

The Dean Acheson Lecture on Foreign Policy With Senator George Mitchell

May 24, 2010*

Remarks as delivered[†]

Thank you very much Michael, Robin West, Dick Solomon, and so many distinguished guests, and so many friends here. It's a great honor for me to be able to participate in an event that is named for a former Secretary of State Dean Acheson.

I confess that when Dick Solomon called me to invite me to come to address you on the subject of peace and conflict resolution, I was uneasy and uncertain about accepting, because I'm familiar with the United States Institute for Peace and the work it has done and I knew that all the members of the audience would each know as much if not more than I did about the subject. But then I reflected on my first day in the Senate, and I want to tell a couple of stories about that because the subject of my remarks is serious and the whole evening ought not to be serious. So it's easy for me to talk about my career in the Senate because it wasn't serious in many respects.

I entered the Senate under unusual circumstances, I was serving as a federal judge in my home state of Maine when, 30 years ago this month, then President Carter appointed Senator Ed Muskie as secretary of state, creating a vacancy in the Senate, which as you know, under American law, the governor fills. There was a lot of publicity; there was an ex-governor, an ex-senator, a couple of ex-congressmen from Maine all of whom were highly qualified and interested in the position, there was a lot of publicity about it. And the Governor announced that he didn't want Maine to be under-represented in the Senate for a long period of time so in just a few days he said he would hold a press conference at the state capital to announce his appointment. The evening before I went to bed, like everyone else in Maine wondering who he was going to appoint. My name had not been mentioned in the speculation; I'd been a federal judge for less than a year, so it never occurred to me that I might be under consideration. That evening the Governor called me and he said, "I'd like you to come down to the state capital tomorrow so that I can announce that I'm going to appoint you to complete Senator Muskie's term." I said, "Gee, Governor, this is a really big decision, I need time to think about it, to consult with my family, friends." He said, "I'll give you one hour." I protested, but he insisted, so I immediately called up my three older brothers. I grew up in a very small town in Maine, with three older brothers who were very famous athletes. Very well known not just in our community, but state-wide. And then I came along and I was not as good 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 around our small town as "Johnny Mitchell's kid brother, the one who isn't any good." As you might expect I developed an inferiority complex and a highly competitive attitude toward my brothers.

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[†] Transcript provided by the Office of the Special Envoy for Middle East Peace, U.S. Department of State.

So that night, when the Governor called me, I called them up, ostensibly to seek their opinion. But I confess there was a note of triumphalism in my voice when I informed them that the Governor wanted to appoint me to the United States Senate, what do they think about that? The answers were predictable, my brother Johnny said "It's ridiculous. Everybody knows you're a loser. Nobody can understand how you got to be a federal judge, and the people of Maine are entitled to have a qualified person to represent them in the Senate." My two other brothers said much the same thing in less polite language. So I hung up and I called the Governor up and I said, "Governor, I don't need an hour, I've received all the reassurance I need of my ability to perform this job, so I accept." The next day I went down to the state capital, the Governor announced my appointment, I flew down here to Washington and I was sworn in right away. Actually, the Senate was debating some legislation and the then majority leader of the time was kind enough to interrupt them to have me sworn in and the Senate resumed debate and moments later I cast my first vote. The first of many informed judgments I made on your behalf and on behalf of other Americans.

Then I went for the first time to my office, and a young man said to me, he had a long list of things for me to do, he said, "Senator, we have a very interesting initiation here." And I said, "What is it?" and he said, "There are about 2,000 Certified Public Accountants from all over the country holding a convention here in Washington and they just called up and wondered if you would come and be a keynote speaker." And I said, "Gosh, that's amazing, as of yesterday I myself didn't know I'd be here." And to think that these accountants were so far-sighted as to hold this open for me. "Ah no," he said, "it's nothing like that, they've had four cancellations at the last minute and you're the only member of Congress they could think of who might not have anything to do tonight." I said, "What do they want me to talk about?" He said, "The tax code." I said, "The tax code? To 2,000 Certified Public Accounts? Every member of the audience will know more about the subject than I do." And this young aide looked at me, drew himself up to his full height, and he said "Senator, keep in mind that you are now a United States Senator. And you will be regularly called upon to address in public subjects about which you know nothing. So you might as well start now and get in practice."

