

A Must-Read Speech

Zbigniew Brzezinski's remarks from the "New American Strategies for Security and Peace" conference

Zbigniew Brzezinski

The following is a transcript of the speech delivered by former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski on Oct. 28 at New American Strategies for Security and Peace, a conference co-sponsored by the Prospect in Washington, D.C. The speech followed an introduction by David Aaron, a former deputy national security adviser.

David, distinguished guests, friends, and there's some overlap between the two categories. It's very touching to be introduced by a close friend, a colleague who worked very closely with me for four years, with whom we tried to forge policies that would be responsive to the realities of power and to the demands of principle.

To the extent that there were any accomplishments to which I can lay claim I am certainly more than eager rightfully so to share them with David Aaron. What more can I say about that introduction. Since our relationship with President Jimmy Carter was invoked perhaps the only additional thing I can say is to repeat what he recently said after being equally generously introduced.

He came up to the podium and said of all of the introductions I have ever heard this one was the most recent.

Ladies and gentlemen, forty years ago almost to the day an important Presidential emissary was sent abroad by a beleaguered President of the United States. The United States was facing the prospect of nuclear war. These were the days of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Several emissaries went to our principal allies. One of them was a tough-minded former Secretary of State, Dean Acheson whose mission was to brief President De Gaulle and to solicit French support in what could be a nuclear war involving not just the United States and the Soviet Union but the entire NATO Alliance and the Warsaw Pact.

The former Secretary of State briefed the French President and then said to him at the end of the briefing, I would now like to show you the evidence, the photographs that we have of Soviet missiles armed with nuclear weapons. The French President responded by saying, I do not wish to see the photographs. The word of the President of the United States is good enough for me. Please tell him that France stands with America.

Would any foreign leader today react the same way to an American emissary who would go abroad and say that country X is armed with weapons of mass destruction which threaten the United States? There's food for thought in that question. Fifty-three years ago, almost the same month following the Soviet-sponsored assault by North Korea on South Korea, the Soviet Union boycotted a proposed resolution in the U.N. Security Council for a collective response to that act.

That left the Soviet Union alone in opposition, stamping it as a global pariah. In the last three weeks there were two votes on the subject of the Middle East in the General Assembly of the United Nations. In one of them the vote was 133 to four. In the other one the vote was 141 to 4, and the four included the United States, Israel, Marshall Islands and Micronesia.

All of our NATO allies voted with the majority including Great Britain, including the so-called new allies in Europe—in fact almost all of the EU—and Japan. I cite these

events because I think they underline two very disturbing phenomena—the loss of U.S. international credibility, the growing U.S. international isolation.

Both together can be summed up in a troubling paradox regarding the American position and role in the world today. American power worldwide is at its historic zenith. American global political standing is at its nadir. Why? What is the cause of this? These are facts. They're measurable facts. They're also felt facts when one talks to one's friends abroad who like America, who value what we treasure but do not understand our policies, are troubled by our actions and are perplexed by what they perceive to be either demagoguery or mendacity.

Maybe the explanation is that we are rich, and we are, and that we are powerful, and we certainly are. But if anyone thinks that this is the full explanation I think he or she is taking the easy way out and engaging in a self-serving justification. I think we have to take into account two troubling conditions.

Since the tragedy of 9/11 which understandably shook and outraged everyone in this country, we have increasingly embraced at the highest official level what I think fairly can be called a paranoid view of the world. Summarized in a phrase repeatedly used at the highest level, "he who is not with us is against us." I say repeatedly because actually some months ago I did a computer check to see how often it's been used at the very highest level in public statements.

The count then quite literally was ninety-nine. So it's a phrase which obviously reflects a deeply felt perception. I strongly suspect the person who uses that phrase doesn't know its historical or intellectual origins. It is a phrase popularized by Lenin (Applause) when he attacked the social democrats on the grounds that they were anti-Bolshevik and therefore he who is not with us is against us and can be handled accordingly.

This phrase in a way is part of what might be considered to be the central defining focus that our policy-makers embrace in determining the American position in the world and is summed up by the words "war on terrorism." War on terrorism defines the central preoccupation of the United States in the world today, and it does reflect in my view a rather narrow and extremist vision of foreign policy of the world's first superpower, of a great democracy, with genuinely idealistic traditions.

The second condition, troubling condition, which contributes in my view to the crisis of credibility and to the state of isolation in which the United States finds itself today is due in part because that skewed view of the world is intensified by a fear that periodically verges on panic that is in itself blind. By this I mean the absence of a clearly, sharply defined perception of what is transpiring abroad regarding particularly such critically important security issues as the existence or the spread or the availability or the readiness in alien hands of weapons of mass destruction.

