



**THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE
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Moderator

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Speaker:

TONY BLAIR

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Paul Roth, *The Washington Institute*: To Tony Blair, scholar and statesman, who, through the power of ideas, was the moving force behind an historic transformation of his party, his country, and the world; who, armed with the strength of his convictions, has not only been unflinching in his view that evil anywhere is a threat to mankind everywhere, but who has had the courage to use the bully pulpit his position provided as well as the blood and treasure his nation sacrificed to defeat the forces of evil time and again; who, as the inheritor of a tradition generations old, infused the special relationship with the United States with renewed vigor, standing shoulder to shoulder with America to provide invaluable support, wise counsel, and firm partnership through some of the darkest moments in our history; who, as a selfless pilgrim for peace, plays a critical role in helping Arabs and Israelis pivot from an era of conflict and bloodshed to a new era filled with the potential for a secure, prosperous, and lasting peace; who, by recognizing the power of faith to captivate, to motivate, and to inspire, has infused his public life with a deep sense of compassion, a reverence for knowledge, and a consistent appeal to the better angels in all faith traditions so that women and men around the world might rise above their basest instincts to embrace new ideas for the sake of the common good; and who, it is hoped, has only completed the early chapters of a life of statesmanship, scholarship, and service to the causes of peace, freedom, justice, and equality. In recognition of these qualities and attributes, we the trustees and fellows of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy take great pride in bestowing upon you our 2010 Scholar-Statesman Award. (Applause.)

Tony Blair: Thank you, Paul. And thank you, Marty. You know, when Paul was saying that my national anthem was about to be sung here, I kind of thought you guys might have changed your minds. (Laughter.) It's never too late, you know.

I just wanted to say what a tremendous honor it is to be given this award by The Washington Institute. I have to say, when I said to my oldest college friend that I was getting an award as a scholar-statesman, he said, "Scholar? There must be some mistake surely." (Laughter.)

But it's a deep, deep privilege to be with you here this evening, and in particular to be with Howard Berkowitz, who I met out in Jerusalem and who I formed a very strong attachment to the very first time I met him. I think he's a wonderful person. I know he's done great work for the Institute. And I'm really delighted and proud to be here with him tonight and him getting honored too. So thank you, Howard. (Applause.)

And most of all, thank you very much for this award. It's amazing how nice people are to you once you stop being prime minister. (Laughter.)

Now, what I'm going to do is give some brief opening remarks and then Rob and I are going to have a session together there. And really what I want to focus on, I've no doubt we will talk about the Middle East peace process. But I want to focus on the broader threat just in my initial remarks.

The warnings of the past days of terrorist attacks in Europe remind us the security threat is still very much with us. The extremism remains alive. We see it in bombs in Baghdad or Kabul, but also in terrorist acts in Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, Kashmir, Chechnya, across swaths of the Middle East and beyond. The past ten years have seen 150,000 people die in the Mindanao dispute in the Philippines alone.

The policy choices from 9/11 onwards were and are immensely difficult. But eventually, they come down to this: do we confront this extremist ideology in order to change it, or do we manage it and hope in time it changes itself? I still find this judgment hard to make. But on balance, I don't believe that it can be benignly managed out of existence. (Applause.) Its roots are too deep, its narrative too pervasive.

And so, I believe we need a revolution in our thinking. I do not think it is possible to defeat the extremism without defeating the narrative that nurtures it. And there's the rub. The practitioners of the extremism are small in number. The adherents of the narrative stretch far broader into parts of mainstream thinking.

And what is this narrative? It is that Islam is basically oppressed by the West, disrespected, and treated unfairly, that the military action we took post-9/11 was against countries because they are Muslim, and that in the Middle East we ignore the injustice done to Palestinians in our desire to support Israel because the Palestinians are Muslims and the Israelis predominantly Jews.

It is a narrative that now has vast numbers of assembled websites, blogs, and organizations. And of course, many of those that agree with this narrative abhor the terrorism. But as the support across the Middle East for the Muslim Brotherhood shows, far too many buy into far too much of the analysis of the extremists, if not their methodology.

