

Tibor Nagy
LBJ Lecture Nov. 15, 2004

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LBJ Distinguished Lecture
Remarks for President Denise Trauth
Student Center Teaching Theater
Monday, November 15, 2004
6:30 p.m.

Good evening, and welcome to our fall 2004 Lyndon B. Johnson Distinguished Lecture.

Our speaker tonight comes to us with a particularly timely issue — foreign policy advice for a new presidential term.

It is certainly a subject of interest to all of us.

It consumes the front pages of our major newspapers, fuels the rhetoric of presidential candidates and provides fodder for talk shows.

Some of those doing the talking about this subject are simply grabbing headlines and are marginally acquainted with the deeper issues involved.

Tibor Nagy [TEE-bore NAHJ], however, has the background to justify his opinions.

He has devoted his career to promoting peace and prosperity in the world.

He has served ambassadorships under both Democratic and Republican administrations.

He was born in Hungary and came to the United States as a political refugee.

He first joined the Foreign Service in 1978, after earning his master's degree from George Washington University, and was soon on assignments to Zambia, Seychelles, the African Bureau in Washington, Togo, Cameroon and Nigeria.

He was ambassador to Guinea in the Clinton administration and ambassador to Ethiopia in the Clinton and Bush administrations.

He is now back in the United States, working as associate vice provost for international affairs at Texas Tech.

Tonight Mr. Nagy is our speaker for International Week as well as for the LBJ Lecture Series.

Please welcome Ambassador Tibor Nagy.

Tibor Nagy

President Trauth, distinguished faculty, distinguished students, honorable ladies and gentlemen; I hope I've covered everybody with that protocol. I'm delighted to be with you this evening.

I'm especially delighted with the subject, we went back and forth on this, and I'm just so happy that this subject was chosen.

I'd like to thank the person who came up with this because it is so timely, with the presidential election and also with other events which have been happening in the last couple of weeks.

The subject allows me to present this as a demarche.

Now in the diplomatic field, a demarche is something we do quite often.

It's a point of view that we take to our host government to try to convince them that United States policy happens to be correct, and their policy is wrong, or to reinforce a policy that they're doing that we happen to like—to say please keep doing that.

So, I'm going to give you my demarche as I would to the president of the United States. Then what would usually happen after we give a demarche is the person who has been demarched, I'm not sure it's a verb, but the person that receives the demarche then has an opportunity to either come back with a question or tell you they disagree or tell you that they agree, and that's what we'll do tonight, after I give you my demarche there will be a time for questions, answers, comments, anything like that.

Tonight we are doing, "Listen Mr. President: Foreign Policy Advice from the Trenches."

Mr. President, there have been many, many books written about foreign policy, but the bottom line on foreign policy is that the purpose is to promote the security and welfare of the United States of America globally. Now one unfortunate characteristic of our policy, historically, has been that we always tend to react to the last danger instead of looking ahead or predicting the next one. We can think of Pearl Harbor. We can think of Sputnik. And more recently of course we can think of September 11th.

Unfortunately, the world is too dangerous to continue that practice, especially now. Since many enemies of the United States no longer wear uniforms so that we can know what country they belong to, nor do they represent nation-states, our enemies can be "out there" everywhere amongst friend, amongst foe, and even here in the United States amongst us.

There is a very interesting Ethiopian proverb, and I'll sprinkle a couple of African proverbs in my demarche tonight Mr. President, "If you are hiding, don't light a fire."

Unfortunately, we are the only country in the world that really cannot hide. We are a superpower with interests everywhere and on every single issue. And frankly we are confronting a globe where we see troubles in every direction. And we are no longer certain, beyond a very few countries on either side, who are the real friends, who are the real enemies. It almost seems like most countries are a little bit of both.

One thing we do know Mr. President, unfortunately, ordinary people around the world seem to have more and more problems with us, for whatever reasons.

So Mr. President, what do we do?

Where do we start?

