



The United States' Role in the World

An address given to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council
On May 29, 2008 by

The Honorable George J. Mitchell
Former Senate Majority Leader
Former U.S. Special Envoy to Northern Ireland

I've asked to talk about the challenges facing the United States in this, the 21st century, and I will do so in a moment but since I'm not going to be talking about my time in the Senate I don't want to leave any impression that I didn't enjoy it, because I really did. So I want to begin with a couple of stories about my first day in the Senate.

I entered the Senate under unusual circumstances. I was serving as a federal judge in my home state of Maine when one of Maine's senators was appointed Secretary of State. It was in the middle of the year, the Senate was in session and the governor of Maine said that he didn't want Maine to be under represented in the Senate so on the following Monday—this was in the middle of the week—he was going to call a press conference at the State capitol to announce his choice to succeed Senator Muskie and complete his unexpired term. We had a former governor, a former senator, two former congressmen, all of whom were mentioned in the media speculation. My name was not mentioned and frankly it never occurred to me, I had just become a federal judge the year before. On that Sunday night like everyone else in Maine I went to bed wondering what the governor was going to do the next day.

About eleven o'clock at night the phone rang, it was the governor calling. He said, "I'd like you to come down to the State Capitol tomorrow at noon so that I can announce I'm going to appoint you to the Senate." I said, "Governor, this is a really big decision and I need time to think about this. I have to talk to my family and consider it." "Well," he said, "I'll give you one hour," and I said, "That's not enough." He said, "That's all you're going to get. Look, if you call me up and say 'no' at midnight I will have just 12 hours to find someone else and most of them in the middle of the night." So, I said, "OK. I'll call you back in an hour."

I immediately called my three older brothers. I grew up in a very small town in Maine; my three older brothers were very famous athletes, very prominent, not just in our community but in our state and in New England. And then I came along and I was not as good an athlete as my brothers, in fact, I was not as good as anybody else's brother. So, very early in life I began to be known in our small town as "Johnny Mitchell's kid brother, the one who isn't any good." As you might expect, I developed both a inferiority complex and a very competitive attitude towards my brothers, so when I called them that Sunday evening, I confess, there was a note of triumphalism in my voice as I informed them that the governor wanted to appoint me to the Senate – what did they think? They responded immediately and very negatively. My brother Johnny put it directly. He said, "Look, everybody knows you're a born loser." He said, "You couldn't possibly win a state-wide election. In fact," he said, "nobody understands how you go to be a federal judge, since that's a lifetime employment you'd better stay there." My two other brothers expressed the same sentiments in less polite language and so I hung up the phone and I called the governor. I

said, “Governor, I don’t need an hour, I’ve already received all the reassurance I need to accept this position.”

So, I went to the state capitol, the governor made the announcement, and I got on the plane and flew to Washington. The swearing in was scheduled for the next morning and on the way down on the plane I wondered whether all three networks would carry it live, or maybe just one or two of them, whether it would make the front page of the *New York Times*, how many thousands of people would be present to watch it. When we landed at the airport in Washington it was late afternoon and I decided to go up to the capitol rather than go directly to the hotel just to meet the Senate majority leader and get the lay of the land. A guard took me up to the Senate chamber, the senate was in session debating a bill and introduced me to the majority leader. He had a vague idea that I was coming, he was very busy and he was under the mistaken impression that the swearing in was to take place then. I said, “No, no, its tomorrow.” “No,” he said, “we’ll take care of it right now.” So they swore me in and it took less than ten seconds. Nobody noticed, not even the senators who were standing five feet away from me, as I was sworn in. As you might expect that was a huge disillusionment.

Almost immediately the senate resumed the debate and a vote occurred. For those of you interested in political trivial I hold the all time record in American history of having cast a vote the shortest time after becoming senator—two minutes. That was the first of many informed judgments I made on your behalf and on behalf of other Americans.