You know, when Pastor Jones was going to burn the Quran, he was rightly and roundly condemned for it by everyone from President Obama down. But what intrigued me was why such condemnation was necessary. And by the way, it was necessary.

Suppose an imam with fifty -- or was it by the end thirty? -- followers in Karachi was to burn a Bible. I can barely imagine a murmur of protest. It wouldn't be necessary for the president of Pakistan to condemn it because no one here would remotely consider he supported it. The irony is that the many Muslims who believe passionately in coexistence and tolerance are not empowered but frequently disempowered by our refusal to confront this narrative.

We think if we sympathize with the narrative that essentially this extremism has risen as a result partly of our actions, if we meet it halfway, we help the modernizers to be more persuasive. We don't. We indulge it and we weaken them. Worse, a reaction springs up amongst our own people that we are pandering to this narrative. And they start to resent Muslims as a whole. And this is because implicit in this indulgence is an acceptance of the argument that Islam and -- for want of a better term -- the West are fundamentally in conflict.

So in my judgment, what we should be doing instead is confronting the narrative head-on, forming an alliance across the face and across the divides of culture and civilization to defeat it. Now President Obama gave the template for this brilliantly in the Cairo speech. But we need to act on it. We should point out with vigor that in Kosovo, America and Britain went to the aid of Kosovan Muslims -- and not because they were Muslim but because they were a people in distress. That 9/11 was an utterly unprovoked attack on all of any faith who share civilized values. That in Iraq and Afghanistan, whatever you think of the original action, we enabled the people to choose their government -- they did so, and the terrorism that now seeks to destabilize both countries is not about some so-called liberation from occupation but is actually about attacking fellow Muslims just because they want the same freedoms as we have. That though of course there can be many legitimate criticisms of Israeli policy, Israel has a clear right to exist -- terrorism is the enemy of peace. And also that the biggest funders of the Palestinians this year, with half of the money going to people in Gaza, will be the United States and the European Union.

So we push forward the peace between Israel and Palestine, as Secretary Clinton and Senator Mitchell and all of us are working for. The conflict there is not the source of extremism. But progress there removes much of the poison that the extremists use.

But let us be firm about the basis for such a plan: a viable state of Palestine that offers the Palestinian people the dignity and justice of statehood, but alongside a secure state of Israel, because Israel's security is not a strategic interest simply of Israelis but of all of us. (Applause.)

And we should make it crystal clear to Iran: acquiring a nuclear weapon is unacceptable not just to America but to the civilized world. And if people say, "Why should India or France have a nuclear bomb but not Iran?", I say go and read the speech of Iran's president to the United Nations just days ago here in New York and tell me that is someone you want with a nuclear bomb. (Applause.)

And finally, we should wake up to the absurdity of our surprise at the prevalence of this extremism. Look at the funds it receives. Examine the education systems that succor it. And then measure over the years the paucity of our counterattack in the name of peaceful coexistence. We have been outspent, outmaneuvered, and outstrategized. And it's time it stopped.

So my conclusion is that we must act with resolution and also with intelligence. Sometimes, this policy choice is presented as a struggle between a foreign policy based on principle and one based on pragmatism. In reality, in my experience in politics, principles without a practical plan result in inefficacy. But pragmatism, unless driven by principle, can result in avoiding the challenge rather than answering it.

At stake in this challenge, I believe, are the values of the civilized world -- those that unite civilized people of all faiths and none. Needed is a plan to defend those values effectively. But the plan will be better motivated and better implemented if it is done with the principles we believe in, the values we hold dear, and the values that are worth standing up, believing, and fighting for. Thank you. (Applause.)

Robert Satloff, *The Washington Institute*: Well, I'm sure we'd all just rather listen to Prime Minister Blair for another 15 minutes -- (laughter) -- but my job is to ask our guest some questions and to have a public conversation about many of the ideas that he just discussed in this room. Let me first take this opportunity of congratulating Prime Minister Blair.

