

THE 102ND JOHN A. SIBLEY LECTURE:
“A BALANCED VIEW OF AMERICAN POWER”

The Honorable Lee H. Hamilton

March 27, 2007

Presented by the Dean Rusk Center in commemoration of the Center's 30th Anniversary and sponsored by the Charles Lorigans Foundation of Atlanta

Lee Hamilton: Good afternoon to all of you and thank you very much for the most gracious reception I have had at the University of Georgia. What a delight it was for me just an hour or so ago to walk around this campus, wishing that I were young enough to enjoy the courses of this great University and the ambience here. Dean White, thank you for your hospitality. And Don Johnson, with whom I served in the Congress for a term and remember very well his effective representation of the United States as a textile negotiator in the U.S. Trade Office, I am honored indeed to give the Sibley Lecture. Now, Don mentioned the fact that I had been in the Congress for 34 years. I'll tell you a little story about that. I made a very bad mistake when I retired. I announced that I had been in the Congress for 34 years and had cast over 16,000 votes. I did a little bragging. I went back to my office. I had a phone call from a constituent, and the constituent said, "Lee, I understand you voted 16,000 times." I said, "That's right." He said, "I understand you served 34 years." I said, "That's right." He said, "I want you to know that as you announced your retirement today, you finally made a decision I agree with."

I was inducted into the Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame, and I am going to test your knowledge here, a little bit, of basketball. Do you know the name Oscar Robertson?

Older folks do. Oscar Robertson was the Michael Jordan of his day. I don't know, maybe the Kobe Bryant of his day – on everybody's list of the all time greats of the NBA. They introduced him right before me, and they said that during Oscar's basketball career in the NBA he scored 28,613 points. You can look it up. I turned to emcee and said, "Just forget my point totals, would you please."

Now, I had a lot of fun in the United States Congress. I still remember some of the more memorable moments. I remember driving one day in Washington, DC, and seeing my friend, Father Robert Drinan, who was then a member of Congress, a Catholic priest. I don't think a Catholic priest can serve any more in the Congress, but they could then. He had his bumper sticker – the all-time best bumper sticker. It said: *Vote for Father Drinan or Go to Hell.*

We just had St. Patrick's Day here a few days ago and that reminded me that President Bush, 41, came to the Hill on St. Patrick's Day to meet with members of Congress. He said on St. Patrick's Day there are two things you must do. One, is you have to visit with scholars, and the other is, you have to visit with Saints. Speaking to members of Congress, he said, "And what that means is I've got two more stops to make after I leave here." We had a lot of fun.

I've debated the Middle East matter so often I can hardly remember what happened. But, I do remember one quote. A fellow got up on the floor – Don, I don't know if you remember this or not. We were right in the middle of a Middle East debate

and he said, “I don’t see why the Arabs and the Israelis cannot settle this thing just like good Christians ought to.” “If Abraham Lincoln were alive today,” one of my colleagues said, “he’d be turning over in his grave.” And another member got his metaphors mixed up and he said, “If you don’t stop shearing the wool off the sheep that lays the golden egg, you’ll pump it dry.” So we had a lot of fun, but I’m not going to talk about those things this afternoon any longer. I’m going to talk about a very, very serious subject, and that is: *What do we do with all this power we’ve got?*

America is the world’s most powerful nation – strongest military; largest economy; technologically advanced far above any other nation; the most extensive cultural influence in the world. Just think about the global presence of the United States. Our military serves in over 100 countries today across the world. English is the international language in business, in commerce, and in culture. American movies and television shows can be seen in the heart of Africa, in rural China. Of course, our inventions have revolutionized modern life, but our power is not infinite. We cannot kill every terrorist; we cannot overthrow every evil in the world; we cannot remake the world in our image. Now, it is that seeming contradiction – awesome power, yet our inability to bend the world to our will – that’s what confronts the United States.

I know Iraq sucks the oxygen out of any foreign policy discussion, but what I want to do is take a little longer-term view today about the future of American foreign policy. Or, as I began: *How do we use all of this power?* Go back to 9/11 and look at the comments of President Bush. He set dramatic, even astonishing goals for the United

States. I paraphrase him now: We're going to defeat terrorists in States that sponsor terrorism. We're going to defeat rogue regimes who seek weapons of mass destruction. We're going to ensure that no competitor to U.S. hegemony arises. We're going to abandon our support for stability in the Middle East in favor of democratic transformation.

President Bush was re-elected, and in 2004, in that inaugural address, he pledged that America's mission would be to end tyranny in the world. To accomplish these objectives he took some rather robust actions. We invaded Afghanistan and started "nation building." We identified North Korea and Iran and Iraq as the "axis of evil." We embraced a doctrine of preemptive strikes against threats before they are fully formed. We invaded Iraq and declared our intent to build a "model democracy" that would spread across the Middle East. The President rejected international obligations and treaties that all of his predecessors had supported. He relied less on the traditional alliances – NATO and the other international institutions – and developed the idea of the "coalition of the willing." And, he refused to engage diplomatically with those countries he labeled "the enemies of freedom:" North Korea; Iran; Syria; the Palestinian Authority under Arafat. "We do not," the Vice President said, "negotiate with evil..."

