REFLECTIONS ON A CAREER IN DIPLOMACY

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Thank you President DeGioia and Dean Carol Lancaster for inviting me back to the Hilltop and my Alma Mater. It is truly a pleasure to be with you today. In 1992 when I was in government as Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, I was asked to give the commencement address at the School of Foreign Service. It was a great honor. At the time I was one of the highest ranking graduates of SFS in government. But you will remember that we had a presidential election in November of that year and a Georgetown Alumnus by the name of William Jefferson Clinton was elected President of the United States and immediately became by leaps and bounds the highest ranking SFS Alumnus. When I mentioned this to President Clinton, I told him I didn’t take it personally, but commented that he had been invited to Georgetown on many occasions since, whereas my phone stopped ringing from the Hilltop. He got a big laugh out of that. But time heals all wounds and I am happily back on campus.

Georgetown

On reflecting on my diplomatic career, I owe a great deal to Georgetown and the School of Foreign Service. It was here that I had the opportunity to study under remarkable professors such as Dr. Ulrich Allers who taught the history of political theory from Plato to Marx to Milton Friedman. At the end of the course I asked him who among all the political thinkers we had studied, was the closest to the best system of government. He thought for a moment, looked out of the window at Healy, and answered: the Federalists. There was also the legendary Carroll Quigley and his course on the evolution of civilizations; Professor Waldron who taught a great course on Shakespeare’s plays and thus introduced us Freshman students to the epitome of the Western Canon and what Harold Bloom many years later would call “The Invention of the Human”; Father Fadden and the History of Russia; and many others. There is no question what influence a great professor can have on a young mind and I carried many lessons learned here on this campus to
the corridors of the State Department, to the White House and to United States Embassies abroad.

Mentors

In effect, a university is the first mentor a young person has. Mentors play a very important role in our lives. In my Foreign Service career I was fortunate to have a few who marked my professional life. Perhaps the most important one was my first mentor, George W. Ball, who was the Under Secretary of State during the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations. He was a brilliant man who had political courage. He was the lonely dissenting voice in Washington against the United States engaging in a land war in Southeast Asia and wrote the dissenting memo on Vietnam. As a lowly staff assistant in 1963, I was involved in drafting some of his memos and speeches on Vietnam and I witnessed firsthand the tremendous pressures on him for questioning the conventional wisdom from the President on down. This experience never left me. He was not a “careerist” going along with the powers that be, but a man of informed conviction. At the end, history proved him right.

When I was a political officer in Morocco in the early 1970’s I drew on my mentor’s lessons and wrote a dissenting telegram to Washington on the reliability of the Moroccan Armed Forces as a pillar of the Monarchy. While I had no way of predicting the course of events, I did inform Washington that there was dissension amongst the senior officer corps that could pose a threat to the King Hassan II. This was not the conventional wisdom, namely, that the military was supremely loyal to the regime. My reporting was criticized in certain official circles, but in 1971 there was an assassination attempt against the King by elements of the army during a reception in the King’s palace in Skhirat. This Dissent Channel ensured that the events were not a total surprise to Washington.

Early in my career I had the opportunity to have a conversation with another mentor, Ambassador Raymond Hare, a veteran Foreign Service officer. In diplomacy, he told me, it is essential to master your opponent’s argument and position as completely as possible. You should then explain your opponent’s position to him as completely as possible in terms better than he himself could express. Ipso facto, you have disarmed him to an important extent. Then, you explain, as comprehensively as possible, what areas of agreement may exist. The seed of compromise is planted. This method is much better than a mere statement of positions, under instructions that may serve only to antagonize your interlocutors. Never put your opponent in a corner. Never force him to strike
back—unless, of course, that is your purpose. Always allow him a way out, Hare concluded, preferably in the direction of your point of view and position. This is an excellent formula for any United States administration to follow in the conduct of its diplomacy, and I took his advice to heart throughout my career.

Syria

One example of this was when I was the United States Ambassador to Syria under President Reagan and President George Herbert Walker Bush between 1988 and 1991. The mandate I was given was to try to establish a high level dialogue with an adversarial regime led by Syrian President Hafez Al Assad to determine if there was any common ground between our two countries on contentious issues. I knew that my first meeting with President Assad would be critical in order to gain access to him and his top officials during my assignment to Damascus. I used all of Raymond Hare’s advice for that meeting and then engaged Assad on a very personal level relating my parents’ experiences as Armenian refugees in Syria in the post-World War I period. I wasn’t at all sure it would work in a first encounter with a dictator, but it did and that conversation paved the way for numerous meetings during my three years in Damascus.

Under the strong foreign policy leadership of President George H.W. Bush and Secretary of State James A. Baker III, we were able to reach common ground on a number of key issues: helping to end the civil war in Lebanon; getting our hostages liberated; getting Assad to agree to join the U.S.-led coalition against Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait; freedom of travel for Syrian Jews; and getting Assad to agree to face to face negotiations with the Israelis which facilitated the historic Madrid Peace Conference in 1991.

