

**Understanding the Americans  
Perspectives on US Politics and Foreign Policy**

**Comments to Members of the Free Democratic Party  
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## Understanding the Americans

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I am very pleased to be here and to have the opportunity to exchange some perspectives with you. I must tell you how much I admire those of you who are in public office. As a political scientist I *analyze* politics but you *practice* it. It is an important profession.

When my friend Sibylle invited me to speak to this group I asked if she wanted me to deliver an academic talk or my anti-American harangue, which she has heard. I decided to skip the harangue. I do want you to know that while I am a deeply patriotic person, I am a critic of many of my country's policies. My views should not be seen as typical. Today I want to offer nine observations that I hope will give you some insight into how Americans think and how our political system functions, especially regarding foreign affairs. I want this meeting to be interactive. I want to learn from you at least as much as you learn from me.

### Point One: Geography

I have to start by telling you how interesting it is to me that we can conduct this meeting in English. There is a joke that someone who speaks several languages is called multi-lingual, someone who speaks two languages is called bi-lingual, and someone who speaks only one language is called American. Unfortunately, there is truth in this joke, but there is a reason for it, and that brings me to my first point, the reality of geography.

You cannot understand my country without understanding that we live on the world's largest island. We have to work hard to engage other cultures. Not only does much of the world speak our language, but we are physically distant from people other than ourselves. For someone like myself—growing up in the Midwest—I had to travel nearly a thousand kilometers to reach a place where the language was anything other than English. Our television news is American-centered. If a hole opens in the ground tonight and swallows Berlin, the American headlines tomorrow will say “President reacts to German tragedy.” As a people we are predisposed to be isolated and parochial. We don't understand how the rest of the world operates unless we make the effort to learn. Bill Clinton decided when he was a boy in secondary school that he would enter politics and began a three-decade campaign of self-education. President Bush never made the effort and entered office the most ill-prepared President of modern times.

## **Point Two: National Security**

A second aspect of our isolation is that we are protected from invasion by the oceans that surround us. While other countries experience war and destruction, we have not been invaded since 1812. It is inconceivable that foreign armies could reach our shores. We do not fortify our land. Our military forces are designed for mobility, not defense. The continent defends itself. Our song, *America the Beautiful*, has a line that moved me even before September 11.

Thine alabaster cities gleam  
Undimmed by human tears

We were stunned—more than stunned—by those attacks. It was as if the sun had risen in the west. All of our assumptions about our safety were out the window. I realize that what happened to us was a small fraction of what happened to any German city on a single night during the war, but to us it was the worst thing any foreign enemy had ever done. Since then the President has enjoyed exceptional popular support, even as his performance deteriorates. I think we are still in shock, waiting for the next strike, rallying to a symbol.

## **Point Three: A Nation of Immigrants**

American history has been characterized by a constant influx of people from foreign lands. The discovery of a vast, rich continent with only a few million inhabitants transformed the history of the world. Our task was to populate it without letting it fragment. We began a process called Americanization. We made an unwritten contract with immigrants: we will accept you as one of us but you have to give up your loyalties and identities and accept our language, our history, and our dreams. Abraham Lincoln once received a letter from a German prince noting that many of his citizens were anxious to emigrate to America but they wanted to maintain their German culture. He asked if Lincoln would set aside a piece of land where they could settle to be among themselves. Lincoln wrote that the Germans were welcome but there would be no land set aside for them (and the language of the public schools was English, we might add). By way of personal example, my grandmother was born in France and I grew up around the French language but I never learned to speak it. There was an unwritten rule that French would never be used with anyone born in America. There were costs to this, but also benefits.

From the very beginning we have worried that this process might break down and we would be confronted by an alien element within our borders. In each generation, our fears have been unrealized. A colleague told me of a book written a century ago that said the Italians were

“unassimilable,” an unpleasant word. He laughed. “They didn’t realize that we did not want to preserve Italian culture. We wanted to move to the suburbs and buy a refrigerator.”

Throughout our history we have emphasized those symbols and themes that transcend our differences and link us to each other. The French intellectual Ernst Renan said a hundred years ago that to unite your country it is sometimes necessary to ignore history or even to fabricate it. We have done this quite effectively, turning English Puritans into generic Americans, and turning slaveholding Virginia planters into advocates of individual freedom. In school, our children begin the day by facing the flag and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. Our politicians routinely deliver speeches about American destiny. Such speeches might sound terrifying if delivered by a German leader, but to us they are uneventful Fourth of July rhetoric.

