



JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY
RICE UNIVERSITY

A LETTER TO THE INCOMING PRESIDENT

EXCERPTED FROM

*DANGER AND OPPORTUNITY:
AN AMERICAN AMBASSADOR'S JOURNEY THROUGH THE MIDDLE EAST*

BY

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A Letter to the Incoming President

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A Letter to the Incoming President

Baker Institute Founding Director Edward P. Djerejian's new book Danger and Opportunity: An American Ambassador's Journey Through the Middle East (Simon & Schuster Threshold Editions, September 2008) begins with an open letter to the president of the United States.

Djerejian, who served as U.S. ambassador to both Syria and Israel as well as assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, calls for the Obama administration to adopt a strategic and coherent approach to the broader Middle East. His approach advocates a fundamental shift in U.S. foreign policy in the region from conflict management to conflict resolution, while framing the need for settlement of the Arab–Israeli conflict in the context of the larger forces in the Muslim world. He calls for sustained and focused U.S. engagement in South Asia, especially Afghanistan and Pakistan, where the real struggle against Islamic radicals and terrorism is being waged, as well as efforts to resolve the Kashmir issue between India and Pakistan.

We must not try to impose our own political structure on the Arab and Muslim world, Djerejian states, but we can help foster a democratic way of life in conformity with the cultural context of the region's own mainstream values and ideals. To do so, the United States must learn to deal with the complex religious, ethnic, and cultural factors at play in the broader Middle East.

Djerejian's open letter to President Barack Obama is below.

Dear Mr. President:

I have had the privilege of serving eight United States presidents, from John F. Kennedy to William Jefferson Clinton, in times of peace and war, in both the United States military and the Foreign Service. One of the positions I held at the White House and the National Security Council was special assistant to President Ronald Reagan and deputy press secretary for foreign affairs. There I caught firsthand a glimpse of the power and heavy responsibility of the presidency and, also, of the loneliness of the occupant of the Oval Office at times of critical decision-making.

A Letter to the Incoming President

During President Ronald Reagan's second term, tensions in South Asia over Afghanistan and between India and Pakistan over nuclear weapons were on the rise. We scheduled an interview for the president with a prominent journalist of the Times of India, to give the president an opportunity to underscore United States policy goals in the region. There were some key points the president's advisors thought he should make, and I was assigned the task of ensuring that this was done. Whenever I entered the Oval Office, I would always have a sense of awe at the power and responsibility the incumbent held. This time was no different. As I proceeded to brief the president just before the interview, I stood dutifully in front of his desk, referred to the talking points we had prepared for him, and reiterated the key statements he should make.

I wasn't sure the president had focused on them, so I did something I should not have done. I walked behind the desk and, leaning over the president's shoulder, pointed to the key phrases. I thought we were alone in the Oval Office, but a White House photographer was in the room and caught the scene. Several weeks later I found on my desk a signed photo of this moment, with the following annotation, "To Ed Djerejian. Who says we don't take our work seriously? Very best wishes and regards, Ronald Reagan."

"The Gipper" had seen right through my excess of zeal and made his point in a most gracious manner. So it is with this sense of humility that I, as an American diplomat who has pursued our nation's interests in this part of the world for over thirty years and who has served on both sides of the Arab-Israeli divide as United States ambassador to Syria and Israel, would like to share with you, the next president of the United States, some thoughts on the key challenges in the broader Middle East and the Muslim world at this time of danger and opportunity.

In a speech at Meridian House in Washington, D.C., in 1992, when I was assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern Affairs, I said, "The United States government does not view Islam as the next 'ism' confronting the West or threatening world peace.... Americans recognize Islam as one of the world's great faiths.... Our quarrel is with extremism, and the violence, denial, coercion, and terror which too often accompany it." It was clear to me then, some nine years before 9/11, that with the end of the Cold War and the defeat of communism the next "ism" the United States and the international community would confront would be extremism and terrorism. The critical

A Letter to the Incoming President

struggle of ideas between the forces of extremism and moderation in the Muslim world is a generational challenge, one the United States can influence but not decide. That task is in the hands of the Muslim people themselves.

It is important to avoid politically rhetorical flourishes that cannot produce the anticipated results. As with the “War on Drugs” and the “War on Poverty,” the misnamed “War on Terror” will not end with a dramatic raising of the flag in a clear moment of victory. These are worthy causes, but they are long-term struggles that need to be addressed boldly and intelligently; sloganeering should not distort good public policy. Terrorism is a lethal subset of the larger struggle of ideas between the forces of extremism and moderation, and we must combat it with all the means available to us. The option of military action is always available to you and the Congress when the national security of the United States is threatened, but guns alone cannot achieve success in the overall campaign against terrorism. That task requires a more broad-based and comprehensive strategy.

