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AIPAC Policy Conference 2009

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David Victor: Well, let me ask you a question. What do you think of Policy Conference so far? Well, I'm glad to hear it because as they say, the best is yet to come. Tomorrow will be the most important part of the conference and the starring role is played by you. And I'll get to that in a minute. First though, there's some people here who are simply indispensable to our mission and must be acknowledged.

To my colleagues on AIPAC's national board of directors, thank you for the time, the commitment, and the creative energies you give to our work. I can't tell you how fortunate I am, how fortunate we all are to have your leadership. And special thanks go to my predecessor, my friend, our chairman of the board Howard Friedman. Howard, whose strong instincts and boundless energy continue to be instrumental to ensuring our strength. Thank you, Howard. And to my close friend, to AIPAC's president-elect, Lee Rosenberg. Rosy, once again congratulations.

Finally, AIPAC's executive director Howard Kohr and AIPAC's managing director Richard Fishman, their knowledge of the ways of Washington and the ways of the political system, the hours upon hours they give to every aspect of AIPAC remain a primary reason why the organization is strong and continues to thrive. I said it last year and my words have only been validated in the interim. Howard Kohr and Richard Fishman are as good as it gets. Thank you, gentlemen.

Ladies and gentlemen, later this afternoon you will meet in your lobbying groups to prepare for the most important day of policy conference, Tuesday. Tuesdays have a long tradition of political importance, Super Tuesdays, Election Day, even the State of the Union; and Tuesday is also a day of significance for AIPAC. Tuesday at policy conference is the day the rubber meets the road. Tomorrow, Tuesday, we will go to Capitol Hill. We will meet with our members of Congress. We will make the case, and we will make the difference.

Now, let's be clear. This is a moment of danger, a moment made more dangerous by the fact that too few people see its urgency and now, it falls to us to highlight the true and stark dimensions of the threat and we must also make clear to our leaders their ability to respond to it and the form that response must take. And when I say it falls to us, that is exactly what I mean. You would think that a threat as profound as the prospect of an extremist theology inching toward nuclear weapons, a regime with global ambitions in one of the world's least stable regions, a regime which publicly doubts the historical fact of the Holocaust exists and yet is certain that Israel should not, a regime which is the largest sponsor, state sponsor of terrorism on the globe and trumpets its antipathy for the West and all of this without nuclear immunity. You would think a

threat of such magnitude would see hundreds of thousands of people, if not millions, demanding that their government's confronted. You would think so, but you would be wrong.

We are the only constituency in America making this case. Tuesday we in more than 500 separate congressional meetings must penetrate the thick layer of preoccupation that envelops Capitol Hill. We must help our leaders feel the urgency of this moment and we must help them understand that they still have the power to ensure that Iran does not get the bomb.

But the priority list for most of our elected officials goes something like this: the economy, the economy, the economy, Afghanistan and Pakistan, Iraq, and the economy. And don't get me wrong. These are all vitally important challenges. That's not the point. The point is horrible things can still happen even when good people are distracted by important issues.

As President Obama has repeatedly stated, we must be able to do more than one thing at a time, and actually, in some ways we will be more effective in our meetings tomorrow than we've ever been. Most everyone else marching through the halls of Congress day in and day out is there to talk about pretty much one topic, America's finances and their own. We are not.

We take time away from our lives back home to fly here at our own expense and ask our legislators for support on issues that don't benefit us financially in any way whatsoever. This is rare on Capitol Hill and members are struck by it, but far from being a burden, our being here is evidence of our good fortune. As empowered American activists, we are not mere spectators to history. We are among the fortunate few who will seize the opportunity to change it.

Tomorrow, Tuesday, we will ask our lawmakers to take action in three ways. One, to prevent a nuclear Iran. Two, to help the president pursue Mideast peace by reinforcing basic principles that have undergirded successful American diplomacy. And three, to provide the security assistance necessary to ensure Israel can defend her citizens.

First, Iran. If Iran acquires a nuclear weapons capability, everything changes. A "hinge of history," in the words of Prime Minister Netanyahu; a "game changer," in the words of President Obama. From this very podium last year, then-presidential candidate Barack Obama pledged to do everything in his power as president to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. He was right then and he is right now for making this a priority of his administration. Preventing Iran from becoming a nuclear power is the goal.

Engagement is a means toward attaining it. We support the administration's effort to explore direct diplomacy as a means of preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability. Engagement is one of our tools. There are others; among them, to quote Secretary of State Clinton, "The threat of tough, crippling sanctions." That is the essence of the Iran Refined Petroleum Sanction Act - legislation just introduced in the senate by Senators Evan Bayh, Jon Kyle, and Joe Lieberman; and in the House -- yeah, they deserve your applause, all right -- and in the House by Howard Berman, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs committee, and its ranking member Ileana Ros-Lehtinen.

