
Building Peace in the Middle East

By

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Thank you, Les Gelb. The Council on Foreign Relations is very fortunate to have Les Gelb as its new President. As many of you know, I had the pleasure of working with Les during our last tour in government. He is one of the nation's leading foreign policy thinkers and writers. His advice is valued here and around the world.

Thank you, also, President Rupp, for co-sponsoring our get-together today in this elegant setting. Columbia University is one of this country's oldest and most prestigious institutions of learning. From the schoolroom on Lower Broadway where Samuel Johnson taught eight students in 1754, to this magnificent campus on Morningside Heights, Columbia has represented the spirit of inquiry and intellectual freedom that has made America strong.

Columbia has certainly contributed to the strength of the State Department. Two of our [present] Under Secretaries, Joan Spero and Lynn Davis, have studied here and taught here. They carry on Columbia's great tradition of sending women and men into public life with an international outlook.

My visit here today is one of several I have made and plan to make around the country to talk about our foreign policy. I believe that Secretaries of State should spend more time explaining foreign policy to the audience that really counts—the American people.

A week ago, from a small platform on the south lawn of the White House, the world took a very big step toward a more peaceful future. That simple handshake between implacable foes extends a might redemptive power that can help heal the wounds of this too-often-violent century.

Like the collapse of communism before it, the beginning of the historic reconciliation between the Israelis and the Palestinians conforms our belief that hope can eventually replace despair, cooperation can overcome conflict, and peace and freedom can triumph over war and tyranny.

Today, I will share with you my thoughts on last week's historic developments in the Arab-Israeli peace process. I will place the events of last Monday in historical context and describe to you the steps we must take to ensure that this chance for peace does not slip from our grasp.

For more than 45 years, Democratic and Republican Administrations have worked tirelessly to break the cycle of violence between Israel and its Arab neighbors. They did so because they understood that the United States has enduring interests in this historic and strategic crossroads; enduring interests in a region where conflict always threatens world peace; enduring interests in the security and well-being of Israel and in cooperative relations with the Arab world; and enduring interests in the region's oil reserves which serve as the lifeblood of much of the global economy.

These enduring interests have made Middle East peace a constant and essential goal of U.S. foreign policy. For decades, the goal eluded us. The region remained a tinderbox, threatening to embroil us in its deadly wars. This volatility was due in no small part to the existence of a Soviet Union determined to fuel the forces of radicalism and conflict. While the Soviets by no means caused the Arab-Israeli dispute, they did everything in their power to see that the region remained at a constant boil. Their policies emboldened radicals, intimidated moderates, and left Israel—save for its friendship with the United States—in a lonely state of siege.

Throughout the long struggle of the Cold War, only one Arab country—Egypt—managed to breach the wall that Moscow had helped to erect. Egypt braved ostracism to make peace with Israel. For fourteen long years that heroic achievement has held strong. It also stood alone—until last Monday. The Israeli-Palestinian agreement—in which Egypt's President Mubarak played a critical role—is a powerful vindication of that nation's courage and vision.

It was not until the Cold War began to wane that new opportunities arose to combat rejectionism and promote peace. This was most dramatically demonstrated during the Gulf War. With the United States and the Soviet Union working together, Saddam Hussein's radical challenge was decisively turned back. Without Moscow's patronage, Saddam's "war option" proved to be no option at all. America's overwhelming display of power, principle, and leadership helped to tip the Middle East's balance of power toward moderation and toward an opportunity for reconciliation.

Had we let it rest there—had we left to others the job of turning opportunity into reality—last Monday's dramatic event might never have taken place. Only America could have provided Arabs and Israelis the assurances they needed to go to Madrid and risk breaking the taboo on direct negotiations.

