

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks at the State Department

January 22, 2009

Thank you so much. It is my privilege to come here and to pay tribute to all of you, the talented men and women of the State Department. I've given you an early gift: Hillary Clinton. You—[applause].

In her you will have a Secretary of State who has my full confidence, and I want to thank Chairman Kerry and the Senate for acting swiftly to confirm her, because we have no time to lose.

My appearance today, as has been noted, underscores my commitment to the importance of diplomacy and renewing American leadership, and it gives me an opportunity to thank you for the services that you perform every single day. Sometimes I think the American public doesn't fully understand the sacrifices that you and your families make, the dedication that is involved in you carrying on your tasks day in, day out. And I know I speak for Joe Biden, as well as everybody else on this stage, when we tell you that we are proud of you.

You are carrying on a vital task in the safety and security of the American people. And part of what we want to do is to make sure that everybody understands that the State Department is going to be absolutely critical to our success in the years to come. And you individually are going to be critical to our success in the years to come. And we want to send a signal to all kinds of young people who may be thinking about the Foreign Service that they are going to be critical in terms of projecting not just America's power, but also America's values and America's ideals.

The inheritance of our young century demands a new era of American leadership. We must recognize that America's strength comes not just from the might of our arms or the scale of our wealth, but from our enduring values. And for the sake of our national security and the common aspirations of people around the globe, this era has to begin now.

This morning I signed three Executive orders. First, I can say without exception or equivocation that the United States will not torture. Second, we will close the Guantanamo Bay detention camp and determine how to deal with those who have been held there. And third, we will immediately undertake a comprehensive review to determine how to hold and try terrorism suspects to best protect our nation and the rule of law.

The world needs to understand that America will be unyielding in its defense of its security and relentless in its pursuit of those who would carry out terrorism or threaten the United States. And that's why, in this twilight struggle, we need a durable framework. The orders that I signed today should send an unmistakable signal that our actions in defense of liberty will be just as our cause, and that we the people will uphold our fundamental values as vigilantly as we protect our security. Once again, America's moral example must be the bedrock and the beacon of our global leadership.

We are confronted by extraordinary, complex, and interconnected global challenges: the war on terror, sectarian division, and the spread of deadly technology. We did not ask for the burden that history has asked us to bear, but Americans will bear it. We must bear it. Progress will not come quickly or easily, nor can we promise to right every single wrong around the world.

But we can pledge to use all elements of American power to protect our people and to promote our interests and ideals, starting with principled, focused, and sustained American diplomacy. To carry forward that effort, we are going to be calling on your hard work and perseverance in the months and years to come. Given the urgency and complexity of the challenges we face, and to convey our seriousness of purpose, Secretary Clinton and I are also calling upon the two distinguished Americans standing with us today.

It will be the policy of my administration to actively and aggressively seek a lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as Israel and its Arab neighbors. To help us pursue these goals, Secretary Clinton and I have asked George Mitchell to serve as Special Envoy for Middle East Peace.

George is renowned in this country and around the world for his negotiating skill. He brings international stature and a lifetime of service. His years in the Senate were marked by strong leadership and bipartisan achievement. His efforts on behalf of peace in Northern Ireland were indispensable in reconciling a painful and protracted conflict. Time and again in public service and private life, he has acted with skill and acted with integrity. He will be fully empowered at the negotiating table, and he will sustain our focus on the goal of peace.

No one doubts the difficulty of the road ahead, and George outlined some of those difficulties. The tragic violence in Gaza and southern Israel offers a sobering reminder of the challenges at hand and the setbacks that will inevitably come.

It must also instill in us, though, a sense of urgency, as history shows us that strong and sustained American engagement can bridge divides and build the capacity that supports progress. And that is why we will be sending George to the region as soon as possible to help the parties ensure that the cease-fire that has been achieved is made durable and sustainable.

Let me be clear: America is committed to Israel's security, and we will always support Israel's right to defend itself against legitimate threats. For years, Hamas has launched thousands of rockets at innocent Israeli citizens. No democracy can tolerate such danger to its people, nor should the international community. And neither should the Palestinian people themselves, whose interests are only set back by acts of terror.

To be a genuine party to peace, the Quartet has made it clear that Hamas must meet clear conditions: recognize Israel's right to exist, renounce violence, and abide by past agreements.

Going forward, the outline for a durable cease-fire is clear. Hamas must end its rocket fire. Israel will complete the withdrawal of its forces from Gaza. The United States and our partners will support a credible anti-smuggling and interdiction regime so that Hamas cannot rearm.

Yesterday I spoke to President Mubarak and expressed my appreciation for the important role that Egypt played in achieving a cease-fire, and we look forward to Egypt's continued leadership and partnership in laying a foundation for a broader peace through a commitment to end smuggling from within its borders.

