

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid AIPAC Policy Conference 2008 June 4, 2008

This, the 54th annual AIPAC Conference, provides a forum to those concerned with the survival and flourishing of the State of Israel. For members of AIPAC, 7,000 strong at this Conference alone, as well as government and political leaders of all political persuasions-- conservatives, moderates, progressives, and for Harriet Zimmerman who I'm sorry is not here today; she injured herself. She's is not up and around like we want her to be; I'm sorry she's not here, to President David Victor, Congresswoman Shelley Berkley and well more than 100 Nevadans who are here today, we come together as we do each year to reaffirm our support for the State of Israel.

At a time when the President of Iran is once again threatening Israel's existence our words of support for Israel are as--if not more important than ever. Just weeks ago every single United States Senator stood unanimously and passed a Resolution celebrating the 60th anniversary of the modern State of Israel. The Chairman of the Senate Arms Services Committee, our friend Carl Levin traveled to Israel last week to represent the United States Senate in presenting the Resolution to the Israeli Knesset and congratulating the Israeli people. We sent a clear message to the world that the resolve the United States and support of Israel is as strong as it's ever been.

This unwavering commitment is not a Democratic or Republican value; it's an American value. Last year when I came before you I spoke of the journey that my wife, Landra, and I shared in exploring her Jewish heritage both here in America and our travels around the world and especially Israel. Today I tell you the story of a young Presbyterian woman from Virginia and a Rabbi from rural Mississippi and how their uncommon courage helped move forward the universal fight for justice during the Civil Rights Movement. For six years I chaired the Democratic Policy Committee, the educational arm of the Senate Democrats, and I've attended Democratic policy luncheons for more than 25 years. Among our guests at a recent Thursday Policy Committee luncheon was a woman named Joan Trumpauer Mulholland. Today Joan is a public school teacher in the Washington, DC area. But back in 1961 this courageous 19 year-old woman risked her life as a freedom rider. She believed that segregation was unfair, immoral and wrong. Joan saw a disconnect between her faith which taught that what you do unto the least of my brethren you undo me and the world in which she lived that codified injustice and society in

the law. And so in early June 1961 she flew from Washington, DC to New Orleans to join other Freedom Riders on a train headed straight into the eye of the storm, Jackson, Mississippi. And the coded words of the Freedom Riders, one package were those on trains to Jackson; the other package were those who took Greyhound buses to Jackson. Just as expected, a violent mob was waiting when their train pulled into the station. Joan and her fellow Freedom Riders were beaten and arrested and then sent to one of the most infamous prisons in all America, the State Penitentiary in Mississippi called Parchman. The prison guards made life a living hell for Joan and the Freedom Riders; they weren't permitted to see their family or friends. They didn't eat right. Local lawyers and clergy rarely visited for fear of retribution but a Rabbi named Perry Nussbaum traveled several hours from Jackson to Parchman every week. Most of the Freedom Riders were not Jewish but Rabbi--Rabbi Nussbaum offered prayers to Joan and the others. When he began to chant in Hebrew he discovered that the prison guards would start to move away, not wanting to be near as he spoke those foreign words, which the guards called gibberish. During his Hebrew chants the prisoners learned to join with him in his prayers, in his chants; it's here he began to make a difference. He began all of his prayers in Hebrew, but interspersed his messages in English. Your sister had the baby; your father is out of the hospital; your friends are home safely. That was how encoded in Hebrew prayer the Freedom Riders of Jackson, Mississippi kept in touch with their loved ones and the progress of their movement-free quality. Joan Mulholland, the Presbyterian daughter of a staunch segregationist volunteered to face hatred and violence. The Rabbi from a far off town traveled for hours every week to help those of other religious persuasions in their time of need.

When called upon to make a choice between what was easy and what was right both Joan and Rabbi Nussbaum rejected the easy and chose the right. In my 25 years attending these Policy luncheons as I've just talked about I've never seen the entire Democrat caucus stand and applaud presenters as they did after listening to Joan Mulholland. Rabbi Nussbaum loved by Joan and the others was a religious leaders not only in name but in action because they and countless others made the selfless choice; in just one generation discrimination gave way to justice, oppression gave way to opportunity, and distrust gave way to faith. But you know it took many Joan Mulholland(s) and Rabbi Nussbaum(s) to make the difference. But together it was done; they took action when it counted and they made a difference.

The United States of America and the Democratic Party have done the same for the State of Israel--literally from the hour of its

birth. Many of you my friends here assembled have visited me in my historic office that I have the honor of serving in as Majority Leader. As you walk through the door just six paces off the Senate floor and look to the left you'll see a portrait of our 33rd President. It's a great picture. Harry Truman is a hero of mine; he was an outstanding Democrat and a great American. He was one of our most visionary Presidents and he, perhaps more than anyone, is responsible for the unwavering friendship between the United States and the State of Israel. When the modern State --when the modern State of Israel was born in 1948 many if not most of President Truman's Advisors urged delay in recognizing the new Jewish State. Truman's own Secretary of State, the Decorated General--Four Star General that fathered the Marshall Plan, George Marshall went so far as to threaten Truman, *if you do this I won't vote for you next election*. Harry Truman listened intently to all of his Advisors but not for long. He made his own choice, the choice--he knew that might cost him politically, a choice he knew was difficult but a choice he knew was right. Just 11-minutes after the State of Israel was formally announced at 6:00 p.m. on May 14, 1948 President Harry S. Truman declared the United States the first country to officially recognize the new State of the Jewish people.