In addition to everything that Zach Schreiber just said about him, he's also an author of a fantastic new memoir called *A Journey: My Political Life*. I say it's fantastic because I've had the distinct honor and pleasure of reading all 682 pages of it. (Laughter.) Lots of fascinating passages, revealing passages, even humorous passages. But I'd like to begin, Prime Minister Blair, by asking you about a theme that you just focused [on in] your remarks and recalling a passage from your book about this.

And I quote, after September 11, "It is precisely here that I made a mistake: I misunderstood the depth of the challenge. I was ignorant of the pervasive nature of the phenomenon.... This battle is not, I'm afraid, one between a small, unrepresentative group of extremists and the rest of us. Or at least, it is not only that. It is also a fundamental struggle for the heart, mind, and soul of Islam.... To win...does not require simply a military strategy. It requires a whole new geopolitical framework. It requires nation-building...a myriad of interventions deep into the affairs of other nations. It requires above all a willingness to see the battle as existential and to see it through,

to take the time, to spend the treasure, to shed the blood, believing that not to do so is only to postpone the day of reckoning."

Well, how are we doing in this battle? Who's winning, the good guys or the bad guys?

Blair: (Chuckles.) Well, first of all, Rob, thank you very much for having read the book. (Laughter.) I mean, I wish you hadn't pointed out it was 680 pages long. I don't want that to put any of you off, okay. And it also allows me to be -- one of the things I do in the book, actually, is I break up the chapters into different, sort of, topics. (Laughter.) You know, I'd just like to tell you that.

I still find it, in fact, when a lot of people in America remember me for is after the -- you know, I frequently bump into people here and they say to me -- after the film *The Queen*, you know, they say, "Oh, I did like you in that movie." (Laughter.) And you think, "I was prime minister ten years, that's all they remember?" -- but anyway.

How are we doing in it? Look, I think we're in the middle of it, actually. I mean, I think the thing that I've come to realize -- and one rather shocking admission because I spend so much time out in the Middle East now -- I mean, my understanding, I think, of this issue is profoundly deeper than it was when I was prime minister. You know, to say it is a bit of a shocking admission.

But you realize that there is something that has gone on over a long period of time of which we are now, you know, this is a harvest now being reaped, right? But the sowing was done a long time ago. And this harvest, which is very bitter and difficult -- is it can't be explained by saying its a few extremists who are on the fringe.

You know, one of the points I was trying to make this evening is that if you actually examine the education systems of many of the parts of the world we're talking about now, I really don't know why we're surprised with our problem because people are not being educated in many of these countries to peaceful coexistence. They're actually being educated to an exclusive view of religion. And certainly so far as Israel is concerned, I mean, an antipathy that is not about the failure of the peace process but about the existence of the state.

And so I think, you know, we've just got to understand this is -- I mean, I liken to revolutionary communism. You know, this is something that will take a long time for us to work our way through. We will beat it in the end but we're, I'm afraid, only in the middle of it. (Applause.)

Satloff: In your remarks you made a very important and powerful statement about the ingredients of Arab-Israeli peace. And in your book you have one very clear statement about the missing ingredient to make the peace process successful. And I quote, "The biggest problem with the Middle East peace process is that no one has ever gripped it long enough or firmly enough. The gripping is intermittent, and intermittent won't do. It doesn't work. If it was gripped, it would be solved."

Now, a few moments ago when we had Bill Clinton offering his remarks last year on our tape, he made a case about how it's up to the Arabs and Israelis, Israelis and Palestinians: "No matter what I could do, it was theirs to grab." Is this a contradiction, or do they go hand in hand?

Blair: I think to be fair he did grip it and actually came close to it. But this is my understanding now as opposed to when I was prime minister. I actually think the key problem in the conflict -- nowadays when I'm trying to explain it to people I say, "Go look at a map of the region first, and then look at a map of Israel and the Palestinian territory." And you realize it's a really tiny piece of land, okay.