It is hard now to recall the sense of our own strength and optimism that struck this country – that gripped this country – in the years 2002 and 2003; all of those quotes come from that period. Today, talks of transforming the world with American power have diminished, and everywhere we turn we see the limitations of American power – in Iraq;

the level of violence in Afghanistan; the Taliban resurgence; the drug trade overwhelming the economy; American and NATO casualties rising. In Iran, a hard-line President has come to power, meddled in Iraq, and continued Iran's nuclear program, despite our threats. The Persian Gulf Conflict threatens more than half of the world's oil reserves. In Lebanon, Hezbollah defies Israel and the United States. In Russia, President Putin is moving in an authoritarian direction – interfering with his neighbors – even as we demand that he embrace democracy. In China and India, rising powers – poised almost certainly to play much larger global roles. In Latin America, leftist governments are coming to power who oppose many U.S. policies, and Venezuela's President, Hugo Chávez, lashes out at us daily. In Darfur, international outrage has failed to stop genocidal violence. And around the world, the alarms are ringing louder and louder about global climate change.

Whereas our ability to accomplish things a few years back seemed to be really unlimited, it now seems that the problems often outpace our ability to confront them. Oftentimes we seem to be virtually alone in the world in coping with the costs and burdens, for example, of Iraq. Our power is not dissipated – far from it – but our power is diminished. If, however, America does not lead, more often than not, on problems around the world, progress cannot be made. There may be a primacy of American power, but it is not omnipotent. And, the world looks to us for leadership for practically everything. A few years ago, I walked into the Office of the National Security Advisor and asked him what the fifty-or-so files on his desk were, and he said, “Those are all files that demand an immediate answer.” There was another stack of files over there on

another table. I said, “What about those?” He said, “Those are all urgent problems.”

The fact is, isn't it, that every really tough problem comes to the White House. You and I know about some of them – probably not all of them – but the whole world looks to us for leadership. Why do we have all of these kings and prime ministers and foreign ministers and all of the other high potentates coming into Washington every day? They all come because they want the help of the United States. Maybe they want military assistance; maybe they want economic assistance; maybe they want a photo op with the President – but they come.

It was very wise guidance from President Kennedy – I don't know whether Dean Rusk wrote these words or not, he may have: “We must face the fact that the United States is neither omnipotent nor omniscient, that we are only 6 per cent of the world's population, that we cannot impose our will upon the other 94 per cent of mankind, that we cannot right every wrong or reverse every adversity; and that therefore there cannot be an American solution to every world problem.” You see, our friends around the world are willing to cooperate with us on matters of common concern, but they are not willing to subordinate themselves. This is a complicated world. Other nations pursue their national interest just as vigorously as we do. We cannot make a nation want what we want for them. They have to choose themselves. And, we have a lot of trouble in this country sustaining foreign policy or costly endeavors over a period of years. Our patience in this country is not inexhaustible. Our knowledge of other parts of the world is rudimentary. The American people have a lot of problems here at home that they are concerned about. I think what Americans really want is American leadership, on behalf

of the world, where our interests are protected, where we work with likeminded nations, and where the values of liberty and justice and opportunity are the norm and not the exception. Where, to quote Martin Luther King, “the arc of the moral universe bends towards justice.” That’s what we want.

Now, how do you apply this power? I think some changes are coming about in the way we use our power. We’re moving back now towards a more multilateral position. We’re going to be rejecting unilateralism more, I believe – accepting the reality that we can’t solve every problem in the world; we’re not rich enough and we’re not smart enough, and we need some help. We’re going to find ways to deal with alienated Europe and an assertive China. We’re going to find ways to deal with the United Nations and the European Union as we are now doing to seek tighter sanctions on Iran. We’re going to support U.N. resolutions like the one giving Kosovo attributes of independence. And, we’ll go further than that; we’ll support independence for Kosovo. We’re going to turn increasingly to diplomacy. The Iraq Study Group recommendations about talking to Iran and Syria have been accepted, and we recently began to talk on a bilateral basis, as well as in a multilateral context, with North Korea. We are going to have to learn to accept countries as they are, and not insist on them becoming what we want them to be.