Today we are facing a new wave of immigration, the biggest ever. The Mexicans lead the parade, both legally and illegally. Near Tucson, Arizona, where my son lives, the border is porous. Every night scores of people sneak across. Hundreds die in the desert every year. Millions of Mexicans live in the country illegally. Other persons arrive from Asia and the Middle East. Visitors disappear into our vast land. Signs in the Post Office say aliens must register once a year, but the rules were never enforced. Now those without proper documentation—especially those from the Middle East—will be arrested and probably deported. This is a new age with new fears and new threats to individual rights. I have always told my students that we had the firmest *habeus corpus* rule in the world. I can no longer say that. As a civil libertarian, I am very concerned.

#### **Point Four: The Civil Religion**

Rousseau and De Tocqueville wrote of what is commonly called the Civil Religion. Simply put, there is a unifying religion of the state. The civil religion has everything other religions have: patriarchs, martyrs, rituals, divine holidays, a myth of origin. Americans embrace our civil religion and our politicians try to pass themselves off as high priests. The words of messianic patriotism that come from our leaders sometimes sound frightening to outsiders, but they are just the way we think. Someone once wrote that if the most religious people in the world are Indians and the least religious people in the world are Swedes, then America is a nation of Hindus governed by Swedes. I would add that we are governed by Swedes pretending to be Hindus.

There are several themes in our civil religion. Let me outline them for you and you can listen to the President’s next speech to see how many appear. We are a covenant people who

prosper only because we bend our knee to God; we are a Chosen People blessed by God in a way that other peoples can only envy; we are a Shining City on a Hill, a beacon of light unto the pagans; we are a nation drawn from the nations for a special purpose; we are a nation protected by God, but only so long as we obey our Covenant; finally, we are a nation that periodically falls into apostasy, is chastened by God, and has to be called back to obedience.

Most Americans believe that our role in the world is benign. You heard our Secretary of State say that we view our control of Iraqi oil as a trust for the Iraqi people, and you heard our president say that we will stay in Iraq as long as necessary but not one day longer. Such statements are met beyond our shores with skepticism, but within the country they resonate as the way Americans *should* and *do* behave. We are a naïve and innocent people, ill informed and easily manipulated, at least in the short term. We are doubly handicapped by an aggressive and militant television media that sensationalizes complex issues and inflames public opinion.

#### **Point Five: The Neo-Conservatives**

I do not have to tell a room full of Germans that the world was transformed a decade ago. All of us were astonished by the fall of the Soviet Union, the reunification of Germany, and the collapse of the communist regimes of Eastern Europe. These events left everyone, from professors to presidents, scrambling to figure out what comes next. We now have what the world resisted for 200 years, a hegemonic power. The US Defense Department reacted to these events with strategic planning documents in 1991 and 2002.<sup>1</sup> These documents embraced American domination. The first document spoke of the need to prevent the emergence of any “*potential competitors*.” Germany and Japan were not happy, and the offending phrase was changed to “*potential adversaries*,” but the spirit was still there. Then came the strategic planning document of 2002 with its doctrines of preemption, unilateralism, and nuclear first strike. Both of these documents showed the hand of Paul Wolfowitz but also the influence of Dick Cheney.

Today American strategic policy appears to be dominated by an orientation that we call Neo-Conservative. This is a matter of some controversy in my country and I would like to offer you some information about this group. These are not conservatives in the sense of Nixon-Kissinger or Bush-Baker. Those earlier conservatives were prudent, cautious advocates of

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<sup>1</sup> Defense Planning Guidance for the 1994-1999 Fiscal Years; Defense Strategy for the 1990s; Defense Planning Guidance for the 2004-2009 Fiscal Years.

American influence in a system of alliances and international law. The Neo-conservatives are different. Their Guru is Richard Perle, a Cold Warrior from the right wing of the Democratic Party. Perle worked for Senator Henry Jackson in the 1970s but left the Democratic party because of its opposition to the Vietnam war and its support for détente. He was in the Reagan Defense Department and was labeled the Prince of Darkness because of his strong opposition to arms control. In 1996 Perle and several of his followers served as advisors to the new Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu. They wrote a policy paper for him entitled *A Clean Break*.<sup>2</sup> It condemned the Oslo Accords, advocated overthrowing Saddam Hussein and replacing him with Prince Hassan of Jordan, suggested destabilizing Syria by using its internal ethnic tensions against it, and urged Israel to give up US foreign aid to increase its autonomy. Through another Neo-Conservative vehicle, the Project for a New American Century, Perle and his allies wrote an *Open Letter* to Bill Clinton in 1998 again calling for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.<sup>3</sup> They advocate similar policies through JINSA, the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies, based in Jerusalem and Washington, and the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank. You note that they are not elected officials and are not coming out of popular support groups.