Well, there's a foreign policy stove, and there are many pots on there. Some are boiling with the tops off—we can see them. Some are on there and they're covered—we don't know if they're boiling or not, and those may be the most dangerous of all.

There's another interesting Ethiopian proverb Mr. President, it says, "it is the calm and silent water that drowns a person."

So what are the most important issues?

What are the pots that really, really need to be looked at?

I think that everybody agrees that Iraqi is at the very front. It needs immediate attention. And, there is no debate right now as to whether or not it was the right thing to do to go in there or not.

A couple of weeks ago I sat down with one of my friends, former National Security Advisor for President Clinton Tony Lake, a very strong Democrat. He told me, "Tibor, from my point of view, when President Bush decided to go into Iraq, it stopped being a Republican war, it stopped being a Democratic War, it became an American war."

And I think most Americans agree today that one thing we have to do, Mr. President, is come up with a rational exit strategy.

But most Americans also understand that the US cannot simply walk away, which means that we have to leave Iraq with a certain amount of stability and security. Which means, Mr. President that we have to leave it with a government with credibility both inside and outside the country, and in effect that means that the planned elections are essential, but they must have a credible outcome. Which also means, unfortunately, that there has to be enough coalition forces on the ground, and everyone knows that when I say coalition I mean mostly American, to guarantee that the elections can take place in most of Iraq.

Now this is one of those events, where unfortunately the election environment is more important than the date. Yes Mr. President, we said that we wanted to have those in January, but that date may have to slip because it is absolutely essential that they be credible.

Looking at the larger Middle East, it is very important Mr. President to realize that we cannot separate Iraq from the rest of the region. Successful elections in Iraq are one of several factors that could make this, right now, the most unique opportunity in fifty years to permanently effect change in the Middle East.

A tremendously significant event took place just a few years ago with the death of Yassar Arafat. Now we can debate whether he was the devil incarnate, whether he was a hero whether he was a patriot, whether he was a terrorist, whether he was a statesperson, that doesn't matter. What's significant is that he died. And we know that most people living in Palestine want change. Most people living in Israel want change. Most people living in the Arab countries desperately want change. And there is a very short window of opportunity to do that.

Now Yassar Arafat dying has another positive aspect, Israeli-Palestinian détente is the perfect issue for us to come together yet once again with our European allies. The Europeans have traditionally been seen as pro-Palestinian we have traditionally been seen as pro-Israeli. Mr. President I believe that we immediately have to have high-level discussions with the Europeans and develop a joint plan for both of us to present together to both the Israelis and the Palestinians. While we can't go into the details of a plan, it must have several minimal characteristics.

It must provide for an independent Palestinian state.

It has to address the issue of Israeli settlements.

It must provide for real Israeli security, and it somehow must address the status of Jerusalem.

One suggestion, Mr. President would be for you to send a very high-level envoy maybe someone from across the political aisle, maybe someone like the former President Clinton, or, another very high-level gentleman is available as of today, former Secretary of State Colin Powell when he leaves.

The possibilities, Mr. President, of a quasi-democratic Iraq coming together with a Palestinian-Israeli peace agreement would be a monumental change for the better in the entire Middle East. And a major defeat for global terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism. Mr. President, we cannot let this opportunity pass. Because if we do, I can guarantee you there will be more radical Islam, there will be more, and more severe terrorist acts, there will be a danger to the few moderate Arab states that exist to become unbalanced, and there is a real danger of Saudi Arabia going down the tubes in the next five years.

Now I know Mr. President, that just these issues will take a great deal of your attention.

Unfortunately, there are other issues that might even be more critical to the security of the United States of America. I'm talking about nuclear proliferation.

This may be the biggest single threat to our nation, and yet it's extremely frustrating because we really don't know how immediate it is, how severe it is, or how extensive it is. But we do know that the time to ask is now.