Now do not think this was easy. The negotiations were very difficult, contentious and at times quite precarious. It took many diplomatic shuttle trips by Secretary Baker and a Presidential Summit in Geneva between Presidents Bush and Assad to achieve these ends. We also coined a new word in diplomatic annals—“Bladder Diplomacy.” President Assad was prone to hold meetings that lasted many, many hours. The particular challenge was that he would never take a break—even for the call of nature. This put his interlocutors in, may I say, a stressful position at times. In one meeting that was in its sixth hour, I found myself in a critical situation after much fresh orange juice and Arabic coffee. Assad was giving Secretary Baker his analysis, that I had heard many times, on the nefarious consequences of the Sykes-Picot Agreement in the interwar period and I seized the opportunity to signal the Foreign Minister that I had to make an urgent call to my
Embassy. I left the room, did what I had to do, and returned during the conclusion of Assad’s narrative, rather pleased with my deft handling of the situation. Little did I know till later that Baker jokingly told Assad while I was out of the room that “Ambassador Djerejian had to go to the bathroom to make a phone call.”

Meridian House Speech. June 2, 1992

When I returned to Washington from Damascus in 1991 as Assistant Secretary State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, the Bush Administration was dealing with the challenges of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union. It was a period of transformational change in international affairs and the end of the Cold War. From my vantage point in Washington, I began to realize that the zero sum game was over in the Middle East and elsewhere in terms of Soviet-affiliated states and U.S.-affiliated states and that we needed to start thinking of reformulating our strategic approach toward the Middle East.

One of the things that I learned from George Ball was that a well-timed substantive foreign policy speech could have an important impact and I decided to give one charting the Administration’s planned approach to the region. After many drafts and consultations with Administration national security officials and experts from academia, I gave the speech at Meridian House here in Washington on June 2, 1992. The basic themes of the speech were that after the fall of Communism, the next “ism” we could anticipate confronting was not any world religion or culture such as Islam, but extremism and terrorism of either a secular or religious cloak. This was the year before the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993.

Further, the speech outlined a dual track approach to achieve Arab-Israeli conflict resolution and to promote political, economic and social reforms in the region and especially in the Arab countries, given the large deficits in political participation, employment, human rights, women’s rights, social justice, poverty and inequality.

But the part of the speech that got the most notoriety was on the United States view and approach toward Islamic groups and movements. I point this out because 21 years later we are still challenged by this issue, especially after September 11, 2001. Allow me to cite some of the pertinent passages dealing with Islam because they are very much relevant today:

*In countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa, we thus see groups or movements seeking to reform their societies in keeping with Islamic ideals. There*
is considerable diversity in how these ideals are expressed. We detect no
monolithic or coordinated effort behind these movements. What we do see are
believers living in different countries placing renewed emphasis on Islamic
principles, and governments accommodating Islamist political activity to varying
degrees and in different ways.

I am not talking here about trying to impose an American model on others. Each
country must work out, in accordance with its own traditions, history and
particular circumstances, how and at what pace to broaden political participation.
In this respect, it is essential that there be real dialogue between government on
the one hand; and the people and parties and other institutions on the other.
Those who are prepared to take specific steps toward free elections, creating
independent judiciaries, promoting the rule of law, reducing restrictions on the
press, respecting the rights of minorities, and guaranteeing individual rights, will
find us ready to recognize and support their efforts, just as those moving in the
opposite direction will find us ready to speak candidly and act accordingly. Those
who seek to broaden political participation in the Middle East will, therefore, find
us supportive, as we have been elsewhere in the world. At the same time, we are
suspect of those who would use the democratic process to come to power, only to
destroy that very process in order to retain power and political dominance. While
we believe in the principle of one person, one vote, “we do not support one person,
one vote, one time.” (This was translated in the Arab media as “one man, one
vote, one time”).

Let me make it very clear with whom we differ. We differ:

- With those regardless of their religion, who practice terrorism, oppress
  minorities, preach intolerance or violate internationally accepted standards
  of conduct regarding human rights;

- With those who are insensitive to the need for political pluralism;

- With those who cloak their message in another brand of authoritarianism;

- With those who substitute religious and political confrontation for
  constructive engagement with the rest of the World;

- With those who do not share our commitment to peaceful resolution to
  conflict, especially the Arab/Israeli conflict;
・ *And with those who would pursue their goals through repression or violence.*

These themes, with certain variations, have been adopted in both Republican and Democratic Administrations and you can hear echoes of them in President Obama’s landmark speech in Cairo in June, 2009. With the outbreak of the Arab Awakening or Arab Spring in 2011, these issues have become even more poignant as we grapple with how to craft specific policies in the region and countries involved in the current turmoil.