This legislation will strengthen America's hand in the engagement process. Now, the White House has been clear. Engagement is not an open-ended proposition and failure to meet clear benchmarks will have consequences. The legislation we will lobby on Tuesday provides very real consequences, specific tools for the administration to use should the president determine the need to steal diplomacy with real penalties. Iran's economy has been described, especially of late, as a soft underbelly. Its Achilles' heel is its need to import refined petroleum products to meet 40 percent of its demand for gasoline and diesel. Prevent it, hinder Iran's domestic refining capacity, and you threaten the shutdown of Iran's economy. This new sanctions legislation promotes exactly that.

There are only a handful of companies providing Iran with refined petroleum products. This legislation targets them as well as companies that ship these products, ensure their delivery, or provide machinery for Iran's domestic refining industry. They will all be offered a simple choice. You can do business with Iran. You can do business with America. You cannot do both.

Now, the other single greatest point of Iranian economic vulnerability is its banking system, particularly its central bank, which as the Wall Street Journal recently put it, is the keystone of Iran's financial system and its principle remaining lifeline to the international banking system. This new legislation urges the administration to sanction the central bank of Iran. It's a dramatic step, a dramatic step which could have a crippling effect on Iran's economy.

Sanctions work. We have proof. While some may be frustrated that Iran's nuclear pursuit continues after more than 15 years of our working against it, others understand the implications of this fact. They understand that in a day when nuclear know-how did not exist on the planet and in a day before computers, our country developed a nuclear bomb from scratch in four years. And yet Iran today after nearly two decades of relentless effort and an ambition still does not have a nuclear weapon. How can that be? A big part of the answer is previous administrations, Congress, and the people in this room. Because of our advocacy and the sanctioned legislation Congress enacted, Iran's road has been made much longer and much rougher, and the legislation we will lobby on tomorrow will take economic sanctions to a deeper level than ever before.

Our next lobbying issue: Israel's quest for peace. There's a window of opportunity here as well. The new administration is just that -- new -- and they're still in the midst of developing their policy and approach toward the Arab Israeli conflict. Congress has a role to play, an important role in helping shape that policy and in creating a context for the administration to think about these issues.

Tomorrow we can help our members reinforce the principles which have guided successful American diplomacy in the past and have promoted America and Israel working closely together to achieve peace with security. We will ask our members of congress to sign on to letters initiated in the Senate by Senators Christopher Dodd, Johnny Isakson, Arlen Specter, and John Thune and in the House -- and in the House by Democratic leader Steny Hoyer and Republican whip Eric Cantor.

These letters lay out the parameters necessary for negotiations to succeed. They state that the parties themselves must negotiate the details of any agreement. They underscore that our country

and our democratic ally Israel, the country which will take the greatest risks in any peace agreement, must work together privately and they call on the United States to insist that the Palestinians end violence, terror, and incitement and build the institutions necessary for a viable Palestinian state living side by side in peace with the Jewish state of Israel. And they also call on the Arab states to do far more to normalize relations with Israel and support moderate Palestinians.

Our third lobbying item, foreign aid. This too is a critical element of Israel's security and for that reason it has been at the core of AIPAC's lobbying efforts for the past several decades. Two years ago in recognition that Israel was more threatened than ever before, America and Israel signed an agreement. Israel committed to step up its own defense expenditures and we, the United States, agreed to increase our investment in Israel's security. Now, developments in the interim stretching from Lebanon to Gaza to Iran have only underscored the wisdom of this decision. Yet despite the agreement, the money is not guaranteed. Congress has to vote each year to provide the funds, and for this reason tomorrow we will ask our friends in Congress to vote for the foreign aid package that includes \$2.775 billion in critical security aid.

Now, look. One of the consequences of a bad economy is increased scrutiny of every U.S. dollar spent. This year no doubt will be a tougher environment for foreign aid. We have to make the case to new members and old friends. Aid is an investment in Israel's security and this country's vital interests abroad.

Ladies and gentlemen, tomorrow we will embark on the most important work we do. All the talk, learning, and preparation will be translated into action and results. So let me ask you to step back for a minute and contemplate the contrast between tomorrow, Tuesday, and a Tuesday almost 70 years ago.

After nearly three weeks at sea -- three weeks -- hope after hope after dashed hope was about to be transformed into horror. With 937 mainly German Jewish refugees on board, the S.S. St. Louis was denied entry, first to Cuba and then to the United States of America. In limbo, just miles off the Florida shore the passengers could see the lights of Miami. And to ensure nobody would try to swim ashore, U.S. Coast Guard boats were sent out towards the ship. Passengers desperately wired the White House and then the State Department pleading for entry. But the rescue of European Jews was not a priority. Oh, and Congress? Just three months before the St. Louis set sail, leaders in both houses of United States Congress allowed a bill that would have admitted 20,000 Jewish children from Germany to die in committee and with it likely those same children. And the State Department wired the passengers aboard the St. Louis. Its reply: no entry. And so it was on that fateful Tuesday in June of 1939 the S.S. St. Louis turned away from our shores and sailed back to Europe and the inferno.

All that is necessary for disaster to unfold is for good people to do nothing. The good people in this room will not be bystanders to this pivot point in history. President Peres, we will act to influence its outcome. Thank you.