Upon his election, President Clinton immediately reaffirmed America's historic role and enduring strategic interest in Arab-Israeli peace. He saw the opportunity for an historic breakthrough. On the morning after the election, he vowed to make the pursuit of Middle East peace a top priority. That is why he moved so quickly to gain the trust of key regional parties and to reaffirm America's unstinting support for Israel's security. And that is why, for my first official trip abroad, he sent me to the Middle East. His message was clear: the United States was irrevocably committed to advancing the peacemaking process; to reinvigorating the negotiations; and to elevating America's role to that of full partner.

The President's effort built upon the hard work of his predecessors. Our victories in the Cold War and in the Gulf created an environment in which peacemaking became possible. Our intervention at key moments this year, to resolve crises over Palestinian deportees and over violence in Lebanon, salvaged the peace process when it teetered on the brink of collapse. Throughout the last 22 months, under both Republican and Democratic Presidents, America's sustained political involvement—whether in presenting a draft declaration of principles or in constantly pushing to define the parameters of the possible—set the stage for decision-making in the secret Oslo channel, for which we owe so much to the Norwegians.

In the end, of course, last Monday's triumph belongs to the parties themselves—to the Israeli and the Palestinian people—who reached out to each other. And that is as it should be. Indeed, the basic premise of the Madrid process has been that face-to-face negotiation between the parties is essential. From the beginning, the United States has encouraged communication in as many different channels as possible—both formal and informal, public and private—with the understanding that the most durable solution would be one forged in direct negotiation.

It would be a great mistake if America were now to withdraw or shrink from its full and long-standing partnership in the peace process. Our leadership is essential if this historic agreement is to realize full potential. Today, on behalf of President Clinton, I announce our intention to lead a wide-ranging effort not simply to give peace a chance, but to ensure that it will not fail. Just as the United States organized a successful international coalition to wage war in the Gulf, we will now organize a new coalition—a coalition to breath life into the Israeli-Palestinian Declaration.

As a first step, the United States will convene a Conference to Support Middle East Peace, building on the Madrid framework. Secretary Bentsen and I, together with our Russian counterparts, will invite foreign and finance ministers representing the Europeans, Japan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, Canada, the Nordic countries, and others—and, of course, the Israelis and the Palestinians. The World Bank will also be present, and it will pay a major role in coordinating and providing assistance.

The purpose of this conference will be to mobilize resources needed to make the agreement work. The international community must move immediately to see that the agreement produces tangible improvements in the security and daily lives of Palestinians and Israelis. If peace is to be achieved, the agreement must be translated into results quickly and vividly.

There are varying estimates of the resources required to start building an economic base in Gaza and the West Bank. The Bank's initial estimate is that at least 3 billion dollars will be needed over the next ten years. An important portion of this sum will be needed for a quick start effort over the next year. All agree that we must take immediate steps to address the high rate of unemployment that robs families of hope and fuels extremism. Housing, roads, and other permanent improvements must be developed quickly. We must also act now to improve assistance in public administration, tax collection, and social services.

Given the number and commitment of our international partners, we are confident these needs can be met. And we will stimulate these supporters by our own example. Working with the Congress, we expect to assemble an initial two-year package worth 250 million dollars.

In this vital effort, we must also involve the private sector. A significant part of the initial U.S. package will include OPIC loans and guarantees to spur private sector involvement and economic growth.

There is another resource that America can and should provide. At the White House last Monday, immediately after the signing ceremony, the President, the Vice President and I met with a group of Jewish and Arab Americans. This was truly a unique and special event. We were moved by their shared sense of hope and by their spirit of reconciliation.

We must draw on their talent, ingenuity, and good will. In that spirit, the President will appoint a task force of Jewish and Arab Americans to help us develop joint projects and private investment in the region. We also intend to name a senior coordinator for U.S. assistance—much as we have done in the case of the former Soviet Union.

Ladies and gentlemen: the real barrier to peace between the Israelis and Palestinians—the psychological barrier—has already been breached. Compared to that obstacle, the resource challenges we face can surely be met. I am convinced that we can succeed.

