

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger
Remarks at Business Executives for National Security Eisenhower Award Dinner
In honor of Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton
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Charlie, Chuck, ladies and gentlemen. I got to know Charlie Rose when his program was on the air between two and four in the morning. He was merciful – he taped you in the afternoon. I guess there were fifty people listening to that program at the time (laughter), but they were all fanatics. And you heard more from these – I don't know – hundred people or whatever they were than from many other programs that I have participated in. When I was asked to come here, I did so because Chuck Boyd asked me, and only later did I realize that the Secretary of State was speaking earlier in the evening, and I thought she might stay for dinner, which would have made the juices flow and made me give her detailed advice (laughter). But then I reflected on the fact that that might be not all that appropriate, and so we worked out the following arrangement – that I would speak relatively briefly on some philosophical points and then give you a chance to ask three or four questions. Three or four questions because if I let you ask more than that, well they don't serve breakfast here (laughter).

So let me make a few observations about the challenges of policy makers and of statesmen. And I would put the issue this way. When the scope for action is greatest, the knowledge on which to base such action is usually at a minimum; when the knowledge is greatest the scope for action has often disappeared. In 1936 it would have required very little effort to stop Hitler, and the world would still be arguing whether he was a misunderstood nationalist or a maniac. We know now what he was, but it was knowledge purchased at the cost of millions of lives. This is the inherent dilemma. When we think of the speech the president has to make tomorrow, the first question the policymaker has to ask himself is "Where are we? What is the state of affairs?" There are endless debates in the academic community whether realism or idealism should dominate foreign policy, and of course there has to be an element of idealism, but you have to start with understanding where you are. Then, as you make those decisions, you will learn that the pros and cons usually come down to something like 51 to 49 percent. And only moral convictions and a vision of the future can help you choose.

On the issue that we are facing now, in Afghanistan. There are three levels, at least, of problems. There is the security issue. Then there is the issue of civilian construction. And finally there is the diplomatic issue. But the problem we face, it's that the time scale for these various efforts is not the same. The security issue has an immediate dimension and has to operate in a calculable time frame. It requires a strategy of convincing the adversaries that they cannot achieve their objectives. I am therefore uneasy when I hear the phrase "exit strategy" because if you put a time limit on your effort, you encourage your adversary to wait out the timing. And in any event there are various levels of exit strategies. The most compelling, of course, is victory. The next is some kind of negotiation with the adversary. And the third is some kind of diplomacy with the environment. In the case of Afghanistan, we are in the situation that the security threat posed by Afghanistan is serious for us, as the Secretary pointed out. But it is even more serious for India, Pakistan, China, Russia, and in a weird way even Iran. So if this policy evolves it is necessary to mesh these various efforts together. But we cannot make one a substitute for the other. If we fail in the military field, diplomacy will not rescue us – in fact diplomacy will become unmanageable. And civilian construction we have to face will take a longer time, by far, than any military plans we can now conceive.

So, in analyzing the situation, it is very important to understand the components of the challenge. And what compounds the complexities is that the immediate decisions the president has to make concern one landlocked country in Central Asia. The historic evolution that is taking place involves the shift of the center of gravity of world affairs from the Atlantic to the Pacific and to the Indian Ocean and the emergence of countries that 30 years ago were playing peripheral roles. For the United States this is an experience unprecedented in our history. In the past, any problem we recognized as a problem, we thought was soluble by the deployment of resources. We have been brought up to think that every problem has a solution and that that solution takes place in a finite time. Now we are in a world which is constantly evolving, in which we have to learn to move through a series of stages to desirable goals.

I've been a policymaker. I've been a professor, and there are a number of important differences. The professor can take his time in assessing problems, he can choose his problems, and he has the privilege of changing his mind. The policymaker is obsessed by the limitations of time. He can never deal with every problem that he might be dealing with simultaneously, so all his experience is an experience of making priorities and of having the courage to choose these priorities. He cannot go back after he has made a decision and say "I made a mistake and I'll write another article or book."