When the vote was over a young guy came into the senate chambers. He had been Senator Muskie’s administrative assistant and he was now mine, and he was horrified at the fact that I’d, on my own without direction from anybody, gone into the senate chamber and gotten sworn in. So, he took me back to Senator Muskie’s office where he gave me a lecture on following orders. It didn’t sit too well with me, I’d been a federal judge and I’d gotten used to giving orders and having them followed, but I understood and he went down a long list of things I was to do. Then he said to me, “Senator, we have a very interesting invitation for you to be introduced as the keynote speaker tonight to a convention of 3,000 certified public accountants who are meeting here in Washington.” I said, “Gosh, that’s just amazing. Until yesterday I myself didn’t know I would be here and to think that they held this important position open for me.” “Oh, no,” he said, “it’s nothing like that. They’ve had four last minute cancellations and you’re the only member of congress they could think of who might not have anything to do tonight.” I said, “Well, what do you want me to talk about?” He said, “The Tax Code.” I said, “You want me to go tell 3,000 CPAs what’s in the Tax Code when every single member of the audience knows much more about the subject than I do?” He looked at me with disgust and said, “Senator, with that attitude you’ll never get anywhere in politics.” He said, “You’re now a United States Senator and you’ll regularly be called upon to address in public subjects about which you know nothing. So you might as well get used to it now.”

So, I went down to tell 3,000 CPAs what’s in the Tax Code and here I am to tell you all about what’s going on in the world. Before I look into the future I want to ask you to come back with me to late 1942 when a small group of American officials traveled to London to meet with their British counterparts to begin planning for the immense task of reconstruction that they knew would be necessary when the Second World War ended. Gradually, the two governments expanded the scope of their discussions and other nations took part in a widening effort to secure the peace and to promote stability and prosperity. With the United States leading the way, new international institutions and alliances were established. The United Nations was created, NATO was organized, Germany and Japan were rebuilt and became democratic and resurgent. On the

continent the European Union was founded. All this and more helped what started as the North Atlantic Alliance, to become one of the most successful economic, political and military collaborations in all of history. That alliance is now under great stress and has badly frayed just as we face many new and dangerous threats and the possible divergence of several ominous trends.

The first and most dangerous is, of course, the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Others include the increase in the number of non-government groups committed to the use of terror and their decentralization, making identification and interdiction much more difficult than it was just a few years ago. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism; increasing competition for energy security among the developed and developing nations. In 2006, for the first time in history, oil consumption in Asia exceeded that of North America, driven by the phenomenal growth of the economies of China and India—and that gap is likely to widen with such consumption. And, of course, we confront the potentially huge adverse effects of climate change.

There is, of course, no single act, no one policy, no one person who can instantly enable us to reverse all these trends but some needs, it seems to me, are clear. We must be realistic about the threats we face. They're real, they're dangerous, and we must treat them that way. But they're also very different from the threats we faced in the 20th century and we must recognize and act upon those differences. It is, for example, unlikely that we will in the near future face a major conflict involving nation states. The United States' military power is so great in comparison to any other single country or conceivable combination of the dynastic countries that it is not likely to be that kind of challenge, more likely it will be a continuing series of actions of the type we've seen recently by nongovernmental organizations committed to the use of terror, many of them covertly supported by other governments.

So an obvious need is for a more effective counter-terror program. If we've learned anything in the past few years—Northern Ireland, the south of Lebanon two years ago, Iraq now – it is that military force by itself is plainly insufficient because counter-terrorism is not a conventional war. The effort must include more effective and cooperative police work, more active diplomacy, economic and financial interdiction and much more that is not primarily military in nature. It's constantly referred to as "the war on terror" but terror is a tactic not an enemy. It is not a new tactic and there are many differences among those who use such tactics. Some have specific political objectives; some do not. Some are coherent with a group with whom dialogue is possible; some are not, but it is inaccurate, unhelpful and openly self-diluting to simply lump them all together and treat them all the same way.

This leads me to a final dangerous trend which ought to be of concern to every American and that is the rising tide of hostility to the United States throughout the world. Today, American power is ascendant in the world yet Americans aren't celebrating and nor is anyone else. To the contrary, poll after poll reports widespread and rising hostility to the United States. Our power is the greatest it has ever been, our standing in the world is the lowest it's ever been. There are many reasons why this is so, among them the reality that every dominant power in history has aroused some degree of antagonism, envy and hostility simply by virtue of its dominance, and some of the policies of the current administration have exacerbated this condition. But whatever the cause it is imperative that we change the situation because this negative attitude towards American leadership severely impairs our ability as a nation to create effective coalitions to deal with the many problems that I've described and others. We now see that effect on a daily basis in Iraq, in our dealings with Iran, in our efforts to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and elsewhere. It

is critical that we rebuild our historic relationship and that we regain our moral stature in the world

In the past several years beginning as Senate Majority Leader and continuing since, I've met with political leaders from every country in Europe from Ireland to Russia, from Scandinavia to the Mediterranean. I asked each one this question: Now that the Soviet Union no longer exists and Russia has withdrawn its military forces back to its national territory, do you believe that the United States should withdraw its military forces back to its national territories? Without exception every European leader responded immediately and emphatically "no." Ask yourselves why do some countries want U.S. forces on their soil, and how can that be reconciled with the widespread hostility to the United States to which I earlier referred?