So that came into my mind, and I said, "If I can go and talk to those accountants about the tax code I can go and talk to the United States Institute of Peace." So here I am.

I do want to mention one other person who's not here, but who is principally responsible for the creation of the United States Institute of Peace. Shortly after I entered the Senate, I became quite friendly with Senator Spark Matsunaga of Hawaii. And, as we all called him, "Sparky" had an overwhelming interest in the establishment of what he used to call a Department of Peace. And I remember him telling me and as he talked to every member of the Senate, "We have a Department of Defense; we should have a Department of Peace." Well, we don't have a Department of Peace today, but we have the United States Institute of Peace, and I couldn't let the moment pass without recognizing the memory of one of the nicest persons I've ever met. Former Senator Spark Matsunaga, without whom none of us would be here. So please join me in a round of applause for a great man.

I've been asked to talk about conflict resolution, in particular my experiences in Northern Ireland and in the Middle East. I didn't know you were going to play this video tonight, so there's a little bit of overlap. But I'll begin with some more general comments.

Human history is in large part a story of conflicts. How they arose and how they were resolved, so the subject is not new.

But it has taken on a new urgency in a world in which:

- the number of people is increasing rapidly;
- the number of nation states continues to grow;
- the number of non-state organizations which initiate or extend conflict is also on the increase;
- And there are rapid technological developments that make it easier to start and to conduct conflicts than it is to prevent or end them.

I was in Baltimore recently and saw there a large electric clock which projects population growth in the world.

On the day that I was there, it predicted that in 2080 there will be eleven and a half billion people on earth. I personally believe that's an overestimate, but population growth is an important factor, especially when compared with the past.

It took eighteen hundred years, that's 18 centuries, following the birth of Christ for the world's population to reach one billion. The most recent billion was added in less than 20 years.

Although the rate of growth has slowed, a credible estimate is that by 2050, in the sweep of history that's a short 40 years away, there will be more than nine billion people on earth, an increase of almost forty percent over the current level.

That means more competition for land, for water, for all natural resources; more competition for economic growth; for political power; and, inevitably as a result, more conflict.

And, sadly, we must recognize that while we live in an age of amazing technological advancement, some of the most dramatic advances have come in the human ability to kill ever larger numbers of other men and women.

Two hundred and twenty-two years ago, in the midst of what turned out to be one of the most important conflicts in all of history, a small group of American colonists gathered in Philadelphia in the convention that produced the American Constitution.

The part of it that we call the Bill of Rights is, to me, the most concise and eloquent statement ever written anywhere of the right of the individual to be free from oppression by government.

For as long as men and women seek to gain or retain freedom, the Bill of Rights will stand as their beacon.

That's one side of the coin of liberty: The right to be free from oppression. The other is the need for everyone to have a fair chance to enjoy the blessings of liberty.

To a man without a job, to a woman who can't get good care or education for her child, to the young people who lack the skills needed to compete in a world of technology – they don't think much about abstract concepts like liberty or justice; they're entirely focused in coping day to day.

Dean Acheson understood this. He headed the U.S. delegation to the Bretton Woods Conference, which gave birth to organizations like the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and what would become the World Trade Organization.

He designed the Marshall Plan to give war-devastated European nations the tools and the money to rebuild their economies.

He knew that without an economic foundation, a peace that had been so costly to secure could not possibly be sustained.

So it was for many years in Northern Ireland. Conflict hurt the economy. Unemployment rose with violence, in a deadly cycle of escalating misery.

Late in the 20th century, after many years of disagreement, the British and Irish governments concluded that if there was to be any hope of bringing the conflict to an end, they would have to cooperate in a sustained effort to lay the foundation for peace.

In 1996, after years of effort, they finally were able to get peace negotiations underway.

The two governments asked me to serve as chairman. I had been involved in Northern Ireland long enough to realize what a daunting task it was.

The negotiations were the longest, most difficult I've ever been involved with, at least until now. Often, no progress seemed possible. But somehow we kept going.

After a year and a half of talks that produced no result, a dramatic event changed my mind and the course of history there. A leading Protestant paramilitary leader was murdered in prison by a group of Catholic prisoners.

That touched off a surge of sectarian killings. A vicious cycle of revenge took hold, and the process slid backward toward the abyss.

