

Iran, Iraq, N. Korea: Covering the Crisis of the Bush Presidency

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Thank you very much Dr. Lakso, and thank you all for this chance to come here to Juniata. I thank you in particular because I understand that you have chosen to be here tonight over watching a volleyball game against Penn State. I question your judgment, but I'm glad to see you here. I look forward to hearing from all of you and getting into a conversation and so I'm going to reserve most of the time tonight for that.

This is a remarkable time in which we are living and I thought I would just try to frame for you a little bit about my thinking about this period of time and particularly the time that I served as White House correspondent, which was from the end of the Clinton administration until last November. I still write frequently about the White House, but I had seven years up front to view all of this. I thought I'd use those moments to share a few thoughts about the world today, about the kind of threats that we face today and how they've compared with eras frequently talked about—Cold War and Vietnam in particular. Then later on when we start talking I'd be happy to take the conversation in any direction you want: about the state of American journalism, about the web versus print, about why this president and the journalists who cover him get along so famously.

This is a remarkable time for the nation. I think it is akin to perhaps no era we have seen in more than six decades. FDR dealt with the Depression that was followed by a two front war. Harry Truman dealt with the first days of the Cold War and the outbreak of the Korean War, the remnants of which, as we have been reminded in recent months, we are still living with today on the Korean peninsula. A few years ago speaking to groups like this, I would often point out that we are living through a period of time that in many ways is as formative as the late forties, when Truman was president and when a new American foreign policy (one that was built on containment and the concepts of George Keenen—who was sort of the author of that approach to the world) emerged from the chaos that surrounded the end of World War II. I say that because George Bush saw it as his task to remake the world and the national security scene again in the days after 9/11 and tonight we will be exploring a little bit of the ramifications of that.

His effort, needless to say, has hit more than a few speed bumps and some might say even a wall of resistance at home and abroad. A country that was remarkably unified five years ago in the aftermath of 9/11 now appears as polarized as at any moment in history. A president who, seen five years ago to be at the height of his powers and popularity, has now lost his majority in Congress. His poll ratings now rank down to nearly the levels Richard Nixon was at in his days before impeachment in 1974. Members of his own party are fleeing from him. Indeed, the war in Iraq is costing us in ways that we are only now being able to measure and assess. A war that seemed in its early days like a phenomenal demonstration of merit and power and the influence of the world's sole superpower has turned into a very deadly array of quite ugly choices in which we find that we can't leave, but we are hoping with increasing desperation for a strategy to justify staying. A year ago, I think it would have been unimaginable that Congress would consider a resolution to condemn the administration's policies in pursuing a war and yet last night, they were debating exactly that, and next week they'll be debating. And meanwhile we are facing unprecedented challenges from other quarters from the countries that the President once termed the axis of evil. Now, at that time he was talking about Iran, Iraq, and North Korea; obviously Iraq is no longer a part of it and I guess today we should call it the axle of evil.

But whatever you call it, both of the remaining countries, North Korea and Iran, are coping with their own huge domestic problems which have spilled out for very different reasons as the biggest nuclear challenges that the United States has faced since the era that we faced down the Soviets and then the Chinese—who got the bomb; Soviets in the late 1940s, the Chinese in the early 1960s. I think one of the least discussed consequences of the Iraq war is that it has made the Iran and Korea problems far harder to solve. It was not supposed to be this way. The thinking in the White House four years ago was that by quickly toppling Saddam Hussein we would send a clear warning to other countries who challenge the United States and the United Nations. I think that no one seriously considered the possibility that the reverse could be true as well; that if America got bogged down in Iraq, it could embolden Iran and North Korea and perhaps feed their way toward atomic weapons—and that is exactly what has happened. In a way, I think this is a more dangerous time for us than the Cold War was—and why would that be? I think we all knew the rules during the Cold War; the Soviets knew the rules, it was clear what steps you could take without provoking a serious response from either Washington or Moscow, and it was clear what things you couldn't do, what was beyond the red line. This was not an era of perfectly clear rules; the Cuban Missile Crisis nearly ended up in a huge catastrophe and things nearly spun out of control. But with that exception, there weren't that many moments where we thought we really were on the brink of what could be a very catastrophic nuclear exchange.