The implementation of the Israeli-Palestinian agreement represents only a part of our larger task in the Middle East. We must nurture a comprehensive reconciliation between Israel and the rest of the Arab world. We must achieve a peace between the people of Israel and the peoples of

Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. In the recent round of bilateral negotiations between their governments, the discussions were serious and constructive. Later this month, at the UN General Assembly, I will meet with my counterparts from Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel to try to keep these negotiations moving and to discuss further steps. We will work tirelessly to ensure that all the children of the region can come to know, in President Clinton's words, "a season of peace."

Another aspect of our effort to promote comprehensive reconciliation is working to encourage our other Arab friends to act boldly in support of peace. The core antagonists in this conflict have courageously opted for mutual recognition and an end to their state of war. This bold step demands an equally bold response from their regional counterparts. Jordan's decision to sign a substantive agenda with Israel last Tuesday is a prime example. The meeting that same day in Morocco between Prime Minister Rabin and King Hassan was also a promising first step that the United States applauds. Other nations must also seize the moment for reconciliation.

Now that the Israelis and Palestinians have agreed to work together to promote their economic well-being, it is illogical for Arab nations to continue their boycott of Israel. Every moment the boycott remains in force, those responsible are punishing Palestinians as well as Israelis.

The boycott is a relic of the past. It is a relic that should be relegated to history—*now*.

There is more to peace than the signing of agreements and the gathering of resources. There is a need for fundamental change in the hearts of these former antagonists. The leaders of the region must exhort those who have used violence as a political tool to renounce it without reservation or exception.

It is also imperative that quick action be taken to remove other vestiges of a bygone era that only hinder reconciliation. This means revoking, at the upcoming session of the UN General Assembly, those UN resolutions that challenge Israel's very right to exist. It also means acting to approve unanimously Israel's credentials at this year's UN General Assembly. And in the U.S. Congress it means amending statutes that inhibit dealing with the PLO.

I reiterate a simple but profound truth: only an Israel that is strong, confident, and secure can make peace. Only an Israel that is certain of its strategic partnership with the United States can take the necessary risks.

On behalf of President Clinton and the American people, I re-state a long-standing pledge to the Israeli public: as you and your leaders continue down the courageous path you have chosen, you should know that America's commitment to Israel's security and well-being will remain unshakable.

It is revealing that at this time when the entire world is praising last week's events, they are being denounced in places like Tehran, Baghdad, and Tripoli. In response to such intemperate words, let me make clear that we remain committed to seeing that the forces of moderation in the region are stronger than the forces of extremism.

To all who are prepared to work with us in building a new Middle East of peace, security and prosperity, I say: you have a reliable and committed partner in the United States. To those who would sow dissension, intolerance, and violence, I say this: the United States, its friends, and its allies will take the necessary steps to ensure that you fail.

REFLECTIONS ON AMERICA'S ROLE

This remarkable week for peace in the Middle East reminds us of the necessity for American leadership in the world—especially in regions of vital interest to us.

My colleague Tony Lake will speak tomorrow at the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. He will address the broad outlines of our foreign policy. His speech reflects broad policy discussions within the Administration, and I commend it to your attention.

Before concluding today, I want to comment briefly on two issues that have been the subject of recent public debate. The first is whether America should pursue an activist foreign policy. The second is whether America should act alone or together with other nations to protect our interests abroad.

The first issue is really the latest round in a century-old debate between engagement and isolationism. The United States chooses engagement. The alternative—neo-isolationism—can be reduced to a simple syllogism: the Cold War is over; we won; let's go home and attend to our problems. We must reject isolationism for the dangerous argument that it is. We must renew our commitment to internationalism, which has served us so well for fifty years.

The pied pipers of isolationism misread the history of this century. They mistake the future of our economy. They minimize the threats to our security. And they misjudge the character of our people.

The end of the Cold War has not ended history. Nor has it severed the links between Americans and the world. But it has left the United States with a continuing responsibility—and a unique capacity—to provide leadership.