United States policy should therefore be aimed at what we can do to strengthen the moderates and marginalize the extremists and radicals, be they secular or religious. This will require all the tools of bilateral and multilateral diplomacy available to you for conflict resolution, public diplomacy, focused intelligence assessments, military assistance and training, special operations, helping countries build representative institutions, and facilitating political, economic, and social reforms and development. Overall, the wiser course will be to avoid imposing solutions from the outside. Instead, you should adopt effective policies and actions that promote solutions that are mainly the outcome of the efforts of the people and countries of the region themselves. Our helping to alleviate the causes of frustration, humiliation, and deep-rooted grievances in the region, which extremists and terrorists exploit for their own political ends, can do much to marginalize the radicals and terrorists and strengthen the moderates.

I was brought up in the school of diplomacy that advocates negotiating differences and, when possible, seeking peace with one's enemies and adversaries. That is the ultimate task of diplomacy, bolstered by our military credibility. Unilaterally isolating adversaries and breaking off communications deprives us of essential tools to pursue our national security interests.

A Letter to the Incoming President

Talking with a clear purpose in mind is neither a concession nor a sign of weakness, especially for a global power such as the United States. At the same time, our diplomacy should never be carried out in a way that indicates a lack of United States resolve. While Ronald Reagan stigmatized the Soviet Union as the “Evil Empire,” his administration negotiated in a determined manner with the communist regime and achieved positive results.

I had the opportunity in 1969, early in my career, to have a conversation with 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 position, 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 not a bad formula for any United States administration to follow in the conduct of its diplomacy.

The absence of dialogue and engagement with adversarial regimes and groups serves only to polarize situations and promote miscalculations, even conflict, especially in the broader Middle East. You should therefore have your secretary of state carefully prepare to engage Iran and Syria in a major strategic dialogue on all the issues between us, in a serious effort to determine what middle ground there may be to build on. Through such comprehensive engagement, with all the key issues on the table, the prospects for getting these countries to change their behavior and accommodate United States interests on such crucial issues as nuclear nonproliferation and Arab-Israeli peace could be greatly enhanced.

As I will contend in this book, the road to Arab-Israeli peace goes through Jerusalem, not through Baghdad or Tehran. Direct face-to-face negotiations between Israel and its immediate Arab neighbors — the Palestinians, Syria, and Lebanon — are the key to peacemaking. While the other countries in the region have an important role to play in bolstering peace efforts, the

A Letter to the Incoming President

focus must be on the parties to the negotiations themselves. The core political issue in the Middle East remains the Arab–Israeli conflict, especially the Palestinian issue, which has strong resonance throughout the Muslim world. For too long this conflict has been exploited as a pretext for regimes in the region not to carry out major political and economic reforms and to secure their positions of power. Any United States administration that doesn't grasp these realities and the urgency of resolving this conflict will face recurrent crises that it will be forced to address on a case-by-case basis, often distracting the government from other priorities at times not of its choosing.

The most effective approach is to steer United States policy from conflict management to conflict resolution. Putting out intermittent fires between Israel, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinians is a short-term and insufficient strategy. Instead, the United States must take the lead within the international community and act in its traditional but tarnished role as an "honest broker" between the Israelis and the Arabs, seeking to bring the parties to the negotiating table under the principled framework of the Madrid Peace Conference and the "land for peace" formula embodied in United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338.

Mr. President, to succeed in this major effort, you must take the lead and invest the power of the presidency in peacemaking through whatever modalities you choose. When United States presidents have displayed the political will and courage and have engaged their administrations in serious peacemaking, there has been progress, as evidenced, for example, by President Nixon in the disengagement agreements in 1974 after the Yom Kippur War, by President Jimmy Carter and the Camp David Accords of 1978 and the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of 1979, and by President George H. W. Bush and the Madrid Peace Conference of 1991. President Clinton, while not achieving a peace settlement, did succeed in narrowing the issues between the Israelis and Palestinians at Camp David and Taba in 2000–2001. President George W. Bush's call for a two-state solution in 2002, with a state of Palestine living in peace and security next to the state of Israel, was an important policy statement that should be translated into deeds in the Israeli–Palestinian negotiations initiated at Annapolis in 2007.

