

Senator John Thune at AIPAC Policy Conference 2011

Transcript

Well, thank you, Barry, for that generous introduction. You know, I have to tell you, when I am looking for advice on the Israeli-American relationship, I normally turn to my Jewish community in South Dakota. I talk to Steve Rosenthal, Dan Lederman, and Stan Edelstein. What we lack in quantity we make up for in quality.

But I want you to know that I have widened and added to that circle because we are making Barry an honorary South Dakotan. He's going to be one of our adopted sons, and I've been delighted to get to know him. Barry's been a great friend, a wonderful family, Alisa and his children. And as he said, I had the opportunity to visit Jerusalem here just recently and he was able to be there and to host us and make that an even more rich and more meaningful experience.

The size of this conference and the roster of distinguished guests that you have assembled testify to the important work that AIPAC does and to the authority that you bring to any discussion of American policy in the Middle East. I'm honored to be among your guests, to have joined you at that great dinner last night, and to have been asked to speak with you today.

AIPAC is an invaluable resource to those of us in public office as advocates for freedom and for preserving American interest in a dangerous and constantly shifting part of the world. So thank you for the great work on those issues and for making sure that our government here in Washington, D.C., remembers the importance of standing with our most loyal allies like Israel.

In my home state of South Dakota, we take looking out for our friends and neighbors seriously. From the day that my grandfather arrived here from Norway back in 1906 and began his experience here in this country, raised three sons in the middle of the Great Depression, and he instilled in those three sons values that my parents passed along to me and my four siblings. They taught us the importance of serving our community, of working hard, and pulling our own weight. They taught us to appreciate freedom and liberty, gifts that come from being fortunate enough to live in the greatest country on earth. And they taught us to live within our means, even if it means going without.

Now, some of those core principles seem to be less widely held here in Washington, D.C., which has led to the incredible increase in our national debt these past few years. In fact, Admiral Mike Mullen, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the highest ranking military official in this country, says that the greatest threat to America's national security is our national debt. That speaks volumes.

That speaks volumes, ladies and gentlemen, because the threats that we face abroad are grave and great, violent Islamic extremism, an unstable Middle East, a nuclear Iran and an ascendant China with its rapidly growing military capability. Our staggering debt and its impact on our economy hangs like a storm cloud over the prosperity of future generations, and in a tangible way it threatens America because it forces us to make far-reaching choices about our priorities. It means we will have to sacrifice programs that a lot of us have supported. That is a challenge we must face head on, and we must do it by changing the course that we have been on for the past several years under Republicans and Democrats.

But just as we need to change Washington's reckless spending, we also need to seriously correct our course on some important parts of American foreign policy and national security. Now, I want to be perfectly clear on one thing. The success of U.S. forces in killing Osama bin Laden was a great milestone in the war on terror. And I want to commend President Obama for making the call to authorize that operation.

Until that mission, there was a great deal of uncertainty about what we would do with bin Laden if we ever caught him. There were a lot of people in Washington saying that terrorists should be treated like ordinary criminals and put on trial in civilian courts. So I was glad to see that the president was willing to recognize that the best interests of the United States involved a different approach. When it comes to fighting terrorists, uncertainty is weakness and weakness is something that we cannot afford.

I hope we will see more of this new direction coming out of the White House because when it comes to our national security, as I said, we do face some great threats. And in every case America is weakened when we demonstrate uncertainty and safer when we clearly demonstrate our resolve and our conviction to win the wars of today and to prepare for the threats of tomorrow. We need to remember where America's core interests lie and who our allies are. We need to state unequivocally that America's ally is now and always will be the state of Israel.

And we are never going to have a peace agreement in the Middle East until Israel's neighbors recognize her right to exist. And if we're going to have any confidence in the good faith of the Palestinians in the peace process, they must find some way to bring about the immediate release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, who was kidnapped by Hamas almost five years ago.

Now, I have a couple of other major concerns about the good faith of the Palestinians. First, I am very concerned about any Palestinian effort to unilaterally declare statehood. Such a declaration would directly violate a number of agreements between Israel and the Palestinians, including the Oslo II Agreement and the Weinberger Memo. This ties into my second concern, which is the entry of Hamas into the Palestinian authority government alongside Fatah.

Of course you are all familiar with the Quartet: the group composed of the United States, United Nations, the European Union, and Russia trying to mediate peace in the Middle East. The quartet has stated on numerous occasions that for any Palestinian government to be properly recognized, it must renounce violence and recognize Israel. Secretary Clinton reaffirmed this position as recently at the beginning of this month.

Now, count me as very skeptical of any Palestinian government that includes Hamas being able to meet these principles. After all, the entire reason for Hamas to exist is the destruction of Israel as Hamas has said in its charter. Now, let me state my position on these two issues very plainly. Any attempts by the Palestinians to seek recognition as an independent state outside the appropriate negotiation process will seriously endanger future U.S. aid.

A group of us met with Palestinian authority Prime Minister Salam Fayyad in Jerusalem just a month ago, and we made this point very clear. The contradiction between Hamas involvement and unilateral declarations on the one hand and U.S. aid on the other is not just a matter of prior agreements and common sense. The United States law is very clear that for any Palestinian government to receive U.S. financial assistance, the government and all its ministers must recognize Israel's right to exist and abide by agreements between the parties.