Firstly there is North Korea. It needs immediate attention. They have nuclear weapons, whether it is five, four, three, two, one, or six, it doesn't matter because they have the materials to produce more. And while, Mr. President, I would characterize the North Korean régime as paranoid-schizophrenic they are certainly not suicidal. It is possible to deal with them, and it is possible to get them to honor agreements. If they understand that we are not naive and are watching. We absolutely need to keep engaged with them, and whether we do it through the six-party talks, China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea, or face-to-face bilaterally, that's not the issue. The process is not the issue, Mr. President. The issue is to be engaged with them and to come up with some kind of agreement.

Mr. President, Iran is also a very serious issue, and it needs immediate attention. But there is good news. Our European allies are very close to an agreement with the Iranians. Here we absolutely have to make our presence felt, because it gives us another opportunity to work together with the Europeans, to be supportive of them and to let the Iranians know that we care very much. Because, if the Iranians continue their nuclear program, there is no telling who will end up with those weapons.

But even beyond Iran and North Korea, we absolutely have to be on watch around the world everywhere for other possible sources of nuclear material going astray.

We barely stopped in the last couple of years, accidentally, a private individual in Pakistan from giving nuclear material to terrorist organizations. How many more such events are going on around the world? We don't know. We have to absolutely cooperate with every intelligence service we can to stop such further ventures.

Mr. President, we know how much you care about global terrorism, and I agree with you totally that terrorism is a symptom—it does not exist in a vacuum. And I also agree with you that it is not a war that will have a clear, easy victory. And I fully support your policy of actively pursuing terrorism and terrorists and confronting them wherever you find them. This is an appropriate short-term solution.

But, Mr. President, we also need to think about the long-term. Instead of only fighting the alligators as they come up to the surface, and then waiting for the next crop of alligators to come up, we really need to start draining the swamp.

And what that means, Mr. President, is promoting global democracy and pursuing global prosperity, and what that means is being a little more active in international development.

We know that poverty does not cause terrorism, because some of the poorest countries in the world do not have terrorism issues. But millions and millions of people have nothing to lose and are a fertile field for terrorist recruitment and support.

On the other hand, we know from history that prosperous, democratic countries never support terrorism, nor have they ever gone to war with each other.

Mr. President, this administration has taken some very positive steps on international development. And for those I wish to credit you.

First for, recognizing that international commerce and trade is at least as important to development as aid. And that it is possible to use a business model for a development agency. So, I applaud you for your pursuit of the New Millennium Challenge Corporation, and going in that direction.

Also Mr. President, the very wise policy to reward those developing countries whose governments are actually trying to help their own peoples lives by looking after their basic needs, and for trying to govern justly.

And also for allowing the products from the poorest world region, that is Africa, to come into the US duty-free under the African Growth and Opportunity Act which was implemented by President Clinton and President Bush very strongly supports its continuation.

And also, Mr. President, credit goes for greatly increasing funding for HIV/AIDS and also for responding generously whenever there have been disasters around the globe.

But I really do urge you that this effort be expanded.

Very few Americans realize that less than two percent of our national budget goes to international development. And yet when we survey people in the United States, a great majority would gladly make that five percent, or six percent, or even seven percent.

So seriously, Mr. President, please take a look at that.

Mr. President, there are other pots which are on the fire and I really don't have the time to go into all of those in detail, but I would like to list those for you because they do need attention.

There are the dynamics between China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

There's the whole issue of unexpected global infectious diseases, which arrive suddenly, like SARS, or Lord forbid, the avian flu.

And Mr. President, assuring US energy supplies, and not just the Middle East, but think about west Africa because west Africa is becoming more and more important as a source for US oil. It's now up to 13% and it's growing versus the Middle East which is 25% and at best holding steady.

And here Mr. President, conflict prevention could go a long way in stabilizing one of the most unstable regions in the world. Where a small amount of money upfront could have prevented the likes of Ivory Coast, of Liberia, or even now with what might happen in Nigeria, not to speak of real humanitarian disasters like Darfur.