Now, just as the terror of rocket fire aimed at innocent Israelis is intolerable, so too is a future without hope for the Palestinians. I was deeply concerned by the loss of Palestinian and Israeli life in recent days and by the substantial suffering and humanitarian needs in Gaza. Our hearts go out to Palestinian civilians who are in need of immediate food, clean water, and basic medical care, and who have faced suffocating poverty for far too long.

Now we must extend a hand of opportunity to those who seek peace. As part of a lasting cease-fire, Gaza's border crossings should be opened to allow the flow of aid and commerce, with an appropriate monitoring regime with the international and Palestinian Authority participating.

Relief efforts must be able to reach innocent Palestinians who depend on them. The United States will fully support an international donors conference to seek short-term humanitarian assistance and long-term reconstruction for the Palestinian economy. This assistance will be provided to, and guided by, the Palestinian Authority.

Lasting peace requires more than a long cease-fire. And that's why I will sustain an active commitment to seek two states living side by side in peace and security. Senator Mitchell will carry forward this commitment, as well as the effort to help Israel reach a broader peace with the Arab world that recognizes its rightful place in the community of nations.

I should add that the Arab Peace Initiative contains constructive elements that could help advance these efforts. Now is the time for Arab states to act on the initiatives promised by supporting the Palestinian Government under President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad, taking steps towards normalizing relations with Israel, and by standing up to extremism that threatens us all.

Jordan's constructive role in training Palestinian security forces and nurturing its relations with Israel provide a model for these efforts. And going forward, we must make it clear to all countries in the region that external support for terrorist organizations must stop.

Another urgent threat to global security is the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This is the central front in our enduring struggle against terrorism and extremism. There, as in the Middle East, we must understand that we cannot deal with our problems in isolation. There is no answer in Afghanistan that does not confront the Al Qaida and Taliban bases along the border, and there will be no lasting peace unless we expand spheres of opportunity for the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan. This is truly an international challenge of the highest order.

That's why Secretary Clinton and I are naming Ambassador Richard Holbrooke to be Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Ambassador Holbrooke is one of the most talented diplomats of his generation. Over several decades, he served on different continents and as an outstanding Ambassador to the United Nations. He has strengthened ties with our allies, tackled the toughest negotiations, and helped deliver a hard-earned peace as an architect of the Dayton Accords. He will help lead our effort to forge and implement a strategic and sustainable approach to this critical region.

The American people and the international community must understand that the situation is perilous and progress will take time. Violence is up dramatically in Afghanistan. A deadly insurgency has taken deep root. The opium trade is far and away the largest in the world. The Afghan Government has been unable to deliver basic services. Al Qaida and the Taliban strike from bases embedded in rugged, tribal terrain along the Pakistani border. And while we have yet to see another attack on our soil since 9/11, Al Qaida terrorists remain at large and remain plotting.

Going forward, we must set clear priorities in pursuit of achievable goals that contribute to our collective security. My administration is committed to refocusing attention and resources on Afghanistan and Pakistan and to spending those resources wisely. And that's why we are pursuing a careful review of our policy. We will seek stronger partnerships with the

governments of the region, sustained cooperation with our NATO allies, deeper engagement with the Afghan and Pakistani people, and a comprehensive strategy to combat terror and extremism. We will provide the strategic guidance to meet our objectives. And we pledge to support the extraordinary Americans serving in Afghanistan, both military and civilian, with the resources that they need.

These appointments add to a team that will work with energy and purpose to meet the challenges of our time and to define a future of expanding security and opportunity. Difficult days lie ahead. As we ask more of ourselves, we will seek new partnerships and ask more of our friends, and more of people around the globe, because security in the 21st century is shared. But let there be no doubt about America's commitment to lead. We can no longer afford drift, and we can no longer afford delay. Nor can we cede ground to those who seek destruction. A new era of American leadership is at hand, and the hard work has just begun.

You are going to be at the frontlines of engaging in that important work. And I am absolutely confident that with the leadership of Secretary Clinton, with wonderful envoys like Richard Holbrooke and George Mitchell, with the dedicated team that is before me today, that we are going to be able to accomplish our objectives, keep America safe, and bring better days not just to our own country, but all around the world.

Thank you very much, everyone.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:11 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, who introduced the President; Vice President Joe Biden; President Mohamed Hosni Mubarak of Egypt; and President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad of the Palestinian Authority. He also referred to Executive Order 13491, Ensuring Lawful Interrogations; Executive Order 13492, Review and Disposition of Individuals Detained at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base and Closure of Detention Facilities; and Executive Order 13493, Review of Detention Policy Options.

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