For the future, I hope we have learned not to hype threats; not to underestimate costs; not to paint unrealistic futures; not to savage those who disagree with us; and, that our task is to apply American power pragmatically and skillfully. Let me be a little more specific. Take this very tough question: *When do you use American military power?* It

may be the toughest question policy makers confront. Everybody in this room would agree that American military power must be second to none, that it is vital to our national security. I think everybody in the room would agree that we have to apply that power judiciously. I hope they would agree that we do not equate seriousness about national security with how loudly we beat the drums of war. I think it is becoming clear what the rules of intervention ought to be. We ought to intervene if there is an imminent threat to the United States. If we find terrorist countries transferring nuclear materials to other countries, we're going to use American power and we're going to use it unilaterally. If we receive information that we're about ready to have an attack on the United States, we're going to use American power, and we're going to use it unilaterally.

We have to have a sense of modesty, however, about our power – what we have, and how we can use it. I hope we will go into future interventions with a clear idea of what is obtainable and what is not, of what resources we are prepared to spend, and what resources we are not prepared to spend – with honesty and precision about the goals that we seek. I think that we have to understand that we're in a different era today. It's no longer – those of you who grew out of the World War II period, like I did – wars are no longer conventional conflicts between armies. The aims of war are changing. Wars are increasingly waged now by non-state actors, and oftentimes with very widespread media coverage. Wars are fought between people and among people to influence people, to settle scores and to achieve power. I hope we have learned that these problems cannot be solved merely by the use of military power. I don't exclude that at all. I must have talked to every general in Iraq. Not one of them said to me, "We can solve the problems

in Iraq with military power.” Neither they, nor I, reject the use of military power, but you cannot solve the deep-seated problems of that country through force alone. We’re going to have to seek international support and use alliances like NATO and others. We’re going to have to learn that we cannot bear all the costs and blood and treasure, that we’re much stronger when we act with international legitimacy. I think Dean Rusk and the history of this country bears this out because the greatest 20th century triumphs of the American military took place within broad international coalitions, not when we acted by ourselves. Of course, when you use power you have to be sure you’ve got support at home.

Or, take the question of the weapons of mass destruction. Obviously we need to oppose the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. I happen to believe that the proliferation of these weapons should be the dominant concern of United States foreign policy. See, our position has been: *Proliferation must stop now. We can have the nuclear bomb; you can't.* Every American accepts that. Other countries do not. The dilemma, of course, is that to allow these countries to develop nuclear weapons of mass destruction will mean a much more dangerous world, and that’s the challenge. Our policy position then must be more than what we demand others to do, although that ought to be part of it. It must include what steps we are willing to take to show the world that we’re serious about non-proliferation.

I do not think we should invade a country simply because they are “suspected” of pursuing these weapons. If that is your standard for military action, we will be in a near

permanent state of war in the years to come because nation after nation after nation is either developing or thinking mighty hard about developing those weapons. The better and the more sustainable way to approach it, is through a robust diplomacy – a commitment to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty which says that non-nuclear states will not pursue nuclear weapons in return for assistance with peaceful power, and that nuclear countries – listen to this – nuclear countries will reduce their arsenals. We’ve made that pledge: multilateral efforts to secure dangerous materials; highly intrusive inspections; robust pressure (military and economic and financial). And, let me again suggest that history is our guide here. Several nations have given up nuclear weapons; and in none of those cases was an invasion necessary; and strong U.S. leadership and pressure got the job done.

Let me take another question up, and that’s the one of regime change. I hear this all the time in Washington. We’ve got to have a regime change of this country or that country, and I can appreciate it and understand it. There are a lot of countries in the world where I’d like to see regime change. I think of North Korea where people are starving while the government builds nuclear weapons. I think of Zimbabwe where the President ravages the economy and imprisons the opposition. I think of Burma where a military regime profits from natural resources, while the people suffer. The critical question here is not on regime change, the question is not: *Is it desirable?* It is desirable in any number of cases. The question is: *How are you going to do it? How are you going to achieve it?* That’s the tough question. And the end of that is: *Are you going to send in the 101st Airborne Division to do it?* We cannot slay every tyrant. Regime

change is left better to the people under the regime. They know what they want. They will be the ones who will benefit or suffer from the consequences of change. I sat in on all of the early discussions in Washington between the Soviet Union and the United States, and we'd get up and read fancy speeches to one another. We'd read in English. They'd read in Russian. We'd end and toast each other with vodka, and then say we're for peace in the world and want our grandchildren to have a wonderful life. And then we'd go home. We did that year after year after year, and nothing much happened. And then, gradually, we put away those formal speeches, and we began to talk to one another, and we got to understand people as people, as human beings, and the thaw began to occur. And you know what? In all of that discussion, over all of those years, with all of the problems that we had with the Soviet Union and their awesome military power, not a single shot was fired. But, we played an important role in regime change.