Why, you may ask, must we remain engaged? First, because it is in our economic interest to do so. We live in a technologically interconnected age. Vast amounts of information and dollars can be transmitted around the world at the speed of light. In such a world, how will we enhance our prosperity if we do not work to open and expand international markets? How will we promote the global growth necessary to our prosperity if we do not successfully complete the Uruguay Round negotiations of the GATT? And how will we create high-paying jobs for Americans if we are not willing to create export opportunities through NAFTA?

Second, we must remain active and assertive for the sake of our security. Were it not for sustained American involvement over the last four decades, we would not be on the road to peace in the Middle East. American engagement is also essential in other regions where our vital interests are at stake. Indeed, in key regions, the United States is the fulcrum on which peace and security rest.

If democracy reverts to dictatorship in the former Soviet Union, Americans are likely to pay a severe price in a revived nuclear threat and increased defense budgets. If ethnic conflict in Europe widens; if security is threatened in Asia; if terrorism spreads; if the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is not checked—if any of these things comes to pass—then our own security and ability to focus on domestic renewal will be directly put at risk.

In short we must remain engaged not out of altruism, nor out of what one scholar has called the "imperial temptation," but because there are real American interests that will suffer if we are seduced by the isolationism myth.

The second issue under recent debate is whether America should exercise its power alone or with others—to use the customary jargon, unilaterally or multilaterally. That issue, as framed, creates a false polarity. It is not an “either-or” proposition

The central purpose of our foreign policy is to ensure the security of our nation and the economic prosperity of our people—and to promote democratic values.

In protecting those interests, the United States must maintain its military strength and reinvigorate its economy so that we can retain the option to act alone, when that is best for us. Let no one doubt the resolve of the United States to protect its vital interests.

Yet in protecting our vital interests, we should not ignore the value of working with other nations. From the Gulf War to the international campaign to aid democracy in Russia, we have seen how collective action can advance American foreign policy goals. It can bolster our efforts to stem the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, to knock down barriers to global trade, and to protect the environment. We have also seen that collective action requires—and cannot replace—American leadership.

No other nation possesses our military might, economic strength, and moral authority. These assets give us the ability to act alone when necessary. When appropriate, we can also leverage our might by sharing the burden with other nations. But we should remember that our ability to generate effective multilateral responses will often depend on our willingness to act alone.

Let me be clear: multilateralism is a means, not an end. It is one of the many foreign policy tools at our disposal. And it is warranted only when it serves the central purpose of American foreign policy: to protect American interests. This country will *never* subcontract its foreign policy to another power or person.

While this largely tactical debate on the means of American engagement has proceeded, President Clinton has been meeting key foreign policy tests: recognizing that domestic economic renewal is fundamental to America’s foreign policy; mobilizing critical and timely support for Russian democracy as an essential investment in our national security; calling for a NATO Summit to adapt the Alliance to meet the security challenges of a new Europe; advancing a New Pacific Community while negotiating a new framework for our economic and trade relations with Japan; and leading the global effort to curb the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

CONCLUSION

I will suggest to you another measure of our leadership: how the world sees us. Last week in Washington, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres paid an unusual tribute to our country.

In the history books, he said:

“Nobody will understand the United States You have so much force and you didn’t conquer the land of anybody. You have so much power and you didn’t dominate another people. You have problems of your own and you have never turned your back on the problems of others.” And Shimon Peres then said: “Thank you so much for being what you are.”

To those who question the need for American engagement, I say, ask Shimon Peres.

Let these indelible events of the past few years—the handshake at the White House; the Berlin Wall falling and the Soviet Union crumbling; Nelson Mandela walking out of prison to

build a new South Africa—let all these point us toward asserting and not abdicating our international role.

Let that shining moment last week on the White House lawn light the way for a just and lasting peace in the Middle East—and illuminate the need for America's continued leadership in the world.