A Letter to the Incoming President

While progress toward Arab–Israeli peace, or even the attainment of that peace, will not end extremism and terrorism, it will do much to eliminate a major cause that the extremists exploit for their own ends and put the onus on radical groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah to justify continued armed resistance and terrorism. It would also do much to restore America's standing and credibility in the Arab and Muslim world.

Too often, from one administration to another, United States foreign policy is diverted away from issues and regions of the world where we should be making a strong and sustained effort to get the job done. Afghanistan and Pakistan, the regional caldron, are prime examples of this unfortunate and costly tendency and the principle of unintended consequences. We succeeded only too well in supporting the mujahideen in Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion of that country in 1979, helping defeat the Soviets in their Afghan adventure and contributing to the demise of the Soviet Union a decade later. We enlisted the support of Pakistan as a key ally in that effort and worked closely with the Pakistani government and military as the conduit of our political and military support to the mujahideen, including the provision of Stinger missiles that caused havoc with Soviet airborne operations.

But once the tide had turned in Afghanistan, we directed our attention elsewhere and virtually outsourced our policy to our Pakistani and Saudi allies, who, in turn, facilitated the rise of the Islamist radicals and the creation of Al Qaeda, led by Osama Bin Laden. The Pakistani military's Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI), which has had close ties to the Taliban and also to Islamist groups since the 1970s, and ultraconservative Saudi Wahhabis played their role in these developments. This situation was further exacerbated by the takeover of the Afghan government by the Taliban, who provided safe haven to Al Qaeda, which authored the deadly attacks on our homeland on 9/11. We successfully overthrew the Taliban regime by force after 9/11, but our military action in Iraq in 2003 diverted us from paying close attention to Afghanistan and Pakistan, resulting in the Taliban's resurgence in 2006 and 2007 as a political and paramilitary force to contend with once again, while Osama Bin Laden and his lieutenant Ayman al-Zawahiri still remain at large, most likely somewhere in Waziristan.

A Letter to the Incoming President

One of the most important decisions you could take is to make South Asia a major foreign policy priority, with a sustained focus on Pakistan and Afghanistan. The stakes for regional peace and stability are dangerously high. Pakistan and India are nuclear weapons states with a serious unresolved territorial issue, Kashmir, between them. Since their partition in 1947, Pakistan and India have gone to war three times. A major effort must be made to resolve the Kashmir issue, lest an escalation of this conflict result in a nuclear confrontation on the subcontinent. The struggle for democracy in Pakistan is fragile, as evidenced by the threat of Islamic militancy within the country, the renewed activism of Al Qaeda from the border regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the assassination of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto by a suicide bomber in December 2007, and the confrontation between Pakistan's president Pervez Musharraf and the Pakistani lawyers' political movement in support of the rule of law and the judiciary.

The United States should actively encourage Pakistan's moderate political parties and forces, the government, and the professional military leadership (the guardian and guarantor of Pakistan's nuclear weapons) to all work toward forming a democratic coalition that could govern Pakistan and restore political stability made credible by the electoral process. Our key policy objective should be the legitimate transfer of power to elected civilian leaders in Pakistan.

Despite its being the top priority for NATO, Afghanistan continues to struggle against the narcotics warlords, the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and Islamic militants who have come back to the fore and are focusing increasingly on terrorist acts, suicide bombings, improvised explosive devices, and the targeting of schools and teachers. Their goal is to sabotage the state and impose their will on the Afghan people. It is a tense struggle between the advance of state institutions and services in the country under the democratically elected government and the armed resistance of the Afghan extremists. Because the institutions of the state are in a formative phase and are not robust, the extremists are more dangerous than their actual numbers would suggest.

Afghanistan is in a major transitional stage that will require sustained and comprehensive support and commitment from the international community. Security, stabilization, and developmental operations are the key to success or failure. A United States general said, "We aren't losing, but we aren't winning either." He underscored the need for building a national

A Letter to the Incoming President

Afghan army and police force to establish the conditions of security that can enable economic and infrastructure development such as basic services and roads — a top priority for Afghans. He is quoted as saying, “Where roads end, the Taliban begins.”

Mr. President, elections alone do not make democracies. Indeed, they are often exploited to perpetuate dictatorships. Let me share with you an uneasy anecdote that underscores the point. During a meeting with the late Syrian president Hafez al-Asad, I referred to his recent re-election by an astounding vote of 99.44 percent. I then asked him, with tongue in cheek, if he knew who the .56 percent were who did not vote for him. He smiled and quipped, “Ambassador, I have all their names.”

