

AIPAC President Lee Rosenberg at AIPAC Policy Conference 2011

Transcript

Good morning. Morning. It's been said that change is the only constant. And certainly this past year is a testament to the truth of that statement. Throughout this conference, we have and will continue to spend considerable time talking about the turmoil abroad and what it means for America, for Israel, and for our work.

But this morning, I want to explore with you the tectonic shifts we are witnessing in American politics right here at home. These are changes which demand from each of us a major adjustment in the way we measure our own activism -- changes which require new thinking and a fresh approach if indeed we want to ensure the safety and strength of America and Israel, now and in the decades to come.

For as long as AIPAC has existed, our ability to help ensure Israel strength and survive had depended upon our own individual relationships -- friendships carefully nurtured over time between members of the pro-Israel community, like you, and elected officials in Congress. It is a model which invests in each of us as lay activists to do the actual work of building relationships. It is our remarkable motto of success and has allowed us to overcome our relatively small numbers as a community.

Our individual conversations with those in power have ensured America's warm embrace of the 63-year-old nation. Every year, AIPAC's leaders have stood before you to report that this Congress is the most pro-Israel in history. And fortunately, that is still the case. Are we that good that we can sit back and relax? The fact is for all that we have achieved and for all that will be written about this gathering in the days to come, for as exciting as it is to be part of the largest pro-Israel gathering of its kind in history, we must not be fooled by our numbers, or by the impressive look of this room teeming with AIPAC supporters.

We have been successful because a relatively small number of leaders over the years assumed the lion's share of the work, building multiple relationships with key members of Congress. What happens when those lay leaders are gone? What happens when those legislators lose an election or retire? Well, we're finding out. In the last several years, a number of trends have taken hold, which have made creating and sustaining political friendships more challenging than ever before, and which demand that we reinvent the nature of our involvement.

Let's take a look at the three factors shaping politics today: American demographics, congressional turnover, and the ever increasing cost of electoral campaigns.

So first, demography. We've witnessed a shift in the last 30 years. As larger numbers of Americans have begun moving away from the Northeast and Midwest into the South and West, congressional representation has changed. Next year, New York will have its fewest number of House seats since the year 1810. Ohio, Illinois, Michigan, Massachusetts and New Jersey, each of them is losing congressional seats. More Americans live in North Carolina than in New Jersey. And more Americans call Washington State home than Massachusetts.

Today, minorities account for 30 percent or more of the population and a majority of America's congressional districts, with Hispanic Americans being among the fastest growing political constituency. Fortunately, your support of AIPAC's work over the years have allowed us to adapt. We've opened offices in places like Houston, San Diego, Las Vegas, Phoenix, Seattle, Atlanta, and Missoula, Montana. And we began initiatives to work as specifically with Hispanic American, African-American, and pro-Israel Christian leaders so that members of Congress, even those without a Jewish constituency, would understand the importance of Israel to America.

But we must keep pace. These initiatives must evolve quickly into deep-rooted movements in these regions. To ensure American support for Israel, continues to remain vibrant, a growing number of Americans must be part of our AIPAC family.

Second, congressional turnover. Not only is our electorate changing, but so are those we elect. Congress today exists in a constant state of flux. When I first got involved with AIPAC about 15 years ago, so long as we nurtured our

friendships with incumbents, we had the relationships we needed to ensure that Congress would always stand up for Israel. But today, Capitol Hill is no longer a place of entrenched incumbency; far from it. In just over two years, over one-third of the House and Senate has changed hands, and nearly two-thirds of the Congress has turned over in the last decade. And more in-House incumbents have lost their election last November than in any other general election since the birth of the state of Israel.

So imagine, if one-third of the professional staff in your office changed every two years -- gone. Knowledge and institutional memory -- gone. Continuity -- gone. Relationships -- gone. If you add up the years of service of everyone who left office in 2010, we lost nearly 800 years of combined legislative and foreign policy experience.

So add to all of this the third factor, the ever-increasing cost of congressional campaigns. The cost of a winning House campaign has increased exponentially. Unfortunately, the number of pro-Israel Americans contributing to those congressional elections has not. Too large a burdened is still being shouldered by too few in our community. And quite simply, it's not sustainable. This moment requires that we make a profound cultural shift in how we think about our own pro-Israel work.

Not only must we increase the number and diversity of Americans involved in our work, we are now required, each of us, to re-imagine what it means to be a pro-Israel activist. Your pro-Israel identity must be remodeled to include a broader responsibility. This isn't something that can be subcontracted to the AIPAC staff or anyone else, for that matter. It needs us. And as I shared last year, being involved in AIPAC and not making financial contributions to politics is like riding a bike without pedals. It just doesn't work.

In the next several months, AIPAC will be announcing the expansion of its political education program -- an initiative designed to ensure that everyone understands the obligation to compliment our AIPAC work with a financial commitment to politics. We will be inviting everyone to play this role; to commit resources to the political process this year the same way you make a decision to support AIPAC every year. We have to be building meaningful political relationships with all of our country's leaders. And that doesn't happen 535 times quickly.

True friendship, wrote President George Washington, is a plant of slow growth. It takes time. It takes effort. It takes dedication. It takes financial resources. It takes your voice. And it takes people like you who are willing to combine all of these elements into solid relationships with our country's leaders. But we need more people like you.

Luckily, we are still in our infancy. In a nation of 315 million, AIPAC is only beginning. We remain a small representation of America's overwhelming support for Israel. We must be far more. It's a historic start, but AIPAC is just beginning to integrate our work into the fabric of our own communities. We must be, for this generation, a clear voice of pro-Israel advocacy, a voice in every conversation with each of every -- of our country's lawmakers and leaders; the voice that ensures that in the years to come, no matter who sits in Congress, the ties between America and Israel will be unbroken. This is our work and this is our calling to be the voice of pro-Israel America.

One of the more interesting projects I've been involved in outside of my AIPAC life -- when I actually had one -- was to co-create and produce a documentary about the history of America as told through the lens of recorded music. This planned eight-part film explores how music in America shaped one another. Throughout our history, music was often a vehicle to popularize a notion, sometimes a political movement. But at a certain point, artists of that time had to make a decision -- a decision to their craft, to use their voice as a method to change how people thought about an issue.

We all have a similar decision to make. What special gifts, what resources do we possess to be the agents of change for this generation to shape how our leaders think and act? Are we willing to contribute those resources -- resources of time, finances, and talent. Are we willing to lend our leadership skills; our ability to build friendships and to persuade and educate, to inspire others to action? Are we willing to lend our voice?

The prophet Isaiah called to his contemporary saying, "The guardians of Israel can neither slumber nor sleep." The visionary Herzl spoke to those of his time, "If you will it, it is no dream." Throughout the remainder of this

conference, we will hear the eloquent and no doubt stirring words of many who have dedicated their lives to America and to Israel. But on this day, at this moment in time, the only voice which can stir us to action which can compel us to be more than who we are, better than we thought we could ever be, that voice can only be our own. Thank you.