Perle was an advisor to candidate Bush in 2000 and headed his Defense Department Transition Team. A Transition Team recruits people for key positions in an incoming administration. Several signers of these two documents ended up in the administration. One was Paul Wolfowitz as Deputy Secretary of Defense. Others are in the State Department, the National Security Council, and on the Defense Policy Board.<sup>4</sup> There is strong resistance to the Neo-Cons from conventional Bush-Baker conservatives, most of whom had doubts about the Iraq War.<sup>5</sup> Many Neo-Conservatives are Jewish and passionately pro-Israeli, i.e., pro-Likud. That

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<sup>2</sup> *A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm*. The Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies, Jerusalem, Washington. 1996. Signed by Richard Perle, AEI, James Colbert, JINSA, Charles Fairbanks, Jr. Johns Hopkins, Douglas Feith, Robert Loewenberg, IASPS, Jonathan Torop, WINEP, David Wurmser, IASPS, Meyrav Wurmser, Johns Hopkins.

<sup>3</sup> Among its signers were Eliot Abrams, Richard Armitage, William Bennett, John Bolton, Robert Kagan, William Kristol, Zalmay Khalilzad, Richard Perle, Donald Rumsfeld, James Wolsey, and Paul Wolfowitz.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Feith, Under Secretary of Defense; David Wurmser, Department of Defense; Elliott Abrams, Middle East Director, National Security Council; Richard Armitage, State Department, John Bolton, Under Secretary of State; Lewis Libby, Chief of Staff of the Vice President. Feith was in charge of a special intelligence agency to bypass the skeptics in the CIA and Defense Intelligence Agency who doubted there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

<sup>5</sup> Many from the first Bush administration were resistant to the Iraq war. Among them were Secretary of State James Baker, National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, and General Norman Swarzkopf. Current Secretary of State Powell was also slow to endorse the war.

has generated some conspiracy theories but their ethnicity is not a sufficient or even defining trait. Many are not Jewish, including Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, Vice President Cheney, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, Former CIA Director James Wolsley, and former Speaker Newt Gingrich.

They are often described as intellectuals but they are really ideologues. What they share is a strategic orientation, an imperial vision, to their critics. They believe that we are in a unique period of history when the potential to transform the world is waiting for America if it will only seize its opportunity. They say there are left-over regimes from the communist age that must be pushed aside, and religious regimes that must be removed. Among their targets are Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Sudan, and North Korea. Afghanistan, Iraq, Serbia, and the Palestinian Authority are now gone. The others await their fate. These are weak regimes, paper tigers if you will, that can be easily pushed into the dust bin of history by the quick application of American force (or by the instigation of internal uprisings). If we act, they say, we will be renounced and criticized, but we will advance the cause of world civilization. The Arabs in particular—the last region without a pro-democracy movement--will benefit. They believe History will thank us.

The Neo-Conservatives mix messianic rhetoric with Cold War *realpolitik*.<sup>6</sup> One professor said they combine the self-righteous idealism of Woodrow Wilson with the tactics of Field Marshall Von Moltke.

### **Point Six: Wars of Quick Decision**

Britain and Russia are familiar with long-term, low-intensity warfare. America is used to wars of quick decision. A few years ago I had dinner with George McGovern, the Democratic nominee for President in 1972 who had opposed the Vietnam War. He said that Americans are

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<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Adelman is on the Defense Policy Board. Last year he was asked what advice he would give President Bush about an Iraq War. His answer illustrates the way the Neo-Cons think. “This is a historic moment. You have a mission. It is almost a divine mission. You have one task in life. That is to wage a global campaign against terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. Unlike any of your predecessors, including Harry Truman at the beginning of the Cold War, you have no public opposition, no congressional opposition, and meaningless foreign opposition. It is a noble, wonderful mission. Our children's lives will be better for it. You are given the opportunity by tragedy to solve the large problem. It is virtually impossible to wipe out terrorist groups, but, by God, you can wipe out countries that support terrorism. There are two countries that are not easy picking, but not tough-- Afghanistan and Iraq. I have no evidence that Iraq was involved in nine-eleven, but I feel it. There is no reason you can't use these ideal conditions to help fulfill your mission.”