**Israel**

My assignment as President Clinton’s Ambassador to Israel in 1993 was my last before my retirement in 1994 to go to Rice University and become the founding director of the Baker Institute. It was my privilege to be Ambassador when Yitzhak Rabin was prime minister – a true warrior turned statesman. We established a close relationship. His strong commitment to the principle of land for peace gave Arab-Israeli peace a real chance. His assassination by a right wing Jewish extremist in 1995 remains a tragic setback for the hopes for Arab-Israeli peace. This goal is still elusive and every effort to reengage the Israelis and Palestinians, including the current one by the Obama Administration and Secretary of State John Kerry, must be strongly supported by all parties.

**Reinforcing U.S. Middle East Policy Today**

Dean Acheson once described foreign policy as "one damn thing after another" and recent events in the Middle East certainly lend credence to that thought. Syria, Egypt, Iran and Iraq all pose serious threats to regional peace and security. The decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict, if not resolved, can lead to another crisis.

The United States has been closely involved in all these countries and has expended much blood and treasure in Iraq and Afghanistan. There is now weariness in America over our involvement in the Middle East, especially militarily. President Obama addressed these issues in his UN General Assembly speech on September 24 and made clear that while overextension in the region is to be avoided, the United States cannot turn away from the Middle East given our national security interests and our humanitarian values. I agree.
The recent confluence of events in Syria, Egypt, Iran, and in the Israeli-Palestinian context presents complex challenges to U.S. policy interests and policy formulation, but also unique opportunities. The convoluted scenario leading to the U.S.-Russian agreement to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons stockpile is an opportunity not only to try to rid the Syrian regime of its WMD capabilities, but also to build US-Russian cooperation into a political solution to the Syrian civil war. There is no military solution to the Syrian crisis, only a political solution that produces a cease-fire between the regime and the opposition and a political transition leading to a post-Asad era. The international community, including Russia and Iran, has no interest in an unstable Syria.

The election of President Hassan Rouhani of Iran is another opportunity that should be exploited to determine if his conciliatory words toward constructive engagement with the international community and especially the United States can be turned into actual deeds by the Iranian regime led by the Ayatollah Khamenei. President Obama stated his clear but guarded intent to engage with Iran and Rouhani reiterated a similar intent for "constructive engagement" with the international community, especially the United States. The nuclear issue, terrorism, Iran's role in Syria and support of Hezbollah, its influence in Afghanistan and now in Iraq, its potential threat to Arab Gulf security, and its policy toward Israel are all compelling national security interests for the United States and our allies.

Akin to the need for U.S. engagement with Russia on Syria, the United States should explore the Iranian offer to engage in a dialogue -- not for the sake of talk alone, but to determine if there is real common ground upon which agreements may be reached. To do so, everything will have to be put on the table. Rouhani has prioritized the nuclear issue as the first agenda item to be discussed to try to reach an agreement under an accelerated time frame. This is an ambitious but welcome development. Nevertheless, any U.S.-Iran dialogue will have to address all the major issues as well as the mutual interests of both sides in order to achieve sustainable results.

As I stated to the Obama administration's credit, it has reinitiated direct Israeli-Palestinian negotiations to try to achieve a permanent two-state solution. In this central issue, the United States is engaging in intensive diplomacy that goes beyond conflict management to conflict resolution. That should be the paradigm it follows toward the Syrian crisis and Iran. The United States can react to "one damn thing after another" in the Middle East or it can make the difficult but much more strategic effort to help resolve the underlying issues catalyzing conflicts
throughout the region. It is a question of political will and commitment to promote and safeguard our national security interests and humanitarian values. In this respect, this is not a formula for overextension in the Middle East, but for the deliberate conduct of coherent and reinforcing diplomacy to achieve progress on issues that affect regional and global peace and security.

In so doing, we must accept the possibility of failure. An important question is whether or not a political consensus can be achieved in Washington between the Republicans and Democrats to pursue such a policy on a bipartisan basis. The stakes are high and one can only hope, perhaps idealistically, for a return to the days when partisan politics stopped at the water's edge. While Acheson decried "events" forcing foreign policy decision-making, under the Truman administration he and his colleagues (George Marshall, George Kennan, Will Clayton and others) guided U.S. foreign policy formulation to its apex with great initiatives that shaped the international landscape, such as the Marshall Plan, the containment policy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and the creation of the United Nations. Can we emulate today, admittedly in different historical circumstances, that bridge from conflict management to conflict resolution? One can only hope.

Closing Remarks

In closing, let me reiterate what a pleasure it is to be back at my alma mater. In terms of public service, a Jesuit education has been described as focusing one on the concept of "discernment" or the ability to judge well. Jesuit tradition uses the Latin word magis or "more" to underscore a life lived in response to the question: How can I be more, How can I do more, How can I give more? In this respect, I address myself to the students in the audience: Let me assure you, your education at Georgetown will prepare you well for public service and whatever career you chose to pursue.