

NATIONAL COUNCIL ON U.S.-ARAB RELATIONS

17TH ANNUAL ARAB-U.S. POLICYMAKERS CONFERENCE

***“TRANSITIONING THE WHITE HOUSE:
CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ARAB-U.S. RELATIONS”***

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 30, 2008

**RONALD REAGAN BUILDING & INTERNATIONAL TRADE CENTER
WASHINGTON, D.C.**

**9:00-9:30: "REVISITING ARAB-U.S. STRATEGIC RELATIONS: AN OVERVIEW AND
PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE"**

General Wesley Clark (USA, Ret.) – Former NATO Supreme Allied Commander, Europe; author, *A Time to Lead*, *Waging Modern War*, and *Winning Modern Wars*; candidate for the Democratic Party nomination for President of the United States [2004]

Transcript by Ryan & Associates

[GENERAL WESLEY CLARK] Thank you very much. And I'm just delighted to be here with the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations. I'm sure it's totally accidental that we are here just a few days before the election when all these issues are up for grabs. But I do want to take time and give my congratulations to John Duke Anthony and Admiral Bernsen, you've got a wonderful program today, and tomorrow. You've got all the key issues, you've got key authorities on these issues, and I think that the participants here and the audience that's watching will be able to really get their teeth into the issues.

I've been given 15 minutes to introduce this and then hopefully have a few minutes of dialogue with you all who are here. Let me just say that we are of course in an election season and the charges are flying back and forth but there are some principal issues that underlie all the charges and all the concerns Americans have, and many of these ideas do revolve around the strategic relationship between the United States and the Arab world. So let me go into this very quickly to set the stage.

The last eight years in the United States to my mind was unusually difficult and dramatic. We had four crises, each of the crises was preceded by warning. In each case the warnings weren't acted on properly. In each case the government took action, and in each case the difficulty, the crisis, the challenge, is still unresolved.

It started in the early summer of 2001 when the warnings were received about the increasing terrorist threat and Osama bin Laden's determination to strike the United States. No one knows if 9-11 could have been prevented, but what the evidence does show very clearly is that the proper actions weren't taken to pull the government together to do everything possible to prevent that strike. After that, we went to war in Afghanistan, a strike, which I think was fully justified, and necessary in terms of going after the people that struck the United States. But secondly there was a strong movement afoot to take the outrage of the terrorist strike and turn it into public support for an invasion of Iraq, an invasion that in my view wasn't compelled by the imminence of the threat. It was purely an elective war.

There were warnings that this would be difficult, but they were brushed aside, and so now here we are five and half years into this conflict and we still got 140,000-150,000 Americans on the ground. We spent hundreds of billions of dollars on it and there are still enormous political and economic challenges to be resolved. I don't think the people understood the incompetence of the execution of this effort until they saw it up close in the third crisis, which was Katrina. And only when it was portrayed across the country, and people from New Orleans began to come in communities and tell their story, and three and four and six months later people were asking how long are these people going to stay in our hotels, did people began to understand the difficulties connecting bold expressions of ideas with effective execution of policy.

And now of course in the midst of this enormous financial crisis. Four crises, eight years. It's not just a matter of execution, its really a matter of old ideas that have out served their purpose. And I think that regardless of which side you're on in this election, I'm a Democrat, and I'm very proud of that. I'm not apologizing for that, but I think regardless of which side you are on it's time for new ideas and I think both candidates reflect that. New ideas because the old ideas

haven't worked, old ideas in terms of security, the idea that it was the military that could somehow save us.

I spent 34 years in the United States armed forces. I love the men and women in uniform, but ask any general or colonel and they will tell you please do everything you can before you put us in to the conflict. It just makes common sense.

The United States to be safe in the world has to make more friends than enemies. We have to build our alliances, use the exchange of information, we have to use our diplomatic power, international law, our economic strength, the power of ideas, living up to our own values, and only as a last, last, last resort, call on the men and women in uniform to go risk their lives, because when you use military force it's permanent. It's easy to get in, it's hard to get out, and usually what looks clean and simple turns out to be dirty and difficult, and complicated. And that's how it's turned out and so I think there's time and there is a willingness, there is a necessity to have some new ideas in the security field.

I think in the economic field it's the same. We talk about an ownership society, and we've certainly encouraged the creation of capital but it turns out that we built a society on debt not on ownership. And we hit the wall on debt. Home mortgage debt, credit card debt, automobile loan debt, sub prime debt, CDSs, CDOs, and as the American public gets into it we are slowly beginning to understand that as important as the banking system is, if you don't deal with the root of the problem, the American consumer, the Americana home owner, and the American family you can't fix this.