But our public debate often takes place as if all choices were available and sometimes as if the gratification of the media is itself a purpose of policy. For example, President Obama was criticized for not achieving in China a solution to the currency exchange problem or to the Iran nuclear issue. It's important to understand that it would be impossible for a Chinese leader to adjust his exchange rate because an American president visited his country and thereby impose on his country the adjustments that such a decision would bring about. Such a decision can never come about on a presidential trip. The presidential trip can conceivably prepare for it, but the art of it would consist of making it appear as a spontaneous Chinese decision. And so our foreign policy now has to take into account the evolution of societies that are at various stages of development and the intangibles of the overall situation. And I say all of this because I have had the opportunity to serve in a period of tremendous turmoil. And I have now seen a number of conflicts in which the United States has been engaged in which we paralyzed ourselves – and in one case defeated ourselves – by our domestic divisions.

I have no idea what the president is going to say tomorrow and I may disagree with nuances of it but my attitude in listening to the speech will be that I hope he succeeds. It must not fail because we are divided, and it must not fail because we start a political debate of a nature that paralyzes our decisions. And, so, in having seen what so many in this room have experienced we must remember that the road on which we will launch ourselves tomorrow will have many components. We should not pretend that we can give a time limit to it. We can hope that our judgment was wise enough to bring it to the conclusion that we envisioned and that is desirable for the peace and stability of the world. It is a privilege for me to be able to say this to a group like this that has rendered such distinguished service to our society and that we will always remember for its service and for its dedication. And now I'll be glad to answer a few questions. Thank you.

Q&A

Question: Mr. Secretary, in looking at the road that we will take ahead in Afghanistan, we have perhaps completed somewhat of a journey in Iraq. To what degree do you feel that we have succeeded or we have not succeeded in establishing a fragile, emerging democracy in Iraq and in the heart of the Middle East and what does that portend for what we have ahead of us in Afghanistan?

Secretary Kissinger:

Let me shock you by saying that I do not belong to the school of thought that thinks that America has an obligation to establish a democracy in every country of the world by the use of military force (applause). We have done better in Iraq in this effort of establishing a democracy than anyone thought possible five years ago, and I would think that if the outcome in Iraq is a constitutional government – even with some shortcomings – that contributes to the stability of the region and participates in international affairs as a peaceful element, we will have done well. And I think we were on the road to this – I would say we have been on the road to this – and I hope that we do not because of the debates that took place in the previous administration neglect the importance of efforts to maintain stability in Iraq now that our forces are in the process of being withdrawn.

Now Afghanistan is a different problem, and I must be frank to tell you that the civilian structure is of a different nature. Iraq had a certain middle class. Afghanistan has never had a central government that controlled the entire territory. Afghanistan has had a formal government in Kabul but the day-to-day administration has been in the hands of feudal rulers in various parts of the country. And therefore the effort to create a western democratic state in Kabul is an effort that will take longer than the toleration of the American public for losses of life. And therefore I would separate it from the military effort in the sense that that's an effort we can do with economic means. As we proceed in the security efforts of course we should do what we can to help in civilian reconstruction on a regional basis and the various measures that the Secretary of State has mentioned are all helpful in that respect, but the answer to your specific question, "how quickly will we see a democratic government in Kabul whose writ runs across the country?" I hope very much that our security effort succeeds well before the process succeeds for the civilian national government.

Question: Dr. Kissinger I think we all want to thank you for being here tonight and your comments have been amazing. I want to change the subject and talk about the Palestinian situation. In light of what's gone on in your career and beyond and right now, is it even possible to have a two-state solution? Can settlements be resolved? If it's possible, how can that happen? If it's not possible, how can we get the Arab world to live with a single-state solution with Palestinian civil rights?

Secretary Kissinger:

The strange thing about the Palestinian-Israeli negotiation is the following: in most negotiations, when you start, you don't quite know what the outcome is. In this negotiation you know pretty well what the outcome will be. What you don't know is who the people will be who will be willing to carry it out. That's the anomaly. The lines of division between the Palestinian state and the Israeli state have been more or less agreed on. What has not been agreed on is Jerusalem, and refugee questions. What is needed is a Palestinian Authority that is willing to give security guarantees and an Arab world that is willing to really accept Israel. On the Israeli side what is needed is a willingness to execute what so many

leading Israelis have already discussed in private conversations. How can it come about? I don't think that an overall solution is possible right now, because there are not enough pressures in order to create the incentives to do it. I'm always hoping that a point will be reached where people will accept some partial solution like drawing a dividing line between the Israeli and the Arab side and leaving questions like the holy places and Jerusalem and the return of refugees to a later negotiation but I'm not very optimistic at this moment of an overall solution being achieved in a short time.