Now we've entered a very different time, what I call the second nuclear age, in which everything that we knew or thought we knew about containment and about deterrence has been turned on its head. We're no longer really worried about a nuclear attack on our cities launched by missiles that we could track from a country that has a return address, where we could respond. Arms control talks, meant to reduce the chances of such a mutual attack and retaliation, seem like a quaint moment of the past. But we are more worried than ever about the possibility of a nuclear weapon going off in an American city. And we are worried about it precisely because the people we are worried about don't know we have a return address; because the weapons technology has now spread far enough and wide enough that it is not all that difficult to obtain the materials or at least the technology to make the materials. I would argue that if 9/11 had not happened, the most famous picture of trouble, of perhaps evil, certainly of menace to the United States, would not be Osama Bin Laden, but instead it would be A. Q. Khan, who was the Pakistani nuclear scientist who went into business for himself and ended up selling a good deal of the technology to produce and enrich uranium to Iran, to North Korea, to Libya, and perhaps to other countries. The fact of the matter is he is not a household name in America and he is not a household name in large part because we are focused on the threat that seems more imminent to us, al Qaeda.

Whatever the biggest threat is that we face, it is clear that the times we live in seem more unpredictable and dangerous than any time in our past. And I think in part that is because the challengers seem so different than those we have faced before. North Korea is the ultimate failed state, one whose horrifying poverty and mismanagement and paranoia have resulted in gulags, and last year a nuclear test. But Iran is in a very different kind of problem, it's a country that's managing a modernizing economy that has people the age of most of you in the audience who were deeply admiring of the United States, that's rich in oil, and that is witnessing a battle between the forces of modernity and the forces of fundamentalism. North Korea's threat, at its core, is a threat to blow up its neighborhood, a very rich neighborhood in Asia. Iran's threat is quite different; it is to restore itself as the most powerful nation in the Middle East. So these are remarkably different challenges that require in many ways very different solutions. And it raises the question which I keep trying to raise in coverage in Washington, of whether or not we are suffering right now from a system overload. It's a subject we can take up later in the evening but that I ask you to think about, whether or not we can manage a war in Iraq, two very different kinds of nuclear challenges, the kinds of problems we are facing in Sudan, and apply to each of them the kind of attention and individual prescriptions that each of them demands.

At the core of the common problem here, though, is a sense around the world that we are distracted. That we are so bogged down in Iraq at this moment that we really can't pay enough attention

to these other threats. And so the North Koreans and the Iranians, who have a long trade in missile designs, are watching how each other operates in dealing with us and watching how much room the world gives them. They're watching the United States to figure out what they can get away with, they're watching the United Nations to figure out how much they can play the system, as we all try, all nations, try to play the system.

I was at a dinner in the fall during the opening session of the United Nations with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Iranian president, and he made it quite clear to us from the beginning of the dinner that he believed America was so bogged down in Iraq, that its forces were stretched so thin, that its public is so weary of confrontation, that the US probably couldn't focus much attention on Iran right now—and he may have been right. North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-Il, doesn't come to dinners in New York, and he may be a hermit, but he's a hermit with Internet access, and he undoubtedly has come to very similar conclusions. And so perhaps, for very different reasons, both have concluded that there may be no better moment in history to move toward a nuclear option or nuclear breakout.

They are both riding a technology wave that perversely has made nuclear engineering cheaper and more efficient than ever. Once you've bought enough uranium or made enough plutonium to fuel a nuclear reactor, moving the next step to building a bomb just isn't that difficult, as the engineering graduates of Kyung Hee University demonstrated to all of us in October. Their blast was announced a fizzle by the experts, but if any of you are fans of the television series "24" and you've been watching in recent weeks, you know that even a small nuclear weapon can ruin your whole day. What's more, the system that we have designed to spread nuclear power technology as the "Atoms for Peace" program of the Eisenhower Age is ridden with loopholes; the Iranians have exploited these quite skillfully. And so Iran is an example of one of the kinds of problems we're headed toward—a virtual nuclear state, one that assembles all the component pieces for a weapon under the cover of developing nuclear energy facilities and that moves them just this far away from being able to build a bomb. In fact, in the second nuclear age, you don't need a nuclear arsenal to demonstrate your power. You simply need to convince the world that you could build one in a few weeks and therefore no one should mess with you.

So how did we get here? How did we get to this point? Beats me, I only cover the White House. But when I started this job in 1999, seven long years ago, I can tell you that there was very little hint what this era would look like. About ten days before President Bush's first inauguration, I was invited down to the ranch to talk to him in what is sort of the ritual *New York Times* interview before the president takes office. It was a remarkable visit, largely because our conversation was so absent of the ideology that seemed to grip the administration only nine months later. He compared the sanctions that were then

against Saddam Hussein to Swiss cheese, but there was no discussion that Iraq posed any kind of urgent threat to the United States. We spent more time, in fact, talking about North Korea and its nuclear program. We spent absolutely no time, as I look over the transcript of the interview, discussing Iran, whose nuclear ambitions at that time we now know were far more advanced than Iraq's.