We have actually experienced in recent months a dramatic demonstration of an unprecedented intelligence failure, perhaps the most significant intelligence failure in the history of the United States. That failure was contributed to and was compensated for by extremist demagoguery which emphasizes the worst case scenarios which stimulates fear, which induces a very simple dichotomous view of world reality.

I think it is important to ask ourselves as citizens, not as Democrats attacking the administration, but as citizens, whether a world power can really provide global leadership on the basis of fear and anxiety? Can it really mobilize support and particularly the support of friends when we tell them that if you are not with us you are against us?

I think that calls for serious debate in America about the role of America in the world, and I do not believe that that serious debate is satisfied simply by a very abstract, vague and quasi-theological definition of the war on terrorism as the central preoccupation of the United States in today's world. That definition of the challenge in my view simply narrows down and over-simplifies a complex and varied set of challenges that needs to be addressed on a broad front.

It deals with abstractions. It theologizes the challenge. It doesn't point directly at the

problem. It talks about a broad phenomenon, terrorism, as the enemy overlooking the fact that terrorism is a technique for killing people. That doesn't tell us who the enemy is. It's as if we said that World War II was not against the Nazis but against blitzkrieg. We need to ask who is the enemy, and the enemies are terrorists.

But not in an abstract, theologically-defined fashion, people, to quote again our highest spokesmen, "people who hate things, whereas we love things"—literally. Not to mention the fact that of course terrorists hate freedom. I think they do hate. But believe me, I don't think they sit there abstractly hating freedom. They hate some of us. They hate some countries. They hate some particular targets. But it's a lot more concrete than these vague quasi-theological formulations.

I think in the heat of debate Democrats should not be nay-sayers only, criticizing. They certainly should not be cheerleaders as some were roughly a year ago. But they should stress a return to fundamentals in so far as American foreign policy is concerned. Above all else in stressing these fundamentals, Democrats particularly should insist that the foreign policy of a pluralistic democracy like the United States should be based on bipartisanship because bipartisanship is the means and the framework for formulating policies based on moderation and on the recognition of the complexity of the human condition.

That has been the tradition since the days of Truman and Vandenberg all the way until recent times. That has been the basis for American foreign policy that has been remarkably successful and has led us not only to a triumph in the Cold War but to emerging as the only global superpower with special responsibilities.

Bipartisanship helps to avoid extremes and imbalances. It causes compromises and accommodations. So let's cooperate. Let's cooperate and challenge the administration to cooperate with us because within the administration there are also moderates and people who are not fully comfortable with the tendencies that have prevailed in recent times.

That has a number of specific implications that are of a policy type. The first and most important is to emphasize the enduring nature of the alliance relationship particularly with Europe which does share our values and interests even if it disagrees with us on specific policies. But the sharing of values and interests is fundamental, and we partake of the same basic beliefs.

We cannot have that relationship if we only dictate or threaten and condemn those who disagree. Sometimes we may be right. Sometimes they may be right. But there is something transcendental about shared values that shouldn't be subordinated to tactical requirements. We should seek to cooperate with Europe, not to divide Europe to a fictitious new and a fictitious old.

And we should recognize that in some parts of the world Europeans have more experience and more knowledge than we and certain interests as important as ours. I think particularly of the Middle East. We should be therefore supporting a larger Europe, and in so doing we should strive to expand the zone of peace and prosperity in the world which is the necessary foundation for a stable international system in which our leadership could be fruitfully exercised.

Part of the process of building a larger zone of peace involves also engaging Russia and drawing it into a closer relationship simultaneously with Europe and with the Euro-Atlantic community. But we can only do that if we are clear as to what we are seeking in pursuing that strategy. I would say that what we ought to be seeking unambiguously is the promotion of democracy and decency in Russia and not tactical help of a very specific and not always all that very useful type purchased at the cost of compromising even our own concept of what democracy is.

I am troubled by the unqualified endorsements of a government in which former KGB types are preponderant as a successful democracy. That has been the judgment rendered at the highest levels again within the last few weeks without any qualification. But in fairness we have to say that some of that happened before this administration

assumed office as well.

We should be aware of that. If we are going to pursue a bipartisan policy let's be willing also to accept some shortcomings on our part. But if Russia is to be part of this larger zone of peace it cannot bring into it its imperial baggage. It cannot bring into it a policy of genocide against the Chechens, and cannot kill journalists, and it cannot repress the mass media.

I think we should be sensitive to that even if they do arrest oligarchs with whom some of our friends on K Street have shared interests. That is not to be approved. It is to be condemned, but surely there are deeper causes for emphasizing that it is important that Russia should move towards democracy.