The United States is still more than twenty percent of the world's GDP, this economy is built more than 70% on consumer confidence and consumption, and so without restoring that confidence and that purchasing power to the American family you cannot bring this economy back. It's not just a matter of providing liquidity to the banking system. That liquidity has to go all the way down and that's a very difficult challenge. It's going to require some new ideas.

And finally another cluster of new ideas. This building is named for a great President, Ronald Reagan. I recall being an army officer and listening to him talk. I voted for Ronald Reagan, I was proud to do so because he helped restore America's military strength but one of the things he used to say, "Don't be looking for government to solve everything. Government is not the solution. Government is part of the problem." And yet, maybe the idea had a strong validity in the early 1980s but today government is part of the solution. And we are looking for government to have a vision, to take us forward, on security, on the economy, on how we relate to the world, on matters like energy, and certainly in terms of the American body politic. Which brings me to a fourth set of new ideas.

In the 1980s with the rise of the modern Republican movement it became clear that through new communications and new technologies and exquisite understanding of voters you could target your political message and you could build enormous strength, but the consequences of it seemed to be that you built the strength out of dividing a country. And you separated one group from another. Some people were more patriotic. Others were non patriotic. Some had more

faith. Others had no faith. Some were good people. Some were not good people. And this sense of division has itself become an issue.

It's time for some new ideas, new ideas on security, the economy, the role of government and how leaders pull the American people together. As I say regardless of who wins this election, I think you are going to see some of those new ideas coming out. What would my expectations be?

First of all in the area of security. I think you're going to see major diplomatic outreach. It will be outreach that is both U.S. led and multinational. It will work in clusters. I think there will be a Southwest, South Asian cluster of diplomatic initiatives. Pakistan can't be allowed to fail as a state. And this requires not only dealing with Pakistan but dealing with the Kashmir issue along with Pakistan and India's relationship, and of course dealing with what's happening in Afghanistan.

The place to start is with strong diplomacy. I think you are going to see a cluster around Iraq. We've just nibbled at the edges of this so far, with the first tentative conversations with those with whom we disagree.

Will we talk to Syria? Will we have a dialogue with Iran? Will we bring all of those who have a stake in the outcome in Iraq together and actually provide a forum for the exchange of issues, the exchange of information and moving the region forward peacefully? I think you are going to see a major effort in that. I think you are going to see a fundamental effort with regard to Israel, the Palestinian and the Lebanon issues.

These are three major clusters of diplomatic effort that I think are inevitable. I think you are going to see a separate channel with Iran. I think the option of using force with respect to Iran's nuclear desires, is not off the table, and Iran should not believe that it is. But I think that the use of force would have to be considered a last resort, and before it's too late I think Iran should be called directly to account for itself on its actions, and its aims and its programs.

I think in economic development you are going to see a major effort from the west to work with the Gulf to work in Pakistan, and pull Pakistan together. I think you are going to see an effort to try to give economic hope to Afghanistan. I think it's possible if you look at Afghanistan, that Afghanistan wouldn't have to be the center of opium production. It could be a center for wheat production in the region. All you have to do is provide know how, capital goods, water and a market. And it certainly is easier to ship wheat than it is to ship pomegranates. So I think with a little bit of leadership people in Afghanistan could be given hope that their country has a real purpose in world development. Afghanistan also has natural resources like gas, which hasn't been fully developed, and it is a wonderful transit area. I think you're going to see some major efforts at economic development there.

I think energy independence is going to move to the fore. Energy independence for the United States, but greater reliance, greater development of green, of renewable and sustainable resources around the world. It's only necessary. It's not directed at any particular group, or country or effort, it's simply essential. Because at 85 million barrels a day, no matter what the price of oil is today, with the growing world population and economic development all over the world it is

clear that the age of petrochemicals has to be supplemented and eventually supplanted by new ways of providing energy to human activities.

I think these forces and activities and approaches come together sharply on Afghanistan and Iraq. On Afghanistan we are going to need a real strategy for success, two more, three more, five more, eight more brigades of US soldiers is not a success strategy for Afghanistan. The military are the first ones to tell you that. Neither are the provincial reconstruction teams. What's needed instead is a broader strategy that combines diplomatic outreach in the region, with economic hope for the people of Afghanistan, with the kind of the security measures that are essential and the political measures inside of Afghanistan to bring those who doubt this together at the table and give them a stake in a positive outcome.

And with respect to Iraq, I think you are also going to see a strategy that uses the withdrawal of American forces to incentivize a reconciliation of the long-standing political issues inside Iraq. Iraq unlike Afghanistan is sitting on a sea of economic hope in terms of its undeveloped oil potential. But it can't be realized without the kind of diplomatic and political efforts in the area that frankly we haven't seen pushed as intensely as they need to be thus far.

So I think, ladies and gentlemen, as you look at the culmination of this election season that what you can expect to see with regards to U.S. and Arab relations regardless of which party wins is new ideas. New ideas in terms of national security for the United States. New ideas in terms of our economic approach in the world. New ideas with respect to the U.S. leadership and they will definitely impact policies in this part of the world.