Well, obviously part of the answer lies in power itself. Most people want to be on the side of the strong. But for too many people, in and out of our country, American power and American principles appear to be diverging. Power increasingly is perceived as the primary or even the exclusive basis of American influence in the world. But I believe it's not. I believe that ideals have always been the primary basis of American influence in the world. The word "democracy" is a combination of two Greek words: "demos," the people; "cracy," the rule or reign of. Democracy means literally "the rule of the people." Nowhere has that ideal been more fully realized than in our society. Our institutions are imperfect as are all human efforts; yet, they function effectively in the most important task of preserving freedom and giving a primary role in our society to individual liberties and we must never forget, not one of us, not for a moment, that the United States was a great nation long before it was a great military or economic power.

American greatness began 221 years ago this month when 45 colonists gathered in Philadelphia in a constitutional convention. Their objective was independence and self-governance and they achieved both. And they did so by creating a nation of laws, not of men, a society based on a shared set of ideals. They had lived under a British king, they did not want there ever to be an American king and in that they were brilliantly successful. We have had 43 presidents and no kings. The ideals that they adopted are not easily summarized but surely they include the sovereignty of the people, the primacy of individual liberty, the rule of law applied equally to every citizen from the president on down, an opportunity for every member of our society. It is the great strength of our democracy that we have power to protect us and principles to guide us. So when our power is deployed, as it must be on occasion, it must be in a manner consistent with our ideals.

There's another point that to me is so important that I mention it in almost every speech I give. I recall very clearly my first day in Northern Ireland more than 13 years ago. I saw for the first time the huge wall which physically separates the two communities in Belfast, the capital and largest city, 30 feet high, topped in some places with barbed wire, it goes right through city streets, indeed, right through some buildings, and it's an ugly reminder of the intensity and the duration of that conflict. Ironically, it's called the "peace line." On that first morning I met with nationals, primarily Catholic, on their side of the wall and in the afternoon with unionists, primarily Protestant, on their side of the wall. Their messages had not been coordinated but they were much the same. In Belfast they told me there was a high correlation between unemployment and violence. A Protestant minister, one of the most powerful and persuasive orators I've ever heard in my life, brought with him two maps, one showing unemployment in the urban areas of Northern Ireland and another showing violence in the urban areas of Northern Ireland. When he overlaid them, of course, they fit like a hand in a glove. The messages from the Northern Ireland Catholics and Protestants were that where men and women had no

opportunities and no hope, they're more likely to take the path of violence. They told me that despair is the fuel for instability and conflict and that hope and individual dignity are essential for peace and stability in every society. Men and women everywhere need income to support their families and they need the satisfaction of doing something worthwhile and meaningful in and with their lives. The conflict in Northern Ireland, as conflicts elsewhere, was obviously not primarily or exclusively economic—it involved religion, national identity, territorial disputes and many other factors. But if there is to be durable peace and stability people need hope, and there can't be hope without opportunity and that requires economic growth and job creation. That growth cannot be just the product of democracy it's essential for the success of democracy, because to a man without a job, to a woman who can't feed or care for her children, to young adults lacking in education or skill debates about democracy seem irrelevant. They worry about coping day to day, about where their next meal is coming from. Democracy means the rule of the people. If it is to succeed at all it must also mean opportunity for people, for all the people.

The 21st century can be, like so many in the past, a time of endless war, famine, depression and injustice, but it also can be a time when the dominant power, the United States, uses its strength carefully and commits its people, its power and its prestige to a great and noble vision—a world largely at peace, with freedom, education, opportunity and prosperity extending to more and more people around the world. That's our challenge. We must make it our destiny.

Thank you very much for having me here today.

www.lawac.org

Speeches are edited for readability and grammar, not content. The views expressed herein are not endorsed by the Council. The Los Angeles World Affairs Council is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that pays neither honoraria nor expenses to its speakers.