Mr. President, I think all of these issues which I've mentioned show clearly that this is the era of globalization. Like it or not globalization touches all of us. And those who deny it are very much like King Canute was in the eighth century, when he stood at the edge of the ocean and ordered the tide not to come up because he was a king.

Well, of course, he got wet.

And we would have the same effect by denying the importance of globalization.

I think, Mr. President, it's very important to note that globalization is neither bad nor good, on its own it's neutral. There is a positive side, thirty percent of the US economy currently is tied to international trade in fifteen years it will be about 50%. And all of us know that the internet and instant communication means that everyone everywhere can now know everything everywhen.

But then there's the other side of globalization. SARS, which we mentioned before, which in 24 hours, thanks to international aviation, can hop from its source in Bangladesh or Thailand or wherever and be anywhere in the world.

And also, there's a globalized side of the 9/11 bombers. Who because of relatively easy visa procedures international aviation, freedom of communication in the United States were able to plan the dastardly acts as easily as they did.

I was recently at a Harvard conference on counter-terrorism. It was a fairly small group, about twenty of us, current and former ambassadors, intelligence folks, high-ranking military officers. And I was really amazed that the one thing everybody agreed on was that the United States desperately needs people who understand the rest of the world and can explain the United States to the rest of the world, hopefully in their own languages.

I hope some of you have heard this little vignette that "Someone who speaks three languages we call tri-lingual, someone who speaks two languages we call bi-lingual, and someone who speaks one language we call an American."

It's a matter of National security to develop international expertise send US students overseas and to make sure that every campus is internationalized. Because competition for everything, no matter what field of study, what your job, competition is being globalized.

Just a few weeks ago, I read a quote by the CEO of the Intel Corporation, a very knowledgeable gentleman, who was publicly greatly worried by America's waning competitive edge in education and research, development, technical innovation while our global competitors are going up. Mr. President, any institution of higher learning which does not actively promote global international themes, which does not promote study abroad, which does not promote language study, and does not promote educational research exchanges with international institutions is doing a disservice to its students and undercutting our national security and prosperity.

Bring it down to personal terms, I'll tell you just a very short story. Two business executives are flying home after an overseas trip, which more and more business executives are doing these days, and of course they're in first class. And after their excellent meal, I understand they still give meals in first class, their conversations become reflective.

"You know," one says to the other, "I finally figured out what this global economy is all about."

"Do tell," the other responds.

“It’s like this,” says the first, “I am finally going to get paid what I am worth and I’m scared to death about it.”

On the other side of the equation, America must put back the welcome mat for international students and scholars.

My own experience in Africa—I spent about 25 years on the ground in Africa, many different countries—and I consistently ran across two types of people who were very, very favorably imposed towards the United States of America. One category were people that had Peace Corps volunteers, either as teachers or living in their villages or personal contact with a Peace Corps volunteer. The second category of people were people who had been to the United States of America as college students, and had gone back and moved on, most of them had become very prominent in government, public service, or private sector, uniformly, favorably disposed towards the United States, a constituency for us, in those countries.

My ambassadorial colleges, we’ve talked about this over and over again, we all agree that it’s in the interest of America’s long-term security to have as many international students and scholars as possible right here in the US. Very few people in America, I have found, think of our higher educational system as an American product, like cotton or oil, but in fact, it’s our fourth or fifth highest US export. About half a million international students add billions to the US economy, or at least they did until recently when the numbers are going down because we are discouraging foreign students from coming to the United States, while Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom are welcoming them. Fewer are coming, and they are taking their money and expertise to other places.

Now, from my point of view, that policy is so short-sighted because if a group wanted to come back to the United States, like the original 9/11 group and to do us harm, they’re not going to do it the same way, that’s looking back at the previous danger. If I was going to get a group of thirty people into the United States, it would be very easy, I would just have them come across Arizona, with phony identity papers, not hard, but unfortunately, we don’t always think that way, Mr. President.