I've got a long list of things to talk about. I can't get through it all. I'm supposed to quit here pretty quick aren't I? Don's getting very nervous back there. I want to talk a little bit about global issues, but I think I'll skip that. I'm not going to skip the point about American values. I think we have to understand the limits of cold-eyed, hard-nosed American foreign policy that focuses only on a narrow calculation of our national interests. Americans do care about what happens in other countries around the world, but if we want to spread democracy we must be sensitive to the needs of the people we are trying to reach. I am going to tell you an analogy here from the world of politics, where I come from. I think the analogy holds. It is a simply analogy. Every political figure I know who has been successful meets a constituent on a daily basis, maybe a weekly

basis, and that constituent asks that person, the office holder, to do something. The office holder knows that he or she cannot possibly do it. But you don't say to that constituent, "I can't do it." You know what you say? "I'm on your side." Or in the words of another politician, "I feel your pain." "I want to help you."

Now it may be a little too easy. I don't think it is. But you see, that is what American foreign policy has to do. 1.3 billion Muslims from London to Jakarta – you know where we stand in their eyes? We have a favorable rating with them in the single digits, most of them. That's hard for us to believe. We're a nice group of people. How come they don't like us? A lot of reasons. But, I'll tell you what we have to do. We have to say to those people: Look, we can't solve your problems. Your countries are going to have to do that, but we want to try to help you. We're on your side when you seek a decent life. We want you to get a better education. We want you to have good health care. We want you to be able to grow up and marry the person of your choice. We want you to have a decent retirement – the same things that we see for us and for our families.

They are not any different from you and me. They want the same things. We can't provide it for them, but we can say we're on your side. We want to help. And so, we have a program today that gives several millions – tens of millions of dollars – to Pakistan to help them create schools that are different from the Madrasah schools where they learn to hate you and hate me and hate America. Now, if you know anything about Pakistan, a few million dollars isn't going to get the job done, but the symbolism is

hugely important. It says to those countries: we're on your side; we want to create an alternative system of education that gives you a decent education and not hatred of Americans and the hatred of the American system; we're on your side; we want an agenda of opportunity for you.

That's what American foreign policy had to do. If you're going to win the war on terror, you have to go after the bad guys like Osama Bin Laden – which we haven't been doing, incidentally. You have to go after him – to use the euphemistic expression, you have to “remove” them. You're not going to convert them. But, to that great mass of Muslims, we have a chance. And, I think the decency of the American people has to come forward. And, we have to pragmatically know we're on their side.

Well, I'm saving you a lot of heartache here, I'm flipping a lot of pages. We have to be strong at home. Just think about it friends. If you and I were less dependent upon foreign oil and gas, we would not be tied to the events in the Middle East, would we? I gave a speech on the floor of the House of Representatives back in the 1970s on energy policy. Now, you know you're getting old when you start re-reading your speeches, and that is what I was doing. I could give that same speech today, not striking a single word of it. We're slow learners in this country. We're more dependent – far more dependent – on foreign oil than we were when I gave the speech. If we didn't have such a substantial trade deficit with countries like China, we'd have a lot more freedom of action in our economic policy. If our own democracy was more robust, with strong checks and balances and respect for the rule of law, we'd be an attractive example – more attractive

example – across the world. If we were more united, and not so polarized as we are in this country today over partisan politics, we would be more able to tackle the tough global challenges that we have and sustain our policies.

Now, this is the final point, I promise you, the final point. I have been concerned that the top policy makers, over a period of many years, in Washington are just too dismissive of the views of the American people. There is a strong powerful strain of elitism in American foreign policy. A feeling by policy makers that the American people are not well informed about complex matters. That they are not able to master the subject. That they are guided by passion and not intellect, and that the country is better served by leaving such serious matters to the elites. If I have heard it once, I have heard it a thousand times: “Trust me... If you had the intelligence I have....”

I picked up a poll the other day – I’m still a politician; I still look at the polls. What did it say?

1. The American people want us to disengage from Iraq responsibly;
2. The American people want us to take out Osama Bin Laden;
3. The people want us to engage in diplomacy even with our adversaries, not just our friends;
4. The people want to reduce our dependence on foreign oil; and...
5. The people want us to maintain strong alliances.

That comes across as pretty good sense to me. In my home state of Indiana, we’d say that was a “down-home” judgment. Now look, I do not romanticize that the people are

always right. I *do* suggest that the policy maker sometimes needs a harness, and that you and I, as Americans, should not invariably put our trust in princes. And, American foreign policy must always be sensitive and respectfully tuned to the views of the American people.

I conclude by affirming, as I trust you would too, that America cannot shrink from global leadership. We've got to stand up for our interests, of course. We've got to try to seek consensual solutions in the world. We've got to be aware of our limitations; our power; our responsibilities. We have to be aware of the yearning across all the world for human dignity. That's what all of this is about – the plea across the world for human dignity. That's our plea. We're on their side. And we have to convey that to them. We have to be idealists without illusions. We have to be pragmatists with a vision. That's the task for America in the years ahead.

Thank you.