Thank you very much. I would be happy to take your questions.

[BERNSEN] General I have a number of questions here and what I would like to do to enable you to gauge the amount of time you want to spend on each one I will read four and we will go back and start at the beginning if that is okay.

Can efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear capabilities, nuclear weapons in the region succeed or do we need to learn to live with nuclear proliferation as a fact?

Number 2. How do our military involvements in Iraq and Afghanistan end? Is victory a relevant term?

Are cross border incursions by U.S. forces into Syrian territory or Pakistani territory necessary or are they counter productive? Do such actions poison the well of our ongoing relationships between the United States and these governments?

Can the American military sustain its current levels of long-term deployment in terms of financial and human costs? And what needs to change to assure a 21st century military that is well trained and equipped and able to maintain sustained deployments?

Now back to number one. That's the cross border incursions by US forces into Syria and Pakistan.

[CLARK] Well that's certainly an ambitious list of questions. Did you write all of those yourself?

[BERNSEN] No. I did not. They came from the audience.

[CLARK] Well let me if I can sketch out quickly some responses on these.

First, with respect to nuclear proliferation, I don't think we have to give up on the idea yet, that we can halt the proliferation of nuclear weapons in this region. I think it's too early to give up. But I think it is clear that we cannot continue to outsource the dialogue exclusively to our European allies.

We are as the United States going to have to participate directly in this. In a dialogue without preconditions but a dialogue with preparation, and we need to talk urgently and directly to Iran. Iran is in many respects the key, and Iran is still, I believe, it's not too late to have that dialogue. So I wouldn't give up on the idea of halting nuclear proliferation.

How do we end the military engagement? You end the military engagement because at some point people decide they don't want to fight. You don't end it by killing people. You end it by persuading the people who were fighting that there is a better alternative than fighting. This requires a combination of diplomacy, economic assistance, communications, outreach and security. So what we're looking to see is a strong set of plans for both Iraq and Afghanistan that move us in that direction.

I don't think it's possible to say that under no circumstances will a force that's deployed in fighting not conduct cross border raids. But I do think that the tactical advantage of a raid like that has to be weighed against the strategic disadvantage.

With respect to Pakistan, it is after all a nation of 170 million people. You can't put a brigade of the 82nd into Karachi and control the country. As much as people might want to. We did encourage President Musharraf to leave and we did encourage democracy and we should give the Pakistani people adequate time and the support they need to legitimate that democracy and show that it can handle its own internal tasks.

It's a real challenge in a time of global economic crisis and faced with the kind of domestic insurgency that the Pakistani authorities are confronting. So I think that the strategic realities of Pakistan argue that we're not seeking an invasion of North Waziristan. That's not a solution to the problem of Pakistan at this point. But would I say that we should never conduct a strike. Listen, that's really up to the people on the ground and the dynamics of that situation at that time. What the people of Pakistan should appreciate is that Americans understand, respect their democracy, want them to succeed and are pulling for their economic and political strength and rejuvenation.

Now with respect to the United States military, I just say that no one would have believed that the United States Army and Marine Corp, volunteer forces, could have sustained this mission for

this long without resorting to the draft or other measures. They have done a remarkable job and my hat's off to the leadership, to the men and women, and especially to the families who have put up with repeated deployments. Their patriotism, their love of country, their commitment to the principles of the United States are truly remarkable. So I think we have to honor the men and women in uniform even as we seek some new ideas on how to keep America safe.

[BERNSEN] I have one another question here that I think would be interesting for you. You were pivotal in bringing an end to the brutalities inflicted on the Muslim Bosnians and Kosovars. What lessons were learned that might be applied to the Arab-Israeli in light of John McCain and Barack Obama emphasizing the need to protect Israel but saying little about the need to protect the Palestinians?

[CLARK] Well I think that if you go back and look at what we did in the Balkans it was about starting with the attitude of respect for all parties. Secondly, that some very talented people led by Ambassador Richard Holbrook were told get this done or don't come back alive, basically. And we stayed in the area and we worked it and worked it and worked it and that required intensive, the most intensive diplomacy. And third it required exquisite attention to detail. Ultimately it was the leaders that decided on the exact boundaries to be negotiated and the exact wording of agreements. So I take three lessons out of it. Lesson number one is respect all parties. You may have to talk with people that, at one point we talked with indicted war criminals, and we didn't want to but we did and it turned out to be important. Number two, that you must have committed talented team that is told you have no alternative but to work this until you produce a solution. And number three you have got to get into the details, no broad brush, down into the details, and stay with it and work it.

Thank you all very much for the opportunity to be with you. I wish you the best for this important conference.

Thank you.

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