Meanwhile, as an example, outside of our embassy in New Delhi India, where there are hundreds and hundreds of Indian students waiting in line wanting to get their appointment about a visa, there’s a big billboard put up by the embassy of Australia saying, “Please come and study in Australia, we guarantee a visa in twenty-four hours.”

Mr. President, that’s what we’re up against.

This administration has been very strong in making decisions that are crucial to national security. And Mr. President, you are absolutely correct in saying that the US does not need a permission slip from anyone when we act on critical matters of national security. Making decisions is not the issue. Explaining them is, because we need to be more successful in explaining our decisions to the rest of the world.

However, we should not despair on that because there is a tremendous reservoir of goodwill towards the United States out there.

I will tell you one very brief incident from my time in Ethiopia.

When the Ethio-Eritrean War ended, in 2000, it had been one of the bloodiest, most damaging wars in the last several decades, tens of thousands of people died, hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people had been displaced, and when the war ended I said to my embassy, “What can we, the United States of America, do that would

maximize, to Ethiopia, to the world, that we are here, that we want to rebuild this country?”

We decided to identify a part of Ethiopia that had been hardest hit by the war.

When the Eritrean troops came across the border, this was a little place called Irob about three-hundred thousand people lived there. When the Eritreans came across they killed or stole all the animals, poisoned almost all the wells, destroyed schools, any infrastructure that there was, there was very limited infrastructure, defaced churches, mosques, killed lots and lots of people, raped many, many girls and women, and just drove the people out. For three years, the people of Irob were living in caves.

And then the war ended, and I said, “Let’s take about four or six million dollars,” not very much money, “and let’s rebuild as much of Irob as we could.”

We rebuilt schools, we brought back oxen and other animals, we cleared out the mines, we built infrastructure, wells, went a long way for four, six million dollars.

It was shortly after September 11th, that I had an opportunity to go up there as US Ambassador and cut the ribbon, officially, on some of the first things that had been built. Took about three days to get up there—it’s not like driving in Texas. Went up there, had the ceremony, the people were there, I cut the ribbon, we made some speeches, and then I was getting ready to leave and one of my embassy folks came to me and said, “Mr. Ambassador, there’s a delegation of elders from Irob and they would like to talk to you.” And I thought,

“Oh boy, here it goes,” because I had done many ceremonies like that around Africa, and most of the time you do it and you’ve built a school or you’ve built a clinic, and then people will come and say, “Thank you very much Mr. Ambassador, we appreciate what you have done, but here’s a list of twenty other things we would like for you to do.”

And I thought, “here it comes, I’m going to be hit with all the other things we have not paid for.”

A very elderly gentleman made a very eloquent speech I didn’t understand a word of it, and I was waiting for the translator to say what I was just thinking, but instead, what he said was, “Mr. Ambassador, we are so sorry for what happened to the United States, and if there’s anything that we can do to help you, we want to do that.”

And it was one of those moments, for me, you know, here we are, the most powerful country in the world, in the poorest country in the world, probably the poorest part of the poorest country, and these people want to help us because they really, really, really like us. Not necessarily for what we have done, but for some of the things that we are represented for.

And I can assure you, Mr. President, that there are Irobs all over the world.

There is a tremendous reservoir of goodwill towards America.

We have lost part of it, certainly, but we can get it back quickly.

Please work on that Mr. President.

My last Ethiopian proverb, “If you cross the river in a crowd, the crocodile won’t eat you.”

Well, because we’re the biggest and the toughest we often try to cross the river by ourselves, and in today’s world, there are many, many crocodiles waiting.

But along with the dangers, Mr. President, the current global environment offer tremendous opportunities to overcome foreign policy problems which have been around for decades.

I wish you ever success Mr. President.

Thank you very much.

Lecture transcribed by Benjamin Hicklin, graduate research assistant 2007-08