To increase the zone of peace is to build the inner core of a stable international zone. While America is paramount it isn't omnipotent. We need the Europeans. We need the European Union. (Applause) We have to consistently strive to draw in Russia while at the same time being quite unambiguous in what it is that disqualifies Russia still from genuine membership in the community of democratic, law abiding states.

Secondly, we have to deal with that part of the world which is a zone of conflict and try to transform it into a zone of peace, and that means above all else the Middle East. In Iraq we must succeed. Failure is not an option. But once we say that we have to ask ourselves what is the definition of success? More killing, more repression, more effective counter-insurgency, the introduction of newer devices of technological type to crush the resistance or whatever one wishes to call it—the terrorism?

Or is it a deliberate effort to promote by using force a political solution? And if there's going to be a political solution in Iraq, clearly I think it is obvious that two prerequisites have to be fulfilled as rapidly as feasible namely the internationalization of the foreign presence in Iraq regarding which too much time has been lost and which is going to be increasingly difficult to accomplish in spite of the somewhat dialectical successes with which we are defining progress in Iraq lately. (Laughter)

In addition to the internationalization of Iraq we have to transfer power as soon as is possible to a sovereign Iraqi authority. Sovereignty is a word that is used often but it has really no specific meaning. Sovereignty today is nominal. Any number of countries that are sovereign are sovereign only nominally and relatively. Ultimately even the United States is not fully sovereign as we go around asking for more men and money to help us in Iraq.

Therefore there's nothing to be lost in prematurely declaring the Iraqi authority as sovereign if it helps it to gain political legitimacy in a country which is searching to define itself, which has been humiliated, in which there is a great deal of ambivalence, welcoming on the one hand the overthrow of Saddam as the majority does, and on the other hand resenting our presence and our domination.

The sooner we do that the more likely is an Iraqi authority under an international umbrella that becomes itself more effective in dealing with the residual terrorism and opposition that we continue to confront. We will not understand what is happening right now in Iraq by analogies to Vietnam because I think they are all together misplaced, and one could speak at length about it.

If you want to understand what is happening right not in Iraq I suggest a movie that was quite well known to a number of people some years ago. Maybe not many in this audience, given the age of some present, but it's a movie which deals with a reality which is very similar to that that we confront today in Baghdad. It's called "The Battle For Algiers". It is a movie that deals with what happened in Algeria after the Algerian Liberation Army was defeated in the field by the French army and the resistance which used urban violence, bombs, assassinations, and turned Algiers into a continuing battle that eventually wore down the French.

I do not expect we'll be worn down, but I think we want to understand the dynamics of the resistance. This provides a much better analogy for grappling with what

is becoming an increasingly painful and difficult challenge for us. A challenge which will be more successful in meeting if we have more friends engaged in meeting it and if more Iraqis begin to feel that they are responsible for the key decisions pertaining to their country.

We will not turn the Middle East into a zone of peace instead of a zone of violence unless we more clearly identify the United States with the pursuit of peace in the Israeli/Palestinian relationship. Palestinian terrorism has to be rejected and condemned, yes. But it should not be translated defacto into a policy of support for a really increasingly brutal repression, colonial settlements and a new wall.

Let us not kid ourselves. At stake is the destiny of a democratic country, Israel, to the security of which, the well-being of which, the United States has been committed historically for more than half a century for very good historical and moral reasons. But soon there will be no option of a two-state solution.

Soon the reality of the settlements which are colonial fortifications on the hill with swimming pools next to favelas below where there's no drinking water and where the population is 50% unemployed, there will be no opportunity for a two-state solution with a wall that cuts up the West Bank even more and creates more human suffering.

Indeed as some Israelis have lately pointed out, and I emphasize some Israelis have lately pointed out, increasingly the only prospect if this continues is Israel becoming increasingly like apartheid South Africa—the minority dominating the majority, locked in a conflict from which there is no extraction. If we want to prevent this the United States above all else must identify itself with peace and help those who are the majority in Israel, who want peace and are prepared to accept peace.

All public opinion polls show that and the majority of the Palestinians, and I believe the majority of the Jewish community in this country which is liberal, open-minded, idealistic and not committed to extremist repressions.

The United States as the government, but all of us as citizens and Democrats particularly, will soon have an opportunity to underline their commitments to a peaceful solution in the Middle East because in the next two weeks a group of Israelis and Palestinians are going to unveil a detailed peace plan on which they have been working for months and months. It's a fifty-page document with maps and detailed compromise solutions for all of the major contentious issues, solutions which public opinion shows 70% of the Israelis would accept.

