

The State of the Debate

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Joseph C. Wilson IV

Former U.S. Ambassador to Gabon

Well, thanks very much, and thank you all for inviting me and for putting together this good program. Mr. Sorensen, nice to see you. Alan said that Ted Sorensen probably forgot something. My view is Ted Sorensen probably hasn't forgotten anything. I've met him a few times in my life. Within 30 seconds of meeting him this morning, he wanted to talk about an area where I used to have some expertise – Africa – and genocide in Darfur, without any prompting whatsoever.

It's nice to be out in the open again. I've been spending the last several months essentially recovering from the election and working on my skiing. Or as somebody said, "Draw your curtains. Don't watch television. Don't read newspapers. Just live like a Republican."

But before I came up and, actually, in November, before I started on my ski odyssey, I reread a speech that was given by President Kennedy shortly after the Cuban Missile Crisis, at American University in 1963, which marked a distinct turnaround in the way that the Kennedy Administration and the President himself thought about the role of the United States in the world and how best to defend our people against foreign threats. And I thought to myself, well, maybe I'll just send this over to the White House and they'll read it and see the wisdom of the advice I'm now offering. They didn't – I didn't. And of course, they didn't. In fact, the last person in the world they listen to these days is Joe Wilson. So here I am with so much to criticize and so little time.

So let me begin. The area that I have been focused on over the past, now, almost three years, of course, has been the Middle East and Iraq. In recent days in the Middle East, it's safe to say that there have been some modest reasons for optimism, or there have been rather some reasons for modest optimism. The bringing to an end of the Second Intifada, a horrible, horrible impediment to peace in the region, and the elections in Iraq are both things that I think people can agree are worthy. The elections in Iraq, the people who braved terrorist attacks, the people who went out and cast their vote, while not a surprise to people who've done democratization around the world, as I have been, is nonetheless to be applauded. That said, however, I don't believe you

can escape the fact that U.S. policy towards the region has been an unmitigated disaster and remains an unmitigated disaster.

It is all well and good to base your policy towards the Middle East peace process on Yasser Arafat dying. But that is not policy. The odds were pretty good that Yasser Arafat, one of these days, was going to die. And for us to have been on the sidelines for the first four years of this Administration while over 650 Israelis and over 2500 Palestinians died in sectarian violence is a hell of a price to pay while you're waiting for Yasser Arafat to die.

The elections in Iraq, while warming the hearts of all of us, of course have resulted in the Iranians having finally won the Iran-Iraq war with firing nary a shot in the past 12 to 15 years – since 1988. Indeed, the Iranian Ambassador to London said the other day, thanks very much to American interventionism, we have now been rid of our loathed enemies on two sides. The Taliban are gone in Afghanistan, and Saddam Hussein and the Baathists and the Sunnis are gone in Iraq.

The United States, after having embarked on this adventure under the pretense of national security – defending us against a foreign threat posed by Saddam Hussein and his weapons of mass destruction, his ties to terrorism, and the possibility that he might give the crown jewels of his armaments to a group of nihilists, thereby losing control of them – did not pan out as a justification. Therefore, the new justification is we send our armies overseas to bring God's gift of freedom to the rest of the world. Freedom was mentioned, I think, 23 times in the State of the Union address. It was mentioned 23 times in the Inauguration. U.S. using military forces to bring freedom – God's gift of freedom – to the rest of the world. If you ask soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines why they joined up, the vast majority of them – with the possible exception of Lieutenant General Boykin – would tell you that they signed up to defend the United States against foreign enemies and against foreign threats. Is it not a misuse of the U.S. Armed Forces to send them marching across the world to "bring freedom"?

Now, we celebrated elections after the Cold War. We celebrated elections in Poland. We celebrated elections in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. We celebrated elections in South Africa at the end of the Apartheid era. How many Americans died in Poland, Czechoslovakia, or South Africa as we played a role in bringing freedom at the end of the Cold War, or at the end of Apartheid? How many Poles, Czechs, or South Africans were killed by American missiles, American guns, or American soldiers in these efforts to bring freedom and democracy and elections to these countries? My point here is that the necessity, or the crutch of using the military to bring democracy at the point of a gun – or in this case, at the point of a Tomahawk Missile – is very much as one person said, bringing a hammer and using only a hammer out of your toolbox because then every problem begins to look like a nail.

