

America and the Middle East:

Meeting the Challenge

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In-Depth Reports

This is a critical juncture for the Middle East and for U.S. foreign policy, and vigorous American engagement in the world is key. Our engagement has a huge impact on the peace and prosperity of the Middle East, and a huge impact on every part of the world.

Not everyone will welcome what I have to say, but I will say it nonetheless. There is now a deeply worrisome isolationism that seems to be creeping beyond its natural habitat among right-wing partisans. And those isolationists are saying, "Leave us alone." At least, that is what they seem to say. They seem to believe that what happens "over there" does not really matter, and that we cannot do anything about it anyway.

That is the isolationists' creed. It was folly in the 1920s. It was a deep tragedy as Adolf Hitler rose in the 1930s. Indeed, we all recall that even after Hitler had begun his march, the draft was renewed by only a single vote margin in the House of Representatives. So the sentiments of isolationism run deep 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. 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.

In a recent 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 do not 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.

During the Reagan administration, I worked hard to cultivate Democratic support for a bipartisan approach to nuclear arms control, first as a Democratic member of the House of Representatives and then as a Democratic member of the United States Senate. I went to Geneva countless times. Many of us in both parties held up the American standard that Senator Arthur Vandenberg and President Truman had exemplified after World War II, and we tried to follow in their mold in building a bipartisan commitment to doing the right thing for our country.

Never has a treaty been handled the way this one was handled, and that is worthy of very serious sustained thought, because we have to do something about it. During the same week as that vote, 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 are about to lose our vote in the United Nations because Congress will not

fund the payment of our arrears or our dues to the UN.

Hello? There is a world out there.

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 supported 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 pregnant women had prenatal care, whether poor families had housing, and whether women could walk down the street without fear. And I felt myself drawn back toward public service. And that is why I eventually ran for Congress.

The disillusionment that I felt as a young person, born 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. There is an instinctive tendency to pull back from the world, go it alone, not get engaged, pretend that we do not have to lead 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 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." That is a false choice, squared. Where does that kind of analysis lead? Where does that kind of politics lead our country?

The isolationists in Congress 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, much less a policy. They ridicule U.S. involvement in peacekeeping efforts, but they cut funding to build other nations' peacekeeping efforts. They decry the dangers of proliferation but slash funding to fight nuclear smuggling. They are 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. Since the 1970s, America has 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 Ehud 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, the United States 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 after the historic signing on

the White House lawn, is, of course, an ambitious one. But having met with Prime Minister Barak and with Palestinian Authority chairman Yasir 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. We cannot 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 beyond the year 2000.

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 and, in the interim, to blocking his efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction. I was honored to help build a bipartisan base of support during the Bush administration for the policy against Iraq that I felt was wise. 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 is just one more reason why we support the Iraqi opposition and will work with them toward the day when Iraq has a government that is worthy of its people and trusted by its neighbors.

We also, of course, remain deeply concerned about 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, terrorism, and opposition to the peace process, we have seen no real change. 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 the source of terror that it still is. Meanwhile, I have repeatedly pressed the issue of Russian weapons of mass destruction transfers to Iran with every prime minister from Viktor Chernomyrdin to Vladimir Putin, and there have been a bunch of them. With the latest one I have 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 is why the

second priority of the Middle East agenda is economic growth and opportunity. The United States seeks 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. But the high hopes that came from the success of that summit have unfortunately not been fulfilled. We need to resume these efforts, expanding 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 Hosni 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 has 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, it 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 crucial 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 to build a culture of peace. These contacts 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 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. 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 to talk to one another again. 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. Although 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 take the 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 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 its mission, and agile in the pursuit of its interests, can make a decisive difference in the spread of peace and prosperity at home and around the world. ❖

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