Democracy promotion that focuses on elections without prior institution building and the development of the rule of law, the adoption of the principles of pluralism, and the alternation of power will, more often than not, lead to unwelcome outcomes. Democratization will not necessarily progress in a straight line. A wiser course may well be for the United States to support and encourage erecting the building blocks of democracy from within these societies. It is best to “make haste slowly” toward this long-term goal. The challenge of fostering democratic forms of governance in the Muslim world is great. United States engagement with moderate forces in these societies, including NGOs, political parties, professional associations, and governments, will require much more sophistication and sustained effort than we have demonstrated to date.

We must be clear that there is no room for dialogue with the Islamic radicals such as those of Al Qaeda, whose agenda is to overthrow the governments in the region, destroy Israel, and weaken the moderates and the quest for modernity in the Muslim countries, as well as to weaken “far enemies” such as the United States. We must, however, differentiate between the Islamic radicals and Islamist groups that do not engage in terrorism. Accordingly, you should authorize the secretary of state to have our diplomats contact and engage certain Islamist groups and parties in the Muslim countries, especially those that do not resort to violence, with a view toward determining firsthand what they really represent, what their goals are, what common ground

A Letter to the Incoming President

there may be between us, and whether we can engage them constructively in the attainment of our foreign policy goals and national security interests.

The decision to wage war and commit the nation's blood and treasure is your heaviest responsibility and burden. Except in a case of imminent attack on our homeland and people, that must truly be your last option as commander-in-chief, after all other options have been thoroughly considered and exhausted. Although Colin Powell has told me that no "doctrine" was ever published in his name, despite the many public references to the "Powell Doctrine," the essential elements of his approach bear your careful consideration if you have to lead the country into military conflict. According to Powell's thinking, as you consider your options in times of crisis, including the possibility of the use of military force, your most important task is to have a clear understanding of the political objective you wish to achieve. In short, "What is the mission?" "What are you getting the military ready for?" "What force structure and levels are needed to accomplish the mission?" The failure to put enough "boots on the ground" in Iraq to restore law and order under an occupation caused many of the tragic difficulties we have faced in Iraq since the successful initial military operations. Our forces have had to deal concomitantly with conventional ground combat, counterterrorism, and counterinsurgency missions. On top of those challenges, our military has been largely involved in nation-building operations to help provide the population with basic services, including, as one U.S. general told the Iraq Study Group in Baghdad, "picking up the trash."

It is important not to confuse military objectives with political objectives. Establishing democracy in Iraq is not a military objective, but taking charge of the country and restoring law and order are essential first steps toward political solutions. The distinction between military action and occupation is critical and calls for distinctively different policies and force levels of both military and civilian personnel. Once the mission is decided, "overmatch" your enemy with decisive force and have that decisive force applied to a clear military objective. Another key question you must ask is "How will this war end?" That is more important than defining an "exit strategy." And last, it is inherent in this approach that if military action is going to last for any appreciable amount of time, you must assure domestic political support and, to the maximum extent possible, international support for the war effort. This approach worked in Panama in

A Letter to the Incoming President

1989 and in Desert Storm in 1991. It was not adopted in Iraq in 2003. Indeed, one of your most important priorities may well be to have a major review of United States military policy and doctrine to assure that we are prepared for current and future dangers to our national security.

In an NPR interview in 2007, a United States Army general in Iraq observed that we are “an Army at war, not a nation at war.” He expressed the painful sentiment that “folks [at home] can do more to support the effort.” During a September 2006 visit to Baghdad by the members of the Iraq Study Group, one of the most effective generals we met was Lt. Gen. Peter Chiarelli. In an article in the journal *Military Review*, he wrote, “The U.S. as a Nation — and indeed most of the U.S. Government — has not gone to war since 9/11. Instead, the departments of Defense and State (as much as their modern capabilities allow) and the Central Intelligence Agency are at war while the American people and most of the other institutions of national power have largely gone about their normal business.”

This is an important issue that strikes at the heart of American society and the concept of public service and sacrifice. Senior military officers have told me that they prefer the all-volunteer armed forces because of the professionalism they can achieve within the ranks, without having to train new recruits drafted every two to three years. But we should give consideration to registering Americans for the possibility of a draft if we are faced with a major war that would require an all-out national effort. We should also consider creating a system of national service in civilian government operations and institutions, in lieu of military service. When we started the all-volunteer armed forces in 1970 during the Nixon administration, the U.S. military began to lose a vital link to the country and American society. The historic concept of “the citizen soldier” was weakened. When we go to war we should be “a nation at war,” with the citizenry engaged in various ways and, to the extent possible, from the broadest levels of society, to defend our national security interests at home and abroad.