In desperation, I devised a plan to establish an early deadline for an end to the talks. I was convinced that the absence of a deadline guaranteed its failure. The existence of a deadline couldn't guarantee success – but it made it possible.

As we neared the deadline, there were non-stop, round the clock negotiations and finally, an agreement was reached. It did not, by itself, guarantee a durable peace, or political stability, or reconciliation. It did make them possible.

It then took a lot of effort, for a long time, to achieve those goals. And indeed, the effort is still ongoing.

Since then, I've been asked often what lessons Northern Ireland holds for other conflicts, especially the Middle East. I'll try to answer that question now.

I begin with caution. Each human being is unique, as is each society. So it follows logically, then, that no two conflicts are the same.

Much as we would like it, there is no magic formula which, once discovered, can be used to end all conflicts.

The situation we faced in Northern Ireland was very different from the one we face in Middle East today.

But there are some basic principles which arise out of my experience that may apply more broadly.

First, I believe firmly that there's no such thing as conflict that can't be ended. They're created, conducted, and sustained by human beings. They can be ended by human beings. No matter how hateful, no matter how hurtful, peace can prevail.

When I arrived in Northern Ireland I found, to my dismay, a widespread feeling of pessimism among the public and the political leaders.

It's a small, well-informed society where I quickly became well known. Every day that I was there, people stopped me on the street, in the airport, in a restaurant, wherever I was and they always began with kind words: "Thank you, Senator." "We appreciate what you're trying to do." But they always ended in despair. "You're wasting your time." "This conflict can't be ended." "We've been killing each other for centuries and we're doomed to go on killing each other forever."

As best I could, I worked to reverse these attitudes. This is the special responsibility of political leaders, from whom many in the public take their cue.

And one way is to create an attitude of success, the belief that problems can be solved, that things can be better. Not in a foolish or unrealistic way, but in a way that creates hope and some level of confidence among the people.

A second need is for a clear and determined policy, not to yield to violence. Over and over, in Northern Ireland the men of violence tried to destroy the peace process; at times they nearly succeeded.

That means there must be an endless supply of patience and perseverance. No matter how severe, no matter how frequent the setbacks, how bleak the outlook, the search for peace must continue.

Seeking an end to conflict is not for the timid or the tentative. It takes courage, perseverance and steady nerves in the face of often horrific violence.

I believe it's a mistake to say in advance that if acts of violence occur, negotiations will end. That's an invitation to those who use violence to destroy the process, and it transfers control of the agenda from the peaceful majority to the violent minority.

A third need, so obvious, is that there must be some willingness to compromise. Peace and political stability simply cannot be achieved in sharply divided societies unless there is a genuine willingness, on both sides, to understand the other point of view and to enter into principled compromise.

That's very easy to say. It's very hard to do. Because it requires of political leaders that they take risks for peace. One of the extraordinary facts of human history is that individuals and whole societies take the most extreme risks in time of war. But rarely will leaders or societies take risks for peace.

And so political leaders must be asked to take risks, and they must respond, if there is to be hope.

I know it can be done, because I saw it firsthand in Northern Ireland.

Men and women, some of whom had never before met, never before spoken, who had spent their entire lives in conflict against each other, came together ultimately in an agreement for peace.

It was long and difficult. But it did happen. And if it happened there, it can happen elsewhere.

A fourth principle, again so obvious, is that we must recognize that the implementation of agreements is just as important and usually more difficult than reaching an agreement.

That should be self-evident. But often just getting an agreement is so difficult, takes so long and so much effort, that there's a natural human tendency is to celebrate, then to turn to other pressing problems. But getting it done is harder than getting agreement to do it.

Once again, patience and perseverance are necessary. It is especially important that we Americans, busy at home and all across the world, not be distracted, or become complacent, by the good feeling created by an interim success or even by a highly publicized agreement.

There's a final point that to me that I think is so important that I bring up every time I speak openly on the subject and it extends beyond open conflict. Although it was 15 years ago, I recall so clearly my first day in Northern Ireland, as if it was yesterday.

I saw for the first time the huge wall which physically separates the communities in Belfast. Thirty feet high, topped in places with barbed wire, it's an ugly reminder of the intensity and the duration of the conflict. Ironically, it's called The Peace Line.