In fact, the decision came so quickly that in the official typed announcement the new State--the new name for the Jewish State, the State of Israel had to be written in with a pencil. Years later, Israeli--Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, met with Harry Truman in New York City. Ben Gurion recounted and I quote, *"I told him that as a foreigner I could not judge what would be his place in American history. But his helpfulness, his constant sympathy with the aims in Israel, his courageous decision to recognize our new State so quickly, and his steadfast support since then have given him an immortal place in Jewish history,"* end of quote.

Sixty years have passed since Harry Truman and David Ben Gurion formed that timeless bond and he fraternity of our nation has steadily grown. Every Democratic President from Truman to Clinton has strengthened that bond by providing Israel security and brokering peace and with the new Democratic nominee, that bond, that ironclad commitment will remain as strong as ever.

And don't let anyone looking to politicize the issue of Israel tell you otherwise; Democrats and Republicans --Democrats and Republicans, all of us together speak with one voice in our commitment to Israel's security and quest for peace. That commitment to Israel has always been honored beyond politics or partisanship and that must not change.

You see the United States and Israel link not just by our long history and shared commitment to a democratic government but by

our common adversaries. Those who threaten Israel and the peace and stability of the region threaten us as well. And so often when we make tough diplomatic choices to stand against tyranny and extremism we make them together. Today Israel regrettably continues to face grave challenges from terrorists and extreme regimes, from Hamas, which launches daily missile attacks against the Israeli citizens--women, children, from Hizballah which has rearmed itself since the 2006 War and perhaps most significantly from Iran and its ongoing pursuit of nuclear technology and support for terrorism. The actions of Iranian government officials are destabilizing, reckless, and a challenge to the peaceful aspirations of the United States, Israel, and all of our allies.

It was just last week that the International Atomic Energy Agency reported that Iran is still withholding critical information that could determine its nuclear intentions. In the last several years Iran has built its uranium enrichment capability from just a few centrifuges to dozens and then hundreds and now thousands with aspirations for even tens of thousands of centrifuges able to produce materials suitable for nuclear weapons. We must use every tool at our disposal to thwart Iran's evil intent just because it is an evil intent. And just as we changed the Soviet Union's conduct and ended the Cold War we must continue to work to solve this problem. Some have argued that we need to tie one back behind our backs and take our most powerful tool--aggressive diplomacy off the table. I believe that is weak, ineffective, and unwise. We need a more effective and robust diplomacy to be sure diplomacy alone may not succeed; if Iran's stubbornness continues tougher and more effective sanctions by a united international community are necessary.

Last year Senator Barack Obama introduced a smart tough divestment plan co-sponsored by 33 other Democratic and Republican Senators that would place severe costs on Iran for its reckless choices. More Senators should join this and other efforts to increase sanctions on Iran. The United States must continue to provide robust military aid to Israel so that Israel can further enhance its qualitative military advantage in the region. I fully support that military aid and the new 10-year plan and I'll urge my Senate colleagues--all of them, Democrats and Republicans to do the same.

These steps will send a clear message; America will never permit Israel's existence to be threatened--never. Israel has the right to exist peacefully and Israel's partnership these past six years with the United States must and will continue. That pursuit of peace requires all in the region to re-commit to a peace process that works, a peace process that moves toward a two-State solution and provides the security of which Israel is entitled. The constant rocket fire from Gaza must end.

Hamas --and Hamas must recognize Israel's right to exist--renounce terrorism, give up its weapons, and abide by previous agreements.

And the nefarious work of Syria to undermine democracy in Lebanon and to enable Hizballah must cease and cease now.

You see my solidarity with Israel dates back well before my public career began. As a young man I started attending Bonds for Israel Drives with Landra and my future in-laws in Las Vegas. Menachem Begin, Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis, Jr., and the legendary actor Edward G. Robinson were those that I remember that I went and listened to as a boy. From the days of my youth onward I've always been a friend to Israel. Ladies and gentlemen that will never change.

As a leader of the United States Senate I commit on behalf of the Democrat Majority and all Senators that we will continue to defend the security and prosperity of Israel as we always have since Harry Truman took those bold first steps and you can be just as sure where the Democrat nominee stands and that's four-square with the State of Israel. That is certain.

You see we're in this together. Just as the Civil Rights Movement relied upon Joan Mulholland, Rabbi Nussbaum and thousands of others--black, white, Jewish and Christian, and just as the founding of the State of Israel 60 years ago relied upon the foot soldiers of a generation of Jews from all corners of the earth who sought a home of their own, now it is our turn to take part in the great challenge of forging a peaceful and prosperous future for Israel. No one believes the years ahead will be easy; I wish they were but they won't be. They may prove to be the best most difficult Israel has ever faced, but I have a strong faith in God. I have a strong faith in the State of Israel and I know that together we will achieve the promise of never again and the promise of a secure and prosperous Israel that we all know is possible. Thank you very much.

[End Harry Reid-WO Time Codes]