One of the major stakes in the struggle of ideas in the Muslim world is the geopolitical reality of the vast oil and gas reserves located in the broader Middle East. Destabilization in this region can lead to major global economic disruptions, especially at a time of limited excess oil capacity and growing energy demand, not only from the United States itself but also from the emerging global

A Letter to the Incoming President

powers of China and India. Creating an energy policy for the United States that responds to the urgency of the situation and looks ahead toward balancing supply and demand and the need for conservation and alternative sources of energy is a compelling public policy challenge that you should address as a top priority.

Mr. President, you are the “Voice of America.” Whether addressing national or international issues, yours is the most important single voice influencing attitudes toward the United States abroad. Our country's public diplomacy must have your stamp of approval, enthusiastic support, and long-term commitment. You are the ultimate director of our public diplomacy. Our public diplomacy has lacked strategic direction since the dismantling of the instruments of persuasion we used so effectively during the Cold War. The task now is to reinvent this role in an effective manner within the government. The enhanced definition of public diplomacy should be “to first listen and understand, and then inform, engage, and influence foreign audiences.” This is the modus operandi of public diplomacy. Getting this done effectively, with clarity of purpose and vision, should be a key objective of any United States administration. Important organizational changes in public diplomacy structure, resources, programs, and operations have been made in recent years, and your administration can build on them. We often hear the criticism that “it's the policy, stupid; not public diplomacy.” But the reality is that if policy and values constitute, say, 80 percent of how people perceive us for better or worse, then there is an essential 20 percent that constitutes the role of public diplomacy and how effectively we communicate with and inform foreign audiences about our policy goals, values, and who we are as a nation and people. Your public diplomacy team has to be an integral part of the foreign policy formulation process and a key instrument in the actual conduct of the policy.

There is an urgent need to build our professional cadres of civilian, military, and intelligence personnel to be proficient in the languages and the cultures of the Muslim world.

We need to emphasize sustained language training and cultural education programs, so that Foreign Service officers in our State Department will have the requisite fluency in, for example, Arabic, so that they can go on an Arabic satellite TV station such as Al Jazeera and express and debate United States policy effectively.

A Letter to the Incoming President

I outline in these pages a strategic game plan for the direction of America's public diplomacy. Given the criticality of words and images in any struggle of ideas, such as that being waged by the Islamic radicals and extremists, the manner in which the United States conveys our values, interests, and policies in this part of the world is of utmost importance. America's greatness is embodied in the example it has historically set for our own people and the world. Extensive surveys show that majorities in the Muslim world admire and identify with such American values as liberty, freedom of speech and the press, freedom of association, the rule of law, social justice, human rights, women's rights, minority rights, pluralism, equality of opportunity, higher education, science and technology, and market-based economies and the economic prosperity they foster. To the extent that the United States can live up to these ideals we will have the moral power to influence — not decide — world events according to our core principles.

Too often, we are not present to explain the context and content of our national values and policies. As the congressionally mandated advisory group I chaired in 2003 on public diplomacy was told in Morocco, “If you do not define yourself in this part of the world, the extremists will define you.” The United States simply cannot afford such an outcome.

The way forward in meeting the strategic challenge of the struggle of ideas in the Arab and Muslim world is fraught with both danger and opportunity. The human-development deficits in the region and the continuing specter of violence, bloodshed, terrorism, and unresolved conflicts that plague this region have consequences that extend beyond its borders and to our own homeland. This complex situation inevitably requires not only crisis management but, more important and in the long term, resolution of regional conflicts and real progress on the major issues and root causes of political, economic, and social instability that extremists and Islamic radicals exploit for their own political and ideological ends. Given the preeminent position of the United States in today's world, our country can do much, in concert with the international community and the countries of the region, to influence, but not decide or try to transform by ourselves, the future progress of the Arab and Muslim world toward a more peaceful, just, and prosperous future.

A Letter to the Incoming President

The struggle to determine the balance between tradition and the forces of modernity and change in the Muslim world will have to come from within the framework of their own culture and societies. But by formulating and pursuing enlightened policies along the lines discussed in this book, you have a unique and historic opportunity to influence the course of events toward positive ends. This will take strong political will and determination to get the job done. We must learn from the successes and failures of the past and have the humility and courage to recognize where we have gone wrong in order not only to not perpetuate failed policies, but to restore the power and standing of the United States of America in the world as a unique experiment in democracy, liberty, and freedom. The stakes are simply too high to do otherwise.

Respectfully,

Edward P. Djerejian