On that first morning I met with Catholics on their side of the wall, in the afternoon with Protestants on their side. Their messages had not been coordinated, but to my surprise, they were the same.

In Belfast, they told me, there was a high correlation between unemployment and violence. They said that where men and women have no opportunity and no hope, they are more likely to take the path of violence.

As I sat and listened to them, I thought that I could just as easily be almost anywhere on Earth. Despair is the fuel for instability and for conflict everywhere. Hope is essential to peace and to stability.

Men and women everywhere need income to support their families, and they need the satisfaction of doing something meaningful with their lives.

The conflict in Northern Ireland was obviously not exclusively or even primarily economic. So I don't want to suggest that these conflicts are exclusively, or even primarily, or even to a large degree dominated by economic considerations. It is an undercurrent. As in the Middle East, so in Northern Ireland, it involved religion, national identity, and territorial competition. Highly emotional issues.

In Northern Ireland, the conflict exacted a terrible price, paid mostly, as it almost always is, by thousands of innocent people.

Just a few months after the agreement was reached, a large bomb shattered the calm of a warm summer afternoon in the small town of Omagh. Many dozens were killed; many hundreds were grievously, horribly maimed.

Amidst the death and destruction, there was laid bare the utter senselessness of trying to solve the problems of Northern Ireland by violence. It didn't work, and it only made things worse.

Two weeks later, I accompanied Prime Minister Blair and President Clinton to Omagh, where we met with the survivors and the relatives of the dead.

Among them were two with whom I spoke and will never forget. Claire Gallagher was 15 years old, tall and lovely, an aspiring concert pianist. She lost both of her eyes.

As we sat and spoke, she looked out, but she could see nothing, her eyes covered with two large white patches. She was an exemplar of grace and courage.

Michael Monaghan was 33 years old. He lost his wife, who was pregnant, their 18-month old daughter, and his wife's mother; three generations of women wiped out in a single, senseless moment.

And yet, despite their terrible and irreparable loss, both Claire and Michael did not speak to me about themselves. They spoke about others, and they urged me to keep the peace process going forward. Their courage and their determination are permanently etched in my memory.

In fact, it was the two of them that I thought of when Secretary of State Clinton and President Obama asked me to serve as U.S. special envoy for peace in the Middle East.

Even before I was asked to serve, I knew it would be very difficult. In December of 2008, when I did not know that I would serve in this position, I spoke at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

There I was asked about Northern Ireland. In reply I noted that the peace agreement there came 800 years after Britain began its domination of Ireland.

Later, an elderly gentleman later came up to me and said, in a loud voice, "Did you say 800 years?" I said, "Yes, 800." He repeated the number, much louder, I repeated it again. Then he said with a wave of his arm, "Ah, such a recent argument. No wonder you settled it."

Well, only in the Middle East 800 years ago recent. And it is true that the circumstances there are very different than they were in Northern Ireland, as I earlier said. But even in the Middle East, I believe conflict can be ended.

There are, of course, many, many reasons to be skeptical about the prospect for success, and most people are.

The conflict is so complex; it has gone on for so long, it has had such destructive effects, the level of mistrust and hostility is so high, that many, perhaps the majority, there and here, regard it as unsolvable.

But we can't succumb to that view.

Because the pursuit of peace is so important that it demands our maximum effort, no matter the difficulties, no matter the setbacks.

The key is the mutual commitment of the parties and the active participation of the United States government, led by the president and the secretary of state, with the support and assistance of the many other governments and institutions who want to help.

Of course this is not a new American objective. President Bush said in 2008:

"The point of departure for permanent status negotiations to realize this vision is clear: There should be an end to the occupation that began in 1967. The agreement must establish Palestine as a homeland for the Palestinian people, just as Israel is a homeland for the Jewish people.

These negotiations must ensure that Israel has secure, recognized, and defensible borders.

And they must ensure that the State of Palestine is viable, contiguous, sovereign, and independent.

It is vital that each side understands that satisfying the other's fundamental objectives is key to a successful agreement. Security for Israel and viability for the Palestinian state are in the mutual interest of both parties."

That is an accurate and effective statement of what American policy is, and has been.

President Obama publicly reaffirmed our policy upon taking office and he has broadened it to seek a comprehensive peace, which also includes Israel and Syria, Israel and Lebanon, and normal relations between Israel and all the Arab nations in the region.

