic interests of business to drive the process forward.

At the same time, we have to encourage greater domestic efforts toward economic reform, as President Mubarak and I have done in our U.S.-Egypt Binational Commission. Egypt has made tremendous progress in taking down the political and bureaucratic barriers to trade and investment, and its people already have begun to reap the benefits. It's been a privilege to work very hard with President Mubarak on these reforms inside Egypt.

Progress of this sort, leading to greater economic growth, is essential for regional security. Broad-based prosperity is the world's best protector of peace.

A third essential ingredient for long-term peace is cooperation on water and the environment. Historically, water has often been a source of conflict. We must work to make it a fountain of peace.

While water is not the only issue on which Turkey must play a key role, water definitely is an issue on which Turkey's role is key. Ten years ago it was unusual for policymakers to acknowledge that the environment is a national security issue. Today the world is beginning to understand that a healthy environment is essential to a higher quality of life, sound economic growth, and long-term security.

We will continue our efforts to work with all countries of the Middle East to cooperate on this essential cornerstone of peace, and water, especially because of the continuing long-term drought, is a critical issue in Israel right now.

Fourth, as we expand the circle of peace we need to deepen it as well. Our efforts to enhance security and promote prosperity must also emphasize the importance of people-to-people contacts. Positive personal relationships can destroy negative stereotypes, accelerate joint projects, and help build a culture of peace. And they need to be backed up by a systematic effort to encourage a climate of tolerance and mutual respect in the media and the schools.

What we need is going to take time. I like to cite the example of Seeds of Peace. Some of you may know about this small program that brings together young Jewish and Arab teens from the Middle East to break down old barriers and stereotypes, all in the name of ushering in a new era of peace, beginning with the new generation of peacemakers.

Seeds of Peace faced a crisis in July of 1997, when students had gathered in Maine for a retreat and news came that

suicide bombers from Hamas had killed thirteen Israelis and injured scores more at a vegetable market in Jerusalem. Most here remember vividly that terrible news and the tragedy it described.

The students, upon hearing the news, instinctively separated themselves into groups, Arabs apart from Israelis. After a time, slowly, guardedly and with careful guidance, Israelis and Palestinians began again to talk to one another. One Israeli said to the Palestinians, "We do not hold a grudge against any one of you." A Palestinian responded, "We are sorry for what happened."

Later the entire Palestinian delegation joined together and denounced terrorism. The young Israelis shed tears of grief. The young Palestinians shed tears of compassion.

A potentially polarizing event became, for these young people, a unifying event, building a bridge instead of a wall.

For more than twenty years I have worked for security and prosperity in the Middle East. I stood up for peace whenever possible. I have always stood for the use of force when necessary. While we have achieved much, our mission is far from complete. The next century must see a strong, stable and secure peace in a region that has known too much war and human suffering.

That means the next century must see an America willing to lead in the world, an America capable of bridging the partisan divides and holding up the values that bind us together -- values that must be asserted in a world that looks to the United States for leadership.

An America unsure of itself, withdrawn from the world, entangled in politics, unwilling to bear any burden at all or pay any price at all to promote security and prosperity would endanger our friends and allies abroad and undercut our security and prosperity at home. But a strong and prosperous America, conscious of its power, confident of our mission, and agile in the pursuit of our interests, can make a decisive difference in the spread of peace and prosperity at home and around the world. Everyone here understands that. You are supporting The Washington Institute, after all. Our work is to make sure that everyone not here understands that. With your continuing guidance and enduring assistance, we will still do great good for the world.

Thank you. Thank you for being here.

(Applause.) ❖

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