When that happens what will be the stance of the United States? Sharon has already condemned it, and not surprisingly. I hope we do not decide to condemn it. I hope we will show at least a positive interest, and many of us as citizens, as people concerned, should I think endorse it because if we count on the people who want peace eventually we will move towards peace. But they have to be mobilized and given support.

I think one of the reasons that that support from the United States has not been forthcoming is in fact political cowardice which I think is unjustified because I have real confidence in the good judgment, both of the Israeli people and of the American Jewish community and more basically of the basic American preference for a moderate peaceful solution. (Applause)

The last third area pertains more broadly to strategic doctrine and to strategic commitment. It involves trying to deal with nuclear proliferation, and we are learning fortunately that we can only deal with that problem when it comes to North Korea or to Iran by cooperation with other major powers.

That we have to support, and if the administration moves in that direction or is prodded to move in that direction that is all to the good because there is no alternative. If we try to resolve the North Korean problem by arms alone we will produce a violent reaction against the United States in South Korea—and don't underestimate the growing anti-American tendencies in South Korean nationalism—and will precipitate a nuclear armed Japan and thereby create a whole new strategic dynamic in the Far East.

In the case of Iran it is also in our interest that the theocratic despotism fade. It is beginning to fade. It is in its thermidorean phase. The young people of Iran are increasingly alienated. The women of Iran are increasingly assertive and bold. Notice the reception given to the Nobel Peace Prize winner when she returned to Tehran. That is a symptom of things to come. (Applause)

And if we take preemptory action we will reinforce the worst tendencies in the theocratic fundamentalist regime, not to speak about the widening of the zone of conflict in the Middle East. But beyond that we still have one more challenge in the area of strategic doctrine which is how to respond to the new conditions of uncertainty of weapons of mass destruction perhaps eventually being available to terrorist groups.

Here I think it is terribly important not to plunge headlong into the tempting notion that we will preempt unilaterally on suspicion which is what the doctrine right now amounts to. The reason for that being we simply do not know enough to be able to preempt with confidence. That to me involves one fundamentally important lesson. We have to undertake a genuine national effort to revitalize and restructure our intelligence services.

For four years I was the principal channel of intelligence to the President of the United States. We had a pretty good idea of the nature of the security challenge that we faced because the challenge itself was based on a highly advanced scientific technological system of arms. Today the problem is much more difficult.

It's more elusive. We're not dealing with nuclear silos and coordinated structures necessary for an effective assault on American security, structures that we could begin to decipher and also technologically seek to undermine or in the event of warfare paralyze. We were really remarkably well informed and in some respects prepared for a central nuclear war to a degree to which we certainly are not today in dealing with the new challenges of security.

These can only be addressed if we have what we do not have, a really effective intelligence service. I find it appalling that when we went into Iraq we did not know if they had weapons of mass destruction. We thought they had weapons of mass destruction based largely on extrapolation. But that also means that our commanders in the field went into battle without any knowledge of the Iraqi WMD order of battle.

They did not know what units, brigades or divisions in the Iraqi armed forces were equipped with what kind, allegedly, of weapons of mass destruction. Were there chemical weapons on the battalion level or on the brigade level or were there special units in the different divisions that were supposed to use chemical weapons?

What about the alleged existence of bacteriological weapons? Who had them? Who had the right to dispose of them? What about the allegedly reconstituted nuclear program? At what level of development was it? Where were these weapons to be deployed? The fact is none of that was known regarding a country that was permeable, that was not as isolated as the Soviet Union.

All of that cumulatively testifies to a fundamental shortcoming in our national security policy. If we want to lead we have to have other countries trust us. When we speak they have to think it is the truth. This is why De Gaulle said what he did. This is what others believed us. This is why they believed us prior to the war in Iraq.

It isn't that the Norwegians or the Germans or whoever else had their own independent intelligence services. They believed us, and they no longer do. To correct that we have to have an intelligence that speaks with authority, that can be trusted, and if preemption becomes necessary can truly tell us that as a last resort preemption is necessary. Right now there's no way of knowing.

Ultimately at issue, and I end on this, is the relationship between the new requirements of security and the traditions of American idealism. We have for decades and decades played a unique role in the world because we were viewed as a society that was generally committed to certain ideals and that we were prepared to practice them at

home and to defend them abroad.

Today for the first time our commitment to idealism worldwide is challenged by a sense of security vulnerability. We have to be very careful in that setting not to become self-centered, preoccupied only with ourselves and subordinate everything else in the world to an exaggerated sense of insecurity.

We are going to live in an insecure world. It cannot be avoided. We have to learn to live in it with dignity, with idealism, with steadfastness. Thank you. (Applause)