When the president began his administration just over a year ago, it seemed that the culture of peace, so carefully nurtured during the Oslo Process, had largely dissipated, replaced by a sense of futility, despair, of the inevitability of the conflict.

The war in Gaza had just ended, the Palestinians were deeply divided, the uncertainty of the Israeli elections lay ahead, and few people believed that there was any chance for re-starting peace negotiations, let alone achieving a peaceful end to the conflict.

And yet, limited as it is, there has been some progress.

1. A right of center government in Israel has endorsed the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza as the way to resolve the conflict.
2. Israel has frozen new housing construction starts in the West Bank for 10 months.
3. The Palestinian Authority is aggressively working to prevent violent attacks against Israel based on its publicly stated belief that violence does not advance the Palestinian cause.
4. There has been substantial and continuing improvement in security, in law and order and in economic development on the West Bank. This is the result of an effort to build, from the bottom up, the capacity to function effectively as a state from the moment of establishment.
This involves extensive cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, with strong support from the United States, the Europeans, the United Nations, and other of our allies.
5. In circumstances that are very difficult for both, Israel and the Palestinian Authority are working to combat incitement and to refrain from taking actions that are provocative and that undermine further trust and confidence.
6. The Arab League has expressed its support for the negotiations. As a result, the Arab states have an important interest in a positive outcome, and they can play an important role in achieving it.
7. And finally, we have consequently begun proximity talks with Israeli and Palestinian leaders in an environment that is more constructive than has existed in the immediate past.

The proximity talks are serious and wide-ranging, with both sides trying to move forward under difficult circumstances.

We commend their efforts and we will do everything possible to help the parties move, as soon as possible, into direct negotiations that will result in a two-state solution.

I recognize, of course, that I could just as easily draw up a list of the many issues that remain unresolved, of the huge obstacles to resolving them, and of the long litany of past efforts that did not succeed.

We are realistic about the difficulties.

But because peace in the Middle East is so much in the interest of the people in the region, and in our national interest, we must and we will continue our efforts.

We know that we cannot impose a solution. It is up to the parties themselves to negotiate directly and to ultimately resolve this conflict, with our active and sustained support and participation.

This will require of them compromise, flexibility, and most of all it will require leadership.

We believe that Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas can be the leaders who finally deliver peace to their people.

Peacemaking requires bold action because we know from bitter experience that there are many enemies of the process who will resort to violence in an attempt to prevent progress and to undermine those who seek a peaceful and more prosperous future for the region's people.

We must strengthen the hand of the moderates.

The United States is committed to being an active partner every step of the way, standing by those who are willing to take risks for peace.

As Secretary Clinton said on March 9, "This is about getting to the table, creating and protecting an atmosphere of trust around it – and staying there until the job is finally done."

I know that there is much history to overcome.

But there also was a lot of history in Northern Ireland, and it was overcome.

The conflicts are far from identical, but they were both created by human beings, and human beings can solve them.

Dean Acheson once said, "History only comes one day at a time."

So must we take it now, one day at a time, and most of them difficult days.

But persistent effort on all sides, despite the centuries of pain and mistrust, can move history in the direction of peace and security.

In fact, when one looks back over the decades since the Six Day War, we can see that the road already traveled is much longer than the distance we still have to go.

Peace between Israel and Egypt and between Israel and Jordan has paved the way.

Now the Arab states have committed to end the conflict and normalize relations with Israel too. All sides have endorsed the two state solution. And all sides know what that solution more or less looks like.

The task now before us is to reconcile the Palestinian goal of an independent and viable state, based on the 1967 lines, with agreed swaps, and the Israeli goal of a Jewish state with secure and recognized borders that reflect subsequent developments and meet Israeli security requirements.

That should not be beyond the abilities of statesmen political leaders if they have the will to do it.

The situation in the Middle East remains volatile, complex and dangerous. But it is not hopeless.

We face the daunting challenge of rebuilding trust, not only between the political leaders, but also between the Israeli and Palestinian people.

Peace requires that we find a way to renew their hope, and to instill the belief that the tragedies of the past need not determine the opportunities of the future.

The president and the secretary of state have made it clear that hardships and difficulty cannot and will not cause the United States to turn away.

We will persevere. And we will work to see that peace does prevail.

Thank you.