The problem is not that you couldn't resolve borders or even very tricky issues like Jerusalem and refugees. You could. I think the problem is that you have to get an alignment between the reality on the ground and the prospect of peace. And by that I mean that, essentially, both sides have a reality-on-the-ground issue. For the Israelis it's security, and for the Palestinians it's occupation. And the two are linked.

And the one thing that should give us hope over these past two or three years -- this is what I've been helping do, but the credit should go to Prime Minister Fayad and the Palestinian Authority. This idea of building the Palestinian state from the bottom-up I think is absolutely essential because a state is not just about borders. It's about governance. It's about institutional capacity. It's about security and the rule of law, you know? It's about the economy.

And in my view the way to resolve is to get a political negotiation top-down that is being met by this building of the state and its effectiveness from the bottom up. And you know the fact of the matter is, if the Palestinians can run their territory with one rule of law, one security force, in a way that gives Israel confidence, then we can get peace. But if Israel ends up thinking it's going to get [what it got] from Gaza, it's going to get Hamas [in] the West Bank, you know, it's not going to take that risk with its security, and I wouldn't if I was the Israeli prime minister. (Applause.) So I think, you know, when you get down to this, it's in that sort of vortex of security, occupation, economy, institution building that the key to this really lies. And that's why it has to be gripped constantly, not intermittently, because these things take time to establish.

Satloff: Do you believe that within one year the Israelis and Palestinians can reach an outline of an agreement? (Laughter.)

Blair: Oh, there's a bit of cynicism there amongst the audience. (Laughter.) Well, mind you, it's probably the reaction of most people in the world right now. And, okay, I'm going to be bold and say yes. And that is not because I'm simply a crazy optimist -- although I am. It's because if we get the right strategy for resolving this, we can.

Look, I spend a lot of time both with the leadership of the Palestinians and, most recently, I've spent hours and days of time with Prime Minister Netanyahu. And I am absolutely convinced that both of them want peace. I believe that. The people want peace.

The problem for the people is not that they don't want peace. They've just given up on the prospect of getting it. So my point is, you know, leave aside all the failed attempts up to now. We had forty years of failed attempts in Northern Ireland. In fact, some people would say we had several hundred years of failed attempts in Northern Ireland.

In the end, these things can be done. And frankly, at this juncture in our world security, it absolutely must be done. So whatever it takes we should go and do it. (Applause.)

Satloff: Since you mentioned world security -- (laughter) -- let me connect this to a different issue that came up in your remarks. In which you make a rather powerful statement in your book. I quote, "It is amazing that people constantly miss the importance of the fact that any threat made in international affairs must be credible. The absence of credibility actually increases the likelihood of confrontation. The recipient of the threat doesn't believe it, so he carries on: then the very choice you are trying to avoid -- go to war or not -- is the one you are forced to make. I saw this time after time. We are about to witness the same wretched business over Iran." Do you see a war with Iran coming?

Blair: I hope not. And I think we should do everything we can to avoid it. But I think that, as I said, Iran having nuclear capabilities is an unacceptable threat and we shouldn't countenance it. (Applause.) The most difficult thing right now in politics is that, you know, when I say this, people sort of say, "So you want a war with Iran?" I say I don't. But the calculus of risk, for me, changed after 9/11. And you know I really do say to people, "Go and read Ahmadinezhad's speech to the United Nations." Because this, after all, is what he's saying to the United Nations. So presumably he's, kind of, on his best behavior, sort of. (Laughter.)

But it's not simply the stuff about 9/11 being the work of American or Israeli agents and all that nonsense. But go read what he says about women. You see, the trouble is -- and this is very understandable -- what we want to do is we want to think, "Look, these guys are basically like us. If we sit down around a table we can, you know, get along together." And the trouble is, you know, sometimes that's not the case. When Ahmadinezhad said, well, he wants to wipe Israel off the face of the map, and you get people in Europe [who] often say, "It's just a piece of rhetoric. He doesn't really mean it." And I'd say, well, if I was an Israeli, I think I'd be a bit worried by it, frankly. (Laughter.)