always supportive of a three-month war but then they become angry. To tell another anecdote, I once met with the Vice President of Syria. One of my colleagues asked him if he really believed Syria would get its Golan province back because it had been occupied since 1967. “What is fifty years in the history of a country?” he responded. Americans don’t think that way. As a people we have no long-term perspective on history. We want solutions, and we want them fast. An American president has until the next election to deal with an issue or face an angry public. The war that began on September 11, 2001 has morphed from a war against Al Qaeda into a long-term, open-ended war against an undefined enemy identified only as international terrorism, of which Iraq was alleged to be a part. There is no victory in such a war. When we went into Lebanon in 1983 we pulled out in humiliation when we lost 241 soldiers. I opposed the war in Iraq for a variety of reasons, but one was my fear that we would pull out and leave a failed state. I hope our friends can help us make sure that does not happen. The world does not need another Afghanistan.

### **Point Seven: Weak Parties and A Strong Congress**

In terms of our domestic political structure our decision process is affected by the fact that we have weak parties and strong Congressional committees. The parties are weak because they do not control the two things that every party system should control, their nomination process and their campaign funding. Our candidates are nominated by a primary system that typically has under 40% voter turnout. This means that someone can be nominated by only 20% of the voters in that party. In some states, primary voting is also “open,” meaning that voters from one party can vote in the other party’s primary. With private funding of elections and an extensive network of what we call PACs, i.e., private fund raising organizations linked to special interest groups, a candidate is dependent upon special interests for nomination. Throw in the fact that much campaigning is done via expensive television advertising and we have a situation in which the party is vulnerable to external groups that can capture its candidates.

In Washington, there is a second important factor. Congressional committees are very powerful. Those committees, not to mention private members, have their own budgets and their own research staff. A member of congress is not just an individual but the leader of a combat team. The committees, through their chairs, control the legislative process, the amendment process, the order in which issues are considered, and even whether or not an issue comes to a vote. They also approve appointments. When a President makes a commitment, it is not clear



that he can get that commitment approved by Congress without serious concessions, especially if powerful domestic groups resist it.

The chairs are chosen through a mix of seniority and election by their party caucus. This means they are good at getting re-elected and at making political deals but are not necessarily well informed about foreign affairs. Some leaders are superb, but not all. Last year Dick Armey of Texas, the House Majority Leader, said that the solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was to “transport” (his word) the Palestinians to another place. After all, he noted, the Jews had been “transported,” and anyway there are many Arab states with much land. In 1998, Trent Lott, Republican Majority leader of the Senate, welcomed Prime Minister Jean Chretien of Canada to Washington by introducing him as “John...John...uh.. Costain.” Chretien kept his smile frozen in place but it was obvious that he was thinking to himself “If you were in my cabinet I would kill you right now as an example to the others.”

When you hear that Congress has passed a resolution declaring Jerusalem to be the united and eternal capital of Israel--a position inconsistent with American foreign policy and certain to destroy any potential settlement--take a deep breath and recognize that this is what we call “pandering.” When you hear that my local representative in Congress has introduced a bill to grant full US veteran’s benefits to anyone who served in the Polish Army during the Second World War, just remember that Detroit is called the third largest Polish city. These are not statements of policy but efforts to make the voters feel good, and to encourage donations for the next election.

### **Point Eight: Ethnic Politics in America**

America has 285 million people. Of these, 5.2 million are Jews, 2.5 million are Arabs and 3 million or more are Muslims. Of the Muslims perhaps 15-20% are Arabs (most are Black) and of the Arabs perhaps 50% are Christian. The idea that all Arabs are Muslims is not correct. The Jews are an old population, fully integrated into American society, prosperous as a rule, and very well organized politically. They were once on the political left but are now divided among themselves. In 2000 they voted overwhelmingly for Gore. The Arabs are a more recent population, some very successful, some not. They are less politically active than the average. Most voted for Bush in 2000 but this is not likely to be repeated. Detroit has approximately 250,000 Arabs, over half being Christian. I have been involved with that community and its problems and would be pleased to discuss it if you wish.