In retrospect, I think President Bush was a president who came in with the most modest of agendas. What he called in that interview a humble foreign policy, it was no sense of mission to democratize the world, many of his aides may have had that in mind, but I don't really believe he did at that time. If anything, Mr. Bush was thinking about disengaging from war. He was worried our military was being stretched too thin by our commitments in Bosnia and by our willingness to engage in nation building around the world. He argued that soldiers shouldn't be walking kids to kindergarten in the Balkans. At the end of our visit on the ranch, he leaned up against his truck and told me he just didn't understand Al Gore's interest in re-making the Marshall Plan around the world. That, of course, was the plan under which Truman rebuilt Japan and Germany. President Bush said he wanted to focus on home.

It's pretty remarkable to read that interview now and think about how stretched thin our military is today, how much nation building has become the core mission of the Bush presidency, and how many times the president himself has invoked the name or cause of George Marshall, as he describes our own mission of bringing democracy to the world.

I was with the President again on 9/11 and saw him react that day in the school house in Sarasota and saw the government as it actively panicked. But after 9/11 something had changed in the President and it was instantly recognizable to the people who had been around him. I think when 9/11 happened he took to the idea of ridding the world of rogue powers, of unleashing democracy in corners of the world that had resisted it, and he came to all this with the passion of the converted, thinking he had found his calling. And for a while it worked. The world was with us, as you'll remember, when we invaded Afghanistan—which had been the breeding ground of al Qaeda—and the country rallied around the President. And I think the President himself quickly identified the correct problem we were facing, that 9/11 could have been a lot worse if the terrorists had access to nuclear material, or even worse, a nuclear weapon.

When the histories of this tumultuous time are written, I think they'll undoubtedly focus on why the President did then decide in 2002 and 2003 to take this war on to Iraq. I don't believe those who say that the President believed Iraq was responsible for 9/11. He knew it wasn't. He has said many times, and I think he's sincere in this, that he believed that after 9/11 you just couldn't tolerate risks as easily as you could before 9/11. If your house burned down one time and you didn't have insurance, you made

sure you bought insurance the next time you had a house. Well, in the case of 9/11, I think he viewed it as, if you allow the breeding grounds to exist you're going to get hit sooner or later, at least that was the justification. But what I don't find compelling is the argument about why one had to deal with Iraq first when you had so many other bigger lurking threats, Iran and North Korea among them, in front of us. In other words, I think it is the right question to ask, whether it would have made more sense to focus more attention on the two powers that were the closest to getting a weapon, and to focus attention on them first, and then perhaps dealt with Saddam Hussein later. It's a question that's very difficult to raise in daily journalism, because the news is driven by Washington's agenda and specifically, by the President's. If the President is out there each day describing the threat posed by Saddam Hussein's Iraq, is it possible to question why he's saying that or even whether the charges are true, and not talking about some other country that may be amassing weapons more quickly. We tried to do all that, and we wrote very aggressively about North Korea and then about Iran, before the war began. But it is difficult in the way we have constructed American journalism—that is to report the news of the day—to write a series of page one stories about the threats the President isn't talking about, without appearing to promote an alternative policy agenda, which is not really our job. In fact, when we did write some of those stories in 2003 during the North Korean crisis and as Iran's capabilities became known, the great White House spin machine made it clear to me that *The New York Times* was focused on the wrong issues. Saddam Hussein, they said, was a greater threat and worse yet he was living in a more dangerous neighborhood. And for Iran, we were told there wasn't really a military solution and there wasn't a political solution, other than waiting for the Iranian people to seek new leadership. We heard something very similar about North Korea. The President's view was that by invading Iraq we created demonstration effect; that the toppling of a dictator, that the embrace of democracy, that he assumed would happen once the dictator was gone, would send a message to the world. He argued that it actually began to work in the case of Libya, which turned over its nuclear program in late 2003, only a few months after Saddam Hussein's fall.

But I think it's reasonable to ask the question now about whether Iraq is actually making it harder for us to manage the world. That dinner a few months ago with Mr. Ahmadinejad certainly made me think it isn't getting any easier. We had this dinner in New York in a big hotel and he spent the first forty minutes or so with a group of twenty-five of us questioning whether the Holocaust ever happened. He argued that under the Proliferation Treaty he had every right to enrich uranium and had no intention of stopping. Why, he asked, should the rules be different for him than they are, for say, the Japanese? And, of course, he made the case that Iran's intent here was not to build a bomb, but simply to become a

significant power. Answering people like Mr. Ahmadinejad is one of the challenges that the administration is going to have to face in the next few years and the next president is going to have to face. And they're the kinds of questions that we as journalists I think are going to have to be prepared to raise, whether the President's talking about them or not. As I often tell people, we can't decide issues, and it's not our role as journalists to decide issues. But it is our role to put things on the agenda and to highlight problems here at home or abroad that are not always being discussed fully or explained by the government. Every journalist comes to that process with a different list so I thought I'd end here tonight by giving you a few on my list.