You know, it's this notion that it's somehow a game for them. And I think that, in a way, almost -- not just underestimates -- it kind of disrespects the fact they do believe this ideology. I mean, it's not that it's simply some tactical game for them. It's something they actually believe. And the trouble is, the one thing that they need to know is that although we have a -- you know, rightly, and this is why I like living in our type of country -- we have a soft and liberal side to us and we are open to people and we are tolerant and so on and so forth, we mustn't let them confuse that with weakness, because when that happens, then they think we basically don't believe as strongly as they believe. And yet, I do. I just exhibit it and express it differently.

But I think we have to show equal determination and even greater will. And if we do that and we exhibit it and we express it and we manifest it, you've got a far better chance of avoiding conflict, because otherwise you will get to a point -- and it won't be too long away -- in which you literally have to decide whether the statement that "Iran having a nuclear capability is unacceptable" is a statement you mean or you don't. (Applause.)

Satloff: Mr. Prime Minister, in your recent election campaign in Britain, Britain's relationship with the United States was a topic on the national agenda.

Blair: (Chuckles.)

Satloff: Now, you are the archetype of someone who manifests the special relationship between our two countries. What does it mean to have a special relationship, how special is it, and how special ought it be?

Blair: (Chuckles.) Well, as we were contemplating earlier, it has had its difficulties from time to time. (Laughter.) Look, for me, it's not about something sentimental or simply sentimental. It's about values that bind

us, that define our societies and that we share. And you see, when people say to me, "Why after 9/11 did you make the 'shoulder-to-shoulder' speech?" -- I think they chose the World Trade Center very deliberately. It's not just a symbol of American power. It's a great international community gathering. Britain lost more citizens in the 9/11 attack, in one single act of terrorism, than any act of terrorism through all the years of Irish terrorism.

And the fact is, that binding together is something that has stood us in good stead, and it should stand us in good stead still. When we came [into] Europe -- when we had ethnic cleansing going on, on the borders of Europe in Kosovo, and we actually faced the prospect of Europe -- having had the Holocaust -- then returning to ethnic cleansing, and thousands of people being killed simply because they were of a different faith or of a different race -- without America, we couldn't have done that. President Clinton agreed in the end to commit fully to this. And as a result of that, which was a hard thing for him to do in American politics, we were able then to mount the campaign and, in the end, defeat Milosevic. We couldn't have done that without America. So it's not something that's even in the past. It's something we do now. We do it now in Afghanistan. We did it in Iraq.

And these alliances are not things that are tested when the going is easy. They're not tested in times of comfort. They're tested in times of challenge. And it's not always the most popular thing in the UK. It's true. But I actually got to the stage in politics in the end of it where -- you know, I started as a politician wanting to please all of the people all of the time because we'd lost four elections -- (laughter) -- in a row. So I was kind of into the pleasing bit. (Laughter.) I always remember meeting someone after our fourth election defeat. We [had] four election defeats in a row. We had eighteen years as an opposition. And this person said to me, "The people have rejected us four times now. What's wrong with them?!" (Laughter.) I said, "Well, maybe we'd better rethink this now." So you know, I really wanted to do that, but I came, by the end of it, to realize that in government, I'm afraid, ultimately what you owe people is your decision to do what is right. And I believed in this alliance. (Applause.) Thank you -- I believed in this alliance and believe in it still -- for Britain, by the way. I mean, I'm a big fan of America, but I was the British prime minister and I was operating for Britain, you know? Concluding this, I think sometimes you can just give something up that should really be cherished without almost noticing you're yielding it. And it would be a big, big mistake if we do that with our alliance.

Satloff: Ladies and gentlemen -- (applause) -- Prime Minister Tony Blair. (Applause.) Thank you very much.

Blair: Thank you. (Applause.)