Question: Mr. Secretary you outlined very clearly with Afghanistan in mind, different elements that one should think about in addressing a strategy. In less than 24 hours our president is going to have to tell all of us what his strategy is and how he plans to pursue it. If somehow you were asked to deliver that speech tomorrow night, what would you tell our country?

Secretary Kissinger:

Well, I've already written at least one article about it. I would give the commander what he asked for, but if the president has a lesser number—I think the commander asked for 40,000—if the president thought 30,000 is the better number I wouldn't argue that. I would prefer the larger number only because that's what the commander asked for. Secondly, I would agree with many of the civilian measures that have been thought about but I would do them on a regional basis rather than a national basis. And thirdly, I would hope that we begin a diplomacy in which Russia, India, Pakistan, and China, are drawn into participation of establishing an international status for Afghanistan. But I want to stress again what I said in my remarks, that if only 70% of this is expressed tomorrow, I would still urge those who pay any attention to what I say to support it. And I would hope very much to have a constructive debate and not a debate that makes an issue of our commitment.

Question: Thank you Mr. Secretary. We've been blessed to have you with us tonight, and prior, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Could I ask you to compare and perhaps contrast, the moment when you were giving advice to President Nixon and President Ford, with the moment in time today where Secretary Clinton has to give advice to President Obama on the many serious questions facing our nation?

Secretary Kissinger:

Well you know, a certain nostalgia has developed about the Cold War, and people think back to the happy days when there were only two powers in the world. But they forget that these two powers had huge nuclear arsenals that were aimed at each other so that when we had a crisis to deal with in the Nixon and Ford period, it had to be done with a consciousness that it might lead to a nuclear conflagration. On the other hand, we opened up to China but China was not yet a superpower; India was a neutralist country that took pride in not participating in international affairs. So now the canvas has many more players and has to be conducted with a more complex analysis. When I served in Washington I thought the press was hard enough to deal with, but at that time there was no 24-hour news cycle. And there were some writers who knew something about their subject (laughter). So, I think in that respect the impact of the media is more immediate. I read over the other day, a press conference I gave after my secret trip to China, and people were asking me very specific questions. And I would answer "well we won't talk about this because it is something we want to reserve for later," but you could never do that today. So, the media in our days were beginning to want to make policy, but now they begin their days stating they distinguish themselves by being policymakers rather than policy

reporters. So I think the pressure of the media environment is greater, the international situation is more complicated, the penalties are less severe if you miscalculate.

Question:

Dr. Kissinger, you commented on 1936 and idealism and realism. From your perspective sir, and perhaps from a professorial point of view, would you care to comment at all on the perspective of the alleged Iranian nuclear situation.

Secretary Kissinger:

Well, I don't think there is an alleged Iranian nuclear situation. There is an actual Iranian nuclear situation (applause). And the fundamental issue is what the impact on international order is if Iran acquires nuclear weapons. The high probability is that other countries in the region will then acquire nuclear weapons. And the more countries acquire nuclear weapons, and especially countries with capacity to acquire the requisite intelligence and technical knowledge for safeguarding them, the greater is the possibility that there will be some nuclear exchange, and I believe that this will fundamentally transform the perception of mankind towards international order. So, preventing the acquisition of nuclear weapons or the proliferation of nuclear weapons is a major American policy objective. What bothers me is that for years now the United States and its allies have said that such an outcome is unacceptable, but the evolution of the negotiations threatens to make it in fact accepted, and if one looks at the case of North Korea and perhaps Iran, we have to prevent a situation from arising where the negotiations become a means by which the proliferation is gradually being legitimized. So, the question will be whether we can generate a combination of incentives and penalties to stop the proliferation. If that fails, and if no consequences ensue, then we will be living in a nuclear world which in even the medium term will be extremely dangerous.

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