I mentioned we're looking for ways to cut our budget. Well, the Palestinians need to understand that we are perfectly willing to use these dollars here at home to help cut our deficit.

That's why I'm an original cosponsor of the Cardin-Collins Resolution, which is a senate resolution that restates these positions. Now, I know you're all lobbying on the Hill this afternoon, and I encourage you to ask my colleagues to join me and to add their names to this important resolution. One of my main concerns on the issue of the peace process is the disconnect between the Obama administration and the people of Israel concerning the primary threat in the region.

I think it's pretty clear. I think it's pretty clear that the primary threat to Israel's security and to U.S. interest in the Middle East is the Iranian nuclear program, not the lack of a comprehensive Middle East peace.

The Obama administration, however, entered office devoting extensive time, effort, and political capital to negotiating a comprehensive Middle East peace. Added to that, when it first began that effort, you would think from its rhetoric that Israeli settlements were the primary impediment to the peace process rather than the regular Hamas rocket attacks or Iran's continued support of Palestinian terrorist groups.

So let's agree. Let's agree that the Iranian nuclear program is the primary security threat to Israel's security and to our interests. It was definitely a concern to Congress when we passed a law last year improving the president's sanctions authority against Iran. You, the pro-Israel community, played an instrumental role in explaining to your elected

officials why this bill was critical and why it created a viable prospect of impairing Iran's nuclear ambitions. Now, President Obama seemed to get it when he signed the bill. He promised at the time, and I quote, "We are going to make sure that these sanctions are vigorously enforced," end quote. Maybe one of the reasons Iran's nuclear program continues and its aggressive support for terrorism continues is that the sanctions are not being vigorously enforced at all.

In fact, the administration has sanctioned only two companies under the energy prong of this act. That's despite evidence that there are companies today engaged in sanctionable activities. Ladies and gentlemen, this is completely unacceptable. Lax enforcement of sanctions provides no disincentive for companies to do business with Iran, and it does nothing to encourage Iran to change its behavior.

Now is not the time for America to be sending mixed signals and messages to the Middle East about what we will tolerate and what we will not. The season of the so-called Arab Spring presents us with opportunities and risks, and all of us will be watching events very carefully. Based upon my recent visit, I'm hoping for the best in Egypt and other countries who are struggling to establish democratic regimes.

But I think we've had some very clear signals the past few months about who our most reliable friends are in the Middle East. It is not Syria or Libya or Yemen; and despite what some have said, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is not a reformer. And although I welcome the administration's recent imposition of additional sanctions against President Assad personally, I wonder why these sanctions weren't previously triggered by Syria's behavior as a state sponsor of terrorism.

Specifically, Syria continues to be a conduit for weapons from Iran to Hezbollah and other terrorist groups targeting Israel, and Syria continues to serve as a transit point for foreign fighters into Iraq. These are hardly the actions of a reformer, and we should not be sending mixed signals on how we interpret these actions. What we should do is let the world know at every opportunity that the United States of America stands with Israel. And this includes reaffirming U.S. law regarding financial assistance to a Palestinian government that includes Hamas.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are at a crucial time in the life and history of our country. As we try and find the right path forward on so many issues, it is absolutely vital that we look to the past for guidance. About three years ago I was speaking to a Jewish-American audience in Las Vegas at an event that Sheldon and Miriam Adelson were holding at their home. And as I was concluding remarks -- my remarks, an elderly gentleman walked into the room and they gave him a standing ovation. I didn't recognize who he was at the moment, but after I sat down, they introduced him as Elie Wiesel. And I had with me at this particular event my wife and my daughter, who at that time was a teenager, is now in college.

She has grown up around politics, and you have to know what she's like. She couldn't be less impressed with political figures, with celebrities, and all the people that she's had an opportunity to meet with in public life, and yet when she got a chance to meet Elie Wiesel, she was literally shaking. And as she went up and got a chance to interact with him and told him that she had read his book, "Night" and what it had meant to her and how it had impacted her, he gave her a kiss on the cheek. And to this day that is one of the most impactful moments in her young life, and it was a reminder to me of the importance of communicating to our young people, to the next generation the lessons of history so that we don't repeat them, so that something like that never happens again.

And it was a reminder that standing strong and defending freedom was, is, and always should be part of our American agenda. You know, Ronald Reagan once said that freedom is only always one generation removed from extinction. It can't be passed on in the blood stream. It has to be fought for and defended and handed down to our children to do the same, or one day we will spend our sunset years telling our children's children what it was once like to live in the United States of America where men were free.

Ladies and gentlemen, this great struggle, this great fight is about freedom, America's national security, our freedom from debt, the unsettled world stage. These are all serious challenges, and they require serious solutions. And if we

lived in any other country in the world, I'd be worried about whether or not we were up to the job, but the American way is to turn adversity into opportunity.

Those who've come before us, men and women like my grandparents and my parents, weathered a Great Depression. They brought the light of freedom to the darkest corners of the world. Their legacy is our call to action. As Americans we can meet these challenges, but we need to be honest about where the dangers lie around the world, what America's true interests are, and who our real friends are.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for everything that you do to advocate for principles, values that support freedom. May God bless you, and may He continue to bless these United States of America. Thank you very much.