How bankrupt is our diplomacy that we don't use the other tools in our toolbox? What is it about the way we do governance now that we determine that the only way to bring democracy to the rest of the world is through the use of military force?

Now, I spent a career – most of my adult life – in the Foreign Service. I joined the Foreign Service in the time of Jerry Ford. I was a young man then. But from the time Jimmy Carter and

Fritz Mondale came into office until the time I retired, promoting those values that we hold dear was an integral part of the way we did foreign policy. And those values that we hold dear were enshrined in international organizations which we helped found in 1945, and in international documents like the Human Rights Charter, which we supported and championed when that was passed. And yet, here we are, 60 years later, in a position where we are essentially eschewing international treaties and international obligations, where we pay very short shrift to those very values that we promoted for several generations. And what has it gotten us?

Well, we're increasingly isolated. We spent one hell of a lot of money and sacrificed the lives of 1400 Americans and counting. Our international reputation is in tatters. We have mortgaged our future to the Chinese. Within several years the plurality—the single largest share—of American debt will be held by the Chinese. And instead of going down in the history of the world as a country that championed human rights, the rule of law, individual freedoms, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, ruled by the majority but protection of minority rights, we run the very real risk of going down in history as the perpetrators of Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, the flagrant violators of those international treaties which we helped to sign – which we helped to pass through the international system. Is that what we want the legacy of our country to be? And, indeed, is that the best way to secure our national security and the security of all Americans going forward? I would argue that, no, that is not. That we have utterly failed and we have failed because we just simply did not understand – willfully did not understand – how complicated the rest of the world is.

We actually thought that by putting American troops into places like Iraq, all Iraqis would want to become like Kansans. Or Oklahomans. Or Nebraskans. We didn't understand they really just wanted to be Iraqis. And now that we're there, what do we do? What is the lesson learned? Well, first of all, the lesson learned is that it is an abuse of our military forces. It is an abuse of our soldiers, sailor, airmen, and Marines to put them in a position where defending our country is not what they're doing. That is not one of their core activities. Where enhancing the peace of a region bordering on an alliance is not what they're doing. Where marauding across foreign lands and making more enemies than they're making friends is in fact what they're doing, that is an abuse of our military services.

Governance by fear – and the meta-narrative for Iran is to instill fear in the United States again – is something that we need to resist. And how do we resist it lest we have our military embark on yet another adventure? We have been ill-served by ourselves. We were ill-served by ourselves in the debate on Iraq – and when I say, “ourselves,” I say, all of us who participated – our Congressional leadership, our press, who, as Richard said earlier, is more inclined now to give the same value to two plus two equals five as it is to give to two plus two equals four. Those of us who participated in the debate allowed ourselves to be intimidated by those on the other side who decided that if they could not beat you on the facts and on the arguments, they would do everything they could to destroy your credibility. Look at John Kerry, look at me, look at Tony Zinni, look at Dick Clarke, look at Paul O'Neill as examples. Is that the way we're going to conduct our debate and our democracy? And this gets down to what we are as a people and I'm going to close on this.

We are a democracy. The public square is open for us to stand out and voice our views and voice our opinions and give the country the benefit of our expertise. And when you have, as I saw the other night on CNN, a debate on Iraq at which the two participants are Andrew Sullivan and Christopher Hitchens – each of whom speak with the lovely accents of Clare Short and Robin Cook, but neither of whom knows squat – I would use a stronger word, but I see we have C-SPAN here – about Iraq or about American foreign policy, then there is a problem in how we do our debates. There is a problem in how we do our debates when somebody like Tony Zinni, who was the commanding general of our Central Command, is essentially forced out of the debate by vile accusations made by people who knew nothing about him, indeed, about the issues. And if, indeed, you're going to allow the debate to be run by Jonah Goldberg, Rich Lowry, Chris Hitchens, etc., etc., we're going to end up making all the wrong decisions as we go. So my argument, as I make to universities around the country as I go around, is this is our democracy. We have to take it back. And we have to resist those who would deny us our rights and, indeed, our responsibility to step into the public square and say, enough of this. Thank you.