There are 13 Jewish Senators out of 100. Arabs are less favored. While four Arabs have been elected to the Senate in the past twenty-five years, all were Christians.<sup>7</sup> Muslims are often attacked when they enter the public realm. Our President and others deserve credit for meeting with Arab and Muslim leaders after September 11 to make sure we did not have a repetition of what happened to Germans in 1917 or to the Japanese in 1942. Political commentators and others have been less kind. At times it seems there are no restraints on what they will say about Arabs and Muslims, calling for their removal from the political system or even expulsion from the land. The historic parallels are disturbing.

There is an annual poll of Washington lobbyists done by *Fortune* magazine. The poll asks the lobbyists to rank the most powerful lobbies in the capital. Year after year two lobbies vie for the top position. One is AARP, the American Association of Retired Persons. I happen to be a member of that group. My sister-in-law signed me up when I turned 50. I was a bit irritated and said, "I am not even close to retiring. Why did you do this?" She said, "You get discounts on hotels." Then I was pleased. There are reasons why AARP is so powerful. First, it has a large membership. Second, it has its own information network. It can reach its members directly. Third, its members vote. Fourth, it knows what it wants. Its message to elected officials is well known: If you touch social security—our retirement system—you are dead meat. In other words, we will fight you.

This brings me to the other powerful lobby, AIPAC--the America Israel Public Affairs Committee. It is commonly called the Israeli lobby but its Jewish critics say it is really the Likud lobby. It has a large membership list. Like other groups they organize annual conferences (typically attended by all presidential candidates) and sponsor a host of summer student interns, political activists in training. Members receive daily e-mails and frequent 'alerts' about legislation or political leaders who question Israeli policy or the Israeli aid package. Like AARP the Israeli lobby has a bottom line: "If you question Israel you are dead meat." As one member of Congress said, "No one wants to wake up and hear that someone you have never heard of has \$500,000 in campaign funds and is challenging you in the next primary."

Traditionally AIPAC functioned to lobby Congress but in the past few decades they have developed what we call a 'grow your own' strategy. They created a spin-off organization known as WINEP (Washington Institute for Near East Policy). WINEP is a think tank that recruits pro-Israeli scholars and activists and brings them to Washington to write books on US

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<sup>7</sup> Until the 2000 election, Michigan's two Senators were an Arab and a Jew.

policy in the Middle East. They then promote those persons for positions in the government. Their greatest success was Dennis Ross, Middle East negotiator under both President Bush and President Clinton. Other AIPAC officials in the Clinton administration were US Trade Representative Mickey Cantor and US Middle East negotiator Martin Indyk. AIPAC is less prominent in the second Bush administration, having been displaced by the Neo-conservatives.

Arabs and Muslims are much less organized. The Clinton campaign of 1996 said that a quarter of its \$200 million budget came from Jewish sources. There is nothing comparable for Arab Americans. Their contributions are modest, and have been returned or challenged on several occasions. In 2000, Hillary Clinton returned a contribution from one of her Muslim supporters because he was a member of an organization, one of whose board members made an intemperate statement about Israel. Some of my former students have gone into politics and have been well received, but at the national level the situation is less positive.

### **Point Nine: The Middle East**

This topic is one that I follow closely, but I am running out of time. Let me just make a few quick comments, for the sake of provocation as much as anything else.

First, there is a book by Daniel Yergin entitled *The Control of Oil*. Yergin says that the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be understood as efforts by industrial countries to bring oil under their control. While I hate to do this, I will also quote Saddam Hussein speaking in the 1970s when he said that the Americans did not want to own oil but to control it. So long as they control it, they can keep Germany and Japan under their security umbrella. A colleague whose insights I respect says this is nonsense. If anyone has a thought on this, I would like to hear it.

Second, America loves Israel and will always support Israel. That will be true for as long as any of you are in office. At the same time, there have been several occasions when Israel and America have been on a collision course because of a fundamental divergence in our security interests. Three American presidents in a row—Carter, Reagan, and Bush—were renounced as anti-Semites. They had tried to represent American interests by resisting the settlements. There is an inherent tension in this relationship.

Finally, when Bill Richardson, a rising star in American politics, was U. S. Ambassador to the United Nations in the 1990s, he said one of his assignments was to prevent any other country or combination of countries from playing a role in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. Keep that in mind. It's our baby.