I've hinted at the first one already. We've entered a series of confrontations around the world without building a system of rules for dealing with them. We said that we would put together coalitions of the willing and that we'll face off against dictators to spread democracy throughout the world. But we've not yet defined who gets to decide what countries are in need of democratization, what countries are in need of regime change. We haven't said that the United Nations is necessarily the forum for that; we haven't made it clear what the right forum should be.

Second, we have an administration that has learned a few hard lessons that we all need to learn from. One of them is that the one phrase from five years ago that, "You're either with us or against us," may sound great as a sound-bite, but is very hard to turn into policy. Pakistan is with us on those days that it's not against us. It's hardly a democracy, but we dare not push its leaders too far. I think I'd say the same for Saudi Arabia.

There's a third lesson I think that as journalists we have to stay focused on and remind our readers that the government does. And that is, that democracy is a wonderful thing to import, but unlike American movies and American cars and American music, it's a very hard thing for this country to export. Iraq is a very clear example of this. You can't want to impose a democratic system more than the people who live in a country want to import that system. In Iraq, we have discovered that there are forces at work that are bigger and more powerful, at least for now, than the motivation to build a democratic government. That doesn't mean that will always be the case. It took us a long time to come to democracy, but it may be the case for a while.

Another lesson that I think we have to remember is the system for keeping the world's worst weapons out of the hands of the world's worst dictators, which President Bush said was the ultimate goal of this administration. That system is clearly broken. But we haven't yet faced up to what we might have to do to rebuild it. We haven't seriously debated whether the nuclear arsenal that we built up in the Cold War, one that still has more than 5,000 weapons around, is actually a stabilizing force—the way one

could argue it was twenty years ago—or whether it’s a destabilizing one, leading other countries to believe that they too need to build their weapons.

And so far we’ve had a hard time getting President Bush, among others, to talk about these questions and these lessons. We can push him during press conferences, we can ask during interviews, but it’s very difficult to get beyond the sort of pat answers that most politicians put together on these things and be able to really dig into the question of what the administration is willing to change. And with only two years left, this administration has to make some choices about the problems that it’s going to confront and those that it’s going to leave to the next administration.

I was reminded of this recently when I was re-reading the transcript of one of my favorite interviews that we conducted with President Bush, and there haven’t been many interviews so there haven’t been many favorites. But it wasn’t my favorite because of what he said, but where he said it. We conducted this interview in the men’s room of a small stadium in New Mexico. OK, it wasn’t exactly a men’s room, it was a dressing room, but you had to walk through the stadium men’s room to get to this. Mr. Bush had agreed to be interviewed during the 2004 presidential campaign and he wanted to do it just before he went to a big rally that was taking place in this stadium. And the Secret Service wanted a room that had no windows, so that they did not have to worry as much about security. The only one they could find was this cinder-block dressing room. So one of their agents led me and one of my colleagues covering the White House, Elizabeth Miller, and Karen Hughes and Condoleezza Rice and some others past the white urinals into this dressing room which was made completely out of cinder-blocks and somebody had thrown a blue tablecloth down over a conference table. The President looked at this and said he expected *The New York Times* was probably accustomed to better surroundings. I told him he clearly hadn’t visited our newsroom lately. But it was an interesting interview because for the first time he admitted the first of his mistakes in Iraq. He said that he had misjudged what the effects would be of winning so quickly in the first days of the war when so many Iraqis dropped their arms and went back into their neighborhoods. And that he had misjudged how they could be lying in wait to come back months or years later. Well, we now all know that was a big misjudgment because it was the beginning of what became the insurgency, and the insurgency begat the sectarian war and the sectarian war begat something that was much more complex than just a civil war. And I think the big question of the Bush presidency now is whether a man who came to office telling us that he was going to have a humble foreign policy, and who entered his second term telling us that he wanted to set the course for freeing the world from tyranny, will make one last effort at a grand vision to remake the world before he leaves

office, or whether Iraq will become such a consuming event for his administration as it has for much of the nation, that it impedes his abilities to address any of the other problems we have discussed today.

Well, I've gone on for long enough, probably too long, but I wanted to just give you a sense of some of the issues that I've been thinking about and I am very eager to hear from all of you with questions either on what I said, or, in the spirit of good journalism, what I haven't said. So I thank you very much for your time.