



Ambassador Chas Freeman addresses a news conference on June 16, of the Diplomats and Military Commanders for Change. The bipartisan group of 27 retired generals, admirals, and ambassadors, called for the Bush-Cheney Administration to be swept out of office in November. Since that press conference, the momentum has been building, for a drastic change in Washington policy. Left to right: Freeman, Amb. Phyllis Oakley, Amb. Robert Oakley, Amb. Donald Easum, and Amb. Donald McHenry.

In the interest of shifting the political discussion away from those phony “wedge issues” that Rove and Company would like to place in the foreground during the election campaign, in order to shift voters from voting on the issues to voting on the innuendo of concocted charges, we present some of these important conference presentations to our readers.

Chas Freeman

‘The Serious Questions Are Being Ignored’

The National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations (NCUSAR) held its 13th annual conference in Washington on Sept. 12-13, attended by about 300 oil industry executives, diplomats, journalists, and Middle East political activists. Chas Freeman, who was an Undersecretary of Defense and the U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia, delivered these closing remarks. Subheads have been added.

Once again, I have been honored by the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations and stand before you to offer a few thoughts on where we—Americans and Arabs—go from here. Rereading what I said to this conference about this in

2001, 2002, and 2003, I am pleased to find that I got a few things right. This year I am far less confident I can see the future.

Seven weeks before elections in this country, neither candidate is saying much, if anything, about how he would address the very serious problems he will confront at home and abroad, including in the Middle East. Instead, the parties are engaged in an embarrassingly trivial debate about whether John Kerry really earned his silver star in Vietnam and whether George Bush did or did not make himself available to bomb the Vietcong if they turned up in Alabama. This is too bad. There are a lot of serious questions before our country, our army, and our people. What we decide and do greatly affect the world.

‘Most Erratic’ Foreign Policy

The past four years have established what honesty compels me to describe as without doubt the most erratic foreign policy record in our history. 9/11 showed the Administration’s early obsession with national missile defense and indifference to more conventional terrorist threats to have been fundamentally in error. Fortunately, the President reacted effectively by rallying the country to fight the “terrorists with global reach” who had attacked us.

But no sooner had we successfully dispersed al-Qaeda’s leaders and punished their hosts in Afghanistan, than we lurched off “in search of” other “monsters to destroy” and invaded Iraq. Ill-defined as they were, our objectives and priorities in that new battlefield shifted with kaleidoscopic ease under the ministrations of the spin-doctors. WMD, then democratization. Deba’athification, then remobilization. Im-

proving the lot of ordinary Iraqis, then restoring their oil production and exports. Transformation of the region, then killing the jihadis and anti-occupation rebels our presence spawned. Now we're told that this hugely costly adventure was really just about getting rid of one man—Saddam Hussein. With the dictator exhumed from his manhole, "mission accomplished." But for some, so far unexplained reason, we nevertheless have to keep forces in Iraq for at least another four years. Or is it five, or twenty years?

The flip-flops, ad-hoc'ery, and confusion about objectives are not limited to our policies on terrorism or Iraq. Consider North Korea. The Administration first declared Pyongyang's nuclear program intolerable, threatened dire consequences, and refused to talk to the North Koreans until they ended their program. When years of all-stick-no-carrot diplomacy predictably failed, the White House began to prepare us to live with a nuclear-armed North Korea. Some suspect we are seeing the same pattern with respect to Iran.

Then there's the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Disengagement, followed by half-hearted diplomacy, followed by passivity. A Road Map drawn, muttered over, revised, shelved, announced as a major initiative, and then set aside. Israeli military incursions in the occupied territories opposed, then endorsed. Israeli unilateralism condemned, then acquiesced in, and finally applauded. Negotiations by Americans with Israelis and Palestinians, then with Israelis alone, and now only among Israelis, with no American input except from the Israeli lobby here.

I have catalogued only a fraction of the numerous examples of this amazing pattern of strategic about-faces, convulsions, and abdications. It's hard to imagine how it could get worse. But if George Bush and Dick Cheney are right, and perhaps they are, John Kerry and John Edwards would be equally or even more spastic and inconstant as policymakers. Apparently, whoever wins, the United States will continue to vex and alarm the world with idiosyncratic and erratic actions abroad. This is not encouraging.

Come on, guys! There are issues of peace and war that you know and we all know you will have to deal with if you are elected. Serious, real problems with major consequences for the United States and the world. Is it asking too much for you to reassure us that you are at least thinking about these issues by telling us something about how you expect to manage them?

How about explaining to us:

What are we now trying to accomplish in the war in Afghanistan beyond running down Osama bin Laden? What would victory look like? Are we into long-term nation-building in Afghanistan? What's the end game or is this the forever war?

What do we need to accomplish in Iraq to enable us to claim success for our invasion and occupation of that nation? In a region in which we kill one enemy and get five free, what needs to happen to let us stop killing Iraqis and other Arabs

and being killed by them?

With Arabs concluding that Americans are indifferent to their suffering and untroubled by injustice, and Americans equating Islam with terrorism, the estrangement between Americans and the Muslim fifth of the human race continues to deepen. By every measure available, the pool of potential recruits for terrorism against the United States and the long-term danger to our country from aggrieved Muslims are expanding. How do you propose to reverse these trends? If they cannot be reversed, what further measures do you propose to restore our security and domestic tranquility while preserving our civil liberties?

Given all the threats that neo-conservatives and right-wing Israelis have uttered, level with us, please. If you're elected, is the invasion of Iran a serious prospect? How about Syria? What does all the current demagoguery against the Saudi royal family portend for policy?

What do you propose to do about the mounting bloodshed in the Holy Land? Let it burn? Whatever Sharon asks you to do? Or something else? If so, what?

What are you going to do about the acknowledged "genocide" in Darfur?

What role do you foresee for a liberated Iraq in the balance of power and security in the Persian Gulf? What role for the GCC or other Arabs in defending themselves?

How do you propose to deal with the requirement of Arab states for a deterrent against nuclear attack, once Iran joins Israel in acquiring nuclear weapons?

I also wouldn't mind hearing what you intend to do about the Korean nuclear issue, which now apparently has a South as well as a North Korean dimension. Or about the Taiwan issue and China. Or about Russia. Or about rebuilding relations with allies and reestablishing a mutually productive relationship with the United Nations.

And, with some of our most senior economists telling us that there is a 75% chance of a dollar collapse sometime over the next five years, I think it might be helpful for you to tell us what you propose to do about the budget, trade, and balance of payments deficits that threaten both our national prosperity and the global economy.

Ladies and gentlemen, I was asked to tell you where I thought we might go from here. I apologize for not doing so. But I've given up on the possibility of either the media or the Congress asking the questions that need to be asked of our Presidential candidates and other politicians. As in the run-up to the Iraq invasion, both have defaulted on their responsibility to question those who lead or aspire to lead us. So I have fallen back on asking these questions myself.

If I've asked the wrong questions, please step forward and ask the right ones. Maybe, if we all ask with sufficient insistence, one or the other of the candidates will actually address an issue or two. That would be most welcome. I, for one, would like to